

CINEMA ALLEY

AT GOLDEN AGE CINEMA & BAR

FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2014

"The present doesn't suit us because we are too nostalgic" – Jia Zhangke

It is no doubt a universal desire to yearn for the unattainable and to want to take back what has been taken from us by time. And as our sense of time accelerates in the 21st century, the ease in which we can recall our personal and collective histories seems increasingly to be determined by an equal ability to re-imagine, re-shape and re-create them through the now near-limitless reproduction of social documentation in the digital realm.

Cinema Alley at Golden Age Cinema & Bar presents a new chapter in the history of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art's annual Sydney Chinese New Year Festival program. Presented in the architectural grandeur of the art deco Paramount Pictures building in the 'Hollywood Quarter' of Sydney's Surry Hills, *Cinema Alley* in 2014 takes as its point of focus the intrinsic connection between notions of cultural nostalgia and recent developments in Chinese cinema and video art. Confronted and at times consumed by the rapid rate of urbanisation and development, the artists presented here each address the complexities of contemporary life in China through personal experience of memory, erasure and the power of the collective imagination.

At the centre of *Cinema Alley at Golden Age Cinema* is a double-bill of feature films by acclaimed Chinese director Jia Zhangke, widely considered as one of the forerunners of the 'Sixth Generation' of Chinese Cinema that emerged in the post-1990s era relative to the beginnings of China's domestic film production in 1920s Shanghai. Jia's oeuvre is characteristic of the Sixth Generation with a penchant for non-professional actors, low budget production and a documentary approach to narrative. Both *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013) draw inspiration from real events as a means of unpacking the micro and macro socio-political landscape of contemporary China.

Still Life documents the impact of the controversial Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River through two parallel stories of people trying to find their spouses, but whose personal attempts to reconnect with their pasts are blocked by the dam itself. The two couples that form the dramatic core of the film resist the mass migration that has been forced upon them, attempting to restore their own lives and in a sense exchanges in the face of the monolithic



dam. *Still Life* is a meditative study of states of being within flux, an elegy to ephemeral moments where one feels the weight of the inevitability of change against the desire to return to a simpler time.

A Touch of Sin marks a departure from Jia's neo-realistic aesthetic, replaced by a lush cinematic style equal parts Hollywood glamour and Chinese operatic drama. Despite the high-gloss surface quality of the cityscapes of Guangzhou and the vastness of rural landscapes in Jia's home province of Shanxi, human experiences remain at the centre of this film. *A Touch of Sin* interweaves four narratives of violence as a way to traverse the changing social contract in contemporary China, presenting an image of contemporary life that is mired with social apathy and consequently with violence.

Chen Qiulin is an emerging Chinese contemporary artist whose practice speaks to the inherent tensions of a country that continues to undergo rapid urban development and social transformation. Originally from the town of Wanxian, located on the Yangtze River, which in the late 1990s was subsumed into the municipality of mega-city Chongqing and with it a number of local cultural traditions, Chen's work often contrasts traditional Chinese life with expressions of contemporary culture in a manner that doesn't simply demonise development, but instead produces surreal and dream-like settings in which to situate her personal experience of the changing face of China.

The Empty City (2012) juxtaposes the natural landscape of Wanxian with the post-industrial developments that now dot the low-lying land. Qiulin draws on her memories of growing up in Wanxian and visiting a local Chinese garden and clock tower, both of which have now become seemingly redundant artefacts in daily life in modern megalopolis Chongqing. The artist describes how in an age where wristwatches or clocks were uncommon the clock tower became a symbolic and functional centre for the village – a place to gather one's bearings. But is the fact that a clock tower no longer needs to exist an inherent flaw of life in China today? Chen simultaneously locates nostalgia in a physical place while also working through the confusion brought about through the changes that occurred in Wanxian and celebrates the hope for a new standard of living that was previously unattainable.

Adrian Wong is a Chinese-American performance and video artist, who originally trained in research psychology before he began making art. Wong, who is currently based in Hong Kong, draws on his experience with psychology as a component of his conceptual practice. Written in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Castagna Venture, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You* is the culmination of 3 months of immersive research into an area of urban redevelopment in the Western District of Hong Kong Island. Aiming to give physical shape to the untold, emotive histories traced in the Western district, interviews with local small business owners and craftsmen were collected and used as source material to script a 30-minute theatrical production.

This installation of video documentation and pieces of the original film set focus on the myriad stories recorded about the apocryphal Lei Mei, a silent film starlet whose infatuation with the West led to her disfigurements via botched plastic surgery and eventual commitment to an

asylum. This character, introduced by an unidentified source in a mid-century periodical, was in fact not real at all. But her story was so omnipresent that the fiction of her life pervaded the memories and recollection of the interviewees. The play's narrative takes these mis-recollections and anecdotes as its scaffolding, using it as a way to frame the conscious and unconscious memories and stories of the region. The vibrant but recognisably dated colours and architectural construction of the stage provide a scene in which the specific images of these symbolic objects appear as detached apparitions of something lost to history, but gained on behalf of local memory and the vocabulary of cinematic forms.

Adrian Wong's immersive bar installation, alongside the works of Chen Qiulin and Jia Zhangke, each speak to the ways in which the moving image can provide a surface upon which to contemplate the possibilities of future generations, whilst also rejoicing in the cultural artefacts we hold dear.

Toby Chapman, Project Curator
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

LIST OF WORKS

Chen Qiulin

The Empty City (2012)

seven channel video installation

dimensions variable

courtesy the artist and A Thousand Plateaus Art Space, Chengdu.

Adrian Wong

Umbrellahead, I Will Find You (2010)

video installation

dimensions variable

courtesy the artist.

Written in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Castagna Ventura with choreography by Lorea Solabarietta and costume design by Jim Chan.

Jia Zhangke

Still Life (2006)

digital Betacam

108 minutes

courtesy Memento International Films.

Jia Zhangke

A Touch of Sin (2013)

DCP

135 minutes

courtesy Curious Films.

#CINEMAALLEY

ARTISTS

Jia Zhangke (b. 1970, Fenyang, Shanxi, China) has emerged as the leading figure of what is known as the 'Sixth Generation' of Chinese filmmakers and is one of international cinema's most celebrated living directors. He was the 2013 winner of the Cannes Film Festival award for Best Screenplay for *A Touch of Sin* and previously was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2006 for his film *Still Life*. Jia's previous film *The World* (2004) made official Chinese state approval and was also nominated for a Golden Lion at the 2004 Venice Film Festival. He has garnered international praise for his films *Platform* (2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), despite their limited theatrical runs throughout the world.

Chen Qiulin (b. 1975, Yichang City, Hubei, China) orchestrates and documents elaborate performances in both post-industrial and natural settings in her native Sichuan Province. Incorporating sculptural elements and relics of traditional life into her photographs and video works, she imparts a dramatic, intuitive take on the rapidly changing Chinese landscape. She has held solo exhibitions at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Today Art Museum, Beijing; Big Factory, Shanghai; and Internet Affairs, Chengdu among others. Group exhibitions include *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Art* (2008), Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago; 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008); and *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (2005), Albright-Knox Gallery and University of Buffalo Art Galleries, Buffalo, New York. In 2007 Chen was awarded an Asian Cultural Council Grant. She is represented by A Thousand Plateaus Art Space, Chengdu, China.

Adrian Wong (b. 1980, Chicago, Illinois, USA) is an artist whose practice includes installations, videos and sculptures drawn from varied subjects that explore the intricacies of his relationship to his physical and cultural environment. Originally trained in research psychology at Stanford University where he received a Masters, Wong began making and exhibiting art in San Francisco before taking up residence in Hong Kong where he has been based since 2005 and where he is co-founder and director of Embassy Projects, an arts consultancy and independent production studio. Selected exhibitions include *The Border Show* (2011), Society for Experimental Cultural Production, Shenzhen; *Troglodyte See the Light Redux* (2011), LTD, Los Angeles; *This is Hong Kong* (2010), Kuandu Museum of Art, Taipei; and *A Passion for Creation* (2009), Fondation Louis Vuitton Fondation, Hong Kong Art Museum. In 2006 he was the recipient of the Videotage FUSE Fellowship.

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