

THE ART WORLD

GUNPOWDER PLOTS

Cai Guo-Qiang at the Guggenheim.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Cai Guo-Qiang, the Chinese installation and pyrotechnic artist, recently told me that as a child he had a recurrent dream of a fireworks display in Tiananmen Square at which no one was present—no crew, no audience—except him. Keep that in mind while viewing Cai's retrospective at the Guggenheim. It might tip the balance of your feelings in his favor, as it did mine. A whiff of eccentric passion complicates the character of his art, which is strenuously theatrical and weirdly political (with ambiguous stands on Mao Zedong and terrorism), calculated in content (East-West tropes are a specialty), and ad hoc in form. It also disarms my prejudice against that sort of work, as being a product more of institutional programs—biennials, inevitably—than of plausible human interests and desires. Cai, who is fifty and has had a studio in New York since 1995, is one of several international art stars—others are Olafur Eliasson, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and, as a grandfatherly pioneer, Christo—whose personal wealth likely includes epic accumulations of frequent-flyer miles. He is in charge of the visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies at the Beijing Olympics, and he has installed works and orchestrated events—usually explosive ones—in dozens of cities, from Tokyo, where he lived from 1986 to 1995, after leaving China, to Santa Fe. Such artists belong less to an art world than to a travelling art circus, with no coherent audience and thus scant purchase for critical discussion. They reduce us all to random faces in crowds of strangers. Is there value in that? There's truth. Globalization, cultural as well as economic, has advanced beyond transcending former centers to discountenancing them. Cai negotiates this boundaryless condition with comfort and élan.

Here is some of what you will behold at the Guggenheim—besides many drawings made with ignited gunpow-

der, which suggest blurry, brown scroll paintings—and what the catalogue says it signifies: "Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows" (1998), the excavated hulk of an old fishing boat that bristles with some three thousand arrows and flies the Chinese flag. Inspired by the legend of a general who replenished his army's ammunition by drawing fire to dummy soldiers, it "examines the dynamics of China's emergence as an international leader." It's quite grand. "New York's Rent Collection Courtyard" is the on-site, temporary re-creation (repeating one that earned Cai the International Award of the Venice Biennale in 1999), in clay, by ten Chinese artists, of a vast socialist-realist sculptural tableau, from 1965. Cai intends "to bring the tradition of figurative sculpture into the arena of contemporary art, while also commenting on the fate of art under the manipulation of political ideology." Both historically and aesthetically, there's a necrophilic feel to "Courtyard"—and a fascination. "An Arbitrary History: River" (2001) is a serpentine, wtertight bamboo trough in which one viewer at a time may pilot a rawhide boat past assorted works by Cai. Among other things, these works refer "to the healing power of acupuncture," symbolize "the marginalization of world religions," and evoke the artist's "youthful romanticization of Mao." (One piece incorporates live snakes, another live canaries.) "Inopportune: Stage One," a revision of a 2004 work, features nine white Chevrolet Metros—six are suspended willy-nilly in the Guggenheim's atrium, two are on the floor, and one is high on the ramp—pierced with flashing electric light rods. It relates "to acts of terrorism"—car bombs, obviously—"offering up the contradiction between a spectator's abhorrence of violence and attraction to the abstract beauty of some violent images." The choice of American cars seems satirical, suggesting a tour-



Cai with part of "Head On" (2006), an installation of ninety-nine life-size wolf sculptures. Photograph by Ethan Levitas.

ist's patronizing enthusiasm for quaint native handicraft.

Talking with Cai, an elegant and pleasant man, gave me a feeling that I've got used to in international art circles lately: that of being provincial, of blinking in the face of an intricate sophistication that is grounded elsewhere. After thirteen years in New York, Cai still uses a Chinese interpreter, and he is disconcertingly serene when discussing the Cultural Revolution, which he experienced in privileged circumstances. In the relatively unroiled port town of Quanzhou, on the Taiwan Strait, his father, a Communist Party member, worked at a bookstore and provided officials—and his son—with banned books. An amateur artist (a handsome scroll painting by him hangs in the show), he initiated Cai into traditional Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy. Cai remembers reading "Death of a Salesman" and "Waiting for Godot" at a time when most books other than Mao's little red one were in bad odor. He participated in propaganda activities while evading *xia-xiang*, the forced dispersal of urban intellectuals to rural areas. (Having studied stage design, Cai managed to obtain a student visa to Japan, with help from a well-connected friend, and he launched his career there.)

Cai remains sanguine about the Maoist slogan "to revolt is justified," meaning, in his words, quoted in the catalogue, "Anything that disrupts the usual and consensual rule or law is considered good." Maoism, he says, "seeped into my mentality, consciously and unconsciously." Nor is he defensive about indulging aesthetically contemplative viewpoints on terrorism—as in producing a fun spectacle about car bombs. He strikes me as innocent of political animus; his detachment seems broadly philosophical—Taoist, more or less. Cai has made works addressed, he declares, to extraterrestrials, and there is about him something of the impassive visitor from another world.

No actual fireworks (which have been part of Cai's life since his childhood) will attend the retrospective—only videos of past performances. (My favorite involves a house that Cai constructed in Berlin in 2006 and then artfully exploded and burned; the effect is an exquisite balance of fearsomeness and beauty.) He is the

innovative master of a medium—the art of making nothing out of something, suddenly—that is far more interesting than anything that monotonously ooh-ah commercial fireworks displays allow. Cai proves the creative potency of horizontally oriented sequential explosions, along the ground or, in one case, across an expanse of sea. He has developed a poetry of daytime displays, with tight puffs of black smoke. He understands gunpowder as Velázquez understood oil paint. "There is an instant of suspension" when fire reaches an explosive core, he has noted. "It is a very blank and quiet moment." Cai has ticked off the emotional effects proper to fireworks: "connections to the cosmos, nature, society, glory, and heroic sensation." He objectifies those thrills, in consciousness, even as he triggers them. The payoff is philosophical indeed, giving concrete reference to abstract thought on meanings of destruction. "No destruction, no construction," Cai told me, paraphrasing Mao. That's a dicey sentiment, considering the tyrannical source. Filtered through Cai, however, it evokes a state of mind capacious enough to smile benignly upon every possible contradiction.

In China, collaborating with the Olympics has been denounced by another star artist, Ai Weiwei, a fitfully brilliant conceptualist in many mediums, who worked with the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron on the design of the dazzling "bird's nest" stadium, before withdrawing from the project in protest against Communist Party policies. Ai, who grew up in a reeducation camp in northwest China, to which his poet father had been banished, is a firebrand for democracy whose frequent provocations include countering the 2000 Shanghai Biennial with an exhibition not altogether subtly entitled "Fuck Off." His public profile in China is kept low by censorship, but apparently without check to his career as an artist. Cai, who seems to move smoothly between officialdom and the avant-garde, has declined to comment on Ai's position. How much do we not yet understand about Chinese internal politics? How high is the sky? ♦

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