



## TIME TUNNEL FIONA BRADLEY

*If we surpass the speed of light we could see the past again. And yet we are the inheritors of the origin of the universe and we therefore continue to carry within ourselves the signals emitted at that time. In this way, I think we possess the capacity to go beyond the speed of light. [...] I'll draw a diagram: here you have visible space-time, there invisible space-time; it is at the intersection of these two spaces that I try to situate myself. The artist must find himself in the tunnel of time.*

Cai Guo-Qiang

*"The past," the professor said, "is an object you feel in the dark..."*

The opening line of James Robertson's story *Shadows*, written for this publication and as a companion piece to Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder portrait of the writer Arthur Conan Doyle, intuitively evokes much of the power of the artist's work. The deliberate confusion of past, present and future; of subject and object; of the tangible and the intangible; characterises a practice whose conceptual preoccupations are remarkably consistent, yet whose physical manifestations take many forms and encompass many different media. Whether extending the Great Wall of China by 10,000 metres in the middle of the Gobi Desert; firing a rainbow of fireworks over the East River for the Museum of Modern Art in New York; redesigning the city of Mito according to Feng Shui principles or sailing a traditional Chinese junk into Venice, Cai seeks always to find a place for the humanity of the individual, and to connect that individual to others in a chain of possibility that unites time with space.

In 1991, Cai made *The Vague Border at the Edge of Time/Space Project*, a drawing produced according to the principles of manipulated chance now common in his work. The artist placed gunpowder along the outline of his shadow as it happened to fall on a sheet of paper, then ignited it. The result – a dynamic sequence of burned and scorched outlines – was identified by the artist in an accompanying text as a space 'where material and spirit are reunited'.

The reuniting of matter and spirit, and the attempt in the present to tune into the past, are the twin impulses of *Life Beneath the Shadow*, the project commissioned by

The Fruitmarket Gallery for the 2005 Edinburgh Art Festival and documented in this publication. The full meaning of the last word of the project's title encompasses both shades, ghostly echoes of past lives, and shadows, testament to present corporeal physicality. *Life Beneath the Shadow* seeks on the one hand to entice and entangle the spirits of the past in the materiality of the present, and on the other to make a space in which to make sense of some of the threatening complexities of contemporary urban life.

The project has several parts. In the first, a grove of plantain trees invades the Gallery. Human in scale, the trees are believed in the Fujian part of China the artist is from, to attract human, particularly female ghosts. To enhance their powers, and to confuse the expected future of their activity with the past inhabited by the spirits they seek, the trees' leaves are inscribed with messages of written accounts of ghost sightings – ghost fragments, as they are called by James Robertson, the writer collaborating with Cai on the project who sourced the accounts. The trees are bathed in simulated moonlight, the fragments barely discernible as the visitor moves through the space, picking the writing out of the gloom, drawn deeper and deeper into the grove and into a state of suggestible introspection from where the experience of the grove becomes more and more ghostly. The trees are filmed overnight on the Gallery's surveillance cameras to record any disturbance, and the footage is screened alongside the trees so that the visitor might scan it for visual evidence of any ghostly presence they may themselves have picked up.

A second part of the installation displays new gunpowder drawings under a web of hovering Chinese joss dolls. Made to symbolise the material world being left behind in death, and burned as part of Chinese traditional cremation ceremonies, the dolls are stuck with needles, invoking simultaneously the malevolence of voodoo ritual and the more positive benefits of acupuncture. The dolls are installed in clusters and singly, crowds of dispossessed souls, and solitary, melancholy figures. Shades of people passed away, they cast their own shadows on the drawings beneath.

Created in the same way as Cai Guo-Qiang's earlier self portrait, the eleven drawings installed under the web of paper dolls are part of a group of thirteen portraits made by the artist for *Life Beneath the Shadow*. Their subjects are all Scottish, and are notorious for their connection with the world of ghosts and ghost stories for which Scotland, and Edinburgh in particular, has a rich reputation. The portraits represent the writers Arthur Conan Doyle and James Hogg; seers, magicians and witches Michael Scott, Issobell Gowdie, the Brahan Seer, the Lady of Lawers, Aleister Crowley, Bald Agnes and Major Weir; the writer and religious reformer Hugh Miller; the minister and writer on the existence of fairies Robert Kirk; the ruthless judge Bluidy Mackenzie, whose mausoleum is believed to be haunted, and Little Annie, the ghost of Mary King's Close in Edinburgh's medieval Old Town.

The subjects were chosen by Cai in collaboration with James Robertson and James Holloway, the Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, who supplied the artist with the names and biographies of possible candidates. Several of the people depicted in the portraits have no recorded likeness, and Cai's is the first attempt to capture one. The artist speaks of his activity in terms of rescue and recuperation – a desire, particularly in the case of the unquiet souls who are reputed to continue to haunt Edinburgh – to lay the spirits of these individuals to rest by resurrecting an image of their material form. His drawings respond to what is known about each individual, sometimes very little, sometimes a great deal. In making his imaginative portraits, the artist drew on





written biographies, reprinted in the back of this publication. From the written word, likenesses were called into being. In a cyclical process, James Robertson then returned them back to words, writing new ghost stories to be read alongside the portraits.

The portraits are a mixture of close ups of faces and more narrative, figurative summaries of past lives. James Hogg, 'The Ettrick Shepherd', responsible, in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, for one of the most spine-chilling novels in the history of Scottish literature, glares balefully out of a dark cloud of gunpowder. The features of his face, like those of the devil of whom he so eloquently writes, disappear into emptiness if you scrutinise him too closely. The Lady of Lawers, a seeress, is empty-headed and dark-eyed, her thoughts and visions radiating outwards towards the future. The form of Robert Kirk is less easily distinguished, but he appears at least to have summoned to him the fairies with which he was reputed to consort.

Some of the portraits make reference to their subjects' violent deaths. Bald Agnes, accused of being a witch, was stripped, shaved and tortured before being put to death by strangulation and then burnt. Cai gives her a very beautiful necklace of ephemeral fire, transfiguring her through the manner of her death. Major Weir was a respected officer in the Covenanting Army, known for stalking about in a long black cloak, a steeple hat and carrying a staff, discovered after his death to be carved with the heads of grinning satyrs. His confession to incest and implication in witchcraft shocked seventeenth-century Edinburgh, and he was burnt at the stake while his sister was hanged as his accomplice. In Cai's portrait, we see the black Major leaning on his stick, as he is reported to do in his regular hauntings of the city. Jean, his sister, is a pale ghost at his side, conceptually as well as literally consumed by the fire that engulfed her brother.

Cai Guo-Qiang has often spoken of the simultaneously creative and destructive nature of gunpowder. His gunpowder drawings burn form on to paper, making images by violently compromising the support on which they are made. In these portraits, the oxymoron inherent in this method of working is reinforced by the relevance of the subject matter – burning on to paper an image of an individual burnt at the stake has a terrible poignancy. Thus the silently screaming effigy at the heart of Issobell Gowdie's portrait.

Gunpowder is a source of power, itself fundamental to the operation of Cai's work. The artist seeks often to harness power from elsewhere, from gunpowder, from nature or, a strongly Chinese proposition crucial to the operation of traditional martial arts, from one's enemies. In this project, though gunpowder is the principal agent of power, the fragile paper joss dolls seem to be its conceptual embodiment, hovering as they do between the material and spirit worlds, taking up a position in the space beneath the shadow. To reinforce the power of the dolls, and to emphasise the part they play in the exhibition, Cai staged a burning of them in the Gallery to complete the installation. Having stuck several hundred dolls with needles, he readied them in heaps on the Gallery floor. He used some to make an effigy of himself on the wall, and set under this effigy a fire pit filled with the remaining dolls. This he set on fire, stirring the flames until they licked the effigy, setting it alight in a burst of white flames. A symbolic cremation, the performance left the residue of the burning on the Gallery wall, a ghostly, burnt echo of the artist, an insubstantial shade keeping watch over the exhibition. *Burning Dolls* dramatically opposes Cai's attempt to bring the subjects of his portraits back to life, his determination metaphorically to reverse their passing from this world to the next. In *Burning Dolls*, he destroys his own image. In the portraits, he uses gunpowder to give his subjects new life.

Eleven portraits hang beneath and between the joss dolls in The Fruitmarket Gallery. The remaining two portraits are displayed in a new installation in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, alongside heads of convicted and executed murderers, selected by the artist from the collection of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, on long term loan to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Phrenologists believed that the outward appearance of a person's head expressed the mental faculties and personality of that individual. The faith they placed in likeness is perhaps echoed in Cai's attempt to recuperate his lost souls through making their portraits, using fire to resurrect, rather than consume, the material body, or at least an imaginative simulacrum of it.

The ghosts which haunt the installations of *Life Beneath the Shadow* exist themselves under a shadow – that of the three black rainbows exploded over Edinburgh Castle at the start of the exhibition. *Black Rainbow: Explosion Project for Edinburgh* was conceived, like the similar rainbows Cai has fired in Valencia and is planning in Thailand, as a dark omen in the daytime, an image of immense and ominous beauty, springing over the city to symbolise the increased threat under which the world currently lives. Art opens up a space in which to contemplate and through which to try to make sense of real events. In firing a black rainbow, a macabre inversion of the universal symbol of peace, into the sky over the castle, Cai uses one of the signifiers of global terror poetically to protest against it. Fighting fire with fire, he unites the creative and destructive powers of gunpowder in a moment of pure visual force. Searing an image on the mind and memory, he creates a powerfully eloquent new space.

Gunpowder, discovered in China during experiments in alchemy, is itself an alchemical agent – it transforms one substance into another. Taking place in a split second, yet creating a lasting visual impression, each explosion blasts, in the artist's understanding of it, a tunnel through time. *Life Beneath the Shadow*, in all its complex parts, seeks perhaps to create such a tunnel in order metaphorically to turn back time, drawing the past into the present to offer a subtle commentary on the transient fragility of human life.

