



YAO QINGMEI, *The Burrow*, 2021, stills from film: 22 min. Courtesy the artist and Magician Space, Beijing.

# YAO QINGMEI

In her latest work, Yao Qingmei parallels the underground fortress in Franz Kafka's short story *The Burrow* (1931), built by a grotesque, paranoid creature desperate to protect itself against imagined enemies, with a middle-class leisure haven and residence in China. In the beginning of Yao's video *The Burrow* (2021), a female voice muses: "The most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over." The work details the daily routine of a security guard employed at the property. Images captured by the more than 400 surveillance cameras installed there are juxtaposed with footage of her dull tasks, such as checking the CCTV monitors in the underground central control room. A close-up shot shows the chamber's massive central processing unit, a mesmerizing cage-like hive that eerily beeps against the pleasurable, operatic tune of *Carmen* (1875) in the background. In voiceover, the guard recites a poem,

expressing how her experience of the external world is only permitted through the screens: "Outside the northeast corner of Building No. 7/There's a hawthorn tree/I watched the growing of the fruits/Green, red, and gone."

The video then transitions to brightly colored scenes overground, of male staff mechanically turning left and right according to commands. Postcard-like wide-angle shots follow, in which tourists pose in front of cameras while staff maintain the landscape in the background. Though in the same frame, the different parties appear to be in parallel worlds, isolated by the structure of the community, each preserving their own "burrows." Through these uncanny depictions, Yao reveals how members of society willingly segregate and reshape themselves to fit the system, reiterating the sentiments in the security guard's poem: "The willow blocks the camera/It must be cut away."

PAMELA WONG