

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.