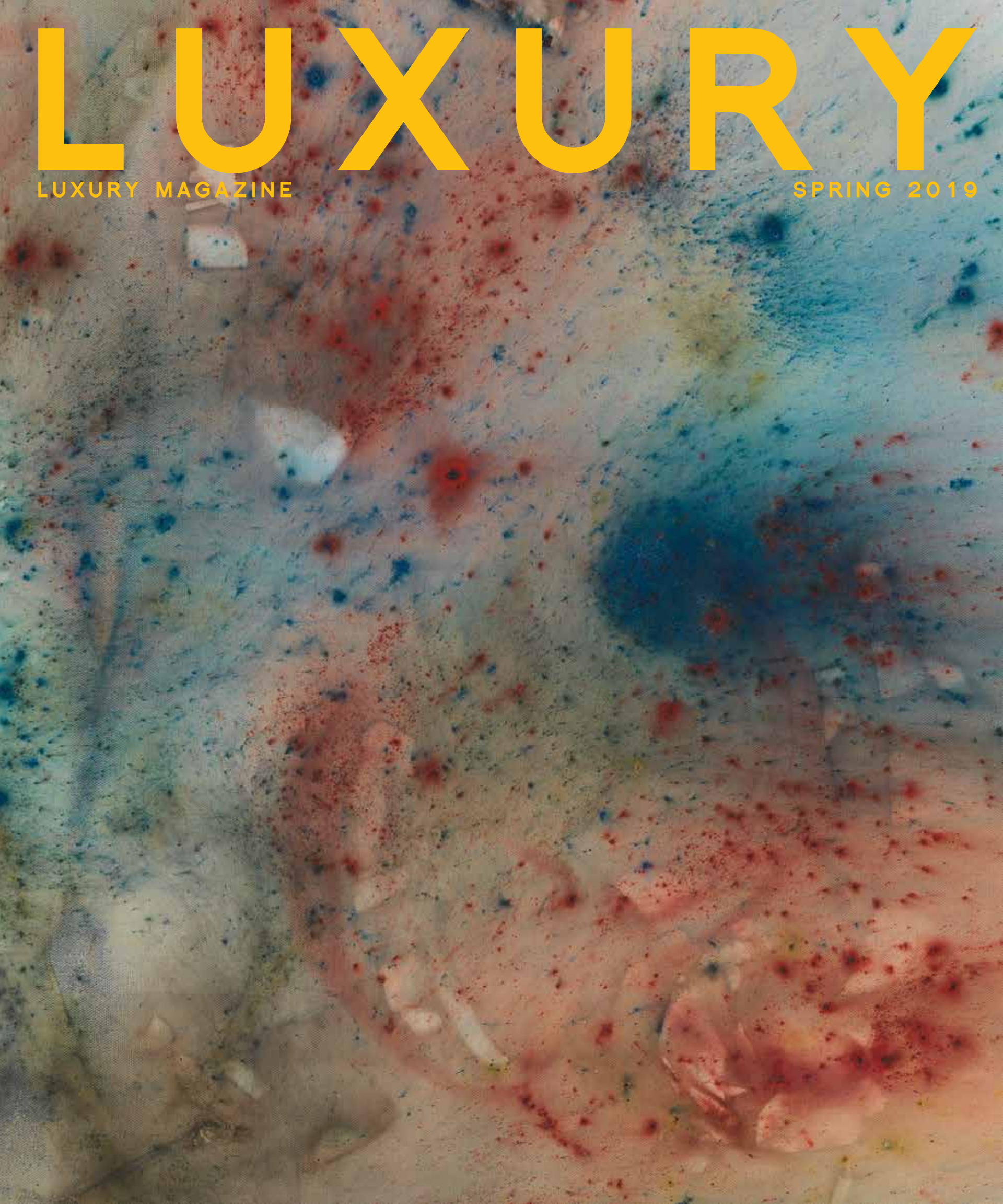


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AN EXPLOSION OF ART

CAI GUO-QIANG harnesses the destructive power of gunpowder to create masterpieces bursting with color and imagery.
by Jason Edward Kaufman



For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang directed visual effects at the opening and closing ceremonies. That first night, he orchestrated fireworks forming 29 giant footprints (one for each modern Olympiad) that marched in sequence for 9 miles, culminating at the National Stadium. More than 1.5 billion television viewers witnessed the minute-long display.

Cai came up with the footprints idea two decades earlier, as part of his art series *Project for Extraterrestrials*. He imagined giants in the universe who could disregard the international borders invented by mankind and believed that to be seen from an extraterrestrial perspective, his work should be outdoors and big enough for extraterrestrials to actually see. “I don’t have specific ideas about any UFOs or alien beings,” he says, “but I believe in the unseen world that exists in the cosmos. I feel it is meaningful and necessary for mankind to be aware that there are eyes out there in the universe looking at us, just as it is for a country to constantly know that there are other countries out there looking at you.”

Born in 1957 in Quanzhou, a coastal city in Fujian Province in Southeastern China, young Cai spent afternoons sitting on a little stool behind the counter of his father’s state-run bookstore. His father had access to the kinds of books that could be read only by members of the Communist Party’s inner circles and Cai devoured them. From the latest developments in foreign literature—Japanese, American, and European writers—to a winner of the Nobel Prize in literature to books about existentialism and the absurd. “They exposed me not only to literature, but to perspectives on humanity and politics,” he says. “I read about hardship in the lives of peasants and workers, and also the romantic side of their lives and their freedom.”



Partial view of *Unmanned Nature*, 2008, a 13 x 147-foot gunpowder drawing commissioned by Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, installed at The Whitworth in Manchester in 2015. *Opposite*: Cai Guo-Qiang in his New York studio. Previous spread: *Day and Night in Toledo*, 2017, a gunpowder on canvas work inspired by El Greco and measuring more than 9 x 20 feet.

In 1986, with help from an acquaintance who worked in the Forbidden City, Cai emigrated to Japan where he remained until 1995. During this period he established his reputation with large-scale explosion events that led to numerous museum exhibitions in Japan and Europe. In 1995 he relocated to New York, where he continues to live and work. His 15-second *Transient Rainbow* explosion over the East River sent 1,000 fireworks up in a great arch of thrilling color from Manhattan to Queens. With his pieces, both tangible works on paper or canvas and wondrous public displays, he is the giant traipsing the sky, inciting an awe capable of dissolving division.

Cai is part of the first generation of Chinese artists to gain prominence on the international stage, and unlike many who conformed to the prevailing taste of the Western market, he imbued his work with Asian concepts and materials. His ideas and iconography spring from Chinese mythology and history, Eastern philosophy and religions, Maoist revolutionary ideas, Chinese medicine, and feng shui. He also finds inspiration in Western thought, particularly astrophysics and art history, and mingles the perspectives of East and West.

Left: Jason Edward Kaufman; Steven Oskier/Alamy

His ghostly gunpowder drawings make use of a material invented in China, but often represent motifs familiar in the locale where he exhibits them: a eucalyptus tree in Queensland, a Botticelli in Florence, and an American eagle landing on a pine tree (symbolic of Chinese tradition) for the American Embassy in Beijing. Using gunpowder—the fuel of war—Cai channels beauty and reflection through his creative process.

The centerpiece of his 2008 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York was a stunning coup de théâtre of nine identical automobiles suspended from the roof of the rotunda, each bursting with rods of blinking colored LEDs. Positioned topsy-turvy in midair, the cars look like a time lapse of an exploding car, an image acutely resonant at a moment focused on the scourge of terrorism. A more tranquil piece made in 2013 for the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art positioned sculptures of 99 animals, predators and prey from around the world, drinking from the same watering hole, stand-ins for the artist’s vision of social harmony on earth.

Growing up, Cai studied social-realist painting and belonged to troupes that produced art and cultural

propaganda promoting Maoism. As a student at the Shanghai Theater Academy (1981–1985), he worked in stage design and turned from traditional Chinese art to Western forms, including oil painting. Intent on developing his own innovative approach, he experimented with new techniques and began making images with burning gunpowder. Early results were basically white and black. Then Cai added yellow, brown, a rusty orange, even blue. His compositions are more deliberate than you would guess from art made by an explosion. While some look abstract, others show mountains or a crocodile gobbling up the sun.

When creating a large work on paper or canvas, Cai begins by sketching. He adds segments of fuse and sprinkles granular explosives by hand, then lays down stencils, plants, or other items whose forms he wishes to record. He scatters more gunpowder to adjust the composition and assistants cover the entire setup with cardboard weighted down to contain the ensuing combustion. Once everyone is clear, Cai ignites a fuse, steps back, and seconds later a hissing eruption rolls down the length of the drawing. Fire boils along the edges, acrid smoke fills the air, and his team races in to tamp down flames. The ▶



Remembrance, chapter two of *Elegy*, an explosion event on the Huangpu River near Shanghai's Power Station of Art in 2014. Left: *Footprints of History: Fireworks Project for the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games*.

cardboard is removed and the artist surveys his creation—a ghostly image as if rendered on sandstone with the residue of the thrilling blast.

In the past several decades, Cai has been the subject of exhibitions at prestigious museums from the Guggenheim Bilbao (the museum's first retrospective devoted to a Chinese artist) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (his was the Met's first solo show by a living Chinese artist). His newest works respond to masterpieces of Western art and have been presented in the Pushkin in Moscow, the Prado in Madrid, and the Uffizi in Florence. The 2017 Prado show included gunpowder drawings in homage to El Greco, one of his favorite artists. Last year's Florence show featured a 15-minute spectacle of 50,000 fireworks, many of them flower-shaped and inspired by Botticelli's *La Primavera*. For an exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples (through May 20), he conducted an explosion event in the amphitheater at Pompeii to echo the ancient city's volcanic destruction. Next on his busy calendar, Cai will act as curator as one of six artists chosen by the Guggenheim to select works for *Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection* (May 24, 2019–Jan. 12, 2020).

For all his success, Cai is not a major presence in the art market. Large gunpowder drawings have topped \$1 million on the rare occasions when they come up for auction, and multiple-drawing sets have sold for \$9.5 million, but he eschews the gallery system, preferring to sell directly to museums and collectors. His base of operations is a multi-story studio in a former school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He and his wife, Hong Hong Wu, also spend time with their two daughters on a farm in New Jersey, where he maintains a second studio and commissioned a house designed by Frank Gehry.

At the New York studio assisted by an interpreter (Cai has never mastered English), the artist spoke about gunpowder, growing up in Communist China, his belief in the unseen, and the complexities of creating large-scale explosion events. ▶



Inopportune: Stage One, 2004, nine automobiles bursting with colored LED rods evoke a stop-action car bombing suspended within the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2008.

Jason Edward Kaufman

Do you believe extraterrestrials are watching us?

We know that 95 percent of the universe is accounted for by dark energy and dark matter. For art and for humanity, and for my own so-called politics, this is a meaningful thing.

Why did you want to become an artist?

Because art seemed to be the only thing that I was extremely good at in my youth. I was not interested in anything else. I also played the violin, wrote poetry, and practiced kung fu martial arts. Every day after I woke up I would go run on the streets that surround the city. Back from that run I would clean myself with well water and then start reading. Later I would play the violin and then paint and draw, and after lunch I would write or paint more. At dusk I would lift weights, and at night I would head out with friends and go to the school plaza to practice kung fu. I am not too different from what I was in my youth. I rarely cook or do any laundry or buy anything from the stores, and I still keep pet fish at home. My wife has known me for over 40 years—we met when she was 17—and she can attest to the fact that I haven't changed much.

Did your parents think you should pursue a different career?

I always occupied myself with enjoyable things to do, so I suppose they thought that I was very unique and they didn't need to worry too much about me. They let me have a huge studio in our house. My parents and siblings made do with sleeping in several small rooms while I took up two large rooms to make a big studio.

How did you cultivate your voice as an artist under the authoritarian control of the Chinese state?

Many of my artist peers, including Xu Bing, must have looked for a free and unique voice in that society. I was aware that lots of artists—for example, the members of The Stars Art Group—were in pursuit of freedom in society. But I was pursuing personal

freedom because since my childhood I always believed that only when individuals can achieve their freedom can society achieve real freedom.

Did that position influence your decision to make art with a destructive material devised for war?

I already had been thinking a lot about creation and destruction—Mao's slogan, "No destruction, no construction." I was using fire to burn my oil paintings, trying to be experimental, but this was still exerting control. I was thinking that the firecrackers that I was surrounded with in my hometown could be a very handy medium for me.

Was your use of gunpowder influenced by the exploration of new materials by contemporary artists in the West and in Japan?

In China I wasn't influenced by them, but after arriving in Japan I had access to modern art. Japanese artists were always debating whether we should be more insistent on our Eastern traditions—Asian philosophy, calligraphy, and even the art of flowers—or more closely follow Dadaism and Pop art from the West. They were aware that Conceptual art was emerging in California, but they were concerned that the past century of development in Japan had simply been the result of Westernization. They were oscillating between East and West, but I was considering a larger scale that could incorporate both, and more importantly surpass the dual relationship. That is when I started my series *Projects for Extraterrestrials*.

One work sought to realize a ladder of flame reaching into the firmament. After several failed attempts starting in the 1990s, I finally realized the vision in 2015, igniting a 1,650-foot rope ladder wrapped with fuse that blazed for several minutes while being held up by a balloon. [*Sky Ladder* was recorded in a feature-length biopic by director Kevin MacDonald.] Another time, I extended the Great Wall of China for 6 miles with a conjoined burning fuse. For centuries the wall defined the northwestern limits of the empire and

I extended it into the Gobi Desert, resuming the nationalist campaign and exposing its futility.

Your father was a devoted Maoist. How did he influence your thinking?

My father was a Communist Party member, and he was very cautious and very loyal. On special Buddhist occasions, like when we commemorated my deceased grandfather, my grandmother and my mother would prepare food offerings. My father would not participate in those rituals and never ate those offerings because he was a firm believer in the Party. But at the same time, he nurtured me to be sensitive to politics. As a child, I often drew portraits of Chairman Mao, and my father would tell me, "Cai, you should not draw portraits of Chairman Mao like this. It will be a problem." I would say, "It's a very good portrait, just like Chairman Mao," but he explained, "You cannot see the difference, but it is not like Chairman Mao and you may get caught."

Did your father allow you to read the books in his state-controlled shop?

Yes. For the books that could be read only by members of the Party's inner circles, he was supposed to deliver them to the mayor's office, but before delivering them he would bring them home. He made covers with newspaper or butcher paper to help preserve the books in case I might tarnish them. And I had to finish reading them within a day or two before he delivered them to the mayor, so I had to read fast.

He was a very cautious person, but what he did opened a window for me to another world. I also eavesdropped on radio stations of the Soviet Union and the so-called "enemies" including Voice of America, and stations in Taiwan, Central Europe, and even Japan. I can still vividly remember the beautiful voice of the Taiwanese radio hostess. I had just a small radio and had to very patiently search for that channel because there was a lot of disruption. Less than a kilometer from my house were huge signal towers intended to disrupt the signals from our "enemy countries." >

City of Flowers in the Sky, an explosion event at Piazzale Michelangelo overlooking the city of Florence in November 2018. Opposite: *Study for Uffizi: Flora No. 1*, 2018, a gunpowder drawing on canvas measuring more than 9 x 4 feet based on Botticelli's *La Primavera*, made for the artist's 2018 solo exhibition at the Uffizi Galleries, Florence.



What else do you recall from that period?

My father had a bicycle to deliver the books. A bicycle was a luxury good in my hometown during my childhood. He pulled a book cart behind the bicycle and I sometimes rode on it. I remember on a long ride seeing a huge relief of Chairman Mao's head that the Chinese military had begun carving into the side of a mountain

in the outskirts of Quanzhou. They began in 1967 and several soldiers fell and died before the project was halted. They realized that birds were defecating on the carving—and that was not a good thing for Chairman Mao!—and the mountain was part of a military base that had been excavated to build missile silos. The carving served as a target for Taiwan to attack, so they left it unfinished. But

the shallow carving still remains on the cliff, and in the sunshine you can clearly see the head of Chairman Mao. In a sense, it is a shadow of history.

That carving of Chairman Mao was like land art, and the experience allowed me to see the appeal of a large-scale artwork installation. Two years ago, I had my solo exhibition at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, marking the centennial of the

Courtesy Cai Guo-Qiang



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Russian Revolution. Before the exhibition I climbed up the mountain and covered the carving with a 164- by 105-foot tarpaulin canvas, and using ink I made a rubbing. Through that act I was tracing my memory of childhood, my father, and of socialist China and Chairman Mao.

Your father was a Party loyalist, but also an artist and book collector. It must have been painful when he became a target of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution.

He was very afraid. During the day you could often hear the strike of the gong, which meant there was a procession,

a riot on the streets, and people would shout that we are criticizing this or that person. In the beginning he was one of those who criticized others.

The staff in the bookstore had been revolutionary leaders in Shandong and Shanxi, and he had to travel to those cities to make sure they really had a clean background. But they were later exonerated and my father was afraid that now they would seek revenge.

It was a very complicated political conflict between different factions. When he was targeted he had to burn his collection of books. He was afraid that smoke coming out of the chimney would attract suspicion during the day, so he burned the books overnight. I helped tear them up. It was not easy to burn whole books. Simply throwing them into the fire took a very long time.

Why do you think he became a target?

My father always tried to be very low-key and modest and actively participated in the revolution. But he was born with a problematic background. His grandfather was a gunsmith who used to manufacture guns for the Communist Party, the National Party, and also the mafias.

Just after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Communist Party sentenced one of his sons to death and another was killed in secrecy by the Party. My father never told me about that part of the family history, but I read about it on a form that Party members had to fill out detailing their background and their ancestors. When I saw that my father mentioned that two of his uncles were killed, it was very scary.

The other side of my family was from a typical lower class, which was deemed at the time very favorable. My grandmother was very self-confident and her strong character and spiritual beliefs impressed me. She was a Buddhist, a Taoist, and at one point believed in Christianity, as well. I share her belief and her longing for the unseen world, a concept that relates to feng shui and qi, the invisible energy of the universe and the energy of your own body. Gunpowder, the medium that I use, is related to this context. It activates an unseen energy, and every time you use it you face your own fate. I don't mean I might be blown up, but using gunpowder makes it hard to anticipate the result of your work, so something is left to fate. My uses of gunpowder are related to my values about life.

What are your latest developments in terms of technique?

I have been creating new work by igniting blue gunpowder on a mirror. At first, no matter how much gunpowder I sprinkled on the surface, it wouldn't explode. Usually I can ignite the gunpowder with only an incense stick, but even with a blowtorch it wouldn't explode. It would just sizzle.

Eventually I decided to place another glass on top of the mirror covering the blue gunpowder, letting the two sheets press against each other. This resulted in a huge explosion. It was a completely surprising result. Gunpowder is quite a character. ▶



You have organized massive explosion events all over the world. The early ones were mostly clouds of black smoke, but now you create in color: footprints, flowers, letters, even rainbows. How have you refined your technique?

To create anything like that in a public space, you face problems like safety and the security of the public and the city. You need to get a permit and I am not a licensed professional for using gunpowder. I need to first identify a company with a pyrotechnical license who can get the permit for me and provide the materials and import fireworks. These various partners also help me set up the products on site, and operate the computer system, strictly according to my design. Most of the time the companies already have their own system, but sometimes they will develop one just to realize my project. They might have to customize the system to generate a faster speed of explosions, or invent products that have computer chips inserted to control the exact location and timing of the explosions in the sky. For celebratory fireworks they wouldn't need precise location and timing controls, but I arrange the shells to form a shape. Each shell has to know the millisecond it explodes in order to form, say, a letter "A" in the sky.



Clockwise from top left: *Heaven Complex No. 1*, 2017, gunpowder on canvas; *Crocodile and Sun*, 2007, gunpowder on paper mounted on wood as six-panel screen measuring more than 7 x 15 feet; *Purple Poppy No.1*, 2018, gunpowder on canvas, 30 x 30 inches; proposal for *Heritage*, a 2013 installation of 99 life-sized replicas of animals, sand, water, and drip mechanism created for the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane.

Sometimes I also rely on scientists outside the company to realize particularly challenging issues. But the day of the realization of the explosion event, generally I just press a button.

Can you simply tell them you want a red letter "A" at a particular height, or hand them a drawing of colorful flowers and have them set up

fireworks to create it?

They can realize about 70 percent of my desired effects. When I first draw my vision for the project, I have already considered realistically their capacity, but still 30 percent of my requests cannot be realized. They always do many tests in the countryside and send me videos and I give them feedback to adjust. Often

Courtesy Cai Guo-Qiang



in the beginning they tell me that what I want is not possible, and I tell them it is feasible and draw sketches to show how it can be done. For example, when I ask them to find a way to explode a straight vertical line, they always told me they could only form a horizontal line. I explained that with computer technology you could realize a line from ground to sky. That technology has helped them realize really interesting fireworks. It has made some companies a fortune in Saudi Arabia and other rich countries where they create events or the royals.

The explosion events are ephemeral and they take place only once. You can record them in a film or drawing, but that is not the same as the actual event. Do you have documentation sufficient to re-create them, and would you allow repeat performances?

In the beginning I did not care that much about documentation of these projects because I thought of them as mostly for extraterrestrials. Let's just allow the light to travel into the universe! As I received more and more support and was hosted by more institutions, many people contributed to the realization of the sky projects, and naturally we ended up having a lot of documentation, from film to photographs and coverage by media. I would say that now the projects are well documented.

Would you allow them to be replicated, even if you are no longer alive?

Yes, of course, if they want to. The night that the giant footprints appeared above the city of Beijing, I turned part of a national ceremony into a platform for my own artwork. It was an artwork for the country, and also an artwork for myself. They could definitely reproduce the exploded footprints or *Sky Ladder*. They could reproduce *Sky Ladder* to celebrate my 100th birthday, just as I did for my 100-year-old grandmother. As long as they feel it is a worthy and interesting thing to do. ♦

