

The University Contemporary Art Museum



Pedro Hiriart, courtesy of the MUAC

The University Contemporary Art Museum (MUAC) is dedicated to art, those who make it, and those who appreciate it. From the outside, its glass wall seems to defy gravity; on the inside, an ample, light-filled space hosts exhibitions that challenge the senses. Since its opening in 2008, it boasts the premier public collection of Mexican art of our day and has sought to promote artistic creation, understanding of the audio-visual, performing, and performance arts with dynamic exhibitions by artists from Mexico and abroad.

Mexico: Sunshine and Solitude

Cai Guo-Qiang at the UNAM

Mariela Sánchez-Belmont*

*All processes have a beginning and an end;
all processes change themselves into their opposite.*

MAO ZEDONG¹

One of those artists from abroad is internationally known Cai Guo-Qiang, who demonstrated in this museum his mastery of the handling of gunpowder. The result was an impressive exhibition of 14 pieces all inspired by his visit to Mexico in September 2010. His show, “Sunshine and Solitude,” is part of the curatorial cycle “Events and Deliriums: Foundation, Material, and Work,” centered on Plato’s description of artists and poets as illusionists and demiurges,² to show the way that art liberates the life force and turns work and matter into pure illusion. The gunpowder explosions liberate that energy and leave us with art.

A single spark can start a prairie fire.

MAO ZEDONG

Gunpowder immediately makes us think of ancient China. But we are not all aware that its formula, dating from the ninth century, was originally developed for medicinal uses. Its name in Chinese, 火药 (*huo yao*), embraces this duality. It is composed of two Concepts: “huo,” or “fire,” and “yao,” meaning “medicine.” Since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it has been used for military purposes. Gunpowder represents the attempts to control life and death, creation and destruction.

Its use in the work of Cai Guo-Qiang is no mere happenstance. He was born in 1957 in the coastal city of Quanzhou in Fujian province, China. He grew used to being around gunpowder and became familiar with its various meanings. Fujian is famous for producing fireworks, used today in China to



Diego Bertuecos

celebrate important national moments: parades commemorating the Communist victory, for exhibitions before the eyes of the world to show its capability as the host of sporting events, and, of course, Chinese New Year. But Cai was also familiar with the other side of the coin. Gunpowder was used in the constant bombardments that crossed the Taiwan Strait. Yin and yang.

“I myself set out to choose a material that brought an element of danger with it, and that would create a certain disquiet within myself as the work was being prepared.”

* Staff writer.



Diego Bernuecos



Elsie Montiel

He composes images by applying different kinds of gunpowder, fuses, and stencils to handmade sheets of paper.

Cai Guo-Qiang, his assistant, and volunteers, before lighting *Quetzalcóatl y Xipe Tótec*.

Replacing oils and ink with gunpowder and fire was a calculated decision. In 1985, he graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute's Department of Stage Design, and the following year, he moved to Japan to continue his studies. It was there that he left behind traditional techniques and opted for explosions. He was seeking a way to free himself. In his words, "I have a controlling personality; I'm obsessive; I like to have things in their place....I myself set out to choose a material that brought an element of danger with it, and that would create a certain disquiet within myself as the work was being prepared."³ Having grown up in a restrictive China

that influenced and controlled individuals' creativity to the nth degree to make it collective, gunpowder, with its uncontrollable explosiveness, presented Cai with an escape valve for contained energy. "I wanted to investigate both the destructive and constructive nature of gunpowder and observe how destruction could also create something."⁴

There is no creation without destruction.

MAO ZEDONG

Comrade Mao used to say that political power is born from the barrel of a gun. Cai Guo-Qiang uses gunpowder as a political weapon. His explosions carry messages and create metaphors. He destroys so people remember. His "Black Rainbow: Explosion Project for Valencia" launched a reminder of black smoke into the heavens so we would not forget the victims of the Madrid March 2004 attacks. The ephemeral spectacle cost almost US\$200 000, scattered in less than 15 seconds. "The pleasure comes precisely...from the destructiveness inherent in the act of consuming that enormous amount of money in just a few seconds....It is the victory of the spiritual reality over the material. Because money is a symbol of power, status, and privilege in our society. And causing explosions worth US\$200 000, lost in 15 seconds, is a declaration of intent."⁵

His work's great achievement is the perpetuity of the ephemeral. The memory sparked by the scattering smoke, by the powder that explodes to leave behind an empty vista but a full heart. Where is the art? Before, during, or after the explosion? His exhibitions spend energy, materials, time, and effort, not to mention money. It all evaporates in a few seconds. But it leaves us with something more, perhaps of greater value.



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Cai Guo-Qiang signing *Eagle*.

The fuses are lit to produce a series of controlled explosions on the surface of the paper, fixing the figures, completely comparable to fine lines drawn with ink.



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Cai Guo-Qiang as *Pine ignites*, one of the 14 sketches in "The Sunshine of Solitude."

THE SUNSHINE OF SOLITUDE

In September 2010, Cai Guo-Qiang visited Mexico during the Bicentennial celebrations, 200 years after the struggle began. In the ruins left by the War of Independence, we built the foundations of a country. One hundred years went by, and with the remains left by the revolutionary hurricane, we erected a homeland. Another centennial was celebrated and Cai came to Mexico. On his trip, he gathered images and smells that impregnated his work.

Weeks of preparation for the fatal moment when it explodes. In sessions open to the public, the artist traces lines

on his canvas. Together with several students from the UNAM National School of Visual Arts, he arranges the pieces for the exhibition designed specifically for the MUAC. He composes images by applying different kinds of gunpowder, fuses, and stencils to handmade sheets of paper. Finally, they explode: the fuses are lit to produce a series of controlled explosions on the surface of the paper, fixing the figures, completely comparable to fine lines drawn with ink. What Cai leaves us when he goes is a majestic exhibition of the impressions Mexico made on his gunpowder. Images of the Valley of Mexico, of scenes of the fight for independence and in the revolution, the pre-Hispanic origins that still color our present,



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副波连 画 羽冠神 Quetzalcantl y Xipetotec
Cai Guo-Qiang, 2010 Mexico



Elsie Monti

and, above, the sun that illuminates it all. Of course, Mexico's traditional ground firework "Castillo" (a tower of fireworks set on the ground) could not be left out, impossible without Chinese gunpowder, reminding us of the heroes of Independence.

When entering the room, the first thing that alerts the senses is a familiar smell. In the midst of the volcanic gravel covering the floor is a representation of Texcoco Lake, but instead of water, it is filled with mescal. This lake is nostalgic for Cai. "I have always been moved by the relationship that lake has with the city. It always seemed sad to know that it had disappeared so Mexico City could become the capital of an empire. If the city had been built around the lake, it would be the most beautiful in the world."⁶ The alcohol it contains is also symbolic; for the artist, it is simultaneously an agent for being together, community, and hospitality, and the bearer of solitude.⁷

The walls of the room are covered with Cai's works, and while the visitor explores, walking on the gravel, his or her figure is reflected in the mescal with the pieces in the background. The ambiance wraps the visitor in the (non-exclusionary) contradiction between the melancholy of the black, white, and brown colors—a brown that could well be the brown of dried blood—and the happiness of imagining (desired) explosions and the power of the resulting beauty. The pieces closest to us will be unrecognizable. You have to move away from them to be able to make out the image. A modern impressionism, à la China. But it is worth staying close a few moments. That way you can appreciate Cai's impeccable technique: the controlled burns on the paper, the white spaces done with stencils, the subtle colors achieved with the different kinds of gunpowder. When you back away, you are presented with Mexico, the product of several explosions the result of which can only be appreciated when the smoke clears

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and time or space distances you from the event. The eternal
destruction and construction of our history.

NOTES

- ¹ Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction*, 1937, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm.
- ² For the ancient Greeks, the demiurge was the spirit that gave rise to and ordered all things out of chaos. In Gnostic philosophy, it meant the universal soul, the active principle of the world.
- ³ "Cai Guo-Qiang llega a México para realizar sus exposiciones de arte," *El Universal*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/cultura/64296.html>, accessed February 20, 2011.
- ⁴ Interview with Octavio Zaya, "Interview: Octavio Zaya in Conversation with Cai Guo-Qiang," Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya, Guoqiang Cai, and Takashi Serizawa, *Cai Guo-Qiang* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), p. 13, cited in Miwon Kwon, "El arte de gastar," Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Quiero creer* (Bilbao: Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, 2009), p. 62.
- ⁵ Interview with David Rodríguez Caballero about the Valencia Project. David Rodríguez Caballero, "Oriente-Occidente-Oriente," *Cai Guo-Qiang*:



Patricia Pérez

套馬 basing horses
Cai Guo-Qiang 2011 Mexico

- Fuegos artificiales negros* (Valencia: Institut Valencia d'Art Moderne, 2005), p. 123, cited in Miwon Kwon, op cit., p. 65.
- ⁶ "Cai Guo-Qiang: arte que resplandece en soledad," *Milenio* (Mexico City), December 5, 2010, <http://www.milenio.com/node/593674>, accessed February 23, 2011.
 - ⁷ Christian Gómez, "El fuego creador de Cai Guo-Qiang," *Cultura UNAM*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.cultura.unam.mx/?tp=articulo&id=2037&ac=mostrar&Itemid=207&ct=322>, accessed February 24, 2011.



Poppy Flowers.

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