

A journey into the shape-shifting universe of Chinese artist Cao Fei

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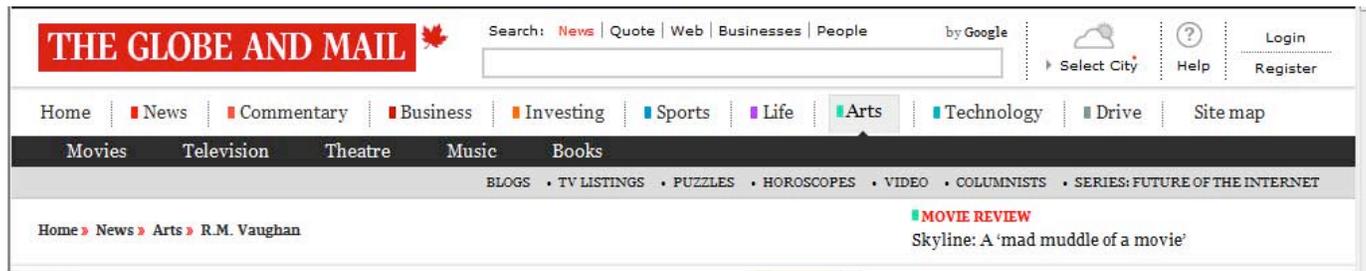
R.M. Vaughan

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R.M. VAUGHAN: THE EXHIBITIONIST

A journey into the shape-shifting universe of Chinese artist Cao Fei

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Cao Fei at A Space Gallery

Until Dec. 11, Suite 110, 401 Richmond St. W., Suite 110, Toronto; www.aspacegallery.org

The online phenomenon *Second Life*, a fantastical virtual world wherein participants can be anyone or anything they choose, and play out their fantasies in landscapes of their own design, has proven a boon to artists the world over.

A Space Gallery, in co-operation with the Reel Asian Film Festival and curators Siya Chen and Heather Keung, jumps right into this mad multiverse with the first Canadian solo exhibition by Beijing-based artist Cao Fei.

Fei, who is known as "China Tracy" on *Second Life*, makes short animated films, in co-operation with other artists, set in RMB City, a futuristic utopia co-created by the artist herself. To call the films imaginative would be the understatement of the season.

In Fei's gorgeously artificial world, Karl Marx washes the feet of a Lehman Brothers banker while Chairman Mao watches, all three discussing the future of money and happiness. Meanwhile, the Monkey King, his voice both squeaky and demonic, interrogates prospective workers. Pageants of dancers (some in Red Guard outfits, some in ball gowns) march by, businessmen float through dream worlds that resemble Expo fairs designed by lunatics, and vast landscapes unfold, dotted with both crystalline architecture and crystal-meth addicts. Talk about the "new China."

Despite the exquisite chaos Fei creates, it would be a mistake to read her work as wholly fanciful. Fei's characters are all engaged in the pursuit of wholeness, and her work openly questions whether one's humanity might be better experienced apart from the so-called real world – if, indeed, our future lies in these new, fabricated realities.

Finally, Fei's work celebrates the limited capabilities of *Second Life*, which can appear stilted and robotic. Instead of attempting to make her characters less like puppets, Fei takes a counterintuitive approach and highlights their stiffness, their *Thunderbirds*-esque disjointed presence.

What better way to ask if un-reality is preferable to reality than to make the distinction between the two bold and obvious? If it meant you could fly through marshmallow clouds and hop from magic castle to glimmering tower in a blink, wouldn't you trade a little rotator-cuff flexibility, yoga class be damned?

As designs for living, Cao Fei's works posit that life's truths can only be uncovered when one gives up fixedness and the falsely calming sureties that are design's stock in trade