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ART & DESIGN

# Redefining Chinese Artists, in Qatar

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By BARBARA POLLACK MARCH 18, 2016

Sitting in a Zen-inspired studio in a converted school building on the Lower East Side, the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang bemoaned how his native country's art is often squeezed between pronouncements of record auction prices and denouncements of China's one-party political system when it is presented in the United States and to some extent Europe.

In Western eyes, a Chinese artist is either a market phenom, like the Gagosian artist Zeng Fanzhi, or a renegade, like Ai Weiwei.

This is what Mr. Cai is seeking to redress in “What About the Art?: Contemporary Art from China,” an exhibition he has organized for the Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq in Doha. Featuring 14 artists and one artist-collaborative duo, the show, which runs through July 16, examines the contributions of Chinese artists to the international canon of contemporary art, focusing on their innovations. Whether this grand goal will register with Qatari audiences or have an impact on current evaluations of Chinese art are questions Mr. Cai and representatives from Qatar Museums are happy to grapple with.

“What I always thought was missing from exhibitions about Chinese contemporary art was the artist’s individual creativity, and I wanted to single that out,” Mr. Cai said. Born in Quanzhou City in Fujian Province in 1957, he rose rapidly to fame after immigrating to the United States in 1995, culminating in a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2008, the same year he designed the fireworks display for the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing.

Known for his innovative use of gunpowder to make surprisingly delicate paintings and drawings — and to fill skies with his spectacular explosive creations — he is also the subject of the a film, “Sky Ladder,” which had its premiere at the recent Sundance Film Festival. Directed by the Scottish filmmaker Kevin Macdonald (“The Last King of Scotland”) and produced by Wendy Deng Murdoch, Hugo Shong and Fisher Stevens, it depicts an artist perpetually in need of greater challenges, including setting off a celestial explosion, Sky Ladder, that reaches 500 meters into the dawn on the occasion of his grandmother’s 100th birthday.

Mr. Cai has often donned the hat of a curator. For Alexandra Munroe, the senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim, who put together his 2008 retrospective there, this role is a natural extension of the way Mr. Cai “leads a project and imbues it with a certain almost jujitsu-like spirit,” she said.

Ms. Munroe sees the state of the Chinese art world as “hijacked by the art market” with very little nuance or criticality, resulting in less tolerance by Western art critics. “So Cai asks ‘What about the art?’ and suggests that we look at Chinese artists not as representative of a nation state that implausibly would have a single style of art, but as individual artists with individual practices.” Ms. Munroe is working on a major survey of art from China since 1989, scheduled to open at the Guggenheim in 2017.

No stranger to Doha, Mr. Cai mounted his first exhibition, “Cai Guo-Qiang: Saraab” — the word for “mirage” — at Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, in 2011. He staged a daytime explosion event, a circle of black clouds in the desert outside the city. At the time, he spent months in Doha, developing an extensive range of public programs and meeting with local artists. The experience solidified

his friendship with Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, chairwoman of Qatar Museums.

The current exhibition is the centerpiece of a year of cultural exchanges with China, organized by the culture ministries for both countries.

Mr. Cai, who maintains a studio in Beijing and one in New York, surveyed the work of over 200 Chinese artists and conducted 40 studio visits. His exchanges with the final 15 — from the MacArthur Foundation awardee Xu Bing and the renowned veteran Huang Yong Ping to the newcomers Xu Zhen and Liu Wei, who show with James Cohan and Lehmann Maupin galleries — are included in the catalog accompanying the show.

One obvious oversight, he admits, is the decided lack of women. He included only two; one, Jennifer Wen Ma, was his former studio manager, and the other is one half of the artist-duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. “Most women artists may create one work that really stands out, but it is hard to see a methodology behind their works, so that made it difficult for me to select them,” he said, sheepishly acknowledging that this criteria overlooked accomplishments by the 2010 Hugo Boss nominee Cao Fei or the pioneer artist Lin Tianmiao, who had a retrospective at Asia Society in 2012.

In each case, he asked the artists how they made their contributions to contemporary art, a question that flummoxed many of the subjects, who were far more used to delivering a biographical narrative or expressing opinions on the content of their work. He discovered that issues such as the impact of a booming art market and the influence of Western art history facing Chinese artists were shared by their counterparts in the Middle East, who also have had to negotiate how to make works that reflect their cultural heritage in the context of a global art world. “Qatari artists have a long and rich history of their own while facing the complexities of global influences,” he said.

Mr. Cai chose artists who would resonate with audiences and artists there. Here are a few of his selected artists, and their contributions.

***Correction: April 3, 2016***

An article on March 20 about the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in Qatar misspelled part of the name of the studio that provided a photograph of "Big Dog," a piece that incorporates a fictional city made of dog chews. It is Liu Wei Studio, not Lui Wei Studio.

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