FALLING BACK TO EARTH

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, Cai Guo-Qiang (pronounced tsai gwo-chang) has created a unique body of work characterised by the grandness of its scale and ambition. Cai’s installations, social projects, gunpowder drawings and explosion events have been presented in prestigious museums and public spaces throughout the world. His works are spectacular in staging and effect, yet they are always underpinned by deeply felt philosophical meditations on the transformative forces that impact and flow from human life: science and faith, beauty and violence, history and current events.

Cai has a longstanding relationship with the Gallery. His participation in the second and third editions of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1996 and 1999 was an important catalyst for the Gallery in broadening the scope and scale of its artistic projects and opening up new ways of working with artists and audiences. At the same time, these projects led the artist to create a range of participatory projects with children and families that have become a hallmark of his work.

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian province, China. He trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy and lived in Japan from 1986-1995. He has been based in New York since 1995.

‘FALLING BACK TO EARTH’ – Cai’s first solo exhibition in Australia – focuses on humanity’s relationship with nature, which was inspired by the unique landscapes of Queensland and Chinese literati (scholarly) painting and poetry, and evokes the yearning for nature and home expressed in Tāo Yuanming’s classic fourth-century poem ‘Ah, homeward bound I go!’ The works in this exhibition reflect on the idea of coming full circle – of working through competing aspects of human nature, as well as the obstacles we face in our relationships with our environment and each other, now and into the future.

The exhibition consists of four installations including two new commissioned works inspired by the Queensland landscape – Heritage and Eucalyptus – as well as Tea Pavilion, a space for rest, and Head On, one of Cai’s signature works. Heritage has been acquired for the Gallery’s Collection with the generous support of the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Diversity Foundation through and with the assistance of the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation.

The exhibition features a series of new interactive projects, an animation and a book for children developed by the artist and the Children’s Art Centre. Also on display in the Asian Galleries at the Queensland Art Gallery is Cai’s major gunpowder drawing Nine Dragon Wall (Drawing for Dragon or Rainbow Serpent: A Myth Glorified or Feared: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 28) created for ‘The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art’ in 1996 and now part of the Gallery’s Collection.
This installation of 99 replicas of animals from around the world, gathered together to drink from a single waterhole, is based on an image that came to Cai Guo-Qiang after visiting North Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah), off the coast of Brisbane. This pristine environment embodies Cai’s perception of a ‘last paradise’, far from the cares and conflicts of the rest of the world, and his utopian vision is conveyed with an almost reverential solemnity. The allegorical nature of this work is heightened by Cai’s play with realism, with the animals’ sizes and forms slightly exaggerated for dramatic effect. The number of animals is also symbolic: nine and 99 recur frequently in Cai’s work. Nine represents ‘long-lasting’ in Chinese numerology, while 99 suggests for the artist something that is not quite complete, providing a sense of insufficiency and expectation.

Although Heritage is inspired by the Queensland landscape, it also references wider themes considering the state of the natural world at this moment in history. It provides a focus for the exhibition’s exploration of humanity’s connection with nature, and was acquired for the Gallery’s Collection with the support of the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Diversity Foundation.

Like the single drip that breaks the surface of the water and interrupts the stillness of the room, Cai raises questions that activate this strange and peaceful tableau: what brought this menagerie together, and how can the predators and prey in this gathering relate to each other? If Heritage portrays the ‘perfect paradise’, does it also symbolise Earth’s sorrow?
For this work, a magnificent native eucalypt, which was earmarked for clearing for an urban community development, has been relocated into the Gallery to create a contemplative and immersive environment. Cai invites viewers to look closely at the tree: to ponder its varied and changing colours, shapes and textures, and to imagine its past and to make proposals for its future, which can be shared via the accompanying interactive. The cycle of life and the passage of time that the tree represents echo other natural rhythms: how we all grow and age, and how every action provides a reaction or effect. Through this work, Cai presents an unfinished process of creative possibility, while expressing that all human activity – from building a home to making an artwork – can influence and place varying degrees of stress on our environment and the natural world.

The eucalypt is a symbol of the Australian landscape; its tough, resilient form embodies the character of the country. Cai was inspired to create this work after visiting Lamington National Park in the Gold Coast hinterland, in particular after encountering the soaring Antarctic beeches, some of the oldest trees in the world. By placing a tree into a gallery space, Cai references the Chinese literati (scholarly) tradition in which artists and poets would commune with nature to gain their moral and spiritual bearings, and represent the landscape as a reflection of their experiences and values. By bringing us into close contact with this particular tree, Cai

EUCALYPTUS 2013
GALLERY 1.2
Like Heritage, Head On is made up of 99 replica animals, although in a markedly different configuration. The horizontal ring of animals in Heritage is echoed in this work’s graceful vertical loop of wolves hurling themselves into the air, only to hit a glass wall before returning to the beginning. The work was originally created for an exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim in 2006 and was inspired by Berlin’s turbulent history. The Berlin Wall, which divided the city during the Cold War era, is referenced in the scale of the glass panel. The accompanying video Illusion II is based on the explosion of a recreated ‘typical German house’, located on an empty lot next to the remains of a train station destroyed during World War II.

Head On also makes broader statements about human nature. Gaining power and momentum through unity, the wolves appear heroic as they leap toward the unknown. There is the implication that if we blindly follow ideology, or misdirect our strength toward a collective goal, there can be damaging consequences. The resilience of the wolves hints at our difficulty in learning from our mistakes. The transparent glass wall suggests that we may not even be aware that an obstacle is there, or know who put it in place, yet it remains impenetrable – invisible barriers can be, the artist says, ‘the hardest walls to destroy’.
Conceived by Cai Guo-Qiang, Tea Pavilion provides an opportunity to pause, rest and reflect on the works in the exhibition. Visitors can sample Tie Guan Yin tea from Cai’s home province of Fujian, and view a documentary created especially for ‘Falling Back to Earth’, which explores the artist’s processes and history with the Gallery.

Fujian is renowned for its tea and produces 50 different varieties, of which Tie Guan Yin is the most famous. The modesty of this brew expresses the virtue of humility, while its offering is a gesture of generosity and respect for others. At the centre of tea culture in China is attention given to the harmony of nature, as expressed in the tea ceremony which can be experienced in the space every Sunday.

The gongfu tea ceremony, with its flowing movements and emphasis on skill and effort, is designed to enhance appreciation for the flavour and aroma of the tea. Key to the ceremony is valuing the time and care taken in the preparation of the tea for consumption, in which an analogy can be made with the processes of reading literature or philosophy and experiencing art. Cai’s work can be enjoyed for the immediacy of its visual impact, but, like the tea, is intended to be savoured — its implications lend
ARTIST ARCHIVE AND TIMELINE
GOMA FOYER AND CINEMA LOUNGE

Installed throughout the GOMA foyer are photographs, documents and artworks drawn from the Cai Studio Archives and from that of the Gallery’s Australian Centre for Asia Pacific Art (ACAPA), offering insight into the artist through key moments in his life and work.

In the Foyer Cabinet is a display based on Cai’s history with the Gallery, including his projects for the second and third editions of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. These documents, photographs and objects reflect the intricacy, ambition and tortuous process that is characteristic of his works, which often contain an element of risk – projects do not always turn out as planned – yet this uncertainty is considered an essential part of the work.

Cai realised significant and highly memorable works in Brisbane: the gunpowder drawing Nine Dragon Wall (Drawing for Dragon or Rainbow Serpent: A Myth Glorified or Feared: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 28) 1996, now in the Gallery’s Collection, which is currently on view at the Queensland Art Gallery; and Bridge Crossing 1999, which was a central work in ‘The Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art’ and included one of the Gallery’s first Kids’ APT projects, created by Cai with the Children’s Art Centre.

Projected in the Cinema Lounge is a video compilation containing classic moments of Cai’s signature explosion events, and on the adjacent wall is an illustrated timeline combining artworks, exhibition documentation and personal snapshots. The display captures Cai’s collaborative approach to making art by emphasising his relationships with others: family, friends, fellow artists and communities around the world. Cai has been described as ‘a truly international artist’, yet while his work often draws on universal themes, specific and personal elements are always present.
Cai Guo-Qiang’s children’s project, produced in collaboration with QAGOMA’s Children’s Art Centre, provides a setting for children to experience aspects of the artist’s practice, from gunpowder drawings and explosion events, to the symbolic imagery of boats, animals and trees that often recur in his installations. Cai’s intention for the exhibition was to ‘share with children my experience as an artist, allowing them to understand and participate in an artist’s practice in more depth’.

As children take on the roles of artist and exhibition maker within the space, they create their own objects – a boat, tree or an animal – which echo the important symbols also present in Cai’s Eucalyptus and Heritage works on display in ‘Falling Back to Earth’.

Young visitors can virtually reimagine the wonderful world of the artist’s experiences, including his gunpowder drawings and explosion events, using multimedia touchscreens and digital effects.

A narrative that alludes to Peach Blossom Spring, the fable by fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming, provides a framework for the Children’s Art Centre project. In Cai’s story, the main character is a young incarnation of the artist, who pursues his dream to make art; he is joined by children he meets during his adventures around the world. This engaging story takes the form of an animated short film, which will be screened within the exhibition space, and a children’s picture book.

Children can also learn about the artworks Cai has made across the globe through a specially-created wall map, featuring images and notes, which has been drawn by the artist with an ink brush directly onto the wall of the Children’s Art Centre.
‘Falling Back to Earth’ includes four major installations – Heritage, Eucalyptus, Head On, and Tea Pavilion – and new interactive projects for children and families in the Children’s Art Centre.

Additional works by Cai Guo-Qiang are also on display in the GOMA foyer and at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG). At QAG, you can see Cai’s major gunpowder work Nine Dragon Wall (Drawing for Dragon or Rainbow Serpent: A Myth Glorified or Feared: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 28) created for ‘The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art’ in 1996.
The Gallery acknowledges the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Diversity Foundation, which has generously supported the acquisition of Heritage for the Collection, through and with the assistance of the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation.

Cover: Sketch for Heritage 2013 / Ink on paper

Page 2: Cai Guo-Qiang, Saudi Arabia, 2013 / Photograph: Shu-Wen Lin / Courtesy: Cai Studio

Pages 3, 4: Sketches for Heritage 2013 / Ink on paper

Page 5: Sketch for installation plan of Head On 2006 in Taipei Fine Art Museum, 2009 / Ink and watercolour on paper

Page 6: Illustrations: Alex Allen / © Queensland Art Gallery, Cai Guo-Qiang, Alex Allen 2013

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