

Press Release

Cao Fei

Duotopia

April 29–August 19, 2023

Public Reception: April 28, 6–9pm

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

Sprüth Magers

For over two decades, the work of Cao Fei has stood at the forefront of thinking around art, media, technology and futurity. Diverse in medium and approach, her projects explore facets of everyday existence mingled with the surreal and spectacular to tap into deep-seeded questions around what it means to be human in this ever-shifting twenty-first century. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present *Duotopia*, a major exhibition by Cao Fei at Sprüth Magers, Berlin, which will transform all of the gallery's spaces and premiere several new works outside of China that delve into the metaverse, virtual reality and the interactions between human and machine consciousness.

Anchoring the exhibition in the downstairs galleries are a group of new videos that each look to the connective and creative possibilities of the metaverse. Viewers first encounter *Meta-mentary* (2022), in which everyday people are interviewed about their thoughts on the metaverse and the distant future. Adjacent vitrines and screens look back to the artist's first virtual-reality construction, *RMB City* (2007–11), which housed her first avatar, China Tracy. Together, these projects illustrate Cao Fei's long exploration into the increasingly porous limits between the physical and virtual worlds.

Installed amid large hanging banners that boldly advertise the exhibition's namesake, *Duotopia* (2022) presents Cao Fei's first architectural creation in the metaverse. Displayed on a horizontal screen, the video is experienced immersively by lying on the floor and looking upward, watching from below as *Duotopia*'s ring-like construction floats and spins amid a blushing sky. Its substructures are shaped like massive aquatic figures that seem to bridge ocean and air. The 'duo' in *Duotopia* refers to the mandarin word 'duō 多', meaning many – thus a layering of many possible futures, environments and aesthetics. In *Oz* (2022), presented nearby on vertical screens reminiscent of mobile phones, Cao Fei has imagined a powerful new avatar for *Duotopia*, fifteen years after the birth of China Tracy and *RMB City*. Poised, androgynous and likewise water-related with her bionic tentacles, *Oz* emits a serene aura that suggests a hopeful eternity.

As a counterpoint to the metaverse, and separated spatially by an elaborate staging of false walls, props, photographs and memorabilia, are three recent projects by Cao Fei relating to the experience of her family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each situates viewers in more of an everyday reality, but still with the artist's signature elements of surrealism and theatricality. *Isle of Instability* (2020) documents a period of quarantine in Singapore during the pandemic's early months. Amid an array of necessities, including sanitizer and government paperwork, a video depicts an "island" the artist erected in her living room for her daughter's distraction and amusement, paired with scenes of deserted highways and city streets. *A Holiday* (2023) – an installation comprising a campground picnic, faux greenery, fences, a video filmed in Beijing in 2022, and other objects – refers to the desperate need for nature that many people craved in reaction to the confines and stresses of long-term remote living. *Still Alive* (2023), Cao Fei's newest video, presents a poignant tribute to her mother amid the grief and loss of her husband, the artist's stepfather, to COVID-19 complications.

In the upstairs gallery, Cao Fei presents two videos that explore the concepts of time, space and the fictions of history and geopolitics. In the nonlinear narrative of *Nova* (2019), a Chinese scientist and his fellow researchers attempt to solve the problem of time travel, assisted by a Soviet scientist with whom he falls in love. In a desperate move, he accidentally traps his son in an alternate space-time continuum. Dressed in a space suit and attempting to find his way home, the son wanders amid a series of retro-futuristic locales that are echoed in the nostalgic details of Cao Fei's lush installation.

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The researchers and the astronaut figure appear again, if briefly, in Cao Fei's new video *MatryoshkaVerse* (2022), in which she captures documentary footage of the incredible border city of Manzhouli in Inner Mongolia. A blend of Chinese and Russian influences, which are visible in giant Matryoshka-doll buildings and amusement parks, Manzhouli and its surrounding landscape become the ground for a metaphysical exploration into multinationalism, cultural hybridity and the complex ways in which human history continues to imprint itself onto the earth. A utopia of a very different sort, *MatryoshkaVerse*, like all of Cao Fei's projects on view, reflects upon the rapid changes brought about by global developments, both in China and throughout the world, as well as the points that connect us across these divides.

Cao Fei (*1978, Guangzhou) lives and works in Beijing. Selected solo exhibitions include MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome and UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (both 2021), Serpentine Galleries, London (2020), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019), Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong and K21 Düsseldorf, Dusseldorf (all 2018), MoMA PS1 (2016), Secession, Vienna and Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (both 2015) and Tate Modern, London (2013). Cao Fei's work has been featured in group exhibitions and major biennial and triennial exhibitions worldwide since the early 2000s. In 2021, she was awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize.

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