

Cai Guo-Qiang working on 'Falling Back to Earth' (2013-14) Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane Photograph Mark Sherwood



CAI GUO-QIANG BECAME AN ARTIST BECAUSE HE DIDN'T WANT AN OFFICE JOB. IN 2011 HE EXPLODED 8300 SMOKE SHELLS IN DOHA'S GULF DESERT FOR *BLACK CEREMONY*. HERE CAI GUO-QIANG TALKS ABOUT PLACE, PERFORMANCE AND DODGING PROBLEMS.

FALLING BACK TO EARTH: CAI GUO-QIANG

NATALIE KING

Despite two failed pyrotechnic 'explosion projects' for the 1996 and 1999 Asia Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art (APT), Cai Guo-Qiang returned for a more grounded invocation with large-scale installations at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane. A gigantic felled eucalyptus tree lies suspended in the gallery, like an environmental relic, while a menagerie of ninety-nine faux life-sized animals are poised to drink at a blue lake. Biblical in scale, this Noah's Ark suggests a harmonious paradise while the number ninety-nine references infinity in Chinese numerology.

Cai Guo-Qiang grew up in Fujian province, across the strait from Taiwan, and recalls hearing the two sides exchange artillery fire. The son of a traditional calligrapher who would draw miniature landscapes on matchboxes, Cai Guo-Qiang trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy and is renowned for elaborately ambitious pyrotechnics, installations and gunpowder drawings as well as for producing the fireworks for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.¹

Natalie King: Tell me about the feng shui of your childhood home. Your room faced a well and lane that brought dark energy, so you stole a pair of stone lions and placed them at the entrance of your house. What is the role of place and orientation in your work?

Cai Guo-Qiang: Ever since I was a young boy, my grandmother always taught me that there is a relationship with the unseen world. Where you should dig your well, which direction your front door should face – all these things matter. Feng shui also applies on a macro scale in relation to my hometown, because Quanzhou had two pagodas that were supposed to enhance the destiny of the township. While growing up I didn't think of these pagodas as two great works of architecture; I thought about their significance in terms of feng shui.

NK: You acted in two martial arts films in your twenties. There is a performative power in your work, the way huge numbers of people are mobilised to undertake artistic acts, almost like propaganda.

CG-Q: This process has been complicated. I grew up during the years of the Cultural Revolution, when there were protests and rallies where tens of thousands of people would march through the streets to be part of an event. In one instance, the government wanted everyone

to help dig a new river. After the trench was dug and filled with water, everyone went swimming. It was not a foreign idea to me for everyone to take part in a certain activity. If you give people a powerful concept and a goal to strive for, there is a reason to participate. That said, a propagandist approach is not the intention of my art because I feel it's necessary to have dialogue with the local culture.

Often I initiate dialogues with local communities. In Australia I learnt from Aboriginal elders before creating large-scale gunpowder drawings in collaboration with volunteers from local communities. In that sense, I absorb different energies from different specific locations.

My upbringing was different from that of other artists who trained in fine-art institutes and worked in solitude. I was trained in stage design so I am used to working with a large crew of actors, directors and set designers.

NK: Your 2002 Phaidon monograph is dedicated to your wife: 'I became an artist the day I met her'.² How does love figure in your work?

CG-Q: Love warms me up. Growing up in my homeland I was a lonely boy. I met my girlfriend when I was seventeen, and we would hike up to the mountains and make paintings and sketches of the landscape. I confided in her all my ambitions and aspirations in art, or my dissatisfaction towards society and any unfulfilled goals in my life. She was my confidante and now my wife, my partner in life.

NK: Your recent 'explosion event' on the Seine in Paris for 'Nuit Blanche' is *One night stand, 2013*, a fleeting encounter or momentary physical interlude. Your detonations are live art yet brief and often visible at night. What is the role of the nocturnal, the time outside of work hours where we can dream and imagine, in your incendiary practice?

CG-Q: With pyrotechnics you need light to be able to see the work, but I have also made daytime explosion events such as *Black ceremony, 2011*, which saw 8300 black smoke shells explode across 29,500 square metres of the Gulf Desert in Doha, Qatar. These rely on smoke. At night, however, the lack of light disguises the geographical context where the projects take place, allowing for a more direct relationship between the light from the explosion and the universe.





NK: Your exhibition titles are poetic and utopian: ‘Falling Back to Earth’ (2013–14) at QAGOMA, ‘Ladder to the Sky’ (2012) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and ‘I Want to Believe’ (2008) at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Can you elaborate on these other-worldly evocations?

CG-Q: Sometimes it’s very difficult to make a direct translation from Chinese to English. The title for ‘Falling Back to Earth’ is derived from the fourth-century Chinese poem *Homeward Bound I Go* by Tao Yuanming. It does have a utopian sense of beauty, but at the same time there is a sense of humour or irony. On the surface, the works might appear to be beautiful but the ideas are somewhat melancholic: the ninety-nine animals in *Heritage*, 2013, all have their heads lowered into the pond, so it looks like they are bowing down, and the scene gives the work a somewhat religious sense of sombreness.

My works are complex and not as simple as they appear. I am a complicated person to start with. I have to maintain a childlike sense of curiosity and channel it into my work. That’s probably the reason why my works are popular no matter where they are shown. It doesn’t matter if I am English or Chinese; the artworks resonate with people, reminding them of their inner child.

WITH *TRANSIENT RAINBOW*, 2002. THERE WERE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF SPECTATORS, AND THE RIVERBANKS ALONG THE EAST RIVER IN NEW YORK WERE COMPLETELY PACKED WITH PEOPLE. EVERYONE CAME FOR THIS MERE FIFTEEN SECONDS – A VERY CONCENTRATED EXPERIENCE. SOMETIMES IF YOU PROLONG THE DURATION, PROBLEMS BECOME MORE APPARENT. AN ART HAPPENING THAT TAKES PLACE VERY RAPIDLY AVOIDS LOGISTICAL PROBLEMS. ART IS MY TIME/SPACE TUNNEL SO I CAN DODGE PROBLEMS.

NK: You have articulated the role of failure in your work, especially in relation to the two unrealised APT projects. Are you the proverbial foolish man moving a mountain³ and are you tempted to try another explosion in Brisbane?

CG-Q: Yes, of course the temptation is there because I have some unfinished business with the Brisbane River. Maybe I owe it a one-night stand!

NK: The current exhibition, ‘Falling Back to Earth’, comprises four discrete works that are grounded in landscape and place, partly inspired by your visits to Lamington National Park and Stradbroke Island in Queensland. Do you think you are returning to earth from the heavens?

CG-Q: In the beginning, I did think that I was shifting my focus towards earth. It’s only as I worked more and more on the project that I could feel there was a theme related to the universe. The project discusses humans’ role and position in the greater universe: what is our planet’s destiny?

NK: Has there been an epiphany moment for you as an artist?

CG-Q: When I was growing up my father used to write calligraphy and make paintings, and my grandmother always commented that

I was more talented than my father. My grandmother’s encouragement and praise made me more confident that I would become a good artist.

When did I know I would become an artist? I have always liked flowers and I would buy them to put in a vase. This was a rare and unusual thing to do in 1970s communist China, and I would constantly worry that as an adult I would have to go to work every day. I tried to control my own fate so that I wouldn’t have to work in an office. Somewhere between buying flowers and not wanting to go to work, I decided that I should be an artist.

NK: There is an opulence or spectacle of excess in the huge cost of your explosions that are detonated in a matter of seconds.

CG-Q: With *Transient rainbow*, 2002, there were tens of thousands of spectators, and the riverbanks along the East River in New York were completely packed with people. Everyone came for this mere fifteen seconds – a very concentrated experience. Sometimes if you prolong the duration, problems become more apparent. An art happening that takes place very rapidly avoids logistical problems. Art is my time/space tunnel so I can dodge problems.

NK: What music are you listening to?

CG-Q: I tend to listen to traditional music. On the GOMA radio station, which you can listen to in the museum elevators, I picked songs that I usually hum to myself, like ‘Danny Boy’.

Falling Back to Earth, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 23 November 2013 – 11 May 2014.

1 This interview took place in Brisbane on 22 November 2013.
 2 See Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya and Takashi Serizawa et al., *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2002.
 3 The title of the famous Chinese story ‘Yu Gong Yi Shan’ translates as ‘foolish man moving a mountain’.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
 Cai Ruiqin, *Untitled (matchbox drawings)*, n.d.
 Ink, pen and pencil on cardboard matchboxes,
 dimensions variable
 Courtesy Cai Studio, New York

Cai Guo-Qiang creating an early gunpowder drawing, Quanzhou, China, 1985
 Courtesy Cai Studio, New York

Cai Guo-Qiang, *Nine dragon wall (drawing for dragon or rainbow serpent: a myth glorified or feared: project for extra-terrestrials no. 28)*, 1996, detail
 Nine drawings, spent gunpowder and Indian ink on Japanese paper, each 300 x 200 cm
 Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, collection

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 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Black ceremony*, 2011
 Explosion event commissioned by Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar
 Courtesy Cai Studio, New York
 Photograph Hiro Ihara