

Cao Shu

Phantom Sugar

14 Mar - 19 Apr 2026

Opening Reception 14 Mar 2026, 8pm

Press Release

Queensway Television is pleased to present *Phantom Sugar* by Cao Shu. Set against an abandoned sugar factory in Shunde, Guangdong, the work weaves together historical narrative and science fiction through interchanging drone footage and 3D-generated moving image, tracing the long human obsession with prediction and control.

Partly inspired by Laplace's Demon – the philosophical thought experiment in which a perfect intelligence, knowing the position of every particle in the universe, could determine all of past and future – Cao imagines a vertical farming system run entirely by artificial intelligence, where every stage of crop growth is facilitated by algorithms to ensure maximum yield. This speculative future is held against the remnants of an industrial past left behind by globalised economies and technology. Across both scenarios, the artist draws upon humanity's compulsion with control as what threads past and future together.

Central to this thread is sugar – and the ant. Drawn to sugar biologically, ants became an unlikely model for artificial intelligence: Ant Colony Optimisation, a foundational AI algorithm, was derived from observing how ant colonies navigate toward food sources through collective, decentralised behaviour. In the video, drones patrol the abandoned factory surveilling colonies of ants – unaware, or indifferent to the fact, that the intelligence guiding them was shaped by the very creatures below. The controller, descended from the controlled.

Sugar and control become the work's twin axes – one a commodity that fuelled industrialisation and the rise of global capitalism, the other a recurring human ambition, as much biological as ideological. Our desire to control however is just as innate as our tendencies to read patterns and impose meanings upon them. Just as how Xiang Yu was led to believe that his defeat was Heaven's will, the work questions how much of what we call fate is pattern we have chosen to believe in, and how much was already written way before we thought to look. The relationship between sugarcane and sugar – between what is consumed in a process and what that process yields – can perhaps offer some quiet clues.

Artist Biography

Cao Shu teaches at the China Academy of Art and currently lives in Hangzhou. His artistic practice includes methods such as historically-based science fiction and a personal approach to the archaeology of technology. Through a variety of media such as 3D rendering animation, video game installations, multi-screen video, and sculpture. His work constructs intricate narrative labyrinths that blur reality and the virtual, creating digitally rendered "memory excavation sites." Recent explorations delve into themes of "socialist sci-fi," encryption technology, and the collective subconscious, critically examining technology's impact on the human psyche.

His accolades include the OCAT x KADIST Young Media Artist Award (2022), Shanghai PRO Exposure Award (2021), BISFF Art Exploration Award (2017), and being shortlisted for the Italy Ducato Prize 2025 and E.A.T. Prize (2024). His work has been exhibited internationally at venues such as Kunsthau Baselland, Macao Museum of Art, White Rabbit Gallery Sydney, Matadero Madrid, M+ Museum Hong Kong, UCCA Dune, Power Station of Art Shanghai, and Sleep Center New York. He has undertaken residencies at Atelier Mondial, Basel (2017), Koganecho Bazaar, Yokohama (2019), and Muffatwerk, Munich (2023). His films have been selected in official competition unit of festivals including DOK Leipzig, Annecy, DMZ Docs Korea, Milano, Ottawa, and Hannover. His work is held in collections like the Kadist Art Foundation San Francisco, White Rabbit Gallery Sydney, HOW Art Museum Shanghai, BY ART MATTERS, Blue Mountain Art Foundation Vienna, and Zhejiang Art Museum.

For more information please DM us on Instagram @queenswaytelevision, or e-mail dd@dddd.pictures