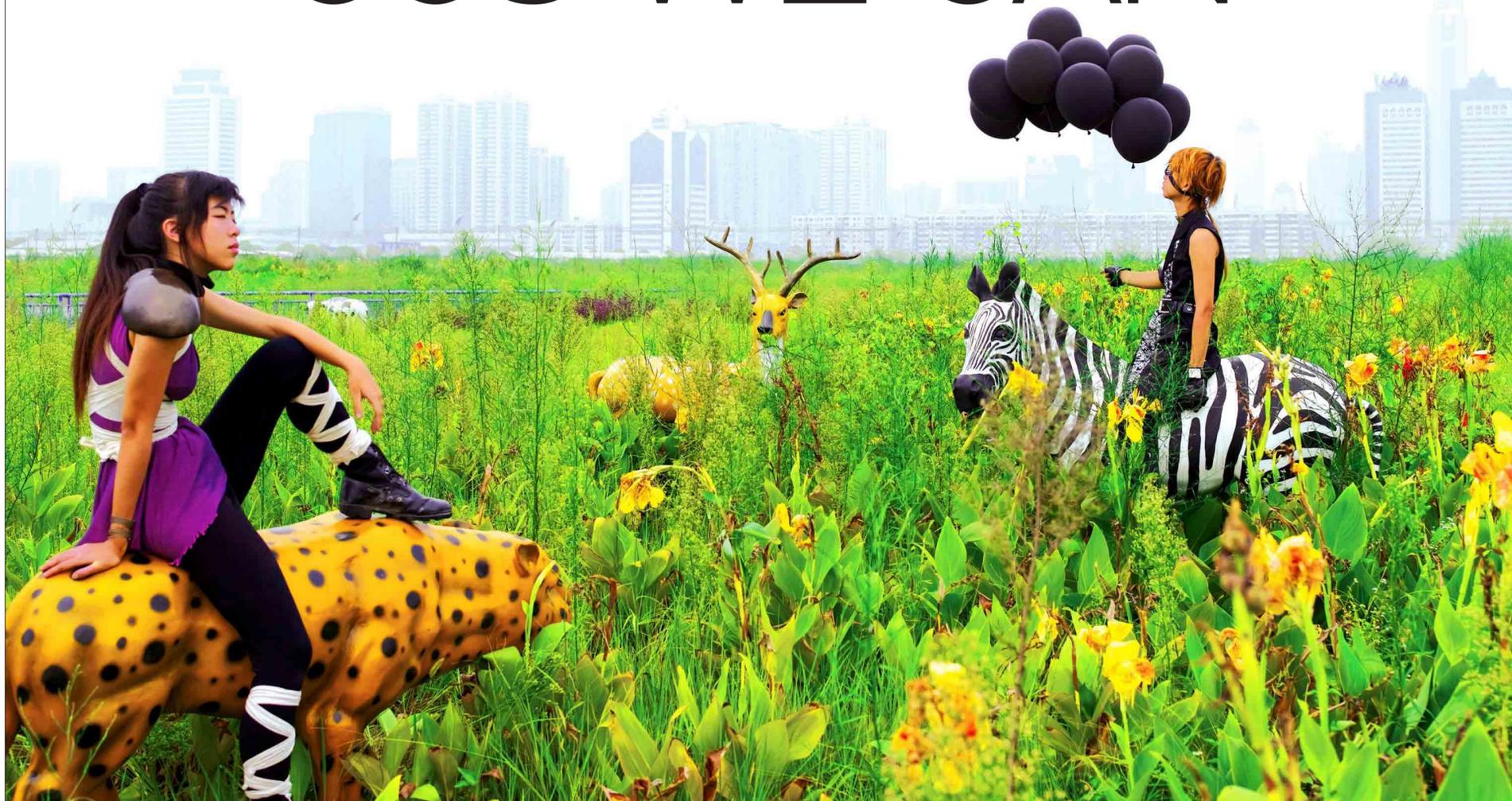


Cao Fei's new exhibition examines the craze for dressing up as anime characters, writes Winnie Yeung

# COS WE CAN



**AGAINST THE SWEEPING** backdrop of a concrete jungle stands a lone young man dangerously close to the edge of a rooftop, his black cloak blowing in the pollution and a scythe in hand, waiting to strike.

Just another anime cartoon? No, it's a scene from a city near you and it's all very real. Well, up to a point.

The image, *City Watcher*, is part of a series by Guangzhou artist Cao Fei on show at Para/Site Art Space.

The video and installation project is based on a Japanese-based hobby called

cosplay, short for "costume and play". It attracts mainly young people, who dress up as their favourite manga or anime characters. Many make their own costumes and accessories, and hardcore fans take part in cosplay contests at comic festivals.

Cao's COSplayers project features about a dozen players from her home town. In their fancy gear, they pose in real-life settings. In one scene, a girl in a purple ninja costume is sitting at home on an old-style wood chair next to her father, who's too busy reading his paper to pay

her any attention. In another, two cosplayers sporting long white and blue hair with matching costumes are on the move. But instead of flying or riding a fancy robot, as their characters would, the pair are riding the underground.

Cao, 27, came up with the topic of cosplay when working on Steps to Heaven, a project for the 2004 Shanghai Biennial. It brought together a small group of artists who were interested in the common theme of desire in an urban context.

"I wanted to describe the surreal desire flying over the city and cosplay seems to be the perfect subject for it," she says.

"Under the big picture of over-development in China, I noticed how society has left human beings along the way and ignored the feelings of young people. I put cosplayers in a big city to show how this extremely large space – namely China – ignores small voices and creates loneliness."

Cao says that as young people indulge much of their time playing computer games, they begin to drift away from reality – and parents who don't understand them. "Cosplay seems to liberate them," she says. "Because they're not satisfied with their own identities, they spend a lot of money on cosplay because it allows them to change their own roles."

It may be a game but they take it seri-

ously, says Cao. "They only pick the anime characters they like most. Everyone's costume is their own. It can't be shared. When you look them in the eyes, you see confidence and how they've turned into that character – with the right pose and personality. Sometimes, even after they've taken off their costumes, they still carry that personality with them."

Nonetheless, Cao says many cosplayers are unhappy. "They can be a hero in the cosplay world, but at the end of the day, they feel lost because there's no change in their status in reality and they remain isolated."

Some would prefer to spend more of their time in cosplay. "They hope to have a relationship with reality although they have escaped from it through cosplay in the first place," Cao says. "From there, some of them started to turn it into a career and opened shops selling costumes in order to re-link themselves to reality."

Modern society is a recurring theme in Cao's works. Besides COSplayers – which has been shown in Fukuoka and New York – she has videotaped Burberry-clad, white-collar workers acting like dogs in *Rabid Dogs* to symbolise how submissive people are prepared to be in modern life. "I'm not a politician and I'm not trying to make a difference," she says. "I use my

**"I'm using video because it's like a sugar-coated bomb. It can attract a bigger audience"**

work to express my feelings – artworks can't change reality, but at least it can represent thoughts."

Cao graduated from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, majoring in theatre, and has been using video as the main medium for her works. "I'm using video because it's like a sugar-coated bomb," she says. "It can attract a bigger audience, which allows me to spread my message."

Cao's exhibitions have attracted plenty of overseas attention. "The west knows about China through their media, but my works provide them a more realistic reality," she says. "This sounds strange, but the fact is they might have a false impression of what China is."

Cao was born and raised in Guangzhou. Her parents are artists. Her father, Cao Chong-en, is a sculptor whose recent works include the Bruce Lee statue at the Avenue of Stars in Tsim Sha Tsui. In *Father*, she videotaped him while he sculpted a statue of Deng Xiaoping.

"My father and I are evidence of how mainland artists have changed," she says. "He never understands what I do, but it's not really a problem."

*COSplayers, Para/Site Art Space, Sheung Wan, Wed-Sun, noon-7pm. Inquiries: 2517 4620. Ends Apr 9*



**Silent Curse (left) and A Mirage (top) from COSplayers. Artist Cao Fei says participants adopt not only the costumes but also the personalities of their characters**

## Know the score? It's not the winning that matters, it's the taking apart

The worlds of sport and art collide in a timely Melbourne exhibition that achieves all its goals, writes Sue Green

Contrary to popular opinion, sport and art aren't mutually exclusive. So says Chris McAuliffe, the curator of Game On!, an exhibition in Melbourne that coincides with the city hosting the Commonwealth Games.

Held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, Game On! brings together artists from Australia, New Zealand and Scotland who create works with themes such as patriotism, allegiance, globalisation and consumerism – "the raw material of an international television economy", McAuliffe says.

"Art and sport are often said to be wholly separate areas of endeavour, as if the world divided easily into jocks and aesthetes," he writes in the exhibition catalogue. "Look a little more closely and,

like all clichés, such distinctions tend to blur and break down."

McAuliffe says sport has many similarities with art. "Some may be stated quite cynically – what is a museum but an Art Hall of Fame, after all." Sport and art both have moments of magnificence, when the balance between the structure and instinct are just right. Both require daily commitment, sacrifice, endurance and inspiring discipline, he says.

McAuliffe was approached by Commonwealth Games organisers, who realised that everything from free world music to international craft residencies, there wasn't much about sport.

He had curated an exhibition about Australian Rules football and art, so knew of artists working on the theme long-

term, rather than as a one-off. He says he thought immediately of Glaswegian Roderick Buchanan, 40, who has worked on sports-related art for more than 10 years and has four works in the show.

His two-minute video *Love/hate/Celtic/Rangers* (2002) dominates the exhibition, even though it's on show in its own room. In it, schoolchildren declare their affiliation for one or other of these two leading Scottish football teams and their strident voices can be heard gallery-wide. It's not until the viewer is close enough to see their expressions – the love or hatred on their young faces – that the power of the work becomes apparent. It concludes with a smiling girl declaring: "Aberdeen."

Buchanan has a wall devoted to his work *Coast to Coast, Dennistoun* (1997-2000) of men and boys from his local area wearing the franchised merchandise of US sports teams. "Sport allows you to go into some really interesting areas," McAuliffe says. "It shows the development of popular

entertainment; it shows the development of mass marketing and mass media."

It also throws up issues about gender, race and public behaviour. Those are aired in the works of New Zealander Richard Lewer, 35, who plays sport every week and says it helps structure his life. He has covered a wall with photocopied "graffiti" – hand-drawn work called *I was either going to be an artist or own my own sports shop* (2005) – capturing some of sport's less attractive refrains: "Dirty Cheating Dogs", "Failure", "It's Only Pain".

His animation, *Skill, training, discipline* (2005), contrasts childlike sketches with unpleasant notions of training discipline and allegations against coaches of sexual abuse (a gymnastics instructor peers through a protégé's bedroom window, strokes her leg and cuts off her hair to add to similar trophies).

McAuliffe says art helps us reflect on how issues that may appear simple – playing sport, training, dealing appropriately



**Australian artist Mathew Greentree's On to the World 2004, at Game On!**

with young people – can be complex. "These artists are all more interested in what goes on around sport – not just the game itself."

Jon Campbell, 44, who lectures in painting at Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts, contributed a 500cm x 250cm flag

carrying the word Yeah. He says "yeah" often, so when he joined a group show in which flags were flown in Hamilton, New Zealand, he thought it would be fun to put the word on his flag – "to look up and see the word 'yeah' might bring a smile to your face".

Since then, the "yeah" flag has

taken on bigger connotations: flag waving is synonymous with patriotism, but Campbell's is a banner for the ideal supporter – "a barracker who sets aside parochial allegiance to celebrate any and all competitors", McAuliffe says.

The gallery has produced "yeah" buttons, posters and 5,000 souvenir-size "yeah" flags to hand out on the streets during the Games. "The stuff about fairness and so on, that has evolved," Campbell says. "It just started out as another artwork."

McAuliffe isn't sure whether those who come for the Games will want to see the exhibition, but Games organisers say that international visitors typically stay on to see what a city has to offer. "That would be fantastic," McAuliffe says. "But we said we'd begin by putting on a good show and see what the audience does."

*Game On!, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Swanston St, Parkville. Inquiries: www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au. Ends Apr 9*