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ESSAYS TIDBITS

## Gates to the City: Cui Jie

by Owen Hatherley

Looking at the work of Cui Jie from a northern European perspective, the first error is probably to think you're seeing some form of lament for a modernist past. That narrative is fairly familiar now, based on a longing for the largest-scale remnants of the material culture of postwar social democracy or state socialism—the buildings they left behind to be inhabited or ruined under neoliberalism.

Looking at the way Cui uses paint, I could compare it with the work of the Polish painter Paulina Olowaska, where the passage of time and gaps in memory are translated into reductions and erasures on the canvas; or to Laura Grace Ford's post-punk crosshatched biro drawings of ruined modernist scenes and vacated luxury flats. Except the temporality doesn't work. For someone born in Shanghai in 1983, seeing modernism as a ruined, abandoned project makes little sense; instead, in these colorful, complex modernist landscape paintings are a series of sources suffusing the space of the present.

Cui is part of a generation of artists considered post-1980s in China—that is, too young to remember the political revolts of the late 1980s, but old enough to have registered the last two decades as periods of intense change. Her paintings, informed by digital montages that precede her work on the canvas, generally focus on urban architectures rendered impossible through games with perspective, which are then aligned with imaginary sculptures. The approach is easily compared to the blank, objective, deliberately puzzling metaphysical townscapes of Giorgio de Chirico. Accordingly, she is studiously neutral and apolitical in interviews, referring to herself as a "typical post-1980s girl" who meets with friends and goes to karaoke.<sup>1</sup>

"I simply observe the surroundings as a stroller living in the environment. Sometimes I stop to look at the colors of the buildings or listen to the noises on the streets," she told a Vitamin P3 interviewer in 2015.<sup>2</sup> A much more telling moment in that interview comes with her reference to the influence of "appropriation styles" derived from the USSR, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, or Japanese Metabolism on the built landscapes of Chinese cities. Discussions of her practice often claim that her work simply depicts what you'd see walking around the cities she's lived in: Shanghai, Hangzhou, Beijing. A closer look at her work shows a conscious use of the imagery of state socialist high modernism.

Take a painting such as *Worker and Cultural Palace Dongguan* (2014), based on a building in one of the southern boom



Cui Jie, *Western City Gate*, 2017  
Courtesy the artist and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

cities that spearheaded Chinese capitalism under Deng Xiaoping, and you'll see first a building informed by the radical aesthetics of the 1920s. The Worker and Cultural Palace (a very Soviet typology) uses many of Le Corbusier's "Five Points," with its pilotis and roof terrace; you can date it later via the science-fiction kitsch of the glass rotunda perched on its corner. Cui has treated the building at the center of the image with the sort of bright, slightly abstracted perspective used by the Russian Constructivists, and as with so many architectural renderings, has left the landscape around it deliberately sketchy. Something else swirls there—one of the giant abstract sculptures she works into her cityscapes. This is an idealized dream-space.

Two paintings make Cui's engagement with the state socialist past's legacy in the present more clear. *Guangzhou Telecom Building* (2017), again set in a southern boom city, features the sort of building that Cui most likes—a futuristic, slightly ungainly, geometrically complex hulk of the 1990s, resembling a debased version of a Constructivist or Metabolist mega-complex. But growing out of it are three giant, cubistic, metallic figures holding up atoms, cogs, and globes. These statues are from the Exhibition of Economic Achievements of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, a set of modernist pavilions built in 1960s Tbilisi, which originally housed exhibitions on the socialist economy. The fusion of these melds the aesthetics of Nikita Khrushchev-era futuristic socialism with Deng's "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which over the course of the 1990s revealed itself to be quite obviously "capitalism."

*Western City Gate* (2017) is one of Cui's few paintings not based on a Chinese building, though its gantries, its outlook tower, and its dynamic asymmetry have some similarities to the 1980s and 1990s Chinese boom architecture. In fact, this is a skyscraper built in the 1970s in Socialist Yugoslavia as a gateway into the capital of New Belgrade. If you were to visit now, you would find the building in deep decline, like most of that confident, ultra-modern city built during the Socialist era. All of the city's investment has instead gone to one place: a massive waterfront development in the digital corporate style of the twenty-first century, funded significantly by Asian investors. In it, all the three-dimensionality and visual excitement of these buildings has been replaced with something seamless and deliberately bland. These paintings can be seen as the pre-history of this global moment, a collage of the architecture of the era just before this one.



Cui Jie, *Guangzhou Telecom Building*, 2017  
Courtesy the artist and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

[1]"Artist Cui Jie: China's 'Post-80s' Generation Making Art Outside of Mao's Shadow," *Jing Daily*, January 20 2012. See: <https://jingdaily.com/artist-cui-jie-post-80s-generation-making-art-outside-of-maos-shadow/>

[2]"Why I Paint: Cui Jie," *Vitamin P3*, November 23 2016. See: <https://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2016/november/23/cui-jie-why-i-paint/>.

Cui Jie (b. Shanghai, 1983) lives and works in Shanghai. She has had solo exhibitions at Pilar Corrias, London, Antenna Space, Shanghai, and OCAT, Shenzhen, and her work has been featured in exhibitions at MoMA PS1, New York; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; chi K11 Art Space, Shanghai; and K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong. In 2018 she participated in *An American City: Eleven Cultural Exercises*, the inaugural edition of the FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, as well as *The Marvelous Cacophony*, the 57th October Salon at the Belgrade Biennale. She graduated from the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou in 2006.

Owen Hatherley (b. Southampton, England, 1981) received a PhD in 2011 from Birkbeck College, London, for a thesis later published as *The Chaplin Machine: Slapstick, Fordism and the Communist Avant-Garde* (Pluto Press, 2016)