



In Search of El Greco No. 8
2016
Gunpowder on canvas, 91.5 x 91.5 cm
Private collection, Hong Kong
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CAI GUO-QIANG: GUNPOWDER ART
25 October–19 April 2020

Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China) is, quite literally, one of the world's most ground-breaking artists. He is best known as the Director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics where he treated awestruck viewers to possibly the greatest fireworks show in history. His practice ranges over painting and drawing, video, installation and performance. This exhibition looks at experiments with his signature medium – gunpowder. Including 14 pieces from the 1980s right up to the present, it explores Cai's cutting-edge work with mainly traditional Chinese materials.

Cai Guo-Qiang is an internationally established artist who has lived, worked and exhibited around the world. He is the recipient of the art-world's most prestigious awards including the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and both the Praemium Imperiale and the US Department of State Medal for the Arts in 2012. He has had solo exhibitions at the Metropolitan and the Guggenheim museums in New York; the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow; the Museo del Prado, Madrid; the Uffizi Galleries, Florence; and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. In 2013 his travelling exhibition *Da Vincis do Povo* which toured across Brazil became the year's most visited exhibition for a living artist, attracting over a million people. In 2016 he was the subject of the Netflix documentary, *Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang* which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

Cai was born in Quanzhou, a large port city in Fujian Province, southeastern China. His father was a traditional Chinese calligrapher and painter and from an early age, Cai was exposed to traditional Chinese art forms and he began painting and drawing. Although his adolescence coincided with the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Cai remembers the Quanzhou of his childhood as a diverse and liberal city where he was able to experiment with different styles and even take on western influences. A significant turning point was in 1971 when he was selected to be an actor in the city's Chairman Mao Thought Propaganda Team which would disseminate the writing and thinking of Mao Zedong. Quickly bored by working as an extra, Cai asked if he could be transferred to paint sets and began working as the assistant to the set designer, buying materials, mixing paint and making sketches. With the collusion of his master, he was allowed to use the spare paints (and funds) for his own work. In 1981, Cai moved to Shanghai to study at the city's Theatre Academy. There, he was exposed to art books and magazines from the west, he attended seminars on western philosophy and aesthetics and he met older artists who had studied in Europe and Russia.

Despite this range of influences, Cai maintained a singular, wholly individual vision. He worked alone and experimented with original techniques, blowing canvases with hair dryers and burning oil paintings. Looking for even greater effects, he began working with gunpowder, a traditional Chinese material that had never before been used in Chinese art. He started by shooting firecracker rockets at canvases (which would then burn up, leaving nothing). He then opened the rockets and removed the gunpowder to sprinkle on the canvas, lighting it with an incense stick. All the while, he was aware of the danger: when he was a child one of his young cousins was killed in a fireworks accident. Carrying kilos of gunpowder home on a bus, sitting next to passengers smoking cigarettes, Cai



Cai Guo-Qiang creating gunpowder drawing
Bird of Light, Brookhaven, New York, 2004
Photo by Chris Smith, courtesy Hirshhorn
Museum and Sculpture Garden

recalls feeling 'extremely nervous.' In 1986 he moved to Japan and it was there that he focused exclusively on gunpowder and came to the attention of prominent artists, critics and the media and he was able to take on ever larger projects. In 1995, after nearly nine years in Japan, he was awarded an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship and moved to New York, where he lives today. Since being based in the USA, Cai has become known for his spectacular pyrotechnic events where he creates large gunpowder explosions in colours and forms that respond to institutional and regional identities.

The Ashmolean's exhibition of 14 works ranges across Cai's career. They represent his profound engagement with both western history and Chinese artistic traditions and materials including paper, porcelain and silk. These include early experimental works from the 1980s in gunpowder on Japanese paper; works in coloured gunpowder on canvas; porcelain panels and sculpture with moulded decoration and gunpowder on the surface; and silk hangings with gunpowder. Coinciding with the Ashmolean's *Last Supper in Pompeii* exhibition, it also shows a selection of objects from the test for one of his most recent projects made in February 2019 in the amphitheatre of Pompeii where a wooden boat, life-size reproductions of Roman sculptures, terracotta pots and glass dishes were sprinkled with black and coloured gunpowders and ignited in a spectacular display that lasted more than three minutes.

Professor Shelagh Vainker, Curator of Chinese Art, Ashmolean Museum, says:

'Cai Guo-Qiang stands apart from his contemporaries in China and in the west as an artist engaging with the world through gunpowder, in explosion events, spectacles and works in more traditional media (such as silk, porcelain, canvas and paper). It is a privilege for the Ashmolean to present the range and energy of his work within the context of the University collections.'

Cai Guo-Qiang says: 'I'm truly grateful for this opportunity to realize an exhibition of such an intimate scale and scholarly depth, focusing on one specific theme — my use of gunpowder on different mediums.'

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▪ PRESS IMAGES:

Images for editorial use are available to download at: <http://bit.ly/caiguo-qiang>

▪ NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition: *Cai Guo-Qiang: Gunpowder Art*
Dates: 25 October 2019–19 April 2020
Venue: Chinese Paintings Gallery, Ground Floor, Ashmolean Museum
Admission: Free
Publication: The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Materials Without Boundaries*; £10 available at the Ashmolean or [online](#)
Symposium: Thursday 24 October 2019, 1–5pm. Further details [online](#)