

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, AUGUST 15, 1997

ART REVIEW

Playing to Whoever In Distant Galaxies

By HOLLAND COTTER

THE Chinese-born installation artist Cai Guo-Qiang, who is presenting his first American solo show at the Queens Museum of Art, is known to many New Yorkers only as a dark-horse finalist for the Hugo Boss Prize awarded by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum last season. His profile is higher in Europe and Asia, however, thanks in part to his participation in two successive Venice Biennales, this year's and the 1995 edition.

Mr. Cai, who is 39 and has lived in New York since 1995, has a keen theatrical flair for multimedia spectacle in which history, politics and metaphysics blend. His most extravagant works, titled "Projects for Extraterrestrials," are site-specific

outdoor pieces, many of which use carefully orchestrated sequences of explosions to create evanescent and often symbolic patterns.

In Hiroshima, for example, the artist ignited a spiraling line of firecrackers and helium-filled balloons to produce an illusion of destructive fire being sucked back into the earth. In Johannesburg, he detonated gunpowder explosives across the facade of a working power station in an emblematic replay of anti-apartheid guerrilla tactics. In the chill, lunar landscape of the Gobi Desert, he added his own extension to the Great Wall of China in the form of a six-mile-long chain of nocturnal flares.

Each of these installations owes a profound (and acknowledged) debt to the ephemeral, time-obsessed earth sculptures of Americans like

Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Walter De Maria in the 1970's. But Mr. Cai's projects, nominally pitched to an intergalactic audience and laced with cross-cultural references, have a peculiarly contemporary flavor as they veer between the absurd and the visionary, between barely suppressed violence and New Age mooniness.

So far, none of the artist's large-scale plein-air pieces have been realized in the United States. But the Queens Museum exhibition, titled

Blending history,
politics and
metaphysics.

"Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century" and organized by Jane Farver, gives a persuasive sense of what he's about.

The show has several components, each of interest. They include a series of mural-like drawings made from gunpowder burns on paper; a charming scale model of an early proposal for the Queens Museum that proved unworkable (it called for, among other things, a full-size United States Navy PT boat); and a

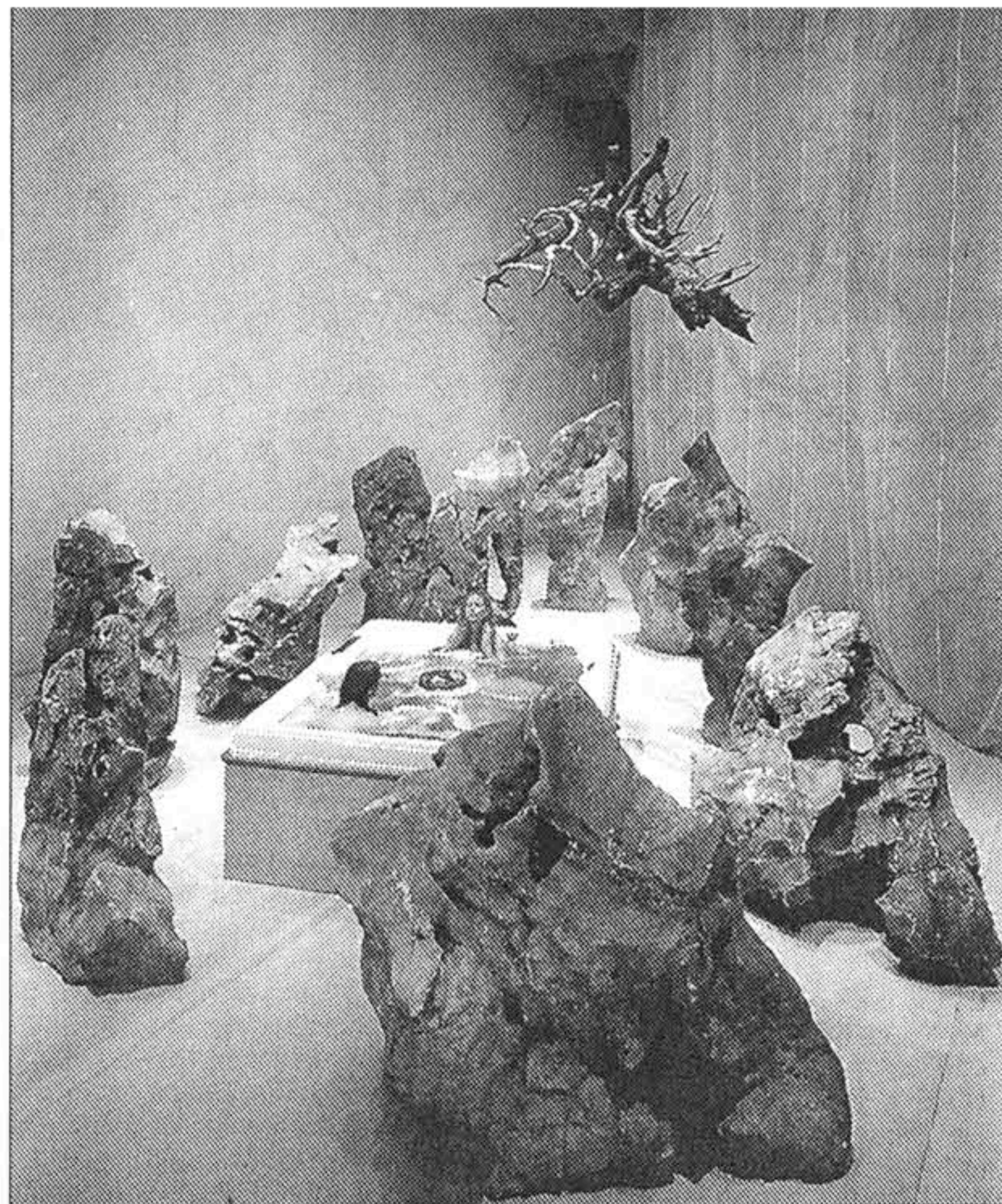
riveting 20-minute film documenting the "Projects for Extraterrestrials" that have been executed to date.

The centerpiece, though, is the elaborate installation from which the show takes its title. The museum's main gallery has been hung with a tentlike curtain of opaque white cotton netting. Enclosed within this is an arrangement of so-called Taihusu rocks, limestone boulders massaged into bizarre shapes by the waters of the Chinese lake from which they were dredged. Among the stones is set a Western-style hot tub filled with warm water, and above it hangs the gnarled, serpentine root of a banyan tree.

Together, these elements make a witty, updated version of the traditional Chinese scholar's garden, in which opposing forms — natural and artificial, fluid and solid, domestic

An old Chinese
garden, updated
with a hot tub.

and cosmological — are combined in harmonious balance. (The Astor Court in the Metropolitan Museum of



Hiro Ihara/Queens Museum of Art

A portion of Cai Guo-Qiang's installation work "Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century," at the Queens Museum of Art.

Art's Chinese galleries is a local model of the type.)

As in much of Mr. Cai's work, the primary message here seems to be one of healing, psychic and social. The rocks have been configured according to Taoist principles to facilitate the flow of vital energy through the space. Herbal ingredients prescribed for a restorative bath are at hand near the tub. And the tub itself, communal in size, is a metaphor for the invigorating "melting pot" — which for some immigrants also proves to be a baptism by fire — that is New York City today.

Despite the wealth of resonant ideas it sparks, "Cultural Melting Bath" has some problems. Within the static environment of the gallery, Mr. Cai's mercurial, essentially gestural sensibility tends to stiffen up. And as is often true in assemblage-based installations, the work's discrete components never entirely gell visually, leaving a final product more rewarding to think about than to actually experience.

(A relaxed, meditative, audience-participation-style soak in the hot tub might help in this regard, but for various practical reasons, the bath will be used only a few times during the run of the show.)

Still, if Mr. Cai's work proves resistant to downsizing, that in itself says something about the reach of

his conceptual ambitions. (He even has plans for installations on the moon.) And one catches a brief but vivid impression of their breadth in the video of the "Extraterrestrial" projects. Each event is represented only by a short clip and an identifying caption, but whether the image is of an immense dragon-shaped kite burning in midair or of a rippling network of light etched like a pictograph against the earth, the results are both preposterous and beautiful enough to be hypnotic.

"Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century" by Cai Guo-Qiang remains at the Queens Museum of Art, New York City Building, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, through Oct. 26. The exhibition is part of the Queens Museum's "Contemporary Currents" series, sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc.