

Cai Guo-Qiang: *Inopportune*
MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts
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The space and scale of *Inopportune*, a site-specific installation at the Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, is Cai Guo-Qiang's (pronounced Tzi Gwo-Chung) staging grounds for what amounts to a spectacular visual explosion, a term that the artist constantly employs when representing and promoting his work. Commissioned by the Mass MoCA, *Inopportune* is displayed in four adjoining cavernous galleries that build upon the museum's reputation for "spectacular" shows – this exhibition in particular is boasted as being the "most expensive installation to date" (Mass MoCA press release for Cai Guo-Qiang's *Inopportune*). Cai intentionally uses the scale of this museum space, part of a complex of converted factory buildings, to create a feeling of excess and senselessness that is typical of the climate of American culture today.

Cai's artistic career has developed out of an enthusiasm for explosions of one kind or another. A prime example of this tendency was *Transient Rainbow*, commissioned by the MoMA in New York in response to the 9/11 attacks, a simultaneously celebratory and mourning display of explosive fireworks over the East River. Building upon such discharges of energy, which Cai views as embodying both creative and destructive forces, *Inopportune: Stage One* is a series of nine Ford Taurus' suspended in the cycle of a mid-air flip, pierced by pulsing rods of coloured light. As the entry point for this exhibition, we were completely overwhelmed by the spectacle of this display of "exploding" cars that appeared to be a physical manifestation of a

Baudrillardian nightmare. This stage of the exhibition begins with a plain white car parked at the entrance of the gallery, followed by a series of seven sequential frames of a simulated exploding car, ending with the ninth and final car resting unharmed on the opposite end of the gallery floor. The combination of excess, both of space and conspicuous consumption, highlights the monetary aspects of the material objects, jolting the viewer into a spectacular simulation of an explosion that has been obviously stilled; thus overwhelming the viewer and leaving them to make sense of the senselessness of this scene. Walking through this space is like walking through the petrified frames of a film. After the initial bang of excitement, we were struck by the emptiness of this arena, which became ironically underwhelming: how long can we stay suspended within the grip of the spectacle?

Furthermore, how is it possible to top this spectacle? Cai Guo-Qiang seizes upon the present climate of the USA to question how long one can remain in state of siege and fear when nothing happens. This is mirrored in the spectacle of exploding cars, which ultimately reconciles itself, no one is harmed and nothing is damaged: everything is all right. This explosion is a metamorphic event, which contains within it both positive and negative repercussions. *Inopportune: Stage One* provides the vocabulary for understanding the remaining works in this exhibition.

In the adjacent gallery is *Illusion*, a video projection of a car moving through Times Square while fireworks dramatically explode out of it; the majority of people milling about this spectacular space seem oblivious and unaffected by the commotion. This 90 second video loop of an actual exploding car – the remains of the charred vehicle was strategically placed behind the screen as evidence – was underwhelming after the

simulacra of exploding cars of *Inopportune: Stage One*. The juxtaposition of reality and the simulacra reveals the inadequacy of the real after the drama of the stage. Even *Nine Cars*, which is placed in the gallery overlooking the main gallery, has more of a dramatic and effective flair than the documentary video of Times Square. *Nine Cars*, a drawing made from exploded gunpowder depicts nine cars in a large circular retina like arrangement. This burned image functions as a gigantic eye – a metaphoric gaze overlooking the nine cars in *Inopportune: Stage One* – emphasizing the participatory nature of the spectacle.

The final enactment of this exhibition, *Inopportune: Stage Two*, consists of a series of nine tigers suspended in various poses pierced by hundreds of arrows set in the landscape of an artificial mountain and trees. The obvious parallels between the nine tigers and the nine cars, in that they are both pierced by dynamic visuals of destruction while suspended in an unnerving stillness – that in a very conflicted fashion is almost meditative. There is a symbolic violence incipient to these scenes of tigers and cars, but it is undermined by the excess of display that Cai uses: the act of stilling both of these tableaux is one that denies the actualization of violence which would relieve the tension and expectation that builds up in the viewer. Is this suspension of violence an analogy for the state of siege that presently grips America in anticipation of a violence that is yet to occur? The simulacra of violence constructed by Cai serves to question the veracity and accuracy with which we view acts of violence. And Cai allows us the ability to scrutinize this terror by pausing.

Inopportune: Stage Two is constructed in direct relation to a Chinese scroll depicting a series of tigers painted by Cai Guo-Qiang's father, which is displayed in the

exit hall of the exhibit. It is this scroll that provided us with the most intriguing reading of the entire exhibition albeit in reverse: it traces the trajectory of the development of imagination from a simple scroll, to the theatrical display of *Inopportune: Stage Two* which is a physical embodiment of the tigers in this scroll, to the contemporary display of the creatures of the Ford Taurus', a vehicle named after the bull-shaped constellation. The visual shift between *Inopportune: Stage One* and *Inopportune: Stage Two* creates the most promising framework for viewing these seemingly disparate collections of extraordinary sights. One can imagine a child growing up looking at this scroll of tigers and fantasizing the stages of simulacra that we witness unfolding before our eyes in the spaces of this exhibition.