

Aspen Art Museum
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Educator Notes



Installation view: *Moving Ghost Town*, 2014. Image courtesy Cai Studio.
Photo: Tony Prikryl

Cai Guo-Qiang

Black Lightning

August 2, 2014

**Moving Ghost
Town**

August 9–October 5, 2014

About the artist

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, China. He was trained in stage design at Shanghai Theatre Academy, and his work has since crossed multiple mediums within art, including drawing, installation, video, and performance art. While living in Japan from 1986 to 1995, he explored the properties of gunpowder in his drawings, an inquiry that eventually led to his

experimentation with explosives on a massive scale and to the development of his signature explosion events. Drawing upon Eastern philosophy and contemporary social issues as a conceptual basis, Guo-Qiang strives to establish an exchange between viewers and the larger universe, utilizing a site-specific approach to culture and history. He currently lives and works in New York.



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Black Lightning*, 2014. Image courtesy Cai Studio. Photo: Tony Prikryl

About the exhibitions

When Cai Guo-Qiang first visited Aspen, he went to Ashcroft, a nearby ghost town. On the way, he fell asleep in the car and dreamed about a friend who had died recently. In the dream, his friend was happy and seated at a table in a dining hall with a group of strong, hardworking miners. When the artist awoke, he saw the building from his dream in front of him.

The installation *Moving Ghost Town* features three African Sulcata tortoises that had initially been allowed to roam freely through three different ghost towns, filming their adventures on iPads mounted on their shells. As they wandered in and out of buildings, through forests and fields, they captured the sites, themselves, and possibly a few ghost stories as well.

In Chinese symbolism, tortoises represent creation, time, longevity, and wisdom; they are associated with the North direction—that of death and rebirth. According to Daoist and Confucian classics, such as *The Book of Ritual*, tortoises are seen as “Supernatural Spirits,” equal in symbolism to that of the dragon and phoenix. Lucky and powerful symbols, tortoises, along with the objects they carry, play an important role in Chinese culture. In ancient mythology, Yu the Great saved the Chinese people from floods by relying on tortoises to carry mud on their backs. Guo-Qiang believes tortoises should be greatly respected as agents of history and blessings.

Although nine is considered the luckiest number in Chinese belief systems, the spatial needs of the tortoises required there be less of them, so the artist only included three—also a lucky number, resembling the Chinese character for “birth.” From an Eastern philosophical perspective, *Moving Ghost Town* takes a contemporary approach, telling the story of Aspen’s rise and fall while inspiring the audience to look back at the past

through the tortoises’ perspective.

Furthermore, in the traditional Chinese belief system, the world is populated by a vast number of spirits, including ghosts, both good and evil. Because evil spirits seemingly have an aversion to light, many rituals involving fire and light developed, including the use of firecrackers.

In conjunction with *Moving Ghost Town*, Guo-Qiang created the daytime explosion event *Black Lightning*. It was performed twice against the dramatic blue sky of Aspen and its iconic mountain, Ajax. An extraordinary presence seven hundred feet high, the black lightning bolt, accompanied by a loud, thunderous crack, emphasized the connection between the museum and the surrounding environment, while exuberantly celebrating the opening of the new Aspen Art Museum building.

Questions for discussion

- | What do you think some of Cai Guo-Qiang's choices symbolize in the context of Aspen and the museum?
- | What can black symbolize?
- | What does a lightning bolt symbolize?
- | What do you know about the history of where you live? How can you find out more from a new perspective?
- | What can animals teach us about our history?

Suggested activities

Symbols and myths

- | Have students research tortoise and turtle symbolism and creation stories in other cultures, such as indigenous Pacific Northwest, Yoruba, and Ancient Egyptian cultures.

Perspective Drawing

- | Invite students to draw a garden scene from the perspective of lying on their stomachs. Have them suggest other perspectives to draw from.

Researching History

- | Ask students how connected they feel to their environment—both in nature and in their city/town. How can they learn more about where we live?
- | Identify a place near where you live to explore: a school, a house, the town, or city center. What can you find out about its history? Create journals to record your research through drawings, interview questions, and observations.

For more information, please contact the Education Department at 970.925.8050 ext. 133 or email education@aspenartmuseum.org.

All new Aspen Art Museum inaugural exhibitions are generously underwritten by Stefan Edlis and Gael Neeson. Indirect exhibition costs are funded in part by the AAM National Council. AAM education programs are made possible by the Questrom Education Fund. Education Workshop support is provided by Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy and Mary and Patrick Scanlan. Scholarships for AAM Summer Workshops are funded by Cari and Michael J. Sacks.