

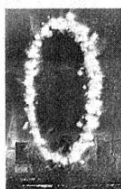
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Playing With Fireworks: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang

Leisure & Arts



Cai Guo-Qiang's medium of choice is gunpowder: The artist uses it both to 'paint' the sky with fireworks and to draw on paper. He tells Tom Vanderbilt about his halo 'Light Cycle,' 1,000 feet in diameter, to appear above New York's Central Park next week to mark its 150th anniversary.

By Tom Vanderbilt

Brookhaven, N.Y.

Set in a densely wooded enclosure in this Long Island town, the Fireworks by Grucci compound evokes a military test range of the desert West. A network of lonely gravel roads is studded with metal shipping containers, or "magazines," each containing the raw materials of fireworks displays, ringed by hulking berms to prevent a chain of accidental explosions. In nearby cinder-block buildings, specialists wearing static-free clothing are at work "packing programs," or assembling the sequences of color and sound that will embroider the night sky for some future audience.

On one recent morning, in a drafty hangar near Grucci's headquarters building, the Chinese-born artist Cai Guo-Qiang was, as it were, packing his own program. Squatting over a large section of textured Japanese paper, Mr. Guo-Qiang, wearing khakis, a T-shirt, and socks that looked like gloves, was carefully mounding small, cumin-colored dollops in an arc across the paper, which was on the floor. Among these mounds he strategically placed a variety of other small, rock-like pieces of black material.

Mr. Guo-Qiang's medium of choice for this "drawing," titled "Transient Rainbow," is gunpowder. Various grades are employed, each for its own effects, some diluted with a compound called "Realgar," an orangish substance used in traditional Chinese medicine—appropriate, really, since gunpowder, whose Chinese name means "fire medicine," was devised by an alchemist seeking an elixir to give the emperor eternal life. Rounding out Mr. Guo-Qiang's arsenal are Rice Krispies coated in black powder (talk about Snap, Crackle, Pop!).

With each large-scale explosion event, Mr. Guo-Qiang creates accompanying gunpowder drawings. There have been artists who have used both gunpowder and fireworks (Ed Ruscha and Dennis Oppenheim, to name two), but no one has so fully explored the aesthetic possibilities, or so deftly rendered the process of combustion as art, as Mr. Guo-Qiang. Born in 1957 in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, and now based in New York City, Mr. Guo-Qiang's globally renowned work has ranged from small-scale "gunpowder drawings" to full-scale fireworks-like spectacles (he prefers the phrase "explosion events," to differentiate his work from the more straightforward, ooh-ahh artistry of Grucci's technicians). On Sept. 15, Mr. Guo-Qiang will unveil a three-stage event, curated by the arts group Creative Time, as part of Central Park's 150th-anniversary celebration.

The centerpiece of "Light Cycle," as the work is called, will be a 1,000-foot-di-



NYC renewed: A computer simulation of 'Light Cycle.'

ameter halo that will be "painted" in the sky over the reservoir in the park's center. The halo, described by Mr. Guo-Qiang as "amulets placed over the heart of Manhattan," is meant to serve as a visual metaphor for renewal and timelessness. The entire event will last no more than five minutes, which belies the months of preparation by Mr. Guo-Qiang and the Grucci technicians. "Light Cycle," while a departure from a traditional Fourth of July spectacle, still required the full technical acumen of Grucci, America's oldest fireworks company.

Some 11,000 shells in total will be fired in a matter of seconds, which requires precise timing and "systems integration." Then there's height and velocity. The shell-bursts at the apex of the 1,000-foot halo, which need to look the same as those at 150 feet, must nevertheless be sent more than three times the normal height of traditional fireworks displays. "Each one of those bursts is a pixel to draw the grand picture," explains pyrotechnics scion Phil Grucci. "The payload has to be the same, but the characteristics of the launch equipment, as well as the makeup of the shell itself, will vary depending on the launch height."

The resulting effect promises to be "aggressive and gentle," words the artist has used to describe himself, with the splendid bombast and technical prowess of American pyrotechnics merging with the subtle, reflective qualities of traditional Asian art, from which Mr. Guo-Qiang derives certain inspiration.

His much-delayed project on this morning is completing a work originally commissioned to mark the opening of MoMA QNS. Once he has finished laying out his gunpowder patterns, his assistants, aided by some Grucci employees, place an identically sized piece of paper over the original, sandwiching the gunpowder rainbow. A number of pieces of flat cardboard are then placed on top, followed by a number of rocks. The idea is to create weight, so that the incendiary force ignited by the enclosed gunpowder will, as it searches for oxygen, move more quickly—thus charring, while not completely burning, the paper. The tension inherent in this process informs Mr. Guo-Qiang's work: How do you create an image without destroying the medium? The potency of gunpowder is poised against the fragility of paper, like painting a butterfly's wings. As more gunpowder is used, the intensity of the effect grows, but so too does the risk of destruction.

Mr. Guo-Qiang steps to the edge of the paper and lights a fuse that trails outward. A sharp-edged crack rips through the hangar, and clouds billow toward the ceiling. With the warm tang of sulfur in the air, the artist's assistants rush to smother any sparks, being careful not to step on the paper (thus leaving a lasting impression). As with Mr. Guo-Qiang's previous works, he exhibited and probably sold.

A moment later, the covering paper is lifted. On each piece there is a broad arch, comprised of a camouflage-like spotting of patterns, textures and colors. The second rainbow, intended as a reflection on the water, more or less matches the first, but with minute distortions. Studying the drawing up close, one is drawn to the randomness and complexity of the images, the painterly grain, while at a distance, one discerns an exhilarating, seductive kineticism to the whole piece. The paper has captured a record of the explosions, but it cannot quite contain their arrested motion. A series of cross-hatches is visible, an unintentional "embossing" by a piece of the cardboard. "It's an accidental, surprising gain," says Mr. Guo-Qiang. "It's a negotiation between the surface and what lies beneath."

Someone asks the artist what his favorite part of the process is. "It's like lovemaking," he says with an impish air. "There is something to every part of it. Without the beginning and middle there can be no end."

Mr. Vanderbilt last wrote for the Journal about rock music in commercials.