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Cui Xiuwen
Drifting Lantern
2005



Lu Chunsheng
The History of Chemistry
2004



Cao Fei
Public Space: Give Me a Kiss
2002

THIRTEEN UNEASY PIECES

by Ben Davis

"The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now," Feb. 26-May 1, 2006, at P.S.1 MoMA, 22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City, N.Y. 11101

By now, the word has spread everywhere in the art world: China is the future. Everyone is in a frenzy, with all the major galleries jockeying to get a Chinese artist in the rotation. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, insiders say that the order has come from the top down that all departments should reorient themselves to add a focus on Chinese contemporary art.

This certainly represents, in part, an authentic interest in a thriving Chinese scene, fruit of the transformation of a rural and tradition-bound society into an urban and capitalist one, squarely focused on the future. But the indomitable air that Chinese art has right now is obviously driven by blind speculation as well. The current show of Chinese video art at MoMA satellite P.S.1, featuring work by 8gg, Cui Xiuwen, Dong Wensheng, Cao Fei, Hu Jieming, Huang Ziaopeng, Li Songhua, Liang Yue, Lu Chungsheng, Ma Yongfeng, Meng Jin, Xu Tan and Xu Zhen, co-curated by David Thorp and Sun Ning, shows both sides of this uneasy situation.

The phenomenon can be summed up by exploring the title of the exhibition itself, "The Thirteen." On the one hand, it's clearly meant to evoke a kind of supernatural aura, and, in fact, the show is anchored by two longer videos, both with real mystery to them. The 28-minute *Drifting Lantern* (2005) by Cui Xiuwen (b. 1970) is the first thing one sees as one enters the darkened galleries, with an entire wall dedicated to its projection. It focuses on a single image: a glowing, pumpkin-shaped orange lantern. Accompanied by a lush soundtrack of erhu, flute and voice, and isolated on a black background, the glowing form bobs forward and backwards, in and out of the screen like a playful spirit.

Occasionally, however, fragments of other images break the blackness, allowing the viewer to become aware that the lantern, in fact, is suspended on a chain, carried by a woman who holds it with a ceremonial steadiness as she advances through streets and plazas. The restless, animated movement of the lantern turns out to be the jerky motion of the camera itself as it follows her path. Moving in and out of the illusion, now isolating the lantern and letting artifice take over, now pulling back to show its context, Cui's piece is perfect as exploration of the potentials proper to video.

Also granted its own gallery is the 29-minute *The History of Chemistry* (2004) by Lu Chunsheng (b. 1968), located exactly half-way through the exhibition from *Floating Lantern* (furthering the impression that it serves as a second pillar of the show). Shot in spare black-and-white, *History's* wordless, sci-fi infused narrative is seemingly structured around an evolution through different forms of power: We follow a group of sailors (water-born transit) who explore a barren, overgrown wasteland, where they are spooked first by a train (steam-power), seemingly running automatically across deserted tracks, and then by a lawnmower (gas/electric-power),



Cao Fei
Cosplayers
2004



Xu Zhen
Shouting
1998



Xu Zhen
We'll come back
2002

mysteriously driven in circles. At last, they draw near an immense, fortress-like industrial complex -- which, perhaps, represents the future, as suggested by the prophetic final image of the group's captain standing frozen, hammer raised in the air.

Three pieces by Cao Fei (b. 1978), scattered throughout the exhibition, show a consistent concern for moments in which fantasy collides with humdrum everyday life. In *Milkman* (2005), Cao captures the pathos of the titular protagonist's daily routine, seeing him at one point lolling in bed, tormented by the come-ons of a late night sex chat show. *Public Space* (2002) features a middle-aged man playing the fool in the street, while the crowd-pleasing *Cosplayers* (2004) depicts various young people clad as cartoon heroes and heroines, staging mock battles in the street before finally trudging back to their dreary normal lives. Though somewhat slight, taken together these works outline a coherent vision.

Returning to the show's name, however: If it is intended to evoke a kind of mystical aura, it also unintentionally indicates that Chinese art is here being thought of numerically, in bulk. As with many efforts at curating video, there is a real problem with cramming too much of it together: Cui's meditative *Lantern* is interrupted by the sound of heavy breathing, clacking ping-pong balls and shouting from crowded suites of videos on either side; Lu's stark, near-silent *History* is stationed adjacent to Hu Jieming's clamorous *From Architectural Immanence* (2005), a 6-minute loop featuring fragmentary blasts of music that supposedly correspond to the shapes of the different types of buildings pictured.

What's more, if this is supposed to be the future, much of the work has the familiar feeling of the recent past. Take the works by young, ultra-hot Chinese artist Xu Zhen (b. 1977), whose interest in provocation and the body recalls 70s artists like Bruce Nauman and William Wegman. *We'll come back* (2002), displayed on a TV set on the floor, focuses on the crotches of two young people using their flies as an ashtray and a purse, respectively, while *Shouting* (1998) features the artist screaming into a crowd from behind a camera and capturing their reactions. (Xu's *Rainbow*, a 1998 video of a naked back being whipped, each cut in the film corresponding to a lashing sound, so that it becomes more scarred even as the actual attacks are edited out, is more interesting). Similarly, the collective 8gg's manipulated footage of Chinese newscasters, making them look robotic, is a gimmick that's been worked from many angles already by other artists.

Many more videos have the feeling of concept-first "gestures" familiar from trendy Western art, here often with relation to China's rapid development: Xu Tan's *Xin Tian Di* (2005), showing images of a landmark Communist neighborhood overrun with Starbucks coffee shops and Vidal Sassoon salons, counterpoised to a soundtrack of Communist anthems; Ma Yongfeng's *The Swirl* (2002), a static, 15-minute shot of Chinese goldfish being tortured in an industrial washing machine; and Li Songhua's *Keynote Speech* (2005), which greets visitors before they enter the galleries with the image of a small Chinese boy reading the bombastic text of a speech on China's glorious economic future.

The pitfall of a top-down emphasis on China-ness -- akin to the fashionable interest in getting tattoos of random Chinese characters -- is that it comes at the expense of the actual rhythms of artistic singularities. Tellingly, P.S.1 accompanies the show with a text extolling video as perfect for China, because it is "a relatively cheap medium that produces rapid results," a formal proposition that echoes Wallstreet's notion of the country as haven of cheap goods and get-rich-quick investment.



Xu Zhen
Rainbow
1998

The classic dangers of speculative frenzy are the overvaluing of mediocre assets, the flourishing of half-baked schemes and the creation of redundancy, as capital indiscriminately builds up "hot" industries. "The Thirteen" shows that, whatever its strengths are, the Chinese art scene is not immune to all this -- though, given the hype, I suppose that this is a progressive lesson in its own right.

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Ma Yongfeng
The Swirl
2002



Li Songhua
Keynote Speech
2005