

**July 16, 2021**

“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.