

Lunch with the FT **Cai Guo-Qiang**

Explosive artist Cai Guo-Qiang on politics and pyrotechnics

Over pork ribs in New York, he talks about his taste for works made with gunpowder — and why the Russians have cancelled his firework performance in Red Square

Leslie Hook AUGUST 25 2017



© James Ferguson

As I walk through Manhattan's East Village towards the studio of Cai Guo-Qiang, I pass brownstones, hair salons and some guys hanging around speaking Italian. The first sign that I might be nearing the studio is a mirror-box sitting on the sidewalk, underneath the window beds, that doesn't quite blend in. Then a red door, guarded by a little stone lion and the Chinese character for luck. I've come to the right spot.

I'm meeting Cai (pronounced "Tsai") for lunch at his studio in New York, where the Chinese artist has been based for more than a decade, because I'm told this is where he always eats lunch. He is looking relaxed, wearing a brown T-shirt and close-cropped grey hair, and greets me with a firm handshake that hints at how much time this 59-year-old spends at the gym.

Although you wouldn't know it from the unmarked door, Cai is one of the most remarkable artists working today. He specialises in gunpowder, and creates firework art on an unparalleled scale — think of a chain of explosions that extends the Great Wall of China by 10km, or a flock of black "birds" appearing in the desert in Doha.

In 2008 he launched the giant footsteps that marched over Beijing during the opening ceremony for the Olympics. More recently, he created a "Sky Ladder" that sent fiery rungs climbing half a kilometre into the clouds. Not all of these projects succeed ("Sky Ladder", an obsessional quest that was the subject of a documentary film last year, took three attempts.) But they have pushed an old medium in new directions — Cai even makes paintings with gunpowder, to explosive and ethereal effect.

A sweet, oily aroma is wafting across the office, so while Cai finishes a meeting, I wander over to the kitchen to see what's cooking. One of the cooks points out the day's dishes: pork ribs made with Coca-Cola, steamed cod, water spinach with garlic, lily bulbs with celery and sausage, green beans and an unusual crêpe made from lotus root, which turns out to be a studio speciality.

My mouth waters as we discuss the food and, as if on cue, an assistant appears to steer me into the main gallery. The room is huge — big enough to hold a dozen of Cai's giant gunpowder works, which are resting on the floor and leaning against the walls, some more than seven metres long. At a distance the paintings appear as colourful, explosive blooms, so that the bright room feels almost like a garden. In the centre, a table has been laid for two.

Cai wanders in and casually finds his sweater on a bench. But there's nothing casual about our dining table: the food is laid out symmetrically in six dishes, with a bowl of soup at each place, and an open bottle of wine waiting on the table. As we sit, Cai asks one of his studio managers to take a picture of us, and I feel as if I've stepped into a piece of performance art. He pours the wine and I start with the question that's been uppermost in my mind since I walked through the door into this Mandarin-speaking world. It feels like a Chinese cocoon, so why is he based here in New York?

As we start our soup, a broth flavoured with pork and squash, Cai recounts how he left China when he was 29, and moved to Japan. It was 1986, a time when China's opening to the world after decades of cultural isolation led to a wave of exploration. "At the time, everyone wanted to go abroad and study, and I did too. In the field I was in, contemporary art, the space for doing this in China was small," he says, speaking Mandarin with a slight Fujianese lilt.

After nearly a decade in Japan, where he scraped by in a rural fishing village doing paintings and installation pieces, he moved to New York. Cai chuckles as he points out that he now earns more from flying into Japan to collect prizes such as the prestigious Praemium Imperiale, than he ever made while living there.


Despite this cosmopolitan background, Cai still picks up his soup bowl and slurps from it directly, as is common in China. He points out that his studio is more multicultural than it appears too, with people from all parts of China — mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan — as well as Japan. "Because through art, through people working together and building relationships and trust, people can overcome the problems of politics," he says, dishing some lily bulbs on to my plate. "Have some, these are good for girls, and good for the skin," he says, a comment that in China would be considered the mark of a gracious host.

That all sounds nice, I say, biting the lily bulbs, which turn out to be tasty tubers with a bit of crunch — but artists can't really avoid politics, can they?

"That's true, I can't avoid politics either," he says. He recalls going back to China to help with the 2008 Olympics. At the time my co-operation with the Chinese government was full of frustration, doubts, it was not easy," he says. "Art should not be a tool of politics, but sometimes art can help make the political climate more open and help society become more free. In my own art, I try to use my personal voice and effort to enable some Chinese people to see the possibilities of another kind of China. A more open China."



'The Death of Sunflower' (2017)



To his critics, Cai has at times been an enabler of the Chinese regime, working with the government to design fireworks not only for the Olympics but for 2009's 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. But he bristles at the way art has become so politicised for Chinese artists, and the way that western media tends to see all Chinese art through a political lens. "I can come back and do things for China; that is not a problem, but I also have my own viewpoint, my own principles," he insists.

We talk about the 2008 Olympics, and how they had the effect of making the country more closed, rather than open. At the time I had been in Beijing to cover the games, and I learn that Cai's courtyard house there is in the same neighbourhood where I later lived. We reminisce about life in Beijing's old alleyways, known as *hutongs*.

I serve him some spare ribs, and ask about his upcoming exhibition in Moscow, which is about the most political topic of all — the October Revolution. It's the centenary of the coup that gave birth to the first socialist government in the world. As we nibble on the spare ribs (always a delicate task when eating with chopsticks), Cai tells me he has just received word that the authorities in Moscow have rejected his grand firework performance, titled "October", which was to have taken place in Red Square and had been in planning for more than a year.



'Adolescent Fling' (2016)

“Of course they wouldn’t give a reason, they just say, ‘Oh it might interfere with security for the helipad inside Kremlin, etc.’ But this was all stuff that they would have known beforehand,” Cai says. His solo exhibition at Moscow’s Pushkin Museum, also called *October*, is still going ahead, but the explosion event — a theatrical three-act work set to music that was to have included teardrops and a giant red star — will not happen.

“They were always trying to decide, do we commemorate the October Revolution, or do we not commemorate it? The choice they made was not to commemorate it,” he says. “If we do commemorate it, then we have to discuss it, study it, talk about communism, talk about the Communist party. It could easily tear apart their society and bring about instability — in that way it is quite similar to China.”

The way history falls victim to totalitarian regimes is something that Cai has experienced first-hand, and he tells me that as he prepares his exhibition, he has drawn from his own past in the Cultural Revolution that ravaged China from 1966 to 1976. He has just returned from his hometown, Quanzhou, where he made a rubbing of a giant face of Mao Zedong that was carved into the mountain when he was a child. “At first I was very nervous [about this exhibition] but I’ve turned it into something that is really about my own destiny, my own life,” he says, dishing some cod on my plate. The theme of the exhibition is revolution, romance, ideals, people searching for a more perfect society, he explains — and also all the problems that came about as a result of that search.



'Footprints of History': fireworks project for the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

He has started writing essays for the exhibition about his own experiences during the Cultural Revolution, and he tells me how in third grade he led his classmates as they bullied their teacher and tried to bring her out for a public denunciation, known as a “struggle session”. He recalls how beautiful she was, and how he lied about something she had said, as he led the charge against her. “As I was writing it, I was very sad, I even cried,” he says slowly, “But when I was little I was very revolutionary.”

Sitting here in New York, it seems easy to discuss these topics, I say, but stories like these are still taboo in China. Even between friends, the Cultural Revolution is almost never discussed. “It’s true, people have selective memory when it comes to these things. I’m that way too, so it is really through this Pushkin exhibition that I’ve written out the past, and faced up to it,” he says.

He tells me how the schoolchildren tried to track their teacher down, but didn’t find her, and later smashed the windows in their school. “As I write these stories, I feel like these things bring out the suffering and uneasiness in my heart. They became scars. These times, the times that we grew up in . . . These things also later influenced my art, and the way I view society.”

There’s a silence and we sip our wine. “Everything I’m saying now is so heavy, isn’t it?” he says.

I notice a small altar mounted on the wall behind where Cai is sitting — an altar to Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy — and ask him about his faith. He has sought out shamans all over the world, and the studio complex we are sitting in has been carefully laid out according to the principles of feng shui. “[It’s] not like those religions where you have to do this, and have to do that. But I believe that these unseen energies, these emotions, can speak to you, can make you create art,” he tells me, saying he was raised in a faith that combined Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism.

The spiritual dimension is part of what has drawn him to gunpowder, the medium for which he is best known. Cai started experimenting with gunpowder in paintings in the 1980s, and later became known for his large-scale firework-based performance art. “For my art there is a common theme most of the time, it is using the things we can see, to search for the world we cannot see,” he says. “Gunpowder as a material can be good at showing these things.”

Cai Studio**40 East 1st Street, New York**

Squash soup

Pork ribs with Coca-Cola

Steamed cod

Water spinach and garlic

Lily bulbs, celery, sausage

Green beans

Lotus root crêpe

Wine

Fresh cherries

Black tea x 2

Total

We sample some of the lotus root pancake, and I notice that the dish beneath has an inky bottom, one of Cai's own designs. He describes what it is like to make one of his explosive paintings: layers of gunpowder are sprinkled over the canvas through stencils and fuses are taped on to create lines. Before ignition (which I'm disappointed to learn takes place in a special pyrotechnic lab on Long Island, and not in his studio) the canvas is smothered in cardboard that's been weighed down with bricks, to reduce the flow of oxygen and prevent it from catching fire.

"Before it explodes, you have absolutely no idea what it will look like," he says.

"It is like experiencing fate. You always think, 'Please, give me a surprise!'" he

adds, making the gesture of a prayer. "So sometimes, when I ignite it, I suddenly feel very reverent, like I'm not such a naughty child. In fact I often feel like an ill-behaved boy, but at the same time I feel like, all day, I'm a child receiving God's love and care."



'Sky Ladder' (2015)

Many of his early gunpowder works were abstract, black-and-white, their smoky textures combined with a sense of figure drawn from his training in classical Chinese painting. Indeed, a painting in that style leans against the wall behind him, although he tells me this is a recent work, made after the death of his father and his grandmother.

He has started using more colour, including coloured gunpowder, which he says is partly related to his grief. “With colour there can be more variation, more loneliness, more sadness . . . as well as lust, desire, sex. The older I get, the more I engage with these emotions, with sensuality. So what you can see here all has sex as a theme,” he says.

To our right, a giant colourful painting shows dozens of animals, which, on close inspection, are having sex in improbable inter-species combinations. His remark draws to mind his recent performance piece in Paris called “One Night Stand” that involved 50 amorous couples and a lot of fireworks. (It also prompted public complaints for inciting public orgy.)

The cook arrives with dessert — a dish of fresh cherries — and black tea. Cai mentions that there will be a small seminar in the studio that afternoon about the abstract movement, and invites me to sit in. Time has flown by and we haven’t even had a chance to talk about contemporary Chinese art yet, I point out. “Do we have to talk about that?” he laughs.



Lunch laid out in Cai Guo-Qiang's studio in New York

Suddenly his open manner becomes more guarded. “I have to be really careful when I talk about this,” he says. Eventually, he says he finds a lot of contemporary Chinese art “very commercial”, with too much focus on the record auction prices. The topic clearly makes him uncomfortable. “Talking about China’s problems, you have to be careful, if you say this and you say that, you can be perceived as an outsider.” I can’t help but notice that for someone who is so dismissive of commercial art, he has had plenty of commercial success himself (and even, as our dishes indicated, his own line of tableware).

After a few more cherries, we head downstairs for the seminar. Two studio assistants lead a long discussion of the evolution of abstract art, and I start to feel a bit like I’m back in art history class. Cai occasionally interjects with his own musings — why, he questions, did abstraction develop in the west before it did in China?

When I take my leave, Cai nods to his assistant, who reappears with cards, books and a silver marker. As Cai starts to sign them, I realise that these are farewell gifts. There’s a holograph postcard of the Sky Ladder, a scarf with an explosion design, and his most recent book, into which he draws a deft figurine on the title page. Clearly he has done this before. “Come by any time for lunch,” he tells me as we shake hands goodbye. “Next time our conversation will be a little lighter.”

Leslie Hook is an FT correspondent in San Francisco

Illustration by James Ferguson

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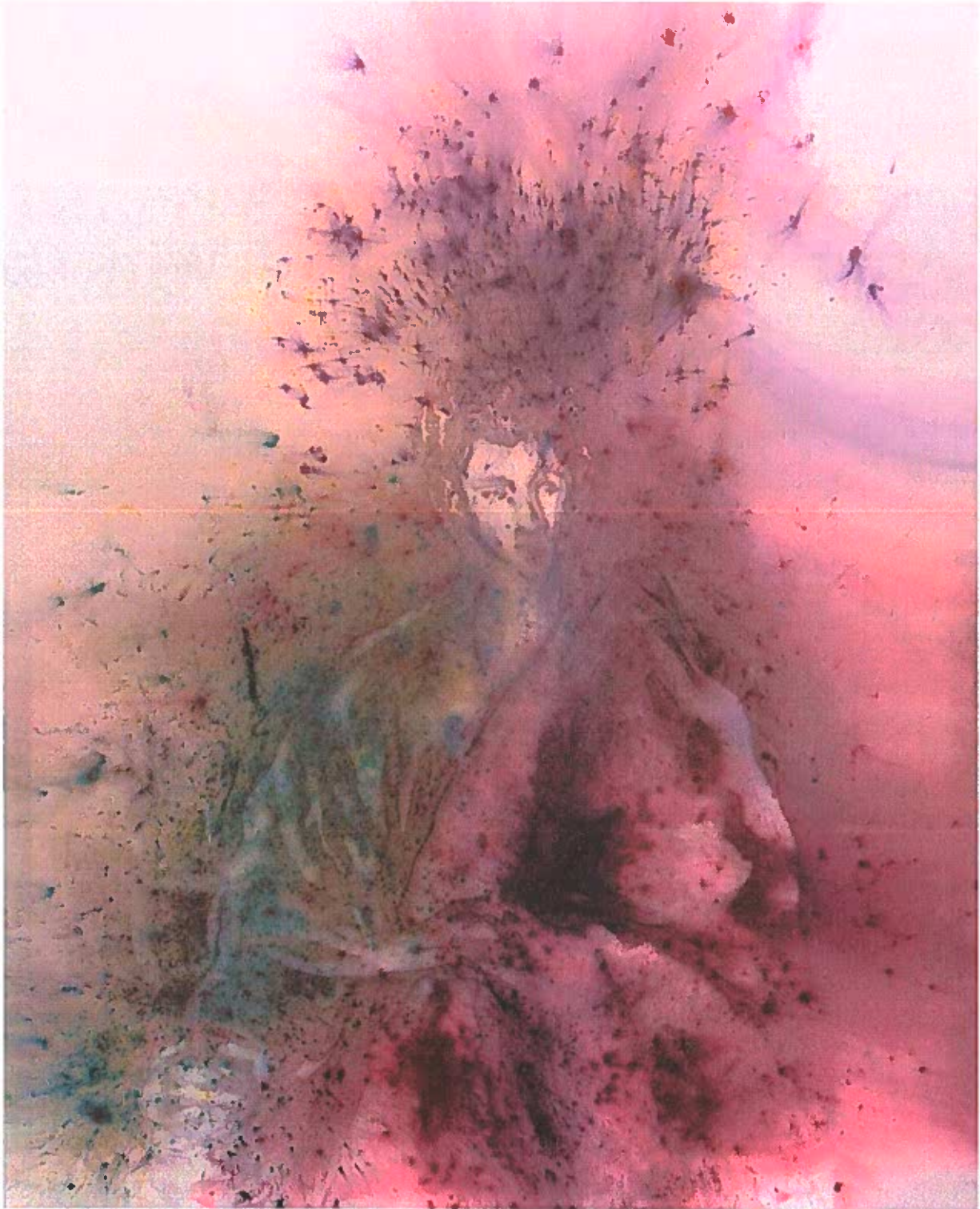
Maybe He Will Become A Painter After All: A Conversation With Cai Guo-Qiang



Brienne Walsh Contributor 

Arts

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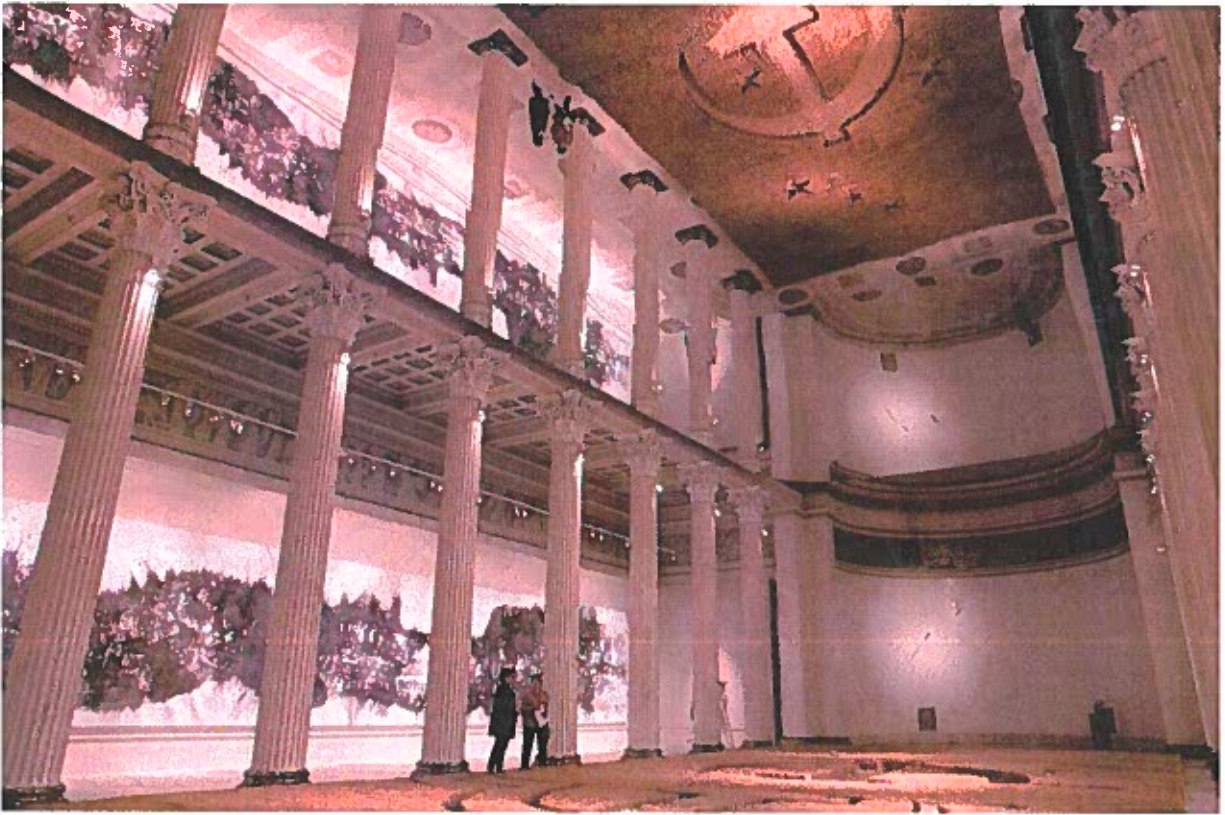
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The first thing I noticed about Cai Guo-Qiang is that he has surrounded himself with smart, articulate, professional woman. On the day we met, two women greeted me at the entrance of Cai's two-story studio, which was designed by Rem Koolhaas' architectural firm, OMA. Located in the East Village, the studio was crowded — not untidily — with gunpowder paintings for *The Spirit of Painting*, an exhibition of Cai's work that will open at the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain, on October 25, 2017. It is the first time since its founding in 1819 that the Prado is commissioning a solo exhibition by a living artist.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) Land 2017 Reeds, plywood board,... [+]
 PHOTO BY YVONNE ZHAO, COURTESY CAI STUDIO

The exhibition at the Prado is one of three major exhibitions of Cai's work to open this fall. The others are *October*, a show of new works at The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts that commemorates the centenary anniversary of the October Revolution, and runs through November 12, 2017; and *Fireflies*, a public art installation consisting of 27 pedi-cabs carrying 900 paper lanterns that will traverse the Benjamin Franklin Boulevard in Philadelphia on the weekends beginning this evening, and running through Sunday, October 8, 2017. One could almost say that Cai Guo-Qiang is one of the only non-partisan links between Russia and the United States this fall.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) Fireflies 2017 Collection of the artist
PHOTO: JEFF FUSCO PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC ART

I was intimidated to meet Cai. Of course, I knew of his most famous works; I studied his gunpowder paintings in college. Even those not familiar with his name, or Chinese art, or contemporary art in general, will likely have seen one of his most visible projects – the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, for which he was the director of visual and special effects. Besides Ai WeiWei, there is arguably no better-known living Chinese artist.

My nerves were put to ease by the presence of the women in his studio. They took me on a tour. They reminded me of my own time working for a famous photographer who also surrounded himself with capable women at the height of his career. I couldn't help but think of the cliché that there is always a woman behind a great man – or in Cai's case, many women, all of them elegantly dressed.

After the tour, I was led to a conference room in the basement of the studio. In the center of a wide table lay a collection of plastic hair clips molded in

the shapes of various flowers. Xinran, a Harvard graduate and sculptor who translated the interview, arrived, and told me that the hair clips are currently very trendy in China. Cai himself appeared soon after, holding a cup of tea. After arranging the placement of gunpowder paintings lying against the brick wall of the room, he sat down, and smiled. Unsure of myself, I began asking him questions that I hoped wouldn't be too redundant, or obvious. Cai responded in a language I do not speak. Xinran translated throughout. Below is our conversation.

Brienne Walsh: You have three major exhibitions opening up this fall. I wonder if you still get nervous before an exhibition opens?

Cai Guo-Qiang: I'm nervous about all of them. It's the sense of nervousness a little boy feels. It's not what politicians feel, for example, because for artists, failure doesn't necessarily bring bankruptcy or losing your job.

In Philadelphia, I have two concerns. First, if these Pedicabs will be interesting or exciting enough. And secondly, I've received a lot of enthusiastic emails and phone calls, and I'm concerned whether people have expected it to be very dramatic. In fact, it's not.

I do believe every artwork has its own charisma. Sometimes it's different from what I expect. When a work is finished, it exudes its own charisma, and lives its life independently. Throughout my career, I've created many different artworks, and they have very different charismas. Not all of them have to look one way.

For the Pushkin exhibition, my main concern is that as an outsider, I am seen as criticizing Russia's issues and their history. What I'm trying to do is tie my personal history and journey in this narration so that I can discuss it not from an outsider's perspective. Another concern — that is not separate from the first concern — is whether the Russian audience will understand that I am talking about them as opposed to just talking about myself.

For the Prado exhibition, my concern is mainly that because I'm creating these paintings, and discussing the issues of painting, I immediately become one of all of the painters in art history who faced a similar predicament — whether or not I can truly represent what I'm trying to represent through the paintings. This is not a bad position to be in — any sensible artist would face these questions all their lives. Only an idiot would open an exhibition saying, "Look at my awesome work." It's a good predicament to be in.

As an artist who is always in his boyhood, I have another thought. While the Prado is indeed one of the most important museums in the world, and in painting especially, if I keep at it, maybe one day I will become a painter after all.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) In Search of El Greco No.4 2016... [+]
PHOTO BY YVONNE ZHAO, COURTESY CAI STUDIO

BW: I just saw some of the paintings you will show at the Prado in your studio. They are bursting with color; they depict animals copulating, and fields of psychedelic mushrooms. They are full of themes of passion and wild abandon. I wonder why you are interested in these themes right now?

CG-Q: As some probably introduced to you, the exhibition at the Prado very much starts from el Greco, and is a pursuit of the themes of spirituality. And since colors embody more emotions to begin with, I'm also approaching the Spanish school of painting, and the golden era of painting with this medium.

The reasons behind my artistic thinking and decisions come in the following. The first reason is that I have never stopped pursuing the dream of an artist, which for me began as the dream of becoming a painter, even though I've created works in a wide range of mediums including explosion and installations. I've always continued my practice in painting. The boyhood dream of becoming a painter stays important to me.

The second reason has to do with the state of painting in the contemporary time. The image, which at one point was the singular method for artists or people to deliver messages, has been in a state of crumble ever since the invention of photography. These days you have photography, television and social media, and images are widely available. What is the direction of painting today?



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) Black Poppy 2016 Gunpowder on canvas, ...
 [+] PHOTO BY YVONNE ZHAO, COURTESY CAI STUDIO

BW: When did you first encounter Goya?

CG-Q: It must have been when I was still in China, and flipping through old fashioned art history books. Alas, at that time, Goya in China, as I recollect, was portrayed as a figure who revealed all of the corruption and violence

and the dark times under religious control. The sensuality in his paintings was not discussed. For example, I did not discover *The Clothed Maja* and *The Unclothed Maja* until much later.

But Goya has his two sides. On the one side, he's very skilled at portraying pure beauty, and the elite class. On the other hand, he painted *The Third of May, 1808*, and grotesque scenes of killing.

Perhaps you can tie the duality of Goya's painting to my paintings at the Prado. On the one hand, there are the flowers, the rich colors, the emotion and sensuality. On the other hand, there is the violence and the explosive energy. The starkness of the universe and the extraterrestrials.

BW: You often talk about creating bridges between the physical and the metaphysical world in your work. I wonder what inhabits this "other" world?

CG-Q: In our lives, both individual and shared, there are many layers of the unseen worlds, including our destinies; our continuous conversations with the essence or very nature of life; the nature that we live in, or live as part of; the great universe; and our connections to our ancestry and our futures. There are a lot of connections we cannot see with our physical eyes. The difficulty of art, as a result, is to use visible materials to portray the invisible. Today, as we are flooded with images from all different medias, as everything becomes seen and proven constantly. It's more necessary than ever to think about how to present the invisible, the unseen world beyond despite the machine world we live in.

BW: I think often of what role painting can play in a world saturated with images. What can images capture that photographs, or films, or live videos cannot? I think the answer is that paintings can embody feelings. When you paint, do you feel, and are these feelings in the work itself?

CG-Q: Many artists, when they are creating art, are searching for a vehicle that can manifest a feeling they have inside of themselves. Oftentimes, they are frustrated by the inability of transmitting this thing. And sometimes, the artwork exceeds the artist's imagined results. In those moments, they feel as though they have received divine help, or help from nature, or the invisible energy. Artists are constantly trying to create a state of being in which they can tease out the divine, the unseen.

In "Sky Ladder," a documentary about your seminal explosion event above Huiyu Island Harbour, you speak with an artist who creates clay sculptures. In your conversation, you tell him that the mark of a true artist is that he or she feels the compulsion to create. I wonder what you mean by that?

CG-Q: In China, whether it's contemporary art, or politically approved art, or traditional art — all of them have a very big market. As China undergoes a drastic change, there is also a huge transformation in people's value and belief system. I see more artists thinking of how to satisfy the needs of the market rather than thinking of this change in art and life, and thinking about using art to transmit the frustrations and difficulties, as well as excitement, that people feel during this transformation in society. As artists are trying to satisfy the market, they lose the urge they once felt as young artists, to discover and reveal the magic in life. The artist that "Sky Ladder" showed me visiting, Mr. Hu, even though he's not professionally trained, he's retained the urge to present the reality of his life. I see tremendous value in this.

There is one group of work he made that deeply touched me. He made it after his wife passed away. It consisted of small clay sculptures that depicted love-making scenes. It came out of his own deepest emotion, as he missed his wife. He did this regardless of what society or the art world required of him. He went deeply into his own emotion, and tried to pursue that.

Shouldn't that be the most basic instinct every artist?

BW: Dr. Mr. Hu's work inspire the animals making love in your paintings for the Prado

CG-Q: Not exactly – that actually came from a dream I had. In my dream, I saw a scene of animals from all different species making love around the last pond in the world. Somehow in my dream, the animals were not concerned that the last pond was drying up.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) Palmyra 2017 Gunpowder on canvas 240 X... [+]
PHOTO BY ANDY ROMER

BW: Looking at the work, I was reminded of a recent *New York* cover that declares that the world might be too hot for human life in coming generations. This is something, as a mother, that I am deeply concerned about. I wonder if the painting has apocalyptic undertones?

CG-Q: Of course I'm concerned, but I also have this playful nature. I've always described myself as a boy. So in my work, I tend not to overcomplicate this concern and make it too serious. In my work, I deal with tragic themes; however, I use playful vignettes to narrate these tragedies. In "Head On," in which 99 wolves chase each other, and collide head-on into an invisible wall, and then come back to complete the cycle, there is a deep

tone of helplessness and tragedy. However, you don't see them with blood, or open skulls. So I think in reflecting on my work, there is always a gracefulness in representing tragedy. I think in my aesthetics, this grace in representation perhaps reveals the deeper tragedy.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; Lives in New York) River 2017 Gunpowder on canvas 3 x 20 m... [+] PHOTO BY 33 STUDIO, COURTESY CAI STUDIO.

BW: Even if your work is not political, the locations of the exhibitions of your work in Russia and the United States have political undertones. In Philadelphia, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway pays homage to one of the founding fathers of the United States. In Moscow, your exhibition at the Pushkin commemorates the centenary of the October Revolution. Russia and the United States are currently at war, with each country accusing the other of influencing elections, and trying to grab world power. It strikes me that you have been chosen without controversy for both projects because your work highlights that human beings are equal and similar no matter where they are from. Do you think this is the case?

CG-Q: The reason why I'm so tanned is because I went back to my hometown, Quanzhou, to create an ink rubbing of a giant Mao portrait that was carved into the cliff of a mountain by the Red Guards during the early cultural revolution in 1968. The slope is very steep, and during that time, three Red Guards fell to their death as a sacrifice to the portrait. The carving wasn't finished because they figured out wild animals were defecating on it. When I was little, my father used to bike with me for three hours from my hometown to the edge of the city to see them make this carving. It left a deep impression.

On the centenary of the October revolution, I went back to reclaim this memory. The project at the Pushkin reflects on the feverish utopian dream that people had 100 years ago, and perhaps still today, about creating a better common future. My family, and the people of my time, they very much shared this common dream. I want to take this opportunity to discuss this shared utopian dream and to discuss issues that all of us human beings share.

The spirit behind that work in Philadelphia, as opposed to celebrating the Benjamin Franklin parkway with a grandiose monumental artwork, I decided to have these pedicabs that are like fireflies. It's a participatory project. Anyone who wants to be part of it can celebrate their freedom.

When I create the work I do, it always requires a harmony between the sky, the earth and the people – this is a Chinese saying. It's good timing, but also good people, and a collective effort. In our time, we face issues of globalization, cross border movement and immigration. Layers of concept develop over time. When I was first commissioned to create a work on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, I didn't know Trump would become the president. An artist's work always builds layers of meaning over time.



Brienne Walsh

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Brienne Walsh received her BA in art history from Brown University in 2004. She has worked in the art world for over a decade, first as a gallerina, and then as an art...

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CAI GUO-QIANG

Medal of Arts 2012



Cai Guo-Qiang was awarded the Medal of Art for his longtime contributions to Art in Embassies and cultural diplomacy on November 30, 2012.

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Trained in stage design, Cai Guo-Qiang brings together

drawing, installation, video, and performance in his work. While living in Japan from 1986 to 1995, he explored the properties of gunpowder in his drawings, an inquiry that eventually led to his experimentation with explosives on a massive scale and to the development of his signature explosion events. Over the years, Guo-Qiang has developed a new aesthetic model that aims to establish a bond between viewers and the larger universe around them. Drawing upon Eastern philosophy and contemporary social issues and using a site-specific approach to culture and history, his art may be experienced simultaneously not only by one or a few persons but also, at times, by audiences of thousands or even millions. His approach also embraces collaboration with people of different ethnicities, and uses art to transcend

national borders and encourages cross-cultural dialogue. Commissioned for the permanent collection at the US Embassy, Beijing, Cai's Eagle Landing on Pine Branch eloquently combines motifs from both China and America and alludes to traditional Chinese Literati paintings. His career has centered on collaborating with people of different ethnicities, and using art to transcend national borders and encourage cross-cultural dialogue. At present, he and AIE are exploring a project for the new Chancery in Afghanistan which will involve working with children from the local community. Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. He has received a number of awards, including the forty-eighth Venice Biennale International Golden Lion Prize and the CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts. Among his many solo exhibitions and

projects are "Light Cycle: Explosion Project for Central Park," New York; "Ye Gong Hao Long: Explosion Project for Tate Modern," London; "Transient Rainbow," the Museum of Modern Art, New York; "Cai Guo-Qiang," Shanghai Art Museum; and "APEC Cityscape Fireworks Show," Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Shanghai.



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Meet the Artist Who Blows Things Up for a Living

With ethereal artworks traced in flames and gunpowder, Cai Guo Qiang is making a big bang



Cai Guo-Qiang reviews one of his gunpowder drawings at the Grucci fireworks plant. (Jessica Dimmock / VII)

By [Ron Rosenbaum](#)

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Internationally lauded “explosives artist” Cai Guo-Qiang has already amassed some stunning stats: He may be the only artist in human history who has had some one billion people gaze simultaneously at one of his artworks. You read that right, one billion. I’m talking about the worldwide televised “fireworks sculpture” that Cai Guo-Qiang—China-born, living in America now—created for the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. If you’re one of the few earthlings who hasn’t seen it, either live or online, here’s Cai’s description: “The explosion event consisted of a series of 29 giant footprint fireworks, one for each Olympiad, over the Beijing skyline, leading to the National Olympic Stadium. The 29 footprints were fired in succession, traveling a total distance of 15 kilometers, or 9.3 miles, within a period of 63 seconds.”

But a mere billion pairs of eyes is not enough for Cai’s ambition. He’s seeking additional viewers for his works, some of whom may have more than two eyes. I’m speaking of the aliens, the extraterrestrials that Cai tells me are the real target audience for his most monumental explosive works. Huge flaming earth sculptures like *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters*, in which Cai detonated a spectacular six-mile train of explosives, a fiery elongation of the Ming dynasty’s most famous work. Meant to be seen from space: He wants to open “a dialogue with the universe,” he says. Or his blazing “crop circle” in Germany, modeled on those supposed extraterrestrial “signs” carved in wheat fields—a project that called for 90 kilograms of gunpowder, 1,300 meters of fuses, one seismograph, an electroencephalograph and an electrocardiograph. The two medical devices were there to measure Cai’s physiological and mental reactions as he stood in the center of

the explosions, to symbolize, he told me, that the echoes of the birth of the universe can still be felt in every molecule of every human cell.

Maybe there's the sly wink of a showman behind these interspatial aspirations, but Cai seems to me to be distinctive among the current crop of international art stars in producing projects that aren't about irony, or being ironic about irony, or being ironic about art about irony. He really wants to paint the heavens like Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Only with gunpowder and flame.

When I visit Cai (as everyone calls him, pronouncing it "Tsai") in his spare East Village Manhattan studio with a big red door and a feng shui stone lion guarding the entrance within, we sit at a glass table flanked by wall-size wood screens: his gunpowder "drawings." These are large white surfaces upon which Cai has ignited gunpowder to make unexpectedly beautiful black trceries, works of abstract art that remind one of the intricate signage of traditional Chinese calligraphy or those photo negative telescopic prints of deep space in which the scattered stars and galaxies are black on white. Violence transformed into ethereal beauty.

Cai, who looks younger than his mid-50s, fit, with a severe brush-cut of hair, is joined by a translator and project manager, Chinyan Wong, and we are served tea by a member of his artmaking collective as we begin talking about his childhood. He tells me a story of profound family sorrow during the Cultural Revolution—and the "time bomb" in his house.

"My family lived in Quanzhou, across the strait from Taiwan," he says, where it was routine to hear artillery batteries firing into the mist at the island the mainland regime wanted to reincorporate into China.

"These were my first experiences of explosions.

"My father," Cai says, "was a collector of rare books and manuscripts," and an adept at the delicate art of calligraphy. But when the Cultural Revolution began in the mid-'60s, Mao Zedong turned his millions of subjects against anyone and any sign of intellectual or elite practices, including any art or literature that was not propaganda.

"Intellectuals" (meaning just about anyone who read, or even possessed, books) were beaten, jailed or murdered by mobs and all their works burned in pyres. "My father knew his books, scrolls and calligraphy were a time bomb in his house," Cai recalls. So he began burning his precious collection in the basement. "He had to do it at night so that no one would know."

Cai tells me that after burning his beloved manuscripts and calligraphy, his father went into a strange self-exile, afraid that his reputation as a collector of books would lead to his death. He left his family home and found a perilous refuge in a ruined Buddhist nunnery where the last remaining 90-year-old devotee gave him sanctuary. There—and this is the especially heartbreaking part—"my father would take sticks and write calligraphy in puddles on the ground," Cai says. "The calligraphy would disappear" when the water evaporated, leaving behind, Cai once wrote, eloquently, "invisible skeins of sorrow." Not entirely invisible, one senses, but inscribed like calligraphy on his son's memory and heart.

His father's art echoes in his son's—calligraphy in water and now in fire. In using the deadly gunpowder, he is seeking to transform it from its lethal uses to the ethereal art of calligraphy. This is not just a vague concept: If you happened to find yourself outside the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery this past December, you could have seen Cai ignite a pine tree with gunpowder packets on the branches and transform it into an ethereal tree, a tree-shaped tracery of black smoke etched into the sky by black gunpowder ink.

Instead of his father's Marxism, Cai says, his great influence was Chinese Taoist spirituality. Feng shui, Qi Gong and Buddhism play a role as well, their roots intertwined. He has written of a shaman he knew as a youth who protected him, and of his search for shamans in other cultures. "Spiritual mediums," he tells me, "channel between the material world and the unseen world to a certain degree similar to what art does." And he sees his art serving as a similar kind of channel, linking ancient and modern, Eastern and Western sensibilities. Feng shui and quantum physics.

He still believes in “evil spirits,” he says, and the power of feng shui to combat them. When I ask him about the source of the evil spirits the stone lion is guarding us from, he replies that they are “ghosts of dissatisfaction.” An interesting reconceptualization of evil.

For instance, he tells me that he was working on a project that involved the microbes in pond water, but brought it to a halt when a shaman warned him that “the water might contain the spirits of people who might have drowned or tried to kill themselves in the pond.”

As a youth, he says, “I was unconsciously exposed to the ties between fireworks and the fate of humans, from the Chinese practice of setting off firecrackers at a birth, a death, a wedding.” He sensed something in the fusion of matter and energy, perhaps a metaphor for mind and matter, humans and the universe, at the white-hot heart of an explosion.

By the time of the political explosion of Tiananmen Square in 1989, Cai had left China and was in Japan, where “I discovered Western physics and astrophysics.” And Hiroshima.

The revelation to him about Western physics, especially the subatomic and the cosmological Big Bang levels, was that it was somehow familiar. “My Taoist upbringing in China was very influential, but not until I got to Japan did I realize all these new developments in physics were quite close to Chinese Qi Gong cosmology. The new knowledge of astrophysics opened a window for me,” he says. The window between the mystical, metaphorical, metaphysical concepts of Taoism—the infinity of mind within us and that of the physical universe whose seemingly infinite dimensions outside us were being mapped by astrophysicists. For example, he says, “The theory of yin and yang is paralleled in modern astrophysics as matter and antimatter, and, in electromagnetism, the plus and minus.”

It was in thinking about the Big Bang that he made what was, to me at least, his most revelatory and provocative connection—that we were all there together at the Big Bang. That every particle in every human being was first given birth when the Big Bang brought matter into being. The unformed matter that would eventually evolve into us was all unified oneness at the moment of the Big Bang.

And it was in Japan that he found a focus also on the dark side of big bangs: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And began what has been a lifelong artistic attempt to come to terms with that dark side. When he went to Hiroshima, he says, he felt the “essence of spirits there.”

I know what he means. I had been to Hiroshima researching a recent book on nuclear war (*How the End Begins: The Road to a Nuclear World War III*) not long before Cai had done one of his signature works there. And Hiroshima is strange in its weird serenity. The actual bomb site has been covered over with smoothly rolling lawns (although there are also museums that can give you all the nuclear gore you want). But in general, it’s a peaceful place. Aside from one skeletal dome-topped remnant of a civic structure, there is little trace of the blast that changed the world.

Yet at night you can sense those spirits Cai speaks of. I’d never felt anything so uncanny.

Cai has created “mushroom clouds” over the Nevada atomic testing grounds site and in many other locations across the United States. Mushroom clouds of non-radioactive smoke. Somehow, he hopes, they will exorcise the real mushroom clouds of the past and the potential ones of the future.

But he had trouble, he tells me, with his original plans for Hiroshima, a project he first designed for the 1994 Asian Games. It involved a black cloud descending in a kind of parachute to land harmlessly on Hiroshima’s ground zero. “The idea,” he says, “was meant to suggest that fire descending from the sky has the potential to initiate rebirth. But it faced strong objection...and I had to give up the proposal.”

So he went back to the drawing board and would later win the Hiroshima Art Prize for one of his most brilliant creations, *The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too*. “This explosion project was realized at Hiroshima central park,” he has written, near “the target of the atomic bomb. I dug a deep hole in the ground at the center of the park and then I used 114 helium balloons at various heights to hold aloft 2,000 meters of fuse and three kilograms of gunpowder, which together formed a spiral with a 100-meter diameter, to mimic the orbits of heavenly stars. The ignition kicked off then from the highest and outermost point to the spiral, burning inward and downward in concentric circles, and disappeared into the ‘black hole’ in the center of the park. The sound from the explosion was extremely violent; the bang echoed and rocked the entire city. My intention was to suggest that in harnessing nuclear energy, humanity has generated its own black hole in the earth that mirrors those in space.”

It was a daring, explosive commemoration of sorrow that surpassed even the spectacle of the Olympics and its celebration of strength. He created a kind of inverse nuclear blast at the very site of the death weapon’s impact.

In one of his earliest projects, “I wrote [an alternate history] in which the secret of nuclear power was discovered by physicists but they decided not to use it to make weapons,” he said, and then faxed the fantasy to art galleries and a far-flung list of political luminaries.

We talk further about nuclear weapons. I ask him a question that has pervaded discussion in the controversies I wrote about: exceptionalism. Are nuclear weapons just exponentially more powerful than conventional weapons or is the difference so great they must be judged by different rules of “just war morality,” military strategy and urgency of abolition?

Cai makes the important point that nukes can’t be judged like the use of other weapons because of one key factor: time. “With the release of energy in traditional explosions the energy is dissipated quickly. With nuclear weapons there is constant preservation of its effects”—nuclear isotopes persist in emitting poisonous radiation for many lifetimes of half-lives.

Nuclear weapons rule over time as well as space. Cai also has a shrewd awareness of one of the key problems of nuclear strategy: deterrence theory. Referring to the subtitle of my book, *The Road to a Nuclear World War III*, he asks, “Couldn’t it be said that it is because of nuclear weapons there will be no World War III?”

In other words, only the possession of nuclear weapons by more than one nation can deter the use of nuclear weapons. It’s a position taken by many nuclear strategists, though one that depends on faith in human rationality and the absence of catastrophic accidents.

He speaks worriedly about how this will apply to another potential nuclear flash point: the periodic spikes in tension between China and Japan over the disputed islands in the seas between the two countries. The Chinese claims to the Japanese-occupied islands have resulted in a counter-movement in Japan by some politicians to amend their constitution to allow them to possess nuclear weapons (mainly to deter a potential Chinese nuclear threat).

Cai returned to Japan to make nuclear power the subject of his art in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant disaster. The challenge for him was to make the invisible visible. “The problem is that you cannot see all the radioactive waves the way you can see the smoke left behind by gunpowder,” he explains. He found a somewhat terrifying but creepily beautiful way of making the invisible visible. “I was there to help the inhabitants plant lots and lots of cherry blossom [trees].” Densely packed together so they can be seen from outer space. He’s got 2,000 so far but wants to eventually plant 100,000. What he really seems to hope will happen is that the cherry blossoms will slowly mutate from the radioactivity in the soil, these varied mutations being a way of making visible the invisible poisoning of nature by human nature, a twisted artistic tribute to the mangled beauty that had been ravaged and could be reborn in strange ways.

It’s a breathtaking idea. I’m not sure I’d want to find myself lost in that twisted mutant forest, though I’m sure it would heighten the consciousness of anyone who ventures in or even sees it from a distance.

If it proceeds, he will have found a way to express tragedy through visual art inscribed on the planet, inscribed in the plants' DNA. It may be a conceptual rather than strictly biological vision. "Some mysteries are meant to be [discovered]," he says, "Some are meant to be heaven's secrets."

I'm not exactly clear which is which, but Cai adds that "I try to use my art as a channel of communication between man and nature; man and the universe. Who knows where this channel brings you?"

I ask him what channel brought him to America in the mid-1990s (although he's frequently traveling all over the world to blow things up). He says that while he was in Japan he learned about recent developments in American art, including the work of people he came to admire, like Robert Smithson, who had made grand earth-altering landscape projects like *Spiral Jetty* in the American desert. But the real reason he resolved to move to the United States was "because of NASA," he says. "I was attracted to anything that would bring me closer to the universe—and the universe closer to me."

He says that what continues to fascinate him about America are its contradictions. "I wanted to live and work in a country that is most problematic in the 20th century," he says, "and offer a completely different point of view."

So I ask him, having looked at civilizations from both sides now, from East and West, does he have any lessons that Westerners can learn from the East?

He is not hesitant. It might help Westerners to learn, he suggests, that "Many things don't have an immediate solution, and many conflicts cannot be resolved immediately. Sometimes things take time to heal and when you take a longer time you might be better able to accomplish your goal."

"So in art and artistic expression," he continues, "the things you're trying to relay, they can be full of conflict, and you do not necessarily have to use art to resolve all these conflicts. As long as you acknowledge these conflicts or address the conflict in your art, that is already meaningful."

It makes me think of the poet John Keats' idea of "negative capability": the distinction of a first-rate mind is that it can entertain conflicting ideas, "is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching" after certainty.

When we finish our conversation and I join the members of his collective for a lunch of many dishes Eastern and Western, Cai tells me about his continuing dream project, in which he goes around the world (next stop, Brazil) creating a "ladder to the sky" of fire in the air above the earth, symbolizing his desire to invite extraterrestrials to descend, or for us to ascend to meet them.

As I leave, I pat the head of the stone lion, hoping the beast will protect us should the aliens Cai is inviting turn out to have less than benign intentions.

About Ron Rosenbaum



Ron Rosenbaum is the author of seven books of nonfiction, including *The Artist's Way*, *The Artist's Mind*, and *The Artist's Soul*. An updated edition of his book, *The Artist's Way*, is being published by DaCapo/Perseus Books.

