CAI GUO-QIANG
Falling Back to Earth

GALLERY OF MODERN ART (GOMA)
23 NOVEMBER 2013 – 11 MAY 2014

Secondary Student Worksheet
Cai’s artwork is universal in its scope and considers both history and current events. Throughout his career, he has made art that reflects his concern for humanity. Since the early 1990s, Cai has become known internationally for large-scale events that involve fireworks and gunpowder, as well as ambitious and complex installations in museums around the world.

Key facts about Cai Guo-Qiang (pronounced tsai gwo-chang)

• Born in 1957 in Quanzhou (pronounced chwan-jo), Fujian Province, on the south-east coast of China
• Well known and influential Chinese contemporary artist
• Lives in New York City
• Explores the relationship between people and nature, and the different issues this raises
• Uses a variety of symbols, narratives and traditions as well as a range of materials in his practice

Learn more about Cai’s history by visiting the displays in the GOMA foyer.

Write some other facts.
Many artists work with other people to realise their projects. Scan the QR code to hear a QAGOMA exhibition designer discussing Heritage.

Cai Guo-Qiang checking on the fabrication process of Heritage 2013 / Fuzhou, China, 2013 / Photograph: Cai Canhuang / Courtesy: Cai Studio

Cai is fascinated by our relationships with the natural world and with each other. Heritage creates a seemingly utopian situation based on tolerance and trust, where all types of animals have come together to share a common space. You may find several aspects of Cai’s work surprising; for example, there are no humans present, and many animals are in close proximity to their natural predators or prey.

Art and literature often use animals and nature allegorically to explore human behaviour. One example of this is Animal Farm (1945) by George Orwell. Heritage prompts us to consider the state of life on earth.

• What global and human issues does the artist raise in this installation?
• Does this make you think about the past, the present or the future?

DID YOU KNOW
North Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah) has been home to the Quandamooka people for tens of thousands of years.

Heritage presents a message of hope through a romantic vision or idealisation. However, the work can also be seen as conveying a sense of hopelessness, portraying animals that may have lost their instincts and who must rely on this last pool of water to survive.

• Analyse these two interpretations.
• Do you have a preferred perspective? Justify your position.

Cai’s work suggests many different layers of possible meaning and brings into play a wide range of references from different cultures and disciplines. He has said that:

‘Ninety-nine and nine are both numbers often seen in my work . . . Conceptually, they are both symbols of infinity in Chinese culture, and embody the sense of a large quantity. A hundred seems complete and still, while ninety-nine reads not enough, and thus there is hope and expectation.’

Consider the placement of the animals in the artwork.

• Is there a pattern in relation to their size, food-chain status, surface textures or colours?
• Would you change where they are positioned? If so, why?

Heritage features 99 life-sized artificial animals, diverse in nature, appearing to drink from a large pool of water that is surrounded by pristine white sand. The work symbolises Cai’s perception of Queensland as a paradise on earth, where unspoiled ancient landscapes can still be found and cultural diversity is promoted. The inspiration for Heritage came partly from the artist’s immersion in the Australian landscape: Cai visited North Stradbroke Island, and while he was there he met with members of the Quandamooka community, who are its traditional owners.

Panda featured in Heritage 2013

Concepts
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Eucalyptus trees have long been used to signify the unique conditions of Australia's environment. Placed inside GOMA for our contemplation, this tree's presence focuses our attention directly on aspects of the natural world and our relationship to it that we might not usually consider.

- Study the form, beauty and size of the tree and ponder its past and future.
- Reflect on your own connections to all living things.

Observe the fine details of the tree that usually go unnoticed. Make visual notes below.

- You may like to participate in the Eucalyptus activity. To Cai, Eucalyptus is not complete; he has left room for your creations, and selected drawings will be displayed with the artwork.
- Write an artist statement that explains your drawing approach.

DID YOU KNOW?

Cai gained inspiration for Eucalyptus after trekking through Lamington National Park in South-east Queensland.

Scan the QR code to hear more about the exhibition 'Falling Back to Earth'.


Cai is able to balance the narrative dimension of *Head On* with its extraordinary visual impact and grace. The work, constructed like an unfurling scroll, shows the paradoxical nature of the wolves’ actions — tragic and brave, terrible and beautiful — and reflects Cai’s fascination with the energies of chaos and contradiction, which he attempts to harness in his work.

The wolf is an animal that derives strength in numbers. However, Cai shows us that when this collective energy is misdirected, it can lead to disaster.

*Head On* critiques human behaviour, presenting us with elements of despair and unreflective action.

- **How does Cai achieve a sense of movement in this work?**
- **How does the scale of Head On influence your experience of the work?**

In your journal, reflect on the human traits represented in this work. Explain your thoughts.

*Head On* took the physical and symbolic presence of the Berlin Wall as its starting point, representing it as an enormous pane of glass.

Conceived for the Guggenheim Museum in Berlin, the work recalls the city’s history of division and relates to the destiny of mankind. While realistic and figurative in appearance, Cai hopes to convey a more philosophical message.

Think of the significance of walls throughout history. Also consider the impact of border control and cultural borders.

- **To what extent do such barriers affect us, past, present and future?**
- **What are the alternatives?**
EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION

Cai’s practice is distinguished by his experimentation with non-traditional materials. His works draw on universal themes, such as the power of inherited knowledge, and the effects of process and change on people and on the earth.

• Which sculptural elements — form, texture and scale — does Cai incorporate to get viewers’ attention?
• Does the use of water contribute to the realism of Heritage?
• How does Cai’s use of scale and spectacle contribute to the viewer’s experience of the ‘Falling Back to Earth’ exhibition?

Cai has spoken of the importance of creating a sense of aesthetic distance in his works, meaning that we are able to appreciate them as artworks and not simply as representations of reality.

He cites many influences in his work, including feng shui. Feng shui is the Chinese tradition of positioning objects, furniture and even buildings in order to balance Yin and Yang and direct the flow of chi (energy).

• How does the placement of each of the works in ‘Falling Back to Earth’ affect its meaning?
• Would you describe Cai’s artworks as realistic or surreal?

Cai is known for his spectacular installations.

• What is it about installation art that appeals to contemporary audiences?

Compare and contrast the installations in ‘Falling Back to Earth’.

• What recurring themes can you identify in Cai’s body of work?
• How do you think these themes relate to the exhibition title?

DID YOU KNOW?

Cai’s father loved poetry and art, and often hosted gatherings for his literati friends. During China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Cai’s school was closed for a year. At this time, both he and his father pursued their passion for literature and art at great risk to themselves.

Can you see aspects of Chinese culture in Cai’s practice?

FOR EXTENSION:

This QAGOMA educational resource was developed by Melina Mallos, Debbie Brittain and Susan Restnie (Access, Education and Regional Services, 2013); Curatorial assistance: Russell Storer and Reuben Keehan.

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Animals displayed in Cai’s installations are replicas. No real animals have been used.

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