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LEGENDS AT WORK



Cai Guo-Qiang

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Careening cars, lit gunpowder, disconcertingly convincing stuffed animals: Much of the work of Chinese-born, New York-based artist Cai Guo-Qiang hovers between violence and retrospection, force and elegance. Cai, 56, immerses viewers in sweeping installations like “I Want to Believe” (2008), for which he suspended nine cars exploding with glittering fluorescent tubes in the atrium of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim museum; he has also lit

gunpowder on canvases and rice paper to create unpredictable, moody scenes. His latest show, “Falling Back to Earth,” on view through May 11 at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art in Australia, is no exception to his dynamic and expansive practice. In the new work “Heritage” (2013), 99 different animals, predatory and peaceful, dip their heads in unison toward a pristine turquoise pond in the middle of a sand-covered gallery. The show also includes

“Head On” (2006), which was inspired by the dismantled but still perceptible cultural partition of the Berlin Wall. The piece is composed of 99 wolves frozen in an airborne wave that crashes into a glass panel. The thoughts informing Cai’s works are as divergent as the art itself: fanciful, political, realistic, ambitious, idealistic. >

Cai Guo-Qiang relaxes at a table in his Manhattan home.



You've compared your gunpowder paintings to poppies—because of their similarly ephemeral beauty and potential danger—and you've compared some of your other installations to traditional Chinese scrolls because of how they unfold. Could you explain this thinking? And how did you come up with the new works for your Queensland show?

Poppies are beautiful, but there is a sense of danger behind them, which in a way is like a gunpowder drawing's qualities. My installations show multiple perspectives and a sense of temporality. Unlike Western paintings, which are more often in the setting of a frame or a window, my works show a temporal sequence—the reader unfolds the work to read its narrative development. For example, as you unfold a scroll, you will first see a person standing on a bridge, and then he will walk to somewhere else, perhaps along the bridge. Sometimes people will read it from the perspective of a village, sometimes from above the skies—there are different perspectives to read this work. It's not just setting one frame.

"Head On" is a good example to illustrate this concept. The audience enters the space through the installation, which is composed of 99 wolves. As they walk along the work, they see the entire process—wolves crashing against the glass piece. The entire temporal sequence of the work is shown, and that is what I value. In "Heritage," the audience walks along the pond and reads this artwork laterally. The lakeshore, in a way, is like the Chinese traditional scroll.

What inspired "Heritage"?

When I went to Queensland several years ago to do a site visit, I realized the place was perfect. There was nothing wrong with it, but that in itself becomes a problem. Then, in 2010, I went there to do another site visit. This time, I went with my wife and young daughter. We went to Stradbroke Island—it was a clear blue lake, and you could see through to the bottom. You could see fallen leaves of various colors. Everything is just so beautiful there. But at a certain stage I suddenly realized that if this place was so perfect as a last paradise, in a way it meant that human beings, and Earth, must be troubled. Otherwise, we would think this whole universe was paradise. That's a starting point where, bit by bit, "Falling Back to Earth" takes shape.

Perspective and narrative are very important in your work. How do you bridge the space between your perspective—the narrative you create as an artist—and what a viewer might see, think, or feel? For whom do you make art?

There's a story I like to tell: People from a small village spent a lot of time conceiving very large firecrackers. But fearing that the explosion of these firecrackers might cause danger to themselves and also the village, they planned

to ship one large string of firecrackers to a hilltop outside the village. So they laid down a very long fuse and lit it slowly. Before the explosive moment, everyone was invited from the nearby villages; friends and family were all invited to view the explosion. Everyone was very self-conscious and nervous, excited about the moment. Eventually that explosion took place. That's a story that I, as a little boy, was very interested to see happen. I make the work that I want to see and that has long been on my mind. I think about it like a child, like setting up a trap for myself.

I've been thinking and planning that story, but I haven't realized it yet. Perhaps someday in the future I might make it into a reality. When I conceive a project, on the one hand I create something that I as a little boy hope to see, but on the other hand I will incorporate serious social, political, or economic issues. Different people might read different aspects from the same project. For example, in "Heritage," some people will read the Noah's Ark story in it, and some people will read religious solemnity, rituals, and the power of God. Some others will feel a poetic beauty. The governments of Japan and Korea and China have been quarreling over whom the small islands on the sea belong to. But if Asian people see "Heritage," they will rethink the peaceful coexistence of the three countries. Basically, people will read the work differently.

For me, I don't really care that much [what people think]. I myself just care about making those firecrackers into a reality [from my perspective] as a little boy. But you have to believe that if this little boy really insists on seeing the firecrackers happen, there must be a reason behind it. Just like you really hope to see hundreds of tons of water in that gallery space in that museum. You want to see hundreds of animals lower their heads and drink from the pond. There must be reasons behind it. Other artists might create works for the sake of reasons, while for me, I create works and behind them lay the reasons. Grand issues are the outcomes of my work, but not the objectives of it.

A lot of your work is monumental in scale, but I also read in an interview that you were inspired by paintings your father made on matchboxes. Can you tell me about the movement between scales in your mind?

In a way, the matchboxes are like the seal created by the Chinese craftsman. And the idea is that within this finite space lies infinity. When I was little, my dad would always put me on his lap, and I would sit there while he would roll cigarettes. And he'd create paintings on small matchboxes, which featured seagulls and waterfalls and forests and mountains. Very beautiful and grand scenery. I would ask, "Where is that?" My dad would answer, "It's just our hometown." Later on, when I grew up a little bit, I went back to our hometown with my dad to pay homage at the grave of my grandfather. At that time, I realized what my hometown was really about. There weren't that many seagulls or grand mountains; I could

(OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM) Cai's "Heritage" (2013), installed at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art in Australia. "Head On" (2006), also installed at the gallery.



just see small hills and a few gulls. No falling water at all, no large forests. It was very different from what my father portrayed on those matchboxes. At a later stage, I realized that as an artist, my dad was portraying what was inside his heart. Not really what he saw, but what was inside his heart. It wasn't realistic painting; it was something to portray his feelings. From this small painting on a matchbox came something far bigger and grander. This ties to my work: In that finite gallery space, I aim to present something far grander, to convey infinity within a finite space. It wasn't until recently that I realized one more function of the matchbox: It can light up things. So I can use it to explode things.

What was the genesis of your gunpowder works? How did they begin?

Back in my hometown, Quanzhou, I tried to create contemporary art. I would look around to see what could be used. Socially, it was a bit oppressive and there weren't that many open-minded or outgoing things going on. And for me, my character is sort of timid. I'm not that bold, I'm a bit of a controlling person. So I'm thinking, What can be used to create artworks? At that time, I also saw around me lots of factories that manufactured firecrackers. So I thought the gunpowder might be a great medium for me to break away from my own character. That out-of-control freedom makes gunpowder an appropriate medium for me.

Reasons related to social context, like gunpowder being oppressive or something, faded out. Of course, I went abroad and was in a new context, but what has been attracting me to gunpowder is the unexpectedness.

What's the greatest challenge in creating these works—and also in creating any large-scale work that aims for infinity?

When making the gunpowder drawings, I really care about the relationship between my own body and the work, because I have to carefully design how to interact with the large-scale paper, how to splash the paper, how to exert pressure on the paper with cardboard, and explode the fuse. It's basically an interaction between my physical body and this sheet of paper. On the other hand, this is a project that really involves lots of contributions from lots of people, because I myself won't be able to put out the fire on a drawing that's 3 to 4 meters long. It's a large sheet, so once the fuse is ignited, I definitely need to put it out; otherwise the sheet will just be burned up. I need the help of volunteers to be ready once the explosive moment is gone.

The explosion event is really a public ceremony. As you can envision, hundreds of thousands of people might be present to view that grand moment. But even then, it could be easily reduced to a mediocre ceremony, without artistic value. The trick and the danger is really how to present it with artistic ideas and concepts behind the work.

You probably have heard of "One Night Stand," the pyrotechnic event I did last October on the Seine river in Paris. I seldom create works for the sake of creating fireworks; I always just employ the medium of fireworks or explosions to create my artistic values. For example, for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, at the opening ceremony, I created 29 large footprints that exploded and walked on the sky. "One Night Stand" was about how to present fireworks to mimic the process of lovemaking, from pre-orgasm to orgasm to post-orgasm, in a way that I can make the audience feel the sentiments of the physical body and emotions, the heat of the moment. I invited 50 couples from around the world to be a part of the work. When they felt satisfied that night, they would press a button that triggered the fireworks display. So in a way, they controlled part of the artwork.

Do you have any routines or rituals in your daily practice that help inspire you?

At the beginning of the day and the end of the day, I browse websites to check the latest updates regarding politics or economic issues or social issues. I don't really pay that much attention to the happenings of the art world. I keep this habit probably because I need to set aside a section of time to stay away from my daily art-related work. You see those non-art-related aspects actually contribute to my art creation. And a very personal habit is that before sleep I usually do a massage all over my body, from head to foot, from my palms to the soles of my feet. I do it myself in a space where I can see the sky. Last night, the moon was so bright; it was very beautiful. It's actually a conversation between me and my body before I go to sleep.

When you make new work, how do you begin? What do you start with?

Generally, the creating process is roughly divided into three major phases. Let's go back to the "One Night Stand" project as an example: The Parisian government will send me a message inviting me to do a project for them. Usually, within 10 minutes, I will have some ideas. Otherwise, I might need another day to think about it. During the day, I will read to search for more information regarding the country and the city and to see what it's all about. And then, whether I have an idea or not, the next stage would be a site visit. I will spend a week to 10 days in the country to do a bit of traveling and to feel the land, to eat the local food, to talk with the local people, and to be attracted by lots of interesting stuff. If I go with some preconceived ideas, then the site visit will be an opportunity for me to confirm my ideas. If I go without any ideas, it's a time for me to feel new things and to come up with something. Sometimes the country might be very distant, very far away from where I live, and then perhaps the sense of distance might be an inspiration for me. It's not a carefully designed process. It's not like I spend lots of

energy and attention working on the ideas. Basically, I have a methodology of myself, and based on it, I will start to conceive my ideas. One more thing is how to make myself transparent, to make myself a blank sheet of paper, which means lots of possibilities to take on new things.

Also, I seldom visit art museums. But when I'm invited to do a site visit to check out the museums, the moment I enter the gallery space I will have lots of discoveries. Sometimes I can envision what should be created within the space, and then I will spend some other time to think of what those things might be.

You've lived in New York City for the past 18 years. Do you consider this home now?

China is my homeland, but while here, this is home.

Cai's "Eucalyptus" (2013) at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art.

