## CAI GUO-QIANG

## THE FIRE AND THE ROSE ARE ONE

Story. Geoffrey Coffey

Growing up in southeastern China weaned Cai Guo-Qiang on explosions. His childhood hometown, Quanzhou, was a primary manufacturer of firecrackers, not to mention a main target of Taiwanese air raids throughout the 1950s and early '60s. Fire's potent symbolism made an impact on the boy. He moved to Japan in 1986 and began producing and showing art, winning great acclaim from the start. In 1995, he moved to New York City, where he lives and works today. The 45-year-old Cai (pronounced "sigh") is now among the highest-profile artists on today's global scene, known best for his enormous outdoor events of pyrotechnics and conflagration.

For the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's temporary new home in Queens, New

York, Cai produced *Transient Rainbow*, a monumental arch of red, yellow, and green fireworks exploding across the East River at 60 miles per hour, reaching 500 feet wide and 120 feet tall. The brilliant cascade mirrored the museum's transit from Manhattan to Queens, connecting the two banks of the river for one minute in a fiery covenant. The bright rainbow's reflection in the river merged the seemingly incompatible elements of fire and water, a nod to the harmony of *yin* and *yang* so central to the Chinese worldview and the foundation of Cai's work.

"I have created a lot of pieces that are outward, including fireworks, which might give the impression of a ferocious artist," says Cai. "At the same time, though, I have wanted to look inward, to create something universal and quiet. I am both aggressive and gentle."

However, in surveying Cai's work, "gentle" doesn't always come to mind. Consider Cai's series of gigantic performance pieces, *Projects for Extraterrestrials* (PfE), an ongoing experiment in grand-scale fire art — large enough so that the flames will be visible from outer space. A master of feng shui, Cai designs each piece to complement the specific geography, history, and social conditions of its location; he has produced more than 30 such events across Asia, Europe, and North America.

The artist designed a fiery dragon to visit Vienna during the renovation of its major museum Konsthalle Wien; the flaming beast went flying among the medieval spires and cobblestone streets in *Dragon Sightsees Vienna* 



Restrained Violence-Rainbow (PfE #25, 1995)

## WHERE PAINTERS PAINT, CAI BURNS USING GUNPOWDER, PRODUCING EXQUISITE IMAGES LIKE FINE INK CALLIGRAPHY.

(PfE#32, 1999). In another aptly named performance, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* (PfE#10, 1993), Cai did precisely that —using huge trails of fire, set off using thousands of pounds of gunpowder.

Cai often makes political statements. In *Fetus Movement II* (PfE#9, 1992), he detonated explosions all around himself while standing in an open field outside Kassel, Germany, keeping visual records of his changing brain wave activity and audio masters of the sound of his heartbeats throughout the performance. The artist emerged from the smoke as the hierophant of a new age beyond the attachments of race, nationality, and religion, just as a rising Germany has been reborn from the rubble of World War II.

Other politically charged events in the *Project* for *Exraterrestrials* series included *The Earth Has* 

Its Black Hole, Too, with its 100-meter-wide concentric rings of fire ignited in Hiroshima (PfE #16, 1994), and Restrained Violence-Rainbow, a blazing fireburst over Johannesburg (PfE #25, 1995). In all these pieces, Cai brings an awareness of fire's dual and contradictory role as progenitor and destroyer, both the fundamental element of the Big Bang and the ultimate vehicle of holocaust. "The moment of explosion creates chaos in time and space," says Cai. "After the brief chaotic moment, the work disappears from our vision and flies away into space with the speed of light to meet another audience."

In this wink to presumed celestial onlookers, his *Projects for Extraterrestrials* demonstrates how cultural conflict might appear to a transcendent observer, underscoring that Earth is but a planet, one small wanderer in a vast

multifarious space, merely a supporting player in the great universal narrative rather than its protagonist.

Another well-known piece of aggressive contradiction was No Destruction, No Construction: Bombing the Taiwan Museum of Art (1998). By remote control. Cai detonated a gunpowder bomb on a helium balloon suspended by a string above Taiwan's top art museum. The flames raced down the string to the roof, then ran through hundreds of gunpowder bombs exploding along the top of the building, proceeded down the skylights, then roared through the interior of the building, and finally leapt through the front entrance onto the plaza outside, whereupon two pillars flanking the entrance exploded, leaving burn marks in the design of a dragon. In total, the project used 600 gunpowder bombs. It evoked a purification by fire, or as Cai says, "a momentary eternity, where time and space are suspended — or rather, they return to their primeval moment of beginning." The effect is of healing; the Chinese character for gunpowder means "fire medicine". Cai's dragon pillars are now held in the museum's permanent collection.

Where painters paint, Cai can burn using gunpowder, producing exquisite images like fine ink calligraphy. In May, Christie's New York sold Cai's A Certain Lunar Eclipse (Project for Humankind #2, 1991), a seven-panel "burning" (for it is neither a painting nor a drawing) of the Great Wall and the moon; the price flew above a presale estimate of \$40,000 to close at nearly a quarter million.

Other works show that fire need not be violent. In *Project for HEIANKYO 1200th Anniversary: Celebration from Changan* (1994), Cai convinced the city of Xi An, China to donate 1200 kg. (approx. 2650 lbs.) of its locally brewed grain alcohol as a gift to the city of Kyoto, Japan. He dug a series of trenches into the open space in front of Kyoto City Hall — some formed DNA double-helixes, others shaped the Chinese character for "luck" — then poured the alcohol into the trenches and set it ablaze, creating a hushed spectacle that lasted one hour as an offering and a prayer for Kyoto's future prosperity.

Increasingly a citizen of the world, with his work appearing in museums and galleries on every continent, Cai has kindled a global response to his vision. He embraces an ancient paradox: destroyer as creator, a union of opposites merging to form a stronger whole. Fire is elemental, after all. "There are countries where you have trouble finding oil paint," says Cai, "but I have always been able to find gunpowder wherever I go." o





Fetus Movement II; Projects for Extraterrestrials #9, 1992