

Title

Cui Jie: The Peak Tower

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About the author(s)

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Cover image:

Cui Jie: The Peak Tower

by Wenny Teo • 23.09.2019

In his well-known book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau describes the experience of viewing a city from the top floor of a skyscraper as a 'voluptuous pleasure' that instantaneously transforms the ordinary pedestrian into 'a solar Eye, looking down like a god'.¹ From this elevated perspective, the messy dross of the urban environment below is momentarily arrested, becoming a legible text that grants the viewer a fictive sense of mastery over the city. Although De Certeau was not the first to draw a connection between this totalising aerial view and scopic regimes of knowledge and control, his reflections on the impermanent and fungible nature of everyday urban life and the symbolic pull that these towering structures of power exert over us, remain poignant. The fact that De Certeau made his observations from the viewing platform on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center in New York is especially sobering.

An exhibition at Pilar Corrias Gallery of work by the Shanghainese artist Cui Jie (b. 1983) – her first solo show in London – picks up on these themes by exploring the layered history of viewing platforms built on Victoria Peak, a prominent hill in the former British colony of Hong Kong which offers a sweeping panorama of Victoria Harbour and the cordillera of soaring buildings that crest the skyline of Asia's financial capital. Cui's paintings chronicle the rise and fall of the series of buildings constructed upon this privileged site of power and authority over the past one hundred years – a turbulent period marked by the British handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China on 1st July 1997 that was seen by many to symbolise the end of the British Empire and the confirmation of China's ascendancy.

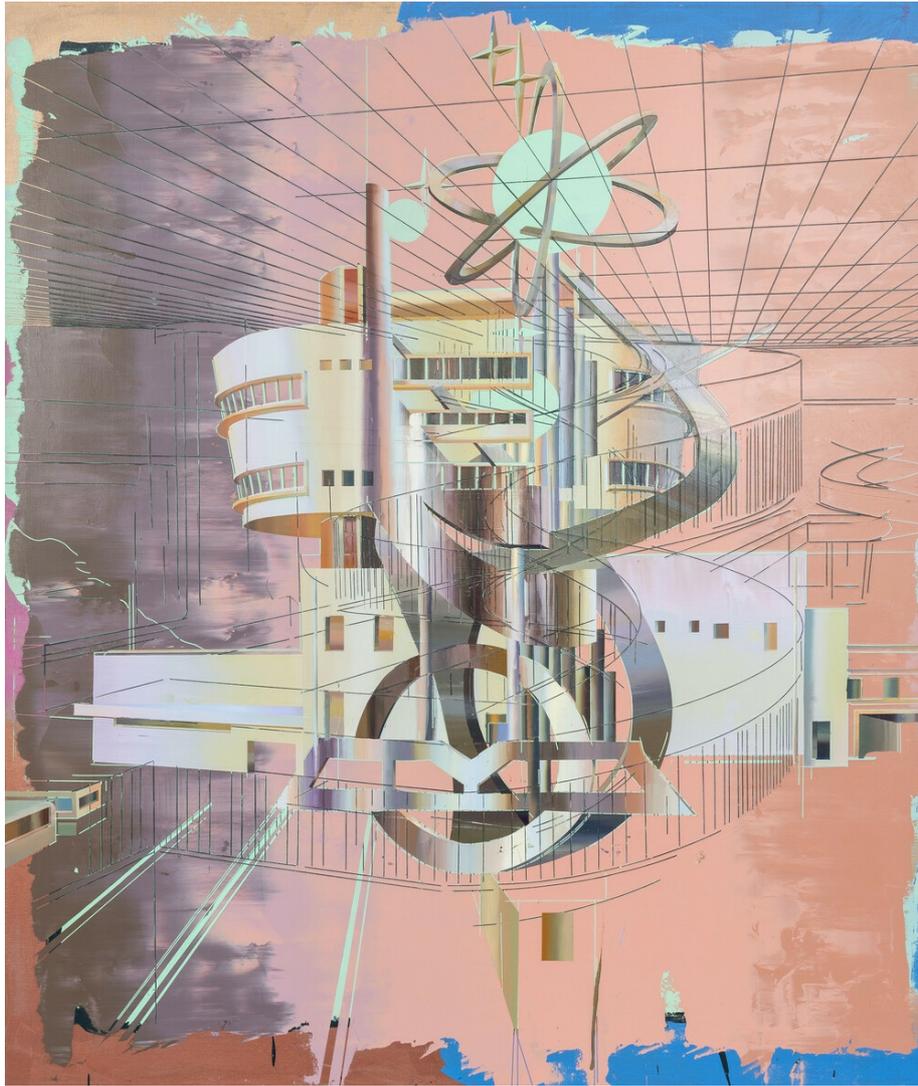


Fig. 1 *The Peak Tower*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 250 by 210 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).

During the Second World War, the diminutive Chinese-style pavilion that once stood on the peak was destroyed by Japanese forces; and it was not until 1972 that a new building designed by the little-known Hong Kong architect Chung Wah-Nan (b.1931) was erected on the same site as a public viewing platform. The latter was soon christened 'Fools tower' in mockery of the lower-class denizens of the city, who would arduously scale the peak on foot to access the view, unlike the colonialists in the Victorian era who were carried up in sedan chairs – quite literally ascending to these great heights on the backs of the impoverished locals. In 1990, in order to accommodate the growing number of tourists that flocked to the peak, drawn to the city by its growing stature as a financial hub, Chung's tower was demolished to make way for the more spectacular edifice that still stands today. The HK\$500-million (£50-million) viewing platform-cum-retail and entertainment complex designed by the British architect Terry Farrell (b.1938) officially opened to the public in May 1997, just a few months shy of the historic handover as a reminder of Britain's

soon-to-be former sovereignty over the island below.

It is not surprising that the history of this charged site should have fired the artist's imagination. Cui has emerged as one of the most prominent Chinese painters of the 'post-80s' generation, born shortly after the open-door economic reforms initiated in 1978 heralded China's new era of rapid modernisation, urbanisation and increasing global influence. Cui is known for chronicling these shifts through meticulously executed, fever-hued canvases that usually feature neglected socialist-era buildings and ordinary urban structures from different time periods; often superimposed onto one another and visually cohered by gauzy sheathes of alternately muted and lurid washes of thinly applied layers of paint. Cui's work captures the faded utopian splendour and utilitarianism of these buildings without sentimentalising their decrepitude, drawing attention to how competing and contradictory ideologies – socio-economic, aesthetic and political – are often concatenated within a single architectonic complex.

Similarly, in this exhibition Cui presents the history of the viewing platforms on Victoria Peak as an overlapping narrative that crosses historical, perspectival and national boundaries. *The Peak Tower* FIG.1 depicts the demolished 'Fool's tower', whose raised white rotunda resembled a truncated version Frank Gehry's world-famous design of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Mapped onto it is a 1990s Soviet-styled sculpture from a city in the south of China that frequently reappears in Cui's oeuvre as a cipher for the ideological aspirations towards science and knowledge that galvanised China's efforts towards modernisation since the New Culture Movement of the early twentieth century. This architectural conglomerate, floating in a backdrop of gradient salmon-pink, is held together by a spiralling grid of black lines FIG.2 that at first seems to reference Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (1920) – with all that this never-realised symbolic structure entailed of the enlightenment and education of the popular masses – but is actually based on a pedestrian overhead bridge in Beijing, which frequently appears as a motif in Cui's paintings.

This fluctuation between familiarity and estrangement is subtly seen elsewhere in the exhibition, particularly in the paintings that focus on the work of Farrell. In *The Second Generation of Peak Tower* FIG.3, the horizontal half-moon tranche of the current building's space-age design is poised against a violently lilac backdrop; while in *The Second Generation of Peak Tower II* FIG.4, the same violet hues are used to accentuate the architectonic features of the building, exaggeratedly lit against a black night sky. In what represents a new technical and conceptual shift in her practice, the layered surface in many of the works presented are further coated with a pixelated film of stencilled black spray paint that makes the coloured contours of the buildings beneath them

appear to glow. This subtle patterning resembles that of the LED screens that are increasingly used to illuminate these structures by night, as well as the Ben-Day dots of the now-outmoded mechanical print technique that commonly featured in the work of Roy Lichtenstein. The patina of dense, regularly spaced apertures that overlay these images like so many eyes are a reminder of the scopic technologies that undergird our experience of urban life, drawing a parallel between the totalising gaze of the aerial view with the more diffuse and increasingly inescapable matrices of surveillance. This is especially apparent in the work *SIS Building* **FIG.5**, which depicts one of Farrell's best-known buildings in London, home to the British Secret Intelligence Service. In Cui's nocturnal rendering, the blockish, fortress-like crenulation of its imposing façade is interrupted by several enlarged satellite dishes clustered against it **FIG.6**, ominously facing outwards.



Fig. 2 Detail from *The Peak Tower*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 250 by 210 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).

In what is undoubtedly the most magnificent work in the exhibition, Cui pushes the surveillant gaze to its most logical extreme. *International Space Station* is a two-metre long canvas almost entirely dominated by a colour field of black dots, signifying the vastness of space. The ISS is reduced to its skeletal contours **FIG.7** in the far left of the canvas, delineated by faint wisps of colour in glinting, muted shades. The earth below is similarly pared down, to a black arc streaked across the bottom of the pictorial surface. One is not only reminded here of De Certeau's 'solar eye', but also of the altogether more invisible and increasingly inescapable

infrastructures of surveillance, WIFI networks and virtual technologies that have so powerfully reshaped our experience of contemporary everyday life. Of course, the recent news that the President of the United States has declared space to be the next 'war-fighting domain' adds a sinister cast to Cui's haunting vision of extraterrestrial architecture.

Indeed, Cui's exhibition opened in London at a time when questions of sovereignty, nationalism, and territorialism have become more critical than ever across the globe – particularly in Hong Kong. Yet Cui did not intend for the exhibition to be read as a direct comment on the currently unfolding crisis there. Like many of her generation, her work is deliberately rinsed of overt political symbolism and didacticism, but it does concern itself with questions of space, place and power. While the urban metropolis has been the main subject of her paintings thus far, works such as *International Space Station* (2019) indicate her conceptual as well as artistic and technical shift towards an expanded definition of architecture, or rather, landscape. Indeed, Cui has always considered herself a 'landscape painter' above all else. By this, she is not referring to the rich history of the genre in China. Rather in the vein of W.J.T. Mitchell (a cultural theorist she cites as a key influence), her work reminds us to look more closely at the world around us; to think of landscape as a cultural construct inextricably connected with the legacies of imperialism and nationalism; as well as one of the most pervasive ways in which these forces are veiled and naturalised.²



Fig. 3 *The Second Generation of Peak Tower*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 250 by 210 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).



Fig. 4 *The Second Generation of Peak Tower II*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 200 by 200 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).



Fig. 5 *SIS Building*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 250 by 210 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).

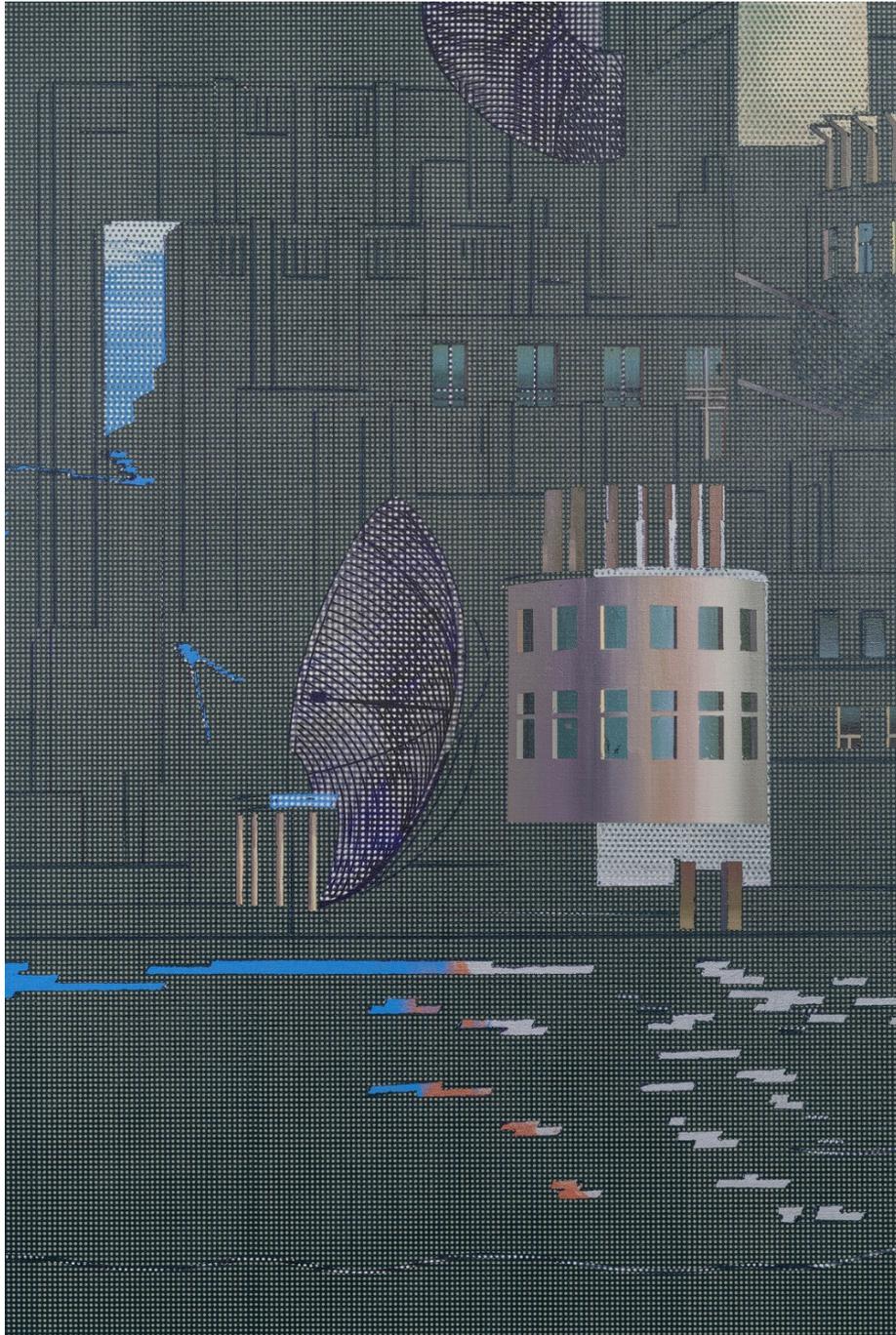


Fig. 6 Detail from *SIS Building*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 250 by 210 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).



Fig. 7 Detail from *International Space Station*, by Cui Jie. 2019. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 210 by 500 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London; photograph Damian Griffiths).

Exhibition details **Cui Jie: The Peak Tower**
Pilar Corrias, London
30th August–25th September 2019

Footnotes

- 1** M. de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), transl. S. Rendall, Berkeley 1984, p.92.
- 2** W.J.T. Mitchell: 'Imperial landscape', in *idem*, ed.: *Landscape and Power*, Chicago 1994.

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