

# Flash in the plan

With gunpowder his preferred medium, Cai Guoqiang is known for artworks that go out with a bang. He's also not one for false modesty, Enid Tsui discovers

**C**ai Guoqiang is best known for his pyromaniacal use of gunpowder and fireworks, but in person he is as calm as the pleasant surroundings of the Asia Society. There, the artist answers all questions in a soft, soothing voice, his patient smile never wavering. He quotes an ancient Chinese saying to explain his Zen-like calm: "A real recluse can live in the busiest of cities."

However, mellow is not the same as self-effacing. Cai is in Hong Kong to receive an Asia Society Arts Award together with Nalini Malani and Yoshitomo Nara, and decides to dispense with false modesty.

That firework display he did for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games? "It was creative, technically and visually very meaningful," he says.

The new exhibition of Chinese art he's put together for Qatar's Al Riwaq Art Space? Apparently, Sheikha Mayassa Al Thani, sister of the ruling emir and head of the Qatar Museums Authority, couldn't wait for its March 14 opening.

Last year, "the whole of Japan" was excited about his show at the Yokohama Museum of Art. "NHK did a total of seven television programmes on it," he says.

A super-sized ego is required to pull off super-sized projects, perhaps. No matter what he creates - he paints, performs and makes installations - there is always drama.

The 58-year-old studied stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy before moving to Japan in 1986, and has created plenty of memorable, large-scale theatricals.

He made a 10km fire wall in Jiayuguan as a temporary extension of the Great Wall in 1993. In 2012, he set off 40,000 rockets outside the The Geffen Contemporary at Moca in Los Angeles. To match his superstar stature, he hired architect Rem Koolhaas' OMA to redesign and expand his New York studio.

One reason for having the 8,675 sq ft space in the Lower East Side of Manhattan is because he has never had gallery representation, so his studio is an important place for him to show his work.

"I started selling directly back when I was a young man in Japan. I really wanted to get into the big Tokyo galleries but people just weren't interested. Then, I started to get commissions from museums and my career took off that way. I did talk to some big galleries at some stage but I think showing in a commercial space has too many constraints," he says.

"Galleries focus on the selling and I find such an approach disheartening. Though for many young artists, galleries introduce them to collectors and that helps them survive. I do not negate the fact that galleries have value."

Cai's first shows were in Japan, his home for eight years. He says he



Cai's fireworks shaped like a footprint flash over the Forbidden City in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Photo: Xinhua

wasn't seen as a Chinese artist then, and it suited him.

"Lee Ufan, Nam June Paik, and I were not considered Korean or Chinese. We were considered Japanese artists when we lived there. We represented Japan in international exhibitions. It was a different era," he says, referring to the heightened sense of nationalist identity and regional tension in north Asia today.

Today, he continues to reject any nationalistic label. New York has been home since 1995 and he sees himself as an international artist.

New York is a place that allows one to be normal, he says. "I feel that it's more natural for me to live in New York. I can better focus on art there," he says.

As he moves around the world, the meaning of gunpowder - his signature material that he applies to paper, walls and vast, empty fields - changes for him.

"When I was in China, it meant destruction and reconstruction to me. In Japan, I started using it to reflect how I see the universe," he says.

He hasn't cut ties with his home country, spending a couple of months in China each year. In fact, he seems willing to do his bit for major state-organised events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the China-Qatar 2016 Year of Culture.

Doesn't that clash with his cosmopolitan identity?

"I have an emotional attachment to the land and its people. I pitched for the Olympics opening, rather than being asked by the government as most people think. It's my way of doing something for this land that gave me so much," Cai explains.

"I was preparing for a group show by Chinese artists before the Cultural Year idea popped up, so I am not doing this because the two governments asked me to."

Over the years, Cai has created work in remote areas in China and elsewhere, drawing comparison with the Land Art movement in the West. Does fame and fortune mean that he only gets out of bed if there's a large enough audience these days?

"Last year, I took *Sky Ladder* to my grandmother's village. I did it for her 100th birthday. She couldn't get out of bed but watched, on a smartphone, a live streaming of how the explosives created a ladder in mid-air. The audience was only the few hundred people living in Huiyu Island," he says.

"What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China", curated by Cai Guoqiang, will run until July 16 at the QM Gallery Al Riwaq in Doha.

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Artist Cai Guoqiang. Photo: Nora Tam

*Sky Ladder*, a fireworks installation, being staged in Huiyu Island harbour, Fujian, last June in honour of Cai's grandmother's 100th birthday.

