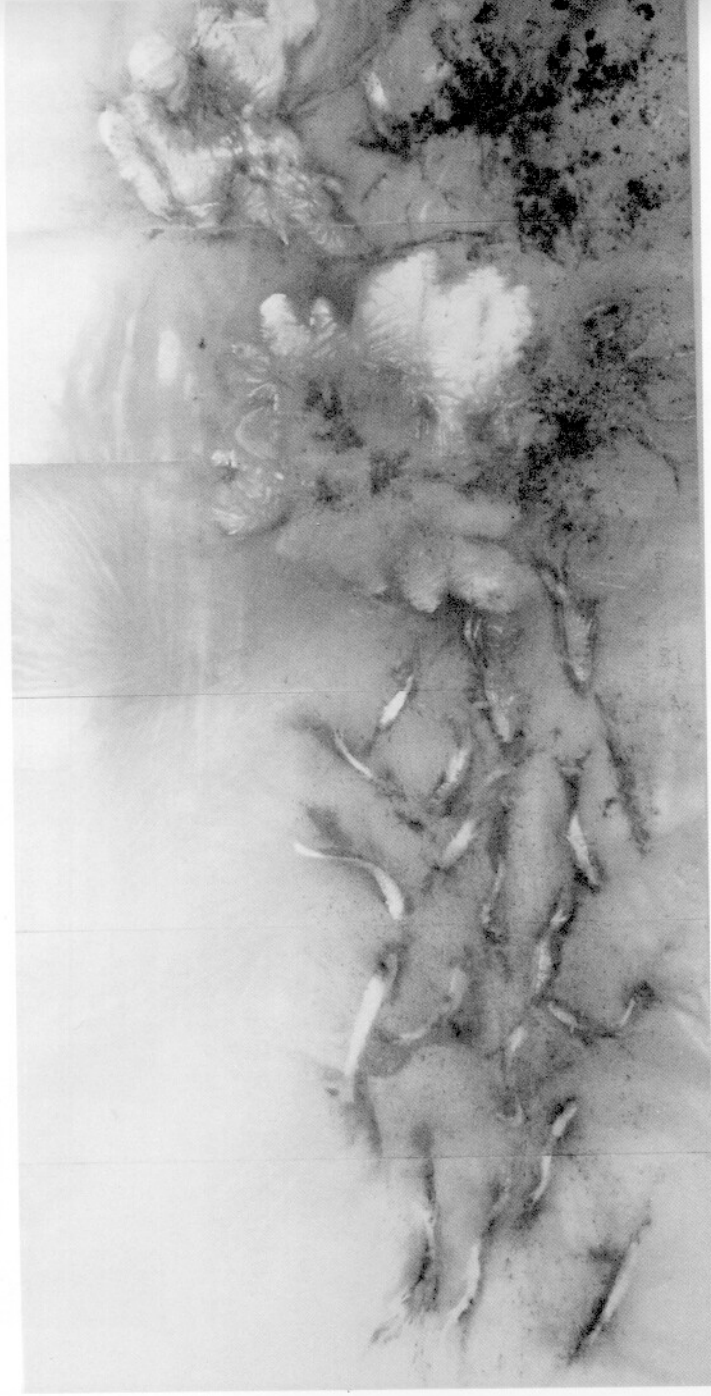


## Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project

Cai Guo-Qiang  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art  
 December 11, 2009–March 21, 2010



I first learned of Cai Guo-Qiang's work through the third season of the PBS series *Art:21* in 2005. Known for creating installations and performances featuring explosions, he created a site-specific installation for the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2006. In 2008, the Guggenheim Museum hosted a retrospective of his work entitled *I Want To Believe*. Guo-Qiang transformed the Frank Lloyd Wright building with his largest installation to date. Featuring nine cars with sequenced, blinking, multi-channel light tubes suspended throughout the museum's atrium, the work simulated exploding car bombs. The theatrical display mesmerized viewers. So it was with great anticipation that I awaited Cai Guo-Qiang's exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project*.

*Fallen Blossoms* was a collaborative effort among Guo-Qiang, the PMA, and The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM), that paid homage to the late PMA director, Anne d'Harnoncourt. The exhibition was kicked off on December 11, 2009, with two explosion events. At sunset, a large explosion erupted over the museum's east façade. As the smoke dissipated, the glowing, burning outline of a flower blossom remained. After a few more seconds, more explosions occurred, and the blossom disappeared. An hour later, the artist ignited a 120-foot-long gunpowder drawing on silk at the FWM. To my great dismay, I was unable to attend either event. While I've watched video footage of both, I am reminded of the importance of the experiential. Video cannot capture the smell of the smoke, the visceral

response of the body to the loud explosions, or the partaking in an event bigger than one's self; the collective experience is lost.

What remained was the exhibition. The PMA's Honickman Gallery featured four large-scale gunpowder drawings entitled *Light Passage* (2007) and the sculptural installation *99 Golden Boats* (2002). As in his previous work, Guo-Qiang's *Fallen Blossoms* explored the themes of nature vs. culture and creation through destruction. *Light Passage* reflects the cyclical passing of time through the four seasons. The canvas' delicate beauty, the subtle, organic colors and rich textures contradict the violent process of the mark making. Suspended from the ceiling, small golden boats of the *99 Golden Boats* piece created a pathway through the gallery, mimicking the swells and curves of a flowing river.

Above: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Light Passage—Spring*, 2007, gunpowder on paper, mounted on wood as six-panel screen, 90 1/2 x 181 9/10 inches. Collection of the artist. Photo by Tatsumi Masafoshi, courtesy Cai Studio. Opposite: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Fallen Blossoms: Explosion Project*, 2009, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, December 11, 2009, 4:30 p.m., 60 seconds, explosion area (building façade), approximately 60 feet x 86 feet, gunpowder fuse, metal net for gunpowder fuse, scaffolding. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio.

The exhibition continued at the FWM. The first-floor gallery presented a chronological slideshow of the artist's life and work. Most notable were the many community-based projects in which the artist has participated, works that have not received as much publicity as the theatrical explosion projects. The second-floor gallery showcased a high-

definition, wall-sized projection of the initial PMA explosion on December 11. Viewing the video in slow motion, the exploding blossom appears frozen in time.

On exhibit in the eighth floor gallery was *Time Scroll*, the work produced by Guo-Qiang during his recent residency at the FWM.

An artificial river constructed from steel panels flowed throughout the gallery, containing the 120-foot gunpowder

drawing. After two months sitting in running water, the scroll had faded. Traces remained of the scorched blossoms and the faint imprint of two girls. The imagery is different from the artist's usual motifs, which are typically sourced from Chinese culture. Upon inquiring about this stylistic shift, I learned that the artist worked from photographs of FWM Director Marion Stroud and d'Harnoncourt to produce the imagery.

In addition to showcasing Guo-Qiang's work, the exhibit was also intended to pay homage to d'Harnoncourt and her forty-year friendship with Stroud. An audio recording of Stroud reminiscing about their friendship played throughout the four floors of the FWM and in these galleries, the connotations of passage and fallen blossoms assumed new meaning. The simulated river's passage symbolized impermanence, but also regeneration—regeneration through memory.

My favorite portion of the exhibit was on the seventh floor. *Time Flies Like a Weaving Shuttle* refers to a Chinese saying that translates as "the sun and the moon move as though they are weaving shuttles."<sup>1</sup> During a three-month residency, five Tujia weavers from Hunan created twenty tapestries depicting Stroud and d'Harnoncourt's friendship narrative. Viewers were invited to observe them while they worked and see their progress. At the time of my visit, fourteen tapestries were complete.

I was awed and honored to meet Li Qiu-Mei, one of the master weavers. In order to become a master weaver, one must apprentice for a minimum of twenty years. I watched quietly while Qiu-Mei's fingers moved deftly and methodically as she wove a complex multi-colored composition. Through a translator, I asked her about her work and why



she wanted to participate in this project. She told me that Guo-Qiang discovered her and her sister's (also a master weaver) work in Hunan. The weavers are part of a one-thousand-person weaver's guild whose mission is to carry on the heritage of Chinese weaving. Qiu-Mei and the other weavers shipped their looms from China to work on this project, and her hope was to expose a Western audience to this thriving Chinese tradition that is passed on through generations.

While the art is fabulous, what made Guo-Qiang's project so unique was the reciprocity involved between the two Philadelphia institutions and their directors, between the artist and the local community, and between the artist and the Tujia weavers. The project's multi-faceted dimensions, which examine both universal and personal narratives, engaged the community in a dialogue. Guo-Qiang's work bridges the gap between the East and the West in a way that preserves and celebrates individual cultural identity.

—**Colette Copeland**

1. Gallery statement.