

SECTION EDITOR: NORMAN J. PASTOREK, MD

# Toward a Global Beauty

## *The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang*

**A**S ORIENTAL AND OCCIDENTAL ideals of beauty seem to converge ever faster, it may be appropriate to reflect on a celebrated artist who bridged cultural boundaries to achieve a global aesthetic vision. Cai Guo-Qiang (1957-) is perhaps the most recognized living Chinese artist today, and the breadth of his work extends across many media to include, besides his well-known gunpowder drawings (**Figure**), large-scale pyrotechnics for site-specific projects: a Chinese junk boat replete with herbal medicines afloat in Venice's canals, wooden shipwrecked ruins, sculptural rock formations encircling a hot tub with live human occupants, paper lanterns, and patterned Issey Miyake dresses. Although Cai's works may seem entirely estranged from his Chinese origins at first glance, they are intimately derived from the landscape of his youth—even as they reflect the cross-cultural currents imparted by his expatriation to Japan in 1986 and his residence since 1995, New York City.

Born in Quanzhou, China, in 1957, the period of tumultuous change in which he was raised would resonate both in his chosen media and the artistic themes he pursued. This port city, the terminus of the famed Silk Road at the southeastern corner of China, is the closest to Taiwan. The haunting echo of artillery fire that volleyed across the strait in his childhood informed his use of gunpowder, an explosive medium in his art and a Chinese invention. His city was also well known for the manufacture of fireworks, featured in his many staged pyrotechnic

events across the world. From 1949 to 1979, the Communist regime narrowed the scope of acceptable art to folk art, traditional brush paintings, and Socialist-Realist themed works. During Cai's formative years, between the ages of 9 and 19 years, the repressive Cultural Revolution was in full swing, further strangulating artistic freedom and stifling educational endeavors. His family was no exception, and it bore its share of tyranny as his father worked as an artist-scholar. His father's work in traditional Chinese calligraphy and inked paintings casting umbrage over him, Cai decided to embark on a different, personal odyssey to explore Western concepts of art and culture. He embraced diverse artistic disciplines, from music and martial arts to drawing, painting, and filmmaking. He also became intrigued with theater design, and, in Quanzhou and later in Shanghai, aimed "to learn about the use of light and space, to work with unusual materials, and to experiment with performance."<sup>1</sup> This experience with theater was later reflected in his exuberant multimedia art. He also fled the cosmopolitan confines of southwestern China for the rugged, unexplored frontier of the northwest. During these sojourns he would begin his love affair with nature, and, by visiting the Qin and Han ruins—a cultural legacy deemed irrelevant by the Communist regime—make manifest his profound respect for the ancient Chinese civilization.

In 1984, Cai began to explore the unique properties of Chinese "fire medicine," or gunpowder, exploded in a controlled fashion on paper. Although he completed many

such paintings in his native land, it was not until he settled in Japan that he became internationally recognized for these expressive pieces. Aside from the purely aesthetic value of his gunpowder creations, Cai sought to delve into the cosmic link that gunpowder suggested, which he likened to the creative and primordial force of the Big Bang. Cai's *Projects for Extraterrestrials*, large-scale works set principally in the open air, were intended to be viewed from the vantage of outer space. In his art, he has sought to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, east and west, civilization and nature, past and future, to achieve a universal dialectic. In his famous sculptural piece, *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996), Cai wedds these opposing themes in a multilayered way: the work consists of a train of inflated sheepskins driven by Toyota engines, spanning a distance of 200 meters. The "dragon" in the title refers to the vibrant Asian economy that dominated the last decade and was deemed a threat, albeit falsely, by the "crying wolf" of the West. The second half of the title alludes to the historical figure of Khan, whose ambitions extended to threaten the Eastern and the Western world of the 12th century. The past is also linked to the present in the artwork by Asia's old mode of transportation, the raft, powered by the current method, the automobile engine. Similarly, Cai often exploits both the dominating images of popular Western media, eg, billboards and magazine advertisements, and traditional Eastern materials, eg, bamboo, gunpowder, and herbal medicines. Cai's art is so firmly rooted in the

cultures of both East and West that it serves to separate, bridge, and ultimately transcend these cultural contexts to arrive at a unique global aesthetic vision.

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**REFERENCE**

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1. Friis-Hansen D. Towards a new methodology in art. In: *Cai Guo-Qiang*. London, England: Phaidon Press; 2002:38-39.



Cai Guo-Qiang  
(1957-). *Self-portrait*,  
1985. Gunpowder and  
oil paint on canvas.  
167 × 118 cm.  
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