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Headline: **Back with a bang**

Byline: New York-based Cai Guoqiang exploded onto the international art scene more than two decades ago with his signature style: gunpowder on paper. Although his plans as an artistic director for the Beijing Olympics are a closely guarded secret, there's bound to be fireworks, writes Didi Kirsten Tatlow.

Cai Guoqiang doesn't look much like a son of Quanzhou, Fujian province - he's simply too tall. Yet, the way he jams on a yellow woolly hat and shivers in the below-zero chill of a January morning at his newly purchased Beijing siheyuan, or courtyard home, betrays his southern roots. For Cai, whose obsession with gunpowder has made him one of the world's best-known contemporary artists, being in the capital is always worth it.

"This is where the emperor lives," he says, wearing his hallmark gentle, friendly smile. "I was born in the south and I grew up there, but my art has a lot of northern symbols: it's big, it's violent. Art in the south is smaller and more fiddly. I'm a contradiction."

This is a big year for New York-based Cai, who turned 50 in December. The artist best known for creating and curating explosion events - a 14-piece lot fetched US\$9.5 million (the most ever for work by a contemporary Chinese artist) at auction in November - will mark three major rites of passage.

First is his longed-for return to the country in which he was born, after a 22-year creative absence; then there's a mid-career retrospective, titled *I Want to Believe*, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York, which opens on February 22, the museum's first solo show devoted to a China-born artist; and lastly, but by no means least, there's the responsibility of leading the visual and special effects team for the four opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Summer Olympics and the Paralympics.

Yet, amid the hullabaloo of fame, fortune and professional commitments, what shines through is Cai's sense of personal freedom.

"When I'm finished with the Olympics and Paralympics, at the end of September, I'm leaving China, like a bird," he says, seated in the "sitting room" - two plain white tables surrounded by chairs and a giant, blue-and-white ceramic bowl in which orange koi flip - of his home, in a to-die-for location at the northeastern corner of Beijing's Forbidden City. It is a tasteful, minimally restored dwelling with fading red pillars and strong modern elements such as folding doors, unvarnished oak flooring and a very effective heating system.

Cai uses his fingers to mimic a bird flying off a tree. "I'm not an aeroplane. Aeroplanes need an airport, and a runway, and lots of people and a lot of technology. I'm just a bird. I stand on a tree and take off. And this is a good season," he says, breaking into that charismatic smile again.

"I've been around the whole world with my art, from Israel to Africa, Ireland to Australia ... now I need to, I long to, return to this place, this earth where I was born and grew up. I want to work here and live here for a while, to revisit my own past and the past of the people, their history and philosophy, to be together with my contemporaries, to live with them and work with them," he says. "That's how I can see my changes - see where I am the same as them, see where I haven't changed, see where I've changed. And to see this country and its very interesting, extreme changes, its swings, its contradictions."

The August Olympics are, of course, the primary reason for Cai's return after a two-decade absence. As a member of the seven-strong "core creative team", led by film director Zhang Yimou, he is bound by secrecy from discussing the ceremonies. "I would say it's a 99.9 per cent secret," he says, then adds with a twinkle, "but there will be fireworks".

Of course. Cai shot - almost literally - to fame thanks to his experiments with gunpowder, or "fire medicine" as it is known in Chinese, reportedly because alchemists discovered it in the 8th century while searching for an elixir of eternal life for the emperor. Cai's installations range from the small - controlled, symbolic burn marks on a piece of paper - to the gigantic: setting off an explosion over a city.

His art has been described as "creative destruction" and has long focused on the connection between barbarism and culture, between artifice and nature, the individual and the group.

Traditional symbols, drawn from medicine, archaeology and seafaring, figure in his work. Many were learned from his father, a classical painter who taught him in secret during the Cultural Revolution.

It was an invaluable education, yet, like many Chinese of his generation, Cai says Mao Zedong taught him the most.

"He was the biggest teacher for everyone. Everything we learned, what to think, how to do things, was Mao's. How to rebel, how to be avant-garde, how to build a new world, to be brave. If that is used to break an old society, it's bad. But if it's used in the cultural sphere, if you don't just rush forward blindly, it's a creative force to stand up and build something new, and you can say that's a good thing."

In that spirit, Cai has experimented endlessly, detonating gunpowder on rivers, in houses, in fields and in the air. Sometimes his works are elegant, round puffs of white smoke that drift over the audience; some have exploded skywards in colourful darts, more like conventional fireworks.

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A 2004 project Cai curated on Jinmen Island (Quemoy), in the Taiwan Strait, saw 18 Taiwanese and mainland artists, including Tsai Mingliang, Tan Dun and Fei Dawei, transform military bunkers into "fortifications for peace".

"I've always been willing to dive into politics, into a society; that is how my creativity works," he says.

The 2004 Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art project was a pointed series of detonations held in each of the world's nuclear-weapons-armed countries; in 1994, he let off an inverted giant mushroom cloud over Hiroshima for that year's Asian Games.

In 1999, Cai sailed a brown-rigged, Fujian junk into Venice and captured that city's Biennale's International Golden Lion Prize for his recreation of the Cultural Revolution sculpture Rent Collection Courtyard. The Venice version fell to bits even as it was being built - as was the intention.

A long-running series of works by Cai has been the Project for Extraterrestrials, aliens being another important theme in his work. "I don't actually believe in extraterrestrials," he clarifies. "What I'm doing with that is to change the point of view to see a problem, to open up our space and look at our planet and see what we're doing down here."

The Olympics has had its fair share of controversy. Recently, well-known artist and curator Ai Weiwei, co-designer of the spectacular Bird's Nest national stadium in Beijing, lashed out, calling the Games "An Olympics far from ... the spirit of freedom" and predicting a slew of government propaganda that will result in "endless nonsense and a bore".

Cai shrugs that off. "Every country's Olympics is a propaganda opportunity. If New York had the Olympics, it would also want to present America's achievements, its best side. The question is: what are you doing? And how are you doing it?"

His plans for the opening ceremony are quietly subversive in their own way, as befits a Quanzhou boy who grew up dreaming of swimming to forbidden Taiwan. Ceremonies, he says, are generally mass events that appeal to the broadest common denominator, but Cai wants something completely different: an opportunity for individual artistic expression; a kind of massive public art show.

"The Olympics ceremony can't just be a ceremony. It has to be 'occasion' art and that kind of art is very difficult. Because it's a public event, with hundreds of thousands of people watching at the site, billions watching on television, it has to not only transmit a lot of old culture and be very informative, but also communicate contemporary China and how it's meeting the world," he says.

"Such demanding conditions normally inhibit artists from making an individual, creative statement. I want to take this situation as a challenge and ask, 'Why

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can't it be art?' On our team, we're all chasing this artistic goal: to humanise the ceremony and to keep in mind the old arts of China, as well as the country's contemporary goals."

All that amounts to a lot of pressure for an artist who is already among the most closely watched in the world, not least because his performance-based works do sometimes go wrong. A damp fuse or a sudden surge on a river and the fire can - and does - go out. "The Olympics is very different from my usual work. The pressure is bigger, that's for sure. With the art works I've done before, I press a switch and if it doesn't work, I can press again. The audience just says, 'Ah, that's art'. But this time it can't happen like that. A lot of people will be watching. That's the reason ceremonies don't usually have anything interesting to them, because there is a lot of pressure on the artistic side. There's no risk, and where there's no risk, there's nothing interesting. So I hope this will be something that exceeds even my own expectations and courage."

In contrast, Cai's upcoming retrospective at the Guggenheim won't require anything new from him. "The point is to find out what my ideas are, what my philosophy is, my artistic exploration and contribution.

It will look at my connection to China, to Asia, to traditional art and culture, to the west and to contemporary art. So I'm also looking back at myself."

For Cai, it's gratifying that the retrospective is sponsored by Hong Kong's Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation. "This is the first time a Chinese foundation has supported me. In the past, it's always been western foundations. The Chinese should have foundations that support Chinese people doing things overseas; contemporary things that Chinese people are really doing."

Marking a sea change in attitudes towards Cai, the retrospective will move to Beijing after New York, opening at the National Art Museum of China on August 15. "The Chinese embassy used to call museums where I was appearing and tell them not to put on my shows. But that doesn't happen any more."

Cai is married to artist-turned-assistant Hong Hongwu and has two daughters, aged 18 and four. His courtyard home is festooned with seasonal decorations and snowmen. "I really like children. Looking at a child is like looking at yourself as you once were. It's like looking at people's real nature, and people are very beautiful."

His family will, for the most part, stay in New York this year. At home, they speak the Fujian dialect, with the exception of the youngest, who speaks Putonghua learned from her Yunnan province nanny. The children attend regular schools in New York.

"My younger daughter really misses me. When she was here at Christmas, she said, 'I'm not leaving, I'm staying in Beijing,' and I asked why, and she said, 'Because I really like you,'" he recounts.

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Other members of Cai's family will draw him back to Quanzhou next year, when he will stage another major exhibition. His father's parents are over 90, his own parents over 70, and both he and his wife, who grew up a 10-minute bicycle ride away from his home, have large families.

"You'd have to say I'm Chinese and a Chinese artist, but you can also say I'm international. There's no contradiction. These days it's very natural, and that's a good thing."

Caption: Cai Guoqiang recently broke all records for contemporary Chinese art when his set of 14 gunpowder paintings sold for HK\$74.2 million in a Hong Kong auction.; Clockwise from top left: Cai Guoqiang uses gunpowder to create Black Fireworks; the artist's creation Bird of Light explodes as intended; Project for Extraterrestrials No 9: Fetus Movement II covered an area of 15,000 square metres and involved 90kg of gunpowder; Cai in his courtyard home.

Photographer: Nick Otto; Masanobu Moriyam

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