

Art in America

GUTS

\$12.00US \$14.00CAN



\$12 JUNE/JULY 2016 COVER BY ED RUSCHA

everyday girlhood in the '90s—an *Ever After* VHS tape figured as a mattress, a glittery Jellies makeup organizer as a pool, and hearts and stars throughout—among materials representing alternative artifacts like Dario Argento movies and “Liquid Television” cartoons. On top of narrating the pursuit of subculture from a suburban remove, Lee’s references prod and make a mess of the shifting and often contradictory roles that young women are expected to play—daughter and bride, creative and muse, thoughtful subject and scopic object.

While the dolls serve as armature for their accessories, they don’t seem hollow. All the care behind Lee’s materials adds up to the idea of wearing a thing deeply. Her papers and plastics recall just how much something like a poster can matter to a young person; they also point to the dense negotiations of race, class, and gender that can undergird a person’s visibility and expression. Lee’s taste for the edgy compounds this knot, reveling in the joys and pains of deviance from standard scripts. For her generation, the internet turned such teenage experiments of affiliation and disidentification into a public ritual: the bedroom became not just a stage but a broadcasting booth for identity formation. In their glass cages, the Jennys seem to wonder: how best to unleash the freak?

Those familiar with *Mommy*, or the conversations around it, are likely to associate Lee’s name with sincerity and gut-punching confessionalism. The film’s narration and editing team with media tropes turned achingly personal; Lee demonstrates how, within our digital remix culture, an image or phrase need not be unique to ring true as one’s own. While intimate citation was also the force behind “Fufu’s Dreamhouse,” such emotive heights are more difficult to reach in the white cube, with its habits of distanced observation, than in the more immersive space of cinema. In the gallery, sincerity has a higher hurdle; there, Lee seemed comparatively remote, even wry. But whether her insights came across clearly for viewers might be beside the point. As any diarist knows, secrecy is liberating—and as an Adidas ad blanketing one Jenny’s wall reads: “SUPERSTAR DOES NOT CARE WHAT THE OUTSIDE WORLD THINKS / SUPERSTAR DOES NOT LIVE LIFE INSIDE THE BOX.”

—Nick Irvin

WILLIAM WEGMAN

Sperone Westwater and Magenta Plains

Although William Wegman made his reputation as a photographer who combined wry humor and conceptualism, his two recent exhibitions showed him to be an accomplished painter with a sophisticated, highly individual style. The concurrent presentations at Sperone Westwater and Magenta Plains focused on, respectively, his recent “postcard paintings” and his early works on paper. Wegman made his first paintings based on postcards in the early 1990s, and his method has remained consistent ever since: he selects postcards from a large collection he keeps in his studio, glues them on top of wood panels, and fills in the empty spaces around the images with painted marks, shapes, and figures. Despite this narrowly defined set of procedures, the resulting paintings differ greatly from one another in composition and mood.

Among the biggest of the paintings at Sperone Westwater was the sixteen-foot-wide triptych *The great indoors* (2013), which shows a panoramic view of a vast interior—a strange mix of an airport terminal and an international art fair. Several alcoves in the sides of the great hall contain different landscapes—a desert, a lake, snow-covered mountains—and the floor and ceiling of the space are packed with colorful semitransparent blocks, their rapid foreshortening emphasizing the magnitude of the place. Peering closely at the vanishing point of the painted interior, viewers will discover that the entire construction expands out from a single postcard floating around the middle of the central panel, depicting a cozy room decorated in green. Similarly, the landscape imagery springs from several different postcards, the photograph at the core



William Wegman:
Lobby Abstract,
2015, oil and
postcards on wood
panel, 30 by 40
inches; at Sperone
Westwater.

of each scene elaborated on in loose, confident brushwork. Avoiding literal depiction or detail, the artist relies on compositional logic and precisely matched colors to make the hybrid images fully believable.

The spatial and visual acrobatics of paintings like *The great indoors* are anticipated in earlier canvases on view, such as *Aerial* (2008). Although measuring only fifteen by twenty inches, it contains three different postcards—bird’s-eye views of a medieval town and a rural landscape, and a photograph of a market with a few buyers wandering between fruit and vegetable stalls. With fluid brushstrokes and a superb sense of color, Wegman has blended the three incongruent images into a single bleak landscape, the painted green and orange background wrapping around the postcards like a clump of moss. *Licensed vendor* (2011), meanwhile, strangely distorts and stretches out a colorful image of a European town before dissolving the scene in a periphery of mud-colored paint. The most fantastic of Wegman’s postcard paintings appear oddly convincing: they have the logic and persuasiveness of dreams. In the paintings, as in dreams, a few vivid details stand out from a foggy, ambiguous,

or chimerical background, tricking the mind into accepting the whole construction as entirely credible.

Among Wegman's works on paper at Magenta Plains were altered photographs dating back to the 1970s and a selection of humorous drawings and cartoons from the 1980s and '90s. The best works in the show highlighted the ambiguousness of seemingly straightforward images; several appeared to presage Wegman's recent paintings. In *Miranda (Girl with Milk Bone)*, 1979, the artist used gouache to apply fake makeup to a photograph of a girl, turning half of her face into a lascivious mask clashing disturbingly with the rest of her smiling face.

While neither exhibition included films or photographs featuring Wegman's Weimaraners, the impact these dogs had on his work makes their presence felt, despite the prudent omission. Weimaraners have been Wegman's ideal props—intelligent, playful, and malleable, capable of creating countless filmic and photographic situations. The postcards appear to function in a similar way: each holds in itself a nucleus of a painting, the photograph anchoring the composition and generating limitless possibilities for image making.

—Tatiana Istomina

CAO FEI

MoMA PS1

ON VIEW THROUGH AUG. 31

While viewers of Cao Fei's excellent survey exhibition will be familiar with myriad products manufactured in China, it's likely that few will have considered, beyond a vague inkling of anonymous workers toiling away in distant factories, who actually makes those products. For her video *Whose Utopia* (2006), the Chinese artist embedded herself in an Osram light-bulb factory in the Pearl River Delta city of Foshan. You see

impressive, robotic machines cranking out lightbulbs for the global market, and close-ups of workers at their meticulous, excruciatingly repetitive tasks. Cao befriended some of these mostly young workers, learning of their lives and of their hidden talents and passions. Everything changes with the video's second part: "Factory Fairytale." One worker suddenly appears as a costumed ballerina, dancing in the factory, and she is downright magical. A middle-aged male employee shows himself to be a surprisingly fluid dancer. Another young man strums an electric guitar; perhaps he yearns to be a rock star. As these workers temporarily assume fresh new identities and briefly realize their passions, regimented factory life converges with a more liberated kind of existence.

Born in Guangzhou in 1978 and based in Beijing, Cao has absorbed the realities of contemporary China in transition. Themes of rampant industrialization and commercialism, an openness to global pop culture, and a willingness to challenge social roles and restrictions, especially gender roles, abound in her work, which spans video, performance, sculpture, photography, and internet projects. *Haze and Fog* (2013), set in grayish, heavily polluted Beijing, is a zombie movie largely sans zombies. Upscale citizens, however, in ultramodern yet generic apartments, seem moribund in their collective materialistic funk. When the bloody, chomping zombies finally appear, near the end, it's a relief, not a fright; something's got to give in this tension-filled anti-paradise. In the video *Cosplayers* (2004), young devotees of Japanese anime and video games, dressed in riotous costumes, move through Guangzhou, fighting each other and also, occasionally, city residents, but they seem alienated and adrift.

There is a profound social engagement in Cao's works, which occurs partly by way of her reimagining of cities. In 2007, she began constructing an island metropolis called RMB City in the online world of Second Life, using an avatar named China Tracy. While this virtual city has a utopian streak, it is also gritty, conflicted, and strewn with references to actual China, including the Oriental Pearl TV tower in Shanghai, Chairman Mao statues, and the imposing Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing (which here sports a giant bicycle wheel at its top). It's the setting for several remarkable machinimas (films made within virtual environments), such as *i.Mirror by China Tracy (aka Cao Fei)*, 2007, a quasi love story involving hesitant yet heartfelt encounters between China Tracy and Hug Yue, the handsome, young, piano-playing avatar of a sixty-five-year-old San Francisco man.

La Town (2014) is an epic video about a dystopian future city rife with discord and decay, but one that discloses moments of tenderness and loveliness. This faux city was constructed from intricate tabletop sculptures—depicting natural landscapes, buildings, airplane crashes, and ecological disasters, and populated with plastic figurines—that are shown in vitrines in a separate room. Elsewhere are several of Cao's grainy early videos. *Imbalance 257* (1999), made while she was still a student, shows her peers at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts engaged in various activities—drinking, teasing one another, having a manic conversation in a bathroom, watching porn, and practicing Qigong. Portraying young people who are at once assertive and vulnerable, opinionated and confused about their identities and futures, the video offers a look into the raw, restless origins of Cao's work.

—Gregory Volk

Cao Fei: *RMB City: A Second Life Planning 05*, 2007, digital print, 47¼ by 63 inches; at MoMA PS1.

