Fire and Water

Notes on Cai Guo-Qiang's Unmanned Nature

It is a scene familiar to any wanderer in the high hills and mountains. One comes to a tarn nestled amidst rocks, with a view of distant valleys and peaks. The air is still. Mist and cloud bleach the details from the scene. All is calm and the world is reflected in the mirror-like surface of the water producing a sensation of infinitude. Elevation and distance. One might meditate upon space, upon the vast, empty and 'unmanned' expanses of the surface of the earth, the open sky stretching overhead into space, the sun impossibly distant yet illuminatingly close and present, hanging just above jagged mountains.

Yet this scene is not located at the top of some lofty peak, but in a gallery of an art museum. It is an installation by the artist Cai Guo-Qiang and comprises a 45-metre long drawing depicting a Chinese mountain range with a huge sun hanging above it. The drawing hangs on a curving wall, forming an enclosing space. Before the drawing a pool of water fills the space, but for a wide walkway which follows the contours of the wall. Unlike most western landscape drawings, which, framed, offer a singular view of a given subject, or traditional Chinese drawings typically presented on scrolls and designed to be studied at close quarter, section by section, almost like a book, this installation can be experienced in a number of different ways. We might view the work from a distance, taking in the dramatic sweep of the mountainous landscape, and the corresponding reflection in the still water. Or we might enter into the space and move through it, promenading along the walkway and experiencing a changing sequence of views, perhaps occasionally stopping to look closely at a detail or the texture of the marks on the surface of the paper.

Cai Guo-Qiang making gunpowder drawing *Unmanned Nature*, Hiroshima, October, 2008.
Photo by Seiji Toyonaga, courtesy Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art

While at first we might think this vast drawing has been executed in ink or watercolour, it has in fact been made with gunpowder, the scorches, burn marks and powder residue in the image uncannily mimicking the ethereal effects conjured with ink and brush by classical Chinese painters. To make such a drawing Cai Guo-Qiang lays out large sheets of Japanese hemp paper on the floor and then carefully places fuses and gunpowder across them, sometimes sprinkling the grainy powder by hand, as if sowing seeds in a field, sometimes working with brushes to manoeuvre the substance and create delicate sweeps of fine residue. Once the composition of the drawing is completed, sheets of cardboard are laid across it, and the fuse is lit. The cardboard serves to contain the resulting explosion and smoke which, carefully calibrated by the artist, burns and scorches the surface of the thick underlying paper without incinerating it completely before being quickly extinguished. Thus, for all his carefully and lengthy preparation, Cai's drawing is 'made' or 'fixed' in an instantaneous flash of light and heat and energy. It is a paradox that a scene of such serene stillness and calm is created by such violent means.

In the exhibition space, there is no suggestion of such a violent inception. All is calm. The surface of the water is still.

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Cai Guo-Qiang is one of the most important Chinese artists working internationally today. Since the early 1990s Cai has become widely known primarily for large-scale explosion events that use fireworks and gunpowder. Yet while this spectacular aspect of his practice (which reached a global audience with the presentation of an extraordinary sequence of choreographed fireworks, *Footprints of History,* during the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics in 2008) has achieved international recognition, he has been equally celebrated for a series of ambitious and complex installations in museums around the world. These installations have incorporated materials including cars, boats, lanterns and artificial animals, as well as participative elements including tea drinking, a miniature roller coaster and even a hot tub, and have articulated Cai's idiosyncratic thinking on diverse subjects including terrorism, migration, extraterrestrial intelligence, human consciousness as well as Chinese and global history.

Within his work of the last decade a major series of works, of which *Unmanned Nature* was the first, deploy large bodies of liquid within gallery spaces to create immersive installations centred upon still reflecting pools.

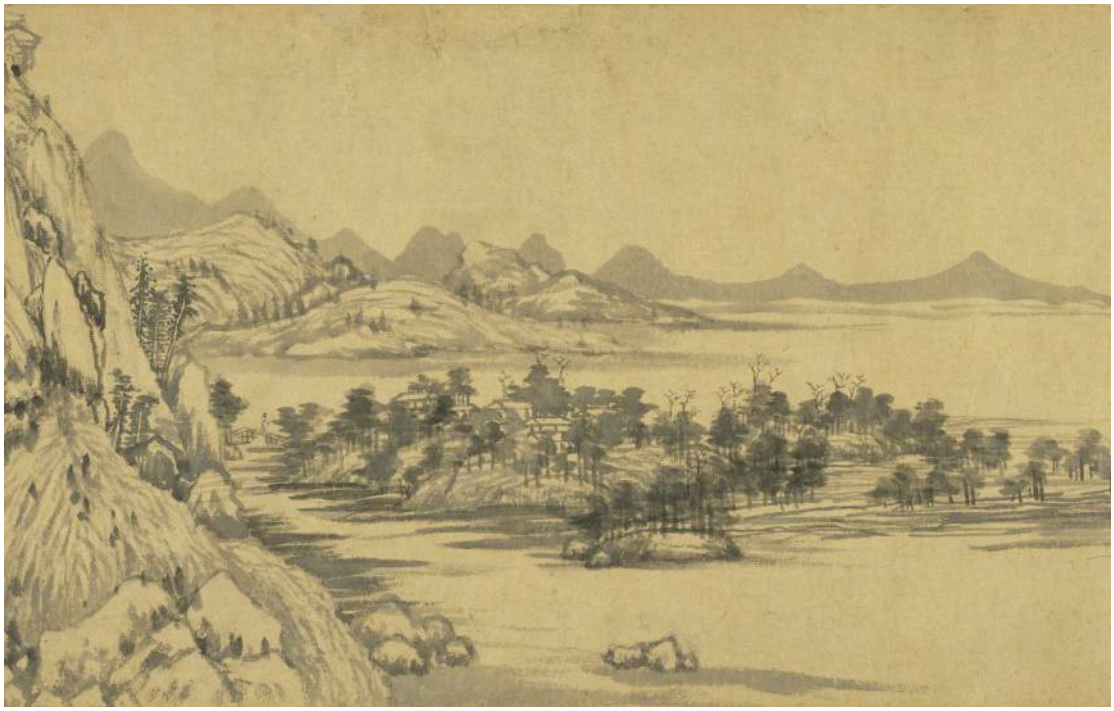
These meditative works have included *Travels in The Mediterranean* (2010) at the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain (MAMAC) in Nice (pictured) and *Sunshine and Solitude* (2010) at the Museum Universitario Arte Contemporaneo (MUAC) in Mexico City, and most recently *Silent Ink* (2014) at the Power Station for Art, Shanghai. *Travels in The Mediterranean* included a very large-scale gunpowder drawing and pool of olive oil, a substance intimately associated with the landscape the work depicted. *Sunshine and Solitude* also used evocative local materials to enrich the specificity of the work. It featured a landscape of local black lava stones with a 'lake' of tequila at its centre. Around the space were positioned large gunpowder drawings of Mexican motifs, landscapes, flora and fauna. In both instances one's experience of the work was as much olfactory as visual.

Installation view of *Travels in the Mediterranean* at Musée d'Art modern et d'Art contemporain, Nice, France, 2010
Photo by Muriel Assens, courtesy MAMAC-Nice

In recent years, two major new works have extended this aspect of Cai's work, *Heritage* (2013), presented at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane (pictured), seems to unite two strands within the museum-based side of Cai's practice. Like earlier pieces such as *Inopportune: Stage Two* (2004) and *Head On* (2006), it uses animals as symbols and presents a theatricalized and dramatic tableau that articulates ideas about nature and culture. Here 99 animals from around the world, including both carnivores and herbivores, gather together at the edge of a large watering hole and drink together. Man is conspicuously absent, and the scene seems edenic, a vision of a world in which all species peacefully co-exist, a kind of gallery-bound ark. In contrast, *Silent Ink* (2014), presented as part of Cai's exhibition *The Ninth Wave* at the Power Station for Art, Shanghai, consists of a 250 metre square lake excavated out of the gallery floor and filled with 20,000 litres of black ink. This is a monumental, spare and powerful work. Unaccompanied by drawings, the pool of ink is a singular object of contemplation, both mirror and void.

Installation view of *Heritage* at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2013. Photo Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art

The composition of *Unmanned Nature* is taken from an iconic work of Chinese art, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* by Huang Gongwang (1269-1354), a scroll that is now in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei (pictured(. It is Huang Gongwang's masterpiece and a work renowned in the history of Chinese painting. The style of the handscroll reflects the fusion of calligraphic techniques with representational painting and is a preeminent example of *literati* art. It influenced landscape painting of the Ming and Qing dynasties and remains a well-known and treasured work of Chinese art.



Huang Gongwang, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, 1350, ink on paper (Courtesy the Collection of National Palace Museum, Taiwan)

Viewed from right to left, the scroll follows a riverbank as hills and mountains rise and fall repeatedly. The scenery is sometimes vague and spacious and at other times clear and detailed. The scroll throughout is rendered in a type of freehand brushwork using monochrome ink known as 'sketching-ideas'. Yet there is also a wealth of fine detail: cottages amongst the trees, a fisherman's pavilion, birds, people going about their daily tasks.

Cai's version of the image is broadly faithful to the key elements of the composition. His major change to the original is in terms of scale. He takes the extreme horizontality of the scroll format (the original work is just 33 cms wide but almost six metres long) and enlarges it to a massive and immersive scale. His striking presentation recalls the panoramas that were popular in Europe in the nineteenth century, and which are sometimes seen as a precursor to cinema. Such presentations were intended to reproduce the experience of being in the landscape. In Edinburgh in 1787 Robert Barker patented a 'Panorama', an invention consisting of a painting on the inside of a cylinder, so that a spectator standing inside the cylinder would have the impression of being surrounded by a landscape. Later versions incorporated rollers so that the scenery would actually appear to move past the viewer and in cities such as London panoramas became a popular form of spectacular entertainment. The panorama wrapped completely around the viewer – there was no beginning or ending to the scene and a unified horizon line. Illusion was everything. Clever lighting mimicked the effect of sunlight playing across the scene. In contrast, Cai's installation makes no real attempt at verisimilitude. *Unmanned Nature* presents a similarly immersive experience, especially from a certain central viewpoint. Nonetheless, the massive scale

of the installation introduces another element – the need to physically move through space in order to experience it fully. In this way it again mimics the experience of landscape and the way in which one moves through a space, finding constantly changing viewpoints.

Just as walking is a key element in our experience of landscapes in nature – how else do we reach the still tarn at the top of the mountain? – so it is a crucial dynamic element in Cai's work.

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Just as we move through the artwork, the artist moves through its creation. Images of Cai Guo-Qiang making gunpowder drawings recall Hans Namuth's famous photographs of Jackson Pollock at work in his Long Island studio, canvas spread across the floor as the artist deftly dances in and out of the image flicking and pouring skeins of paint. Cai also works horizontally, carefully manouvering his materials, balancing over the surface of the image-to-be. Clement Greenberg suggested that Pollock's paintings constituted an 'arena in which to act' and this seems an appropriate way to describe Cai's drawings, even though the intention is very different. Cai's works – despite the beguiling serenity of the final images – also represent a form of 'action painting', an explosive form of mark-making, in which brilliant draughtsmanship executed with hand; broom and brush is interweaved with the marks of chance and in which a degree of controlled unpredictability plays a potent role.

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Unmanned Nature was first presented in 2008 as part of Cai Guo-Qiang's exhibition at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art when he was awarded the 7th Hiroshima Art Award. As such it is inseparable from a theme that has haunted his work since his earliest paintings, that of destruction and creativity. Specifically, he has addressed the nuclear age in which we live, and the paradoxical combination of creative energy and destructive power that the atomic bomb represents.

Installation view of *Unmanned Nature* at the Whitworth, February 2015
Photo by Michael Pollard

In addressing this theme Cai's use of gunpowder is crucial. Invented in China, initially for medicinal purposes, gunpowder serves as a powerful cultural symbol whilst also signifying a dichotomy between healing and destructive tendencies. In Cai's work it is used for both spectacular events and for creating poetic images on paper. Gunpowder thereby becomes an emblematic medium for an artist who seeks, in his work, to effect surprising reconciliations and to facilitate self-knowledge.

The gunpowder drawings are more than just depictions of nature. Instead they suggest, through the process of their creation, an alchemical transformation of time and matter, a powerful fusion of idea and material.
Note that the landscape of *Unmanned Nature* is empty. Specifically, it is devoid of human traces. The dwellings, paths and bridges of the original scroll have disappeared. Note too the very specific formulation of the title. Not 'uninhabited' but 'unmanned'. The suggestion is of a place from which man (and man's influence) has been removed. That, or a site that has been 'unmanned' and thereby rendered impotent or barren. There is too an echo of the terminology of spaceflight, of probes and satellites and voyages into the unknown.

The landscape in Cai's monumental drawing was created through fire and explosion. Yet it is empty, as if it has been purged by that very fire. Given the context of the work's inception we might ask ourselves if this represents a post-apocalyptic vision or an embodiment of a purer state, a reflection upon an ideal place? In 2014, as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War – which along with massive loss of life wrought violent and far-reaching changes to the landscapes of Western Europe – we might ask, how does one read an empty landscape? As an ideal, or as something lost and broken? Or as something into which we project our selves and our future?

Ben Tufnell

Ben Tufnell is Director of Parafin, London. He was a Curator at Tate Britain from 1997 to 2006 and Director of Exhibitions at Haunch of Venison from 2006 to 2013.
Tufnell has contributed essays to numerous exhibition catalogues. His books include *Land Art* (Tate Publishing, 2006), *Richard Long: Selected Statements and Interviews* (HoV, 2007), *Frank Stella: Connections* (Hatje Cantz, 2011) and *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain 1967-79* (Arts Council, 2013). Tufnell curated Cai Guo-Qiang's exhibition at the MUAC in Mexico City in 2010 and contributed an essay to the catalogue of his exhibition at QGOMA, Brisbane in 2013.

Cai Guo-Qiang making gunpowder drawing *Unmanned Nature*, Hiroshima, October 2008
Photo by Seiji Toyonaga, courtesy Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art