

Inopportune

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On arrival at Cai Guo-Qiang's four-part installation *Inopportune* in MASS MoCA's Building 5, you descend into a very large, rectangular gallery from a raised landing. Dazzling, beautiful light suffuses the space, washing over every surface. Hundreds of long transparent rods pulsing with colored light thrust out from identical white cars that hang from the ceiling at vertiginous angles in a long arc down the center of the gallery. As you move further into the gallery, it becomes clear that there are nine cars, the first and last of which rest on the floor, which is lifted off the ground only slightly. Bright white lights race out of it to convey the detonation. From there, the position of the cars become more acrobatic, and the lights move through hot reds and oranges, pulsing quickly in cars three and four, to a full range of fantasy fireworks colors – pinks, greens, violets – bursting out in all directions from the middle cars. For the final two cars in the air, the lights slide into purple and indigo, which Cai describes as “dream colors,” moving at an increasingly meditative pace. The deep indigo light tubes sweep out of the last airborne car like graceful wings, allowing the car to glide to a safe and gentle landing, quite different from its violent launch. The fact that the ninth car is not destroyed, but lands safely, unaltered, at the end, implies a closed and repeatable circuit. Time and space are conflated here; walking from one end of the gallery to the other, you move forward through time, and the pace of your walking controls the pace of the explosion, as if in a dream.

At the end of the long gallery containing this strange, spectacular, evocative installation, you enter a low, dark space with a video projected in a long horizontal format. Nine feet high and 35 feet long, the projection, titled *Illusion*, is big enough to envelope you. The scene is Times Square at night, pulsing with glittering neon, bustling traffic and traffic noise, and crowds of pedestrians, who, in the center of the projection, are nearly life-sized. Into this scene from the left floats a ghostly car like the ones in the preceding gallery. It follows the flow of traffic but appears “pasted” on top of the underlying action in Times Square, quite stylized and obviously fake. After a few seconds, sparks start to fly. Fireworks shoot out of the car, first just a few, then, as the car reaches the center of the projection, in giant bursts of color, light, and noise that obliterate the car. Gradually the explosions recede and the car disappears from the screen on the right. The people on the sidewalks and in the densely packed cars – and even a mounted policeman – are oblivious to what is happening right in front of them. Again as in a dream, you alone can see the explosion. In 90 short seconds, the car enters, explodes, and

disappears, and then the video begins again, so that the car reenters continually. Passing behind the projection screen, which bisects the square room, you find the actual car that was used in filming the video, loaded with spent fireworks and badly charred, real evidence of your apparition.

Exiting this low, dark gallery of mesmerizing video into a stairway, you climb to a mezzanine gallery that affords an overview of the large gallery with the cars and lights. An expansive drawing – nearly 20 feet long and 12 feet high – hangs from the back wall of the gallery. The large circle that dominates the center of the untitled drawing was made by exploding gunpowder on the surface of the heavy paper. Silhouettes of nine cars are equally spaced around the circle, their ghostly outlines burned into the paper. Cai began making drawings with gun powder in 1984, a practice he has pursued intermittently since then and for which he is well known. The gunpowder drawing for *Inopportune*, as well as many other projects, serves as a poetic proposal, encapsulating the conceptual essence of the installation as a whole.

You pass back through all you have seen before to enter the final gallery, which, like the first, is long and narrow, though not so large. Here, you climb a few stairs to find your view is blocked by the back of a large theatrical prop representing a classical Chinese landscape; you see its two-by-four frame and the rough edges of its papier-mâché covering. This strange backstage sight highlights the artificiality and theatricality of the dramatic installation just beyond it. Nine realistic tigers, made of fiberglass and covered with meticulously painted hide, are pierced by hundreds of arrows and hang from the ceiling in various dynamic poses. In fear, surprise, pain, or belligerence, they crouch, leap, and writhe. They move in the opposite direction of the cars, which are in the gallery parallel to this one.

Cai has said his thinking about the work was shaped by the story of *Wu Song the Tiger Slayer*, taken from a Chinese literary classic, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, also variously known as *Tales of the Water Margin* and *All Men are Brothers*. Set in the final years of the Song Dynasty (1101-1125), it tells the tales of virtuous men

and women who were forced to become “bandits” chiefly due to an oppressive and corrupt society. Its themes of heroism, fraternity, honor, justice, and courage are well known to Chinese schoolchildren. Wu Song was a bandit who passed through a village that was terrorized by a man-eating tiger. In a moment of sudden courage, he decided to hunt down the marauding tiger: fortifying himself with spirits, Wu Song ventured into the mountain. To his great surprise, he was able to kill the tiger and thus save the village. From this inopportune encounter, the character has become the paragon of heroism in China. Of course, the Chinese are not the only people who once equated killing tigers, lions, and certain other wild animals with courage and strength. Cai was greatly affected by an ancient Egyptian image of the pharaohs hunting lions. But during Cai’s lifetime, the way society regards the killing of tigers has completely changed. Killing a tiger today is criminal, wasteful, and cruel. Who has attacked these tigers – a hero or a villain? And what have the tigers done – if anything – to bring about such a fierce attack?

Cai used arrows like those that pierce the nine tigers in several earlier works, including one from 1998 called *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*. For that work, a wooden boat struck with 3,000 arrows is suspended in mid-air, like the tigers at MASS MoCA. In a 2002 interview with Octavio Zaya, Cai had this to say about the arrows:

Even though you feel that the arrows symbolize wounding and pain, at the same time the boat is uplifted; the feathers of the arrows enable it, as it were, to take flight. So there's a beautiful contradiction which resembles elements in Chinese martial arts. To describe it in basic terms, in Western boxing if the opponent is hit in the face hard enough he falls, so it's easy to decide who's won. In Chinese martial arts it's much more complex, more internal. The exchanges are more subtle, often using the opponent's own force to defeat him.¹

Several key formal devices appear repeatedly in *Inopportune's* four linked works. The first is circularity: the fact that the first and last cars are identical implies that the explosion is a closed circuit traversed

continually; the repeating loop of the video has the same implication; the ellipse in the drawing is common symbol for continuity; and the parallel placement of the tigers and cars also suggests it. These cycles point to eternal and universal questions rather than momentary and local ones.

Like circularity and repetition, explosions are central to three of the works, and though the tigers do not explode, the arrows that pierce them mirror the light rods that jut out of the hanging cars. One receives and the other discharges a force. Explosions have been a central part of Cai's creative practice since the mid-1980s, when he left China for Japan, where he lived from 1986 - 1995. Although some critics have explained Cai's experiments with gunpowder and other explosives from a biographical point of view (there is an important Chinese army base positioned across the strait from Taiwan, and Cai saw many fighter planes and frequently heard cannon shots while he lived there²), the use of fireworks and other explosives derives not only from his hometown but from China as a whole.

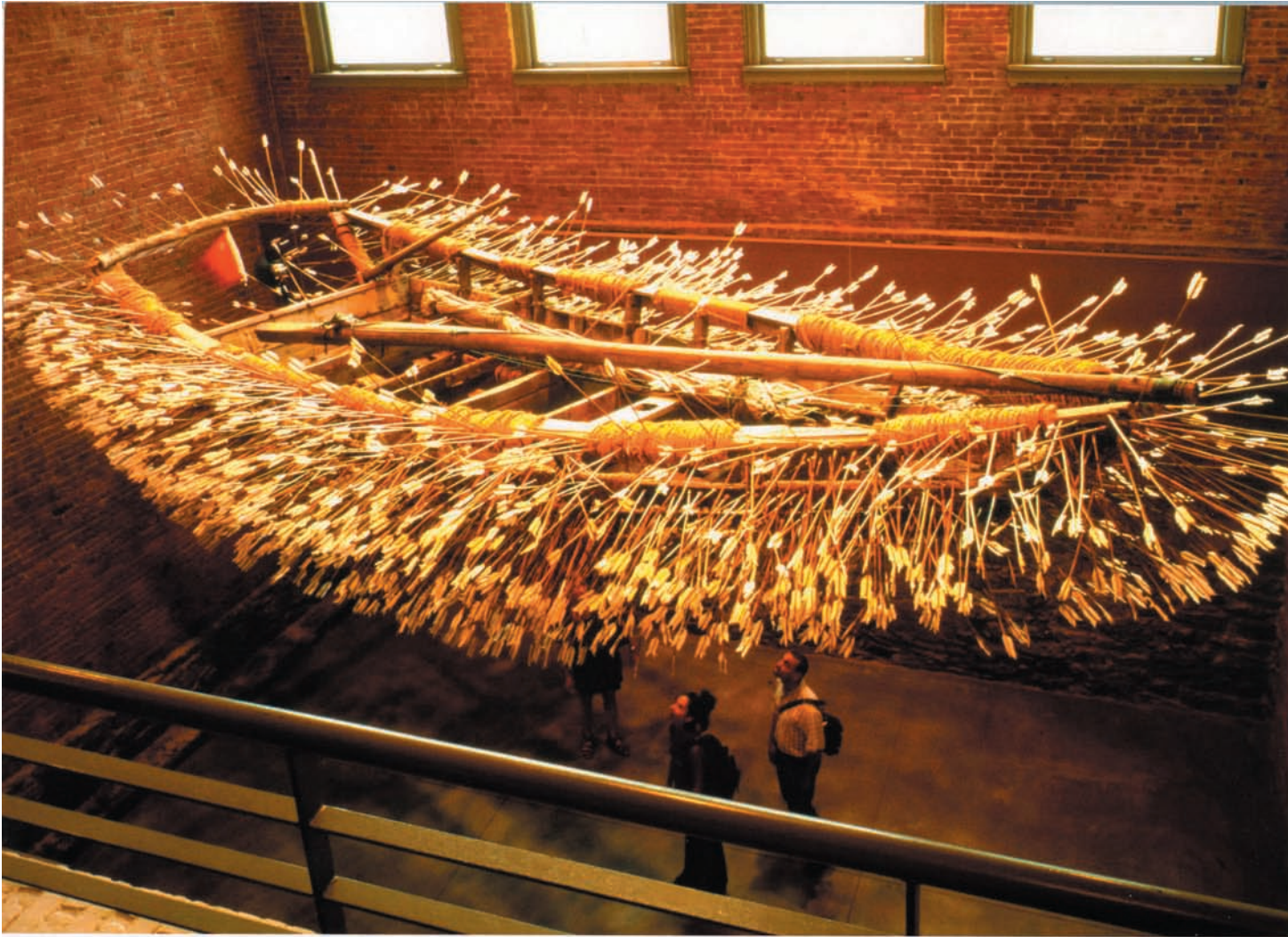
*In my hometown every significant social occasion of any kind, good or bad – weddings, funerals, the birth of a baby, a new home – is marked by the explosion of firecrackers ... Firecrackers are like the town crier, announcing whatever's going on in the town... I saw gunpowder used in both good ways and bad, in destruction and reconstruction. Gunpowder was invented in China as a by-product of alchemy. It is still called "fire medicine" because it was accidentally created during an attempt to produce a medicine.*³

For Cai, explosions – whether from gun powder, fireworks, or even the atomic bomb – go beyond any national context. Their origins in alchemy invoke curative, transformative power and cosmic questions. Even a small firecracker for Cai is connected to much larger releases of energy, even to the Big Bang.

When I came to Japan my encounters with the theories of twentieth-century astrophysics were very significant to me. The concepts of the Big Bang, black holes, the birth of stars, what is beyond the universe, time tunnels, how to leap over great distances of time and space and

*dialogue with something infinitely far away – these ideas were still not commonly in circulation in China at the time. They were an eye-opener for me. At the same time, many of these ideas have similarities with traditional Chinese views, with which I was familiar, of metaphysics and the universe.*⁴

In fact, most of Cai's aesthetic choices are rooted in venerable and robust Chinese artistic traditions. His recurrent use of the number nine (cars and tigers) as well as the long, horizontal format in the installations and the video can be found in the ancient art of Chinese scroll painting. (His father is a classically trained artist whose *100 Tigers* scroll will hang in Cai's exhibition.) Paradigmatic of this tradition is a 13th century scroll in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Chen Rong's *Nine Dragons* is the oldest and finest such scroll extant and points to a practice that pre- and postdates it by nearly a thousand years.⁵ Chen's *Nine Dragons* was inspired by a 10th century scroll called *Nine Deer*, which was in turn inspired by an 8th century example *Nine Horses*, and so on.⁶ Cai's work rests on a foundation of tens



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*,
P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York
Wooden boat, straw, bamboo, arrows, flags
ca. 33 ft.
Collection of Museum of Modern Art

of thousands of nine animal scrolls made throughout the centuries. Wu Tung's interpretation of this scroll in his 1997 exhibition catalogue *Tales from the Land of Dragons* could easily be applied to the nine cars in *Inopportune*. He writes: "The varied expressions of the dragons, their movements and interplay with different elements in nature . . . are manifestations of the *Dao*. (The contrasts in the work) accord with the fundamental Daoist concept of life as the interaction of two forces: *yin* (the negative, receptive, or feminine principle) and *yang* (the positive, creative, or masculine principle)." ⁷

To Western eyes, the use of nine cars to represent nine *moments* in a single unfolding event seems to draw on the work of pioneering photographer Eadward Muybridge (1880 - 1904). Muybridge famously invented stop-action photography as a way of settling the question of whether all four of a galloping horse's hooves left the ground simultaneously. (They do.) But Wu reveals a far older Chinese source. "The nine dragons in the scroll," he notes, "may also be interpreted as one entity experiencing

nine transformations in shape, emotion, age, and wisdom." ⁹ Commentary on this scroll as early as the 14th century offers this interpretation, as well as the belief that the number nine represents the positive, creative, masculine element of *yang*.

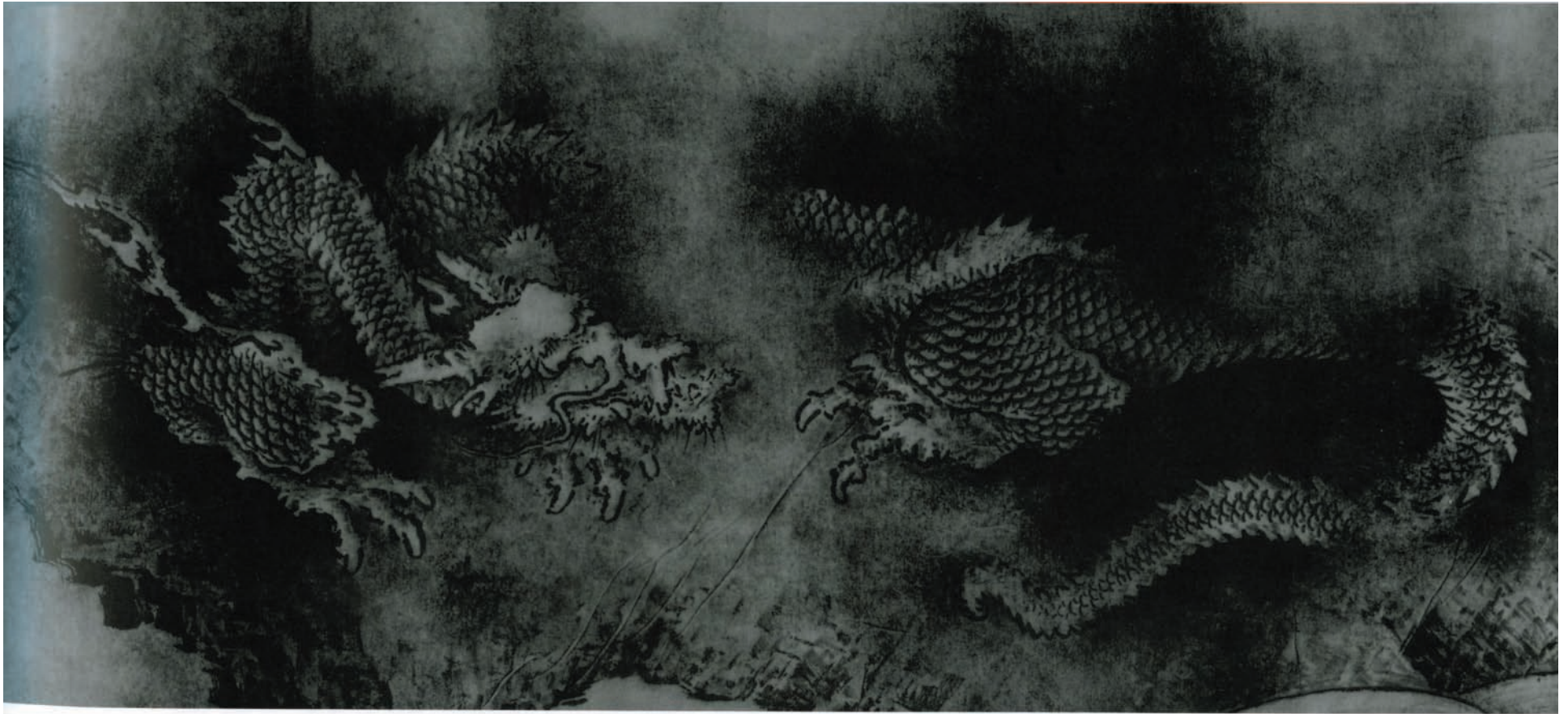
In describing his work in general, Cai has said that "Art can transcend time and space, and achieve something that science cannot. The job of the artist is to create such time/space tunnels." ⁹ Crucial to the creation of a "time/space tunnel" such as we see in *Inopportune* is the sense of being in a dreamscape that, though tethered to reality, has gone outside of it. Like the number nine, the long scroll format, and the fireworks, the evocation of a dream state is part of an ancient tradition. For example, the Boston dragon scroll has incredibly rare colophon added by the artist in which he recounts that he was able to paint the dragons while he was in an intoxicated state of mind. "The creative process recorded in both text and image reflects certain mind-altering experiences and insights long associated with Daoist transcendental practices." ¹⁰ Even Wu Song the Tiger

Slayer's drunkenness during his encounter with the man-eating tiger should be seen in this light, not as folly or bad luck, but as an altered, otherworldly consciousness. It is into this state of consciousness that *Inopportune* invites us.

Although these works derive in part from long-lived Eastern traditions, they also reverberate with Western ones. After all, *Inopportune* was made in the West, for a Western audience, by an artist active in the Western art world for over a decade. A salient feature of Cai's installation for a Western viewer is his use of spectacular light and color. Pulsing lights transform the hanging cars in dramatic, even sublime fashion. The same is true for the glorious, baroque, enveloping use of colored light in the video *Illusion*. Where else in art do these dazzling, spectacular lights appear? Where has this kind of beauty been married with feelings of terror as it is here?

One clue to answering this question can be found in the only poster on Cai's studio wall: a painting by El Greco from his 2003 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹¹

El Greco's paintings are paradigmatic of the way Western artists have used glorious lights and colors, and *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (c.1578), which was included in the Metropolitan exhibition, is paradigmatic of El Greco's painting. The painting shows the heavens opening in an astonishing burst of light to reveal the Greek name of Jesus (IHS) shimmering like the sun. Piebald angels wheel in the sky, which reverberates with color. In the foreground, the Pope, the Doge of Venice, and King Phillip II of Spain are shown kneeling in adoration of the name of Jesus, which was believed to have power over infidels. On the right, heretics are swallowed by a dark monstrous beast, swimming in a sea of smoke. The symbolism of the marvelous light could not be clearer: it is the light of heaven, of Jesus, salvation for the good and just.



Chen Rong, Chinese, first half of the 13th century, *Nine Dragons* (Detail), 1244
Chinese, Southern Song dynasty
Ink and touches of red on paper
Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Francis Gardner Curtis Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

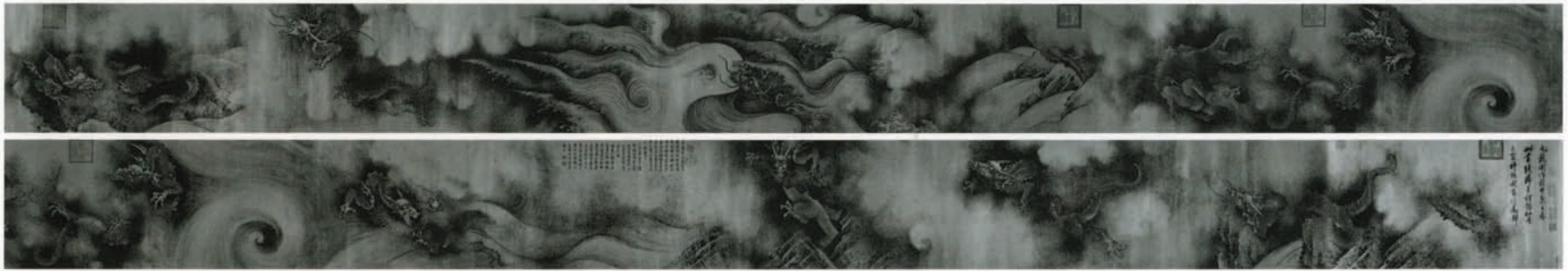
Similar use of light can be found in sculptural works; Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-1652) is the most obvious example. Installed in the Cornaro Chapel in the transept of Santa Maria della Vittoria, in Rome, the famous life-sized sculpture captures the saint's vision of an angel, "his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest ranks of angels, who seem to be all on fire," who plunged an arrow into her heart. The pain she suffered was made bearable only by the mystic ecstasy she experienced, represented by a giant starburst made of golden rods lit by a hidden window above her, which strongly resembles the tubes of light emanating from the cars in *Inopportune*.

The symbolism of the glorious light of heaven is ubiquitous in the West. Nearly every museum, every cathedral, every church displays paintings, sculptures, and stained glass with this as a central motif. The connection of the glory of God, and in particular of righteousness, with spectacular light and of evil with darkness is ingrained in Western viewers. (Even in contemporary popular culture this is the case. Countless movies use a car chase followed by a giant explosion as a way to restore order to an unbalanced

world. The villains die, the heroes are saved.) The inclination to understand this particular form of intense colored light as symbolic of righteousness deeply complicates Cai's installation and video. To whom does this righteousness belong? The installation is disturbingly mute on the subject, forcing us, the viewers, to struggle with the question alone.

Inopportune poses questions whose scope is eternal rather than immediate, universal rather than local, and metaphysical rather than mundane. But those questions unequivocally take the form of a car bomb. As this essay is being written in the winter of 2004, car bombs are immediate, local, daily concerns, addressed in every news cycle. And although Cai, like many successful artists, is a citizen of the world, his family was at home in lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. Terrorism is not only abstract and metaphysical for him, it is also personal.

We live in complicated times. Over the last several years, religious and cultural strife has penetrated the consciousness of Americans in a new way. Since the



Chen Rong, Chinese, first half of the 13th century, *Nine Dragons*, 1244
 Chinese, Southern Song dynasty
 Ink and touches of red on paper, 46.3 x 1069.4 cm (18 1/4 x 431 5/8 in.)
 Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Francis Gardner Curtis Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Muybridge, Eadweard (1830-1904)
Transverse-Gallop, photograph, 1887. From *Animals in Motion*.
 Photo credit: Image Select / Art Resource, NY



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Inopportune Stage Two*, 2004: Nine cars and sequenced multi-channel tube lights
 MASS MoCA Commission

terrorist attacks of September 2001, every car bomb in a faraway place seems a little nearer, instilling in us the idea that it could happen here. It is a difficult, but important, time to make art. Art in general, and Cai Guo-Qiang's *Inopportune* in particular, creates a space, a time, and imagery in and around which to gather our thoughts, without prescribing what those thoughts should be. This is a difficult concept to grapple with, almost as difficult as the idea that an explosion can be beautiful. In the U.S. today, these ideas feel untimely, inappropriate, unsettling – even inopportune – which, for Cai, makes them urgently in need of contemplation and perfectly suited to his art.

Endnotes

1. Octavio Zaya et al, Cai Guo-Qiang (New York: Phadion, 2002) p.28
2. Zaya, p.14
3. Ibid
4. Zaya, p.16
5. Wu Tung, Tales from the Land of Dragons: 1,000 Years of Chinese Painting (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1997) p.197
6. Ibid
7. Wu, p.199
8. Ibid
9. Zaya, p.17
10. Wu, p.198
11. Conversation with Jennifer Ma, September 2004.



Bernini, Gian Lorenzo (1598-1680)
Ecstasy of St. Theresa
Location : Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy
Photo credit : Scala / Art Resource, NY

Greco, El (1541-1614)
The Dream of Phillip II
Location : El Escorial, Spain
Photo credit : Scala / Art Resource, NY