

# Lighting the Way

An interview with Cici Wu by HG Masters



Installation view of CICI WU's "Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)" at 47 Canal, New York, 2021. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

## How did people navigate the second year of the pandemic in New York?

As the pandemic is still happening, I can only speak to what I saw. Many of us are still less active in the usual ways. My gallery in New York, 47 Canal, hasn't had any opening receptions since the pandemic started. In the early days there were stages of fear and the moment when you realize social welfare is tied to your immigration status, which we overcame through intimate circles of friends supporting each other. Then there came a moment of reflecting more deeply on art-making and ideas of engagement. We have tried to reflect on what has changed—and what should be changed—in the social context of the art scene. I noticed that more artists are redirecting their energies to local community work and spending more time with people they treasure. Many art workers found 2021 to be an even more difficult year to sustain their dreams and lives. On the other hand, it also showed the great potential of creating a more solid foundation for alternatives within the world's most capitalistic center.

## Were you able to make art during the various waves and lockdowns?

Yes, I made a series of new drawings, *Lantern Study* (2021), that were presented in my solo show, "Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)" (6/25–8/6). I was looking for traces of paper lanterns from paintings and other art forms made in the pre-modern era. The exhibition also included new sculptures that I made in 2021. The different forms of the lanterns [including a star, lotus, and pagoda] were crafted according to various geographical locations and their historicity. They functioned as both sources of light and as encoders of movements; they are experimental devices that record what may be seen as a suggestion of bodies by isolating shadows in the environment. Flipping a surveillance technology on its head, it demonstrates a world of pure motion; removed from identification, the anonymous shadows jump around on a screen [in an adjacent room]. I'm very glad I made new work—without it I might have felt even worse. Art-making is still a way to process thoughts and mourn.

## What has been your experience of the many shifts in political conversations across the United States in the last two years?

Intellectually and spiritually, Black Lives Matter has transformed humanity and consciousness globally. It has cultivated a collective consciousness to systemic racism, racial capitalism, transformative justice, abolition, healing, and self-care. Decolonial discourse is at its foundations, and the conditions of postcolonial theories are still changing.

It's important to participate in building the future even if it's going to take longer than one's lifetime. Abolition or transformative justice frameworks are not focused on the results that we have to realize before we die; it is a practice of imagination and a learning to think otherwise. All these ideas are still ongoing, and small actions in everyday life mean a lot. People are more consciously resisting, manifesting themselves, practicing more empathy on a daily basis, and finding reconciliation with family. It has been a time for us to re-examine our identity and explore new possibilities, and also a time to say goodbye to the old self and welcome the new self. I felt lucky that I have an intimate circle of friends; we've shared a lot of changes, reflections, and discussions in the past two years.

### What's been happening in New York's Chinatown during the pandemic?

Initially business dropped by a half or two-thirds for many small vendors. The biggest Chinese restaurant, Jing Fong, had to close because it couldn't pay the rent. It was a cultural and social space that fostered significant values that many in Chinatown want to preserve, such as the banquet culture and the 318 Restaurant Workers Union—it was the only unionized restaurant in Chinatown. There were also ongoing protests against MOCA [Museum of Chinese in America] from groups like Youth Against Displacement as well as protests led by NMASS Workers Center to end 24-hour shifts for home-care workers (most of them are immigrant women). The family of one of the board members at MOCA, Jonathan Chu, owns the building where Jing Fong used to be, and MOCA had accepted a city-government grant of USD 35 million as a concession for a new jail in the neighborhood. People were infuriated and disappointed. We don't want Chinatown to be like a museum, with certain parts nicely preserved to attract more tourists—this doesn't benefit local residents and working-class people. The closure of any big restaurant has a huge impact on the small businesses nearby, and the damage often lasts longer.

### Have these conversations influenced your way of working?

They have definitely influenced my way of thinking. I'm more aware that the contemporary art world may not be the only world to share my work. In terms of production, I want to work more slowly. I still have a lot of feelings and thoughts that need to be processed first. I realized the goal for me in making art is primarily to become free—and to constantly think about what freedom means, for myself. I also want to grow old with my friends, and to find someone I love in this journey.

### How do your lanterns—which reference folk symbols from various cultures in Asia and capture contours of shadows with a low-fi, open-source-programmed camera—connect with your interests in cinema and in history?

For a longer-term project, I was planning to look at the transcultural and transnational history of these lanterns, interpreting them as a technological precursor to the development of early cinema—a development that is deeply historically entwined with capitalism, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. Defining

cinema through its basic abstract unit, light, I wanted to search for the transnational, abstract, and feminine origins of early motion pictures. "Lantern Strike" led me to an imaginative past and a speculative form of media—which are given here as the absent, or invisible, historical beginnings of an early cinema in a quasi-fictional Asia. In imagining alternate worlds, I recognize that something has to exist and last longer than this lifetime—something that goes beyond death and life. Therefore, compassion (kindness), love (innocence), and commitment (wish and direction) are meaningful. Immediate consequences and opportunities are no longer my interests.



Left and right: the April 10 rally for Asian American women in Chinatown, New York, 2021. Photos by Andrew Ratto. Images via Wikimedia Commons.

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“Cici Wu: Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)

By Marcus Civin

Histories of cinema tend to follow a timeline of technical and mechanical innovation. In acknowledging cinema’s precursors, or proto-cinema, historians point to early shadow puppets, magic lantern slide projectors, and the first instances of photography capturing movement over time.

In *Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)*, her second solo exhibition at 47 Canal, Cici Wu presents nine sculptures, four drawings, and a video, all dated 2021, that invite us to expand our understanding of proto-cinema by letting light, perception, and philosophy lead the way. Wu considers this reimagining of early cinema to be “outside the existing framework of cinema history.” She endeavors to align proto-cinema with what she terms “light, optical experiences, and abstraction of images.”

This includes the timeless play of light and shadow from sources we sometimes take for granted, such as lamps or moonlight. We also might think about how people can interpret the same light differently. Firelight, for example, can suggest ceremony, celebration, light chasing off darkness, and home, but it can also mean danger, destruction, and war.

*Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)* encourages togetherness, an Asian transnationalism, and solidarity across borders despite national and international crises. Wu’s nine paper lanterns approximate specific local lantern designs, and their titles include the corresponding telephone country codes. *Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+84)*, referring to Vietnam, is a blue diamond-shaped lantern hanging from a stick that rests in a round glass vase on a low wood plinth. *Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+63 prototype)*, signifying the Philippines, is a pink star-shaped



Cici Wu, *Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+852 carambola)*, 2021. Bamboo wire, paper, glue, metal wire, neopixel led, opencv camera, raspberry pi 4B, power adapter board, switch, led, micro-usb cable, lithium battery, memory card, artist’s lantern holder and plinth, 51 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches. Courtesy 47 Canal. Photo: Joerg Lohse.



lantern, also hanging from a stick with a wooden armature and a similar plinth supporting it. There is a rabbit for Hong Kong, a pagoda for Indonesia, and a flower for Myanmar. Thailand hangs the highest, while the South Korean lantern seems to lay on its side. The lanterns cluster together like a glowing pre-colonial or postcolonial reunion, a coalition of neighbors, protesters, or a union on strike.

Further exploring cinematic resonance, Wu embeds digital cameras in her lanterns. They're inactive in the gallery, signifying images to come. Lanterns often have text written on them—names, wishes, or riddles—but the messages of Wu's lanterns are also yet-to-be-determined. The lanterns resemble a watchful community—watching us and watching each other—perhaps wary as a result of the violent past, enduring colonialist attitudes, and an uncertain future. The digital camera, like the lantern, processes and produces light; at either end of a temporal spectrum, the camera and the lantern have a lot in common.

Wu's drawings use ink, mineral pigments, and glue on Japanese paper to historicize her interest in these lights. Lantern Study 01 (Woman Admiring Plum Blossoms at Night) and Lantern Study 02 (Lighting a Hanging Lantern for the Obon Festival) are based on Japanese woodblock prints, the first from the 18th century by Suzuki Harunobu, the second from the 19th century by Shibata Zeshin. In Lantern Study 01, a woman uses a lantern at night to provide light as she gazes at a blooming tree. In Lantern Study 02, another woman lights a hanging lantern as a signal to her ancestors. In these two intimate scenarios, the lanterns, like cameras, assist with connection to other worlds.

TS (Celestials) is based on a section of the Tang Dynasty silk scroll, Eighty-Seven Celestials, sometimes, perhaps erroneously, attributed to eighth-century Chinese painter Wu Daozi. The scroll depicts a procession of gods carrying decorated poles and wearing hairstyles incorporating what appear to be ribbons, flowers, and gems. There



Cici Wu, *Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+95 prototype)*, 2021. Bamboo wire, paper, glue, metal wire, neopixel led, opencv camera, raspberry pi zero, micro-usb cable, artist's lantern holder and plinth. 48 1/2 × 16 1/4 × 16 1/4 inches. Courtesy 47 Canal. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

are no lanterns in this spiritual drawing, but the scroll makes reference to cinema. A scroll unfurls over time like film.



Installation view: *Lantern Strike*, 47 Canal, New York, 2021. Courtesy 47 Canal. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

*Strong Loneliness*, a single channel, nine and half minute video, serves as the final scene in the exhibition. Wu made the video with one of the lantern cameras programmed to recognize shadows. Shadow detection is usually used to clean up images, sometimes in surveillance. Lantern camera in hand, Wu traveled through New York City. In the video recording, her pathways look like a fast-moving patchwork of layered lightmaps. Realistic details, like an aerial view of Manhattan and a protest, are fleeting, quickly overtaken by colorful shapes. We hear children playing, but we don't see them. Buildings become warped and rounded, as if the lantern camera is imposing a fisheye view. The city is no longer entirely architectural or human. Instead, it is an exuberant mash-up of color, line, and sound. Shapes change everywhere along the way.



Installation view: *Lantern Strike*, 47 Canal, New York, 2021. Courtesy 47 Canal. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

In Wu's work, lanterns address spatial, historical, spiritual, and political realms. And with lanterns in hand, abstraction follows fast. According to Chinese legend, an emperor once planned to burn down a hunter's village after the hunter accidentally killed the emperor's prized bird. Instead, the villagers worked together to light lanterns and set off fireworks, fooling the emperor's soldiers, who stayed away because, from afar, it looked like the village was already on fire. In this legend, the interpretation or misinterpretation of light saved the community. It became the stuff of legend. Or, Wu might submit, it was an optical experience worthy of being considered proto-cinema. It was a summoning of light and powerful and multivalent symbolism.