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Cui Jie | New Model Village

Skye Sherwin, It takes a village..., *The Guardian*, March 19, 2022, p.p 62 -63

Skye, Sherwin, Cui Jie: "This kind of communal life is long gone, and memories of it are fading away", *The Guardian.com*, March 21, 2022

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Threat of unlimited fine as anger over P&O grows

Heather Stewart
Gwyn Topham
Matthew Weaver

The business secretary warned P&O Ferries yesterday that it could face an unlimited fine if its summary sacking of 800 British staff on Thursday was found to have breached the law, as protests against the firings took place at ports across the country.

Writing to the company yesterday, Kwasi Kwarteng said he wanted to express "in the strongest possible terms, the UK government's anger and disappointment". He highlighted the taxpayer support received by the firm, including through the furlough scheme, and suggested it did not appear to have followed the procedure required for large-scale redundancies.

"It cannot be right that the company feels tied closely enough to the UK to receive significant amounts of taxpayer money but does not appear willing to abide by the rules that we have put in place to protect British workers," he wrote.

However, Boris Johnson's official spokesman conceded yesterday that senior officials at the Department for Transport had been informed of the company's intentions on Wednesday evening, but had not disseminated the information widely because of commercial sensitivity.

The RMT union's general secretary, Mick Lynch, said: "The fact that the government knew the day before that a foreign-owned company planned to cause major disruption to UK ports but did nothing to prevent it is shocking."

He said the union had "been overwhelmed by the widespread public and political support", adding: "But there is still time to reverse this shameful decision and today we are presenting a plan of action which needs to be acted upon immediately and, if necessary, the government should introduce enabling legislation to make it happen."

In his letter, Kwarteng said failure to give sufficient notice of large-scale redundancies, via the Insolvency Service and the Redundancy Payment Service, "is a 64 65

Ways to bullyproof your kids

Saturday

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The tale of Okhtyrka

'If it can't be controlled, it may be obliterated'

Nataliya Gumenyuk
Okhtyrka

Pavlo Kuzmenko, a surgeon by profession and mayor of Okhtyrka by appointment, offers a rough tally as he drives through the streets of his city, passing one ruined house after another. Not that long ago, potholes were among his biggest headaches.

"Six people were killed here," he says. "Three people there." He prefers not to offer an overall death toll so as "not to frighten the citizens". That number, he adds, can be told "after the victory".

Despite the mayor's conviction, that victory

▲ Larysa Oleksandrivna, 75, near her home close to the city of Okhtyrka moments after construction workers

Epic walks

Saturday

The Guardian - 2022-03-19



↑ Silver End Village, 2021

Cui Jie explores commonalities between purpose-built workers' villages in Essex and Caoyang New Village in Shanghai.

"To maximise profit, [British] factories moved to places where both lands and human resources were cheaper – east Asia for example," she says. "Caoyang New Village declined with China's move from a planned economy to market economy in the 1980s. This kind of communal life is long gone, and memories of it are fading away."

→ Silver End Village and Caoyang Sculpture, 2021

"The drawings emphasise a statue of a female spinning worker wearing an apron, holding cotton flowers high in her right hand and fabrics in her left," says Cui. "In the Caoyang New Village, many residents were female textile workers and the statue was placed by the entrance to the communal park. Now it's removed."



In her new exhibition, Chinese artist Cui Jie reviews lost visions of communal factory living in 1920s Essex and 1950s Shanghai

It takes a village...

Words: Skye Sherwin

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, two sleepy corners of Essex woke up to the modern world. Czech footwear giant Tomáš Baťa's model town rose from nothing in the East Tilbury marshes: a workers' community with everything a short walk from the front doors of its flat-roofed houses, from the shoe factory to the football pitch, the ballroom to the cinema. Window manufacturer Francis Crittall, meanwhile, had just turned "a cluster of rural cottages" into Silver End, a similar model village outside Braintree. Today, with the fashion industry's production now centred in east Asia, the tattered Bata shoe factory is listed, though its communal buildings are

defunct. Silver End's art deco villas have fared better, as restoration-worthy trophy properties.

Wanting an alternative take on Essex's modernism, in 2019 Southend's Focal Point Gallery invited the Chinese artist Cui Jie to visit these sites. Cui has made a name for herself as a chronicler of modern Chinese experience, exploring the swiftly shifting urban landscape in Beijing, Hong Kong and her home city, Shanghai, in layered, impressionistic paintings. Prevented from returning to the UK when the pandemic hit, she found, in Shanghai, an unexpected point of comparison: the Caoyang New Village of 1951. Although conceived as part of Mao's very different communist economic vision, like the Essex developments this artisan textile workers' housing project was all-inclusive, with a cinema, mall, hospital, school and



← Basildon, 2021

Cui's new paintings take in modernist visions across Essex, including the shops in Basildon nestled beneath a long-gone, curving overhang. Suspended in abstract space, buildings appear like apparitions or, as she puts it, "unreachable utopian dreams".

'This kind of communal life is long gone, and memories of it are fading away.'



← Ground Invading Figure #50, 2022

A series of paintings depicts the villages' first inhabitants, while bringing the background into focus in a way that's intentionally jarring. Figures were inspired by early Caoyang publicity shots, and Cui's research into daily life in Essex included old films and photography of sports events and dances.

plenty of green space. And as with Essex, its vision of communal life collapsed as industrial conditions changed.

It was less the architecture that interested Cui, however, than "the elements that are nowhere to be found today: who used to live there, the communal lifestyle and intimacy between people. Unlike buildings, traces of life can easily fade away." A number of her works explore how communities' aspirations and ideology are shaped by our surroundings. In drawings, Caoyang's social realist public statues – including weavers with arms raised like conquering divinities – merge with edifices from the Bata estate. Elsewhere, Bata and Caoyang's cinemas blend. Although western and Chinese movies were poles apart politically, she points out "they were both ritual spaces where the public is to

be collectively entranced. We can clearly see the aesthetic function of the statues: they reveal the ideal state of trance."

Other works explore how our collective inner life is changing now. In a night scene, Harlow town hall is overshadowed by a broadcast mast and enveloped in a densely woven black grid that suggests the web of our digital era, where human relationships are monetised by social media.

While the workers' villages conjure a bygone flowering of integrated living, Cui also wants us to consider what lessons should be learned from past mistakes. "Collectivism is worthy of reconsideration," she says, "but the blueprints behind these practices also call for critiques. Endless industrialisation entails ecological crises. We need to rethink the relationship between us

and nature."

The connections between us, the built environment and nature start to erupt in paintings that, unusually for Cui, depict people. In her series *Ground Invading Figures*, villagers appear in comfortable intimacy with hands and knees touching. Yet the backgrounds are outlined and highlighted, so they butt into these self-contained groups. While recalling maps or aerial shots or architects' plans, for Cui these segments also "pertain to nature, the omnipresent sky, forests or even air, and appear in the form of an ecological crisis". What usually goes overlooked is rendered bright, outsized and hard to ignore, "devouring the edges" of the human subjects.

New Model Village is at Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, until 12 June.