

SCMA CONTEMPORARY ASSOCIATES Purchase Video by acclaimed, contemporary Chinese artist, Cao Fei, for Museum's New Media Collection

Northampton, MA (January 22, 2010) – The Smith College Museum of Art (SCMA) is pleased to announce the acquisition of **The Birth of RMB City**, an animated video of the “construction” of a virtual city named after the Chinese unit of currency (RMB/Renminbi) by the acclaimed Chinese artist Cao Fei. The work is now on view in the Museum's Ketcham Gallery through May 30, 2010 and was acquired for SCMA by the Contemporary Associates.

The Birth of RMB City is the first acquisition of the SCMA Contemporary Associates (CA), a donor group chaired by Wendy Cromwell, Smith class of 1986, dedicated to building the Museum's permanent collection of contemporary art primarily in the areas of film, video, and photography. The acquisition of this work fulfills several objectives established by the Museum as well as the Contemporary Associates: to significantly strengthen the Museum's collection of Asian art and new media while offering an important teaching tool for Smith College faculty. A cutting edge example of art associated with the Internet, where RMB City currently exists as a virtual community on the *Second Life* platform, the video also promises to be of great interest to Smith students and the general public alike.

About **The Birth of RMB**

Working with Vitamin Creative Space, Cao Fei created her virtual city as an amalgamation of old and new Asian architectural landmarks, including: the People's Palace in Beijing, fronted by a flooded Tiananmen Square; Rem Koolhaas' and Ole Scheeren's CCTV building in Beijing, a glass and steel structure with two leaning towers and a dramatically cantilevered prow shown dangling from a crane; the “Bird's Nest” stadium from the 2008 Beijing summer Olympics (portrayed by the artist as the rusted remnants of the structure); and Jiang Huan Cheng's “Oriental Pearl Tower” in Shanghai. A spoked wheel “observation” platform rotates above the city. At street level there are marketplaces and a series of identical, low row

Cao Fei Video ... Museum of Art | page 2.

houses surrounded by barbed wire (possibly a reference to contemporary “socialist housing”). A factory tower continuously belches fire and smoke, and a panda (the city’s “love center”) floats like a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon above the skyline.

The evolution of this and other videos related to RMB City began with the artist’s encounters with the “Second Life” platform on the Internet. *Second Life* was launched in 2003 as a virtual platform for participants to create a parallel reality in which to live out their dreams. Each user is represented by an “avatar,” a digital figure that can be customized and controlled. Participants visiting existing *Second Life* environments can communicate and form relationships, purchase land, design buildings, develop businesses, and trade in the marketplace of their choice. The artist describes how *Second Life* inspired her to begin thinking about creating her own virtual environment:

At the end of the Venice Biennale, I had been travelling for a long time and had seen a lot of different cities. I thought that maybe I could create a place that belonged to me within *Second Life*—my own city utopia. RMB City... is a Chinese city, but it mixes the different elements of China. I’m very interested in the city as an organism and have done a lot of research on cities in the Pearl River Delta, and I’m hoping I can use my knowledge to build a *Second Life* version of my vision of the Chinese city today. All the cities currently in *Second Life* are Western-style, so Chinese users can’t find spaces that reflect their culture. I don’t want to overemphasize the fact that I’m Chinese, but *Second Life* is a big world, and you want to build something to locate your own identity.”

– Cao Fei (Winter 2009)

In May 2008 Cao Fei’s work on RMB City was presented as an exhibition at Lombard Freid Gallery in New York. Construction continued until RMB City’s grand opening on *Second Life* with full public access on January 10, 2009. The *Birth of RMB City* video was created in 2009, after the launch on **Second Life**, and shows the creation of the city, building-by-building, orchestrated by construction figures. At the close of the videos, all the structures disappear, as RMB City itself will ultimately disappear from the Second Life platform. The Guggenheim Museum, which has named Cao Fei a Hugo Boss award finalist for 2010, is now creating a satellite museum on the site.

Cao Fei Video ... Museum of Art | page 3.

Born in Guangzhou, China in 1978, Cao Fei lives and works primarily in Beijing, China.

Acknowledged as one of the key young artists emerging from Mainland China, the artist blends social commentary, popular aesthetics, Surrealism, and documentary conventions, commenting on the rapid and chaotic changes occurring in all facets of contemporary Chinese society. Cao Fei's video installations and new media works explore perception and reality in places as diverse as a Chinese factory and the virtual world of *Second Life*. Applying strategies of sampling, role play, and documentary filmmaking to capture individuals' longings and the ways in which they imagine themselves—as hip-hop musicians, costumed characters, or digitized alter egos—Cao Fei reveals the discrepancy between reality and dream, and the discontent and disillusionment of China's younger generation.

Fascinated by the world of *Second Life*, Cao Fei has created several works in which she is both participant and observer through her *Second Life* avatar, “China Tracy,” who acts as a guide, philosopher, and tourist.

Cao Fei's work has appeared in solo exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery, London (2008); Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California (2007); Museum Het Domein, Sittard, Netherlands (2006); and Para Site Art Space, Hong Kong (2006). She has participated in the New Museum Triennial (2009); Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2008); Prospect.1 New Orleans (2008); Yokohama Triennial (2008); and Istanbul, Lyon, and Venice Biennials (2007). Her work has appeared at the New Museum, New York (2008); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2007); P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2006); and Asia Society, New York (2006).

[Artist's biography from PBS Art 21 at <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/cao-fei/>, featuring the work of Cao Fei, October 14, 2009 *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, “Fantasy” episode, trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/art21org#play/uploads/17/mgSVfKW2dn0>; www.caofei.com; www.serpentinegallery.org, and <http://secondlife.com>.]

30

Media contact: Margi Caplan | mcaplan@smith.edu | 413 244 3150