

Cai Guo-Qiang: Quiero creer/ I want to believe



Cai Guo-Qiang

Last 17th March at Guggenheim Museum Bilbao opened the comprehensive retrospective of the work of Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, *I Want to believe*, which continued until 6th September. The museum is a work of art itself, demonstration of Frank Gehry's architectural genius and proof of the contribution that the building gave to relaunch the city economy, having streams of tourists to converge in a place that, otherwise, is not so rich in touristic attractions. The Guggenheim is self-financing up to 65%, and only for the remaining 25% relies on public and private sponsors: an exemplary success. It is BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria) that, sponsoring one event per year and boasting, among others, important presences in China, for 2009 has chosen to finance the exhibition of this Chinese artist, who has been living in New York for the last 15 years. The retrospective was first successfully shown at the Guggenheim Museum in the Big Apple, although the "European" version allows Cai Guo-Qiang to express better his intellectual and aesthetical research.

**Guggenheim
Museum,
Bilbao**



**Inopportune:
stage one**

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in the southern part of Fujian Province and grew up in the Maoist China. In 1986 he moved to Japan where he lived for some years, to move afterwards to New York,



where he still lives and works, surrounded by a consistent staff that follows and assists him with his spectacular installations. He is a complex, stratified artist who avails himself of an expressive and conceptual vocabulary that ranges over a number of intercommunicating levels: from ancient Chinese mythology to political propaganda through art, from Taoist cosmology to revolutionary tactics, from feng shui to Buddhist philosophy, in a vacillating comparison between East and West, past and future, preservation and destruction, sometimes highlighting deep analogies between historical dynamics, regardless of the geographic coordinates, to focus directly on the mainly human axis. The artist starts from well-known cultural worlds to decipher the unknowable through the spectacular sublimation offered by art and creativity. Creativity spectacularly manifests itself as an instrument of catharsis when he performs his “explosions” in military bases, to expel accumulated negative energy: destroying to create. After all, the gunpowder, invented by his ancestors, is his main means of expression since 1984. The guiding idea is always the explosion, a “revolutionary” method that artistically represents that moment when everything is reset to zero in order to enable new births: a sort of big bang of the artistic creation. On first inspection, his operations might appear a little megalomaniacal. Actually, when coming



*Bilbao,
view from
Guggenheim
Museum*

nearer to the artist, watching him closely and listening to him talking, we understand that in all of this lies a deep, suffered awareness of the ever accompanying error of human act: the error of judging the other, the world, the meaning. Because of this, the explosion seems, symbolically and emotionally, to put an end to, wipe out and, at the same time, stir new forces, which are purified and taken away from the inescapable by setting time to zero. I want to believe: what could it possibly mean if not a tragic, definitive appropriation of hope?

Some videos on the show document these explosions. They come side by side with huge paper surfaces, “drawn” by the burn marks resulting from the explosions, which are complexly realized and not easily predictable, like human actions.

Still in this apocalyptic climate, the museum’s hall hosts a huge installation titled *Inopportune: stage one*, consisting of eight cars, hanging in the simulation of an explosion, that appear suspended in void with both a kitsch and a disturbing effect. It is for sure the most admired and photographed work, but in my opinion the least interesting, beyond, of course, its inevitable strong emotional and visual impact. The extraordinary *Head on* was presented again, after its debut in Berlin and its presence in New York last year: 99 wolves and the human fallibility of the blind run dazzled by the collective ideology. The transparent glass wall

against which the wolves (perfectly recreated with resins and hairs, but not stuffed at all - it is better to make this point clear) jump head on, a wall waiting for the furious masses of their pursuing. It is perhaps an inconvenient work, for the

Head on



multiple levels of possible interpretation, but, definitely, the one to focus the attention on. The Spanish exhibition that gathers many of the works already shown in New York, substantially appears more “intense” than the American one, deeper in its self-given and conveyed sense. It seems to me that the American côté relied more on the most spectacular aspects, concealing the most submerged, unquiet ones. An exercise of removal? Maybe.

There are also the interesting social projects that the artist makes in collaboration with local workers. Among these, we recall Bilbao’s Rent Collection Courtyard (2009), which is a modification of the installation created for the 48th Venice Biennale, upon Harald Szemann’s invitation (Quang won the Golden Lion at the Biennale in 1999). It is a clay sculptural group, made in collaboration with Chinese artists, inspired by a series of

sculptures reproducing one of the most famous Chinese Maoist work of art: the «Rent Collection Courtyard». Created in 1965 by the Sichuan fine Arts Institute’s members, it represents the abuses suffered by the peasants before the advent of Communism. The sculptures will crumble, disintegrating during the show. The project has been repeated again and again, and considers the ephemerality of ideologies and the meaning of political propaganda through images. But we shouldn’t be misled: we know that these representations do not aim to praise the collapse, but to celebrate the birth of newness. We cast a last glance back, before going on and then we don’t look back again, as Orpheus should have done before coming out of the underworld in order to rescue Eurydice. I want to believe, we want to believe. ✪

**Bilbao’s Rent
Collection
Courtyard,
2009**

