

SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG

**Directed by Kevin Macdonald
Produced by Wendi Murdoch, Hugo Shong, and Fisher Stevens**



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Synopsis

In his latest feature documentary, Oscar-winning filmmaker Kevin Macdonald (*One Day In September, The Last King Of Scotland*) has unfettered access to world-renowned contemporary artist, Cai Guo-Qiang.

Cai's work spans East and West, human and cosmic, the playful and the profound. His signature gunpowder paintings pay homage to the Chinese roots of the explosive medium, while incorporating elements of chance and unpredictability. His massive explosion events actively engage audiences around the globe—from his seminal 1993 work that extended the Great Wall of China with six miles of gunpowder fuse; to the daytime colored fireworks that ripped through the deserts of Doha, to the astonishing opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Told through the artist's own words and those of family, friends, colleagues, and critics, *Sky Ladder: The Art Of Cai Guo-Qiang* traces Cai's meteoric rise from childhood in Mao's China to pre-eminent global artist. We witness as Cai struggles with how to affect social change through art, and navigate the compromises and complexities that arise when you've made it to the top. When you've gone as far as he has, how do you challenge yourself?

If you're Cai Guo-Qiang, you continue to chase the ambitious dream that has eluded you for 20 years—Sky Ladder—a 1,650 foot ladder of fire climbing into the skies, connecting heaven and earth. *Sky Ladder: The Art Of Cai Guo-Qiang* is the story of a unique artist at a pivotal moment in his life and times. Produced by Oscar-winner Fisher Stevens (THE COVE), Wendi Murdoch, and Hugo Shong.

ABOUT CAI GUO-QIANG

“Opening myself is always how I work, not just with this film project. My family and work are always intertwined with each other.”

- Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, China. He was trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theater 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, these projects and events aim to establish an exchange between viewers and the larger universe around them, utilizing a site-specific approach to culture and history.

Cai was awarded the Japan Cultural Design Prize in 1995 and the Golden Lion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999. In the following years, he has received the 7th Hiroshima Art Prize (2007), the 20th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize (2009), and AICA’s first place for Best Project in a Public Space for *Cai Guo-Qiang: Fallen Blossoms* (2010). He also held the distinguished position as Director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. In 2012, Cai was honored as one of five Laureates for the prestigious Praemium Imperiale, an award that recognizes lifetime achievement in the arts in categories not covered by the Nobel Prize. Additionally, he was also among the five artists who received the first U.S. Department of State - Medal of Arts award for his outstanding commitment to international cultural exchange. In 2015, Cai was granted the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation Award in recognition of his creative contribution to the arts.

Among his many solo exhibitions and projects include *Cai Guo-Qiang on the Roof: Transparent Monument*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006 and his retrospective *I Want to Believe*, which opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in February 2008 before traveling to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in August 2008 and then to the Guggenheim Bilbao in March 2009. In 2011, Cai appeared in the solo exhibition *Saraab* at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, his first ever in a Middle Eastern country. In 2012, the artist appeared in three solo exhibitions: *Sky Ladder* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), *Spring* (Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, China), and *A Clan of Boats* (Faurshou Foundation, Copenhagen, Denmark).

His first-ever solo exhibition in Brazil, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Da Vincis do Povo*, went on a three-city tour around the country in 2013. Traveling from Brasilia to São Paulo

before reaching its final destination in Rio de Janeiro, it was the most visited exhibition by a living artist worldwide that year with over one million visitors. In October 2013, Cai created *One Night Stand (Aventure d'un Soir)*, an explosion event for Nuit Blanche, a citywide art and culture festival organized by the city of Paris. In November 2013, his solo exhibition *Falling Back to Earth* opened at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Australia. In 2014, he created solo exhibitions *The Ninth Wave* at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai and *Impromptu* at Fundación Proa, in Buenos Aires. On January 24, 2015, he realized *Life is a Milonga: Tango Fireworks for Argentina* in the neighborhood of La Boca.

His most recent solo exhibition *There and Back Again* opened on July 11, 2015 at the Yokohama Museum of Art in Japan. Cai is currently curating an exhibition *What About Art? Contemporary Art from China* at Qatar Museum Gallery Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar which will open on March 14, 2016.

Cai was the curator of the first China Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. Since 2000, he has also converted unexpected spaces into small-scale exhibition venues for rural communities and small towns in different parts of the world. This *Everything is Museum* series includes: *DMoCA (Dragon Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000)* in Tsunan Mountain Park, Niigata Prefecture, Japan; *UMoCA (Under Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001)* in Colle di Val d'Elsa, Tuscany, Italy; *BMoCA (Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004)* on Kinmen Island, Taiwan; and *SMoCA (Snake Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013)* in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan.

He currently lives and works in New York.

SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG

About the Production

"We were lucky to capture Cai at a pivotal moment in his life – as he is struggling with the conflicting requirements of art and politics."

- Director Kevin Macdonald

It's just past dawn on June 15th, 2015, and world-renowned artist Cai Guo-Qiang is standing dockside at Huiyu Island Harbor off the coast of his hometown of Quanzhou City. The embers of his latest explosion exhibition, Sky Ladder, fall into the waters below as local volunteer workers wrap up the aftermath of the event. Beside the pensive, but satisfied Cai is his wife Hong Hong Wu, who weeps tears of joy, relief and amazement. The exhibition is his most personal and ambitious undertaking yet: a 1,650 foot ladder composed of fireworks and anchored by a large helium balloon climbs for two and half minutes into the skies above his city of birth just as daylight is breaking. It had taken the artist twenty years and a handful of failed attempts to make this dream a reality. He is able to share it via iPhone with his 100 year-old grandmother, to whom he dedicates the triumph and who passes away a mere month later. Onlookers who capture the explosion on their cell phone cameras soon leak the footage online; it has received more than 150 million views worldwide.

"Cai is always calm, but his work is so explosive – it's a beautiful contrast," notes Wendi Murdoch, a longtime friend of the artist's and now a producer of a documentary on his life and work. Murdoch, an avid art collector who has known Cai and his family for over 15 years, is tied to him not just through friendship and a profound love of the arts, but also by their shared heritage. Her reverence for him has several dimensions; like most fanatics of his art, she finds his work with gunpowder to be indescribably unique and unforgettable. "What he creates is a special bridge between Eastern and Western art," she remarks.

Murdoch says the idea for the documentary was born out of a desire "to provide an opportunity for as many people as possible to experience Cai's art, to learn about him as a human being and about the struggle and hardship he has had to

endure in making it to the point he's at. I also saw it as a chance for audiences to learn more about Chinese culture." After quickly securing Cai's approval of the project, Murdoch next contacted producer Hugo Shong, as well as actor, producer and director Fisher Stevens, whose Academy Award® winning documentary THE COVE had caught their attention a few years prior. Stevens was somewhat familiar with the artist, having seen his work at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the explosion event, *Light Cycle*, in Central Park at that point. Upon visiting Cai Studio in New York with Murdoch, he was blown away not just by the incredible art, but by the artist himself. "His passion, imagination and creativity were so inspiring," says Stevens. "After that, I felt a film needed to be made about him and his process. He has different types of work but almost all of it you feel in the gut or heart. I had never been a part of a film that was about an artist, so that was another reason I wanted to do it."

With a team of producers in place, the next order of business was finding the right director for the film. Together with executive producer Bennett Miller, the group mulled over ideas and felt that Oscar® winner Kevin Macdonald was a strong candidate. A filmmaker with vast documentary and narrative filmmaking success, Macdonald's keen eye for emotional weight, social issues and history seemed tailor-made for Cai's story. "The first time we met with Kevin we learned that he had barely heard of Cai, and had never been to China," recalls Murdoch. "That was perfect because we wanted someone to step into this venture from outside the art world and take on this film without any preconceived notions."

Macdonald's enthusiasm for the project grew quickly. "The producers showed me books and video of Cai's work, and I was intrigued right away by the cinematic potential it held," he notes. "His art is conceptual and abstract with the weight of emotional baggage. I was also attracted to the idea of making a film in China with such a strong political subtext, like you find in Cai's art." The director soon met for the first time with Cai in New York to discuss plans for the documentary. Upon revealing he had yet to visit China, Cai responded that in order to truly understand his work, one had to go to his homeland. The very next day Macdonald was on a plane with his new subject to experience the country and

culture that shaped one of the modern world's most beloved artists. What Murdoch admires about Cai, perhaps even more than his art, is his humility. "It never ceases to amaze me that someone of his stature, who is globally recognized and exhibits in museums all over the world, doesn't have an art dealer," she muses. "He is in no way focused on selling his work. He could very easily make millions of dollars selling what he makes, but he chooses to focus on the work itself and live a simple life." Macdonald expands on this idea, stating: "He's a part of the booming, exclusive, elitist art world which is so different from the art he actually makes – he is very much an insider and simultaneously an outsider. A good example of this is that he has lived in New York for over 20 years but does not speak English." Stevens likewise gained deeper appreciation and respect for Cai—not just creatively, but also as a person—as the project went on. "He lives a very minimalist life – almost Zen-like," he comments. "He seems to make very complicated art but live a very simple existence. Cai is also one of the most curious people I know. Curiosity is part of what makes him a powerful artist. That's what I admire most."

After several months of planning and scheduling, the filmmakers finally began to shoot SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG in September of 2014. Given that Cai has roots in China and a global art practice, the team ended up traveling the world while documenting him. Several areas of China are featured in the film, including Beijing, Shanghai, Cai's hometown of Quanzhou, and Liuyang in Hunan Province, widely known as the fireworks capital of the world, where many of the materials he uses are manufactured. Much of the film was shot in Cai's American home base of New York City, as well as in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The shoot culminated with the completion of Sky Ladder in June 2015, on Huiyu Island, China.

Spending so much time in China was not only exhilarating for the entire filmmaking team; it provided crucial context to Cai's life and work. "Cai's culture and background had a definite impact on him, as has every step in his journey," says Murdoch. The film follows his story as he began testing his bearings creatively during his early years, doing very controlled oil paintings and calligraphy similar to that of his father. Reflecting on the experience of visiting Huiyu Island during filming,

Stevens observes: “You can tell how the tranquility of this life affected Cai’s work, and then how the upheaval of a changing lifestyle also had effects.”

The beginnings of his freedom to work outside the parameters of his childhood’s social climate, and the birth of the aesthetic that the world has grown to know and love, would come when he moved to Japan from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s and began experimenting with gunpowder in his work. Playing with the unconventional medium’s effects on fixed drawing surfaces led to his exploration of it in the context of gunpowder paintings and “explosion events.” These ephemeral happenings have become his signature work; statements that have taken him around the world to share the exchange that is possible between audiences, their environment, and the art itself. “His firework art is magnificent and one-of-a-kind,” says Stevens. “His gunpowder drawings are gorgeous, unique and haunting – just watching him create one is art itself.” Notes Murdoch: “Each time Cai has been commissioned to do a work in another country or city, he’s influenced by its culture and people and a little piece of that influence stays with him.”

Almost as striking as the global visual spectacles which the documentary captures is the access that Cai granted Macdonald and the producers. While lending insight into his body of work – its history, context, and practice – he was insistent that a portrait of his place in the art world would not be complete without the inclusion of family and friends. Though Murdoch has known Cai for well over a decade, producing the film revealed much about the artist that was previously unknown. He gives intimate and emotional access to visits with both his grandmother, who passed away shortly after filming, and his gravely ill father. The filmmakers were able to interview several members of his family and inner circle, enlightening them on the sacrifices his wife has made for him and the complexities that exist for his children in creating their own identities.

Says Macdonald: “This film is about someone who doesn’t have conventional boundaries in his work. Cai draws so much on his own life experience and that of his family, which for him was not altogether odd to share. He doesn’t have the same boundaries about personal matters either; they’re just part of his life.” In presenting an unrestricted view of his life, Cai was able to use the film’s shoot as a cathartic

experience for himself as well. “The most rewarding and meaningful part of making the film for me was being able to look back at the emotional affiliation between me and my family,” he comments. “I felt that the distance between me and my hometown, after 30 years away traveling around the world, was pulled back through the film. I was given opportunities to review my work and my life. I was able to look back at the processes of how my art and my self developed. Through this project, I also saw the parts of me that are normally neglected, so it allowed me to understand myself better.”

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

KEVIN MACDONALD – DIRECTOR

Director Kevin Macdonald began his filmmaking career in documentaries. His first feature, *One Day in September*, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2000. His second feature, *Touching the Void*, was awarded the BAFTA for Best British Film and became the highest grossing British documentary in UK Box Office history. Other documentary credits include celebrated musical biopic, *Marley* and the groundbreaking *Life in a Day*. Kevin’s first feature-length drama was the critically acclaimed, *The Last King of Scotland*, with additional feature credits including *State of Play*, *The Eagle*, *How I Live Now* and most recently, submarine-thriller *Black Sea*.

Kevin has since completed the pilot episode of *11/22/63*, a new mini series based on the Stephen King novel and starring James Franco.

WENDI MURDOCH – PRODUCER

In 2011 Chinese-born businesswoman, Wendi Murdoch made her debut as a producer with *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Based on the 2005 best-selling novel of the same name, this historical drama was set in nineteenth century China and won the Golden Angel Award at the Chinese American Film Festival.

Ms. Murdoch is a co-founder of Artsy, an online platform to discover and collect art. It is the largest startup in the fine art industry. She is a passionate supporter of broadening global understanding of Chinese art and culture and is involved in a variety of business and cultural projects both in the US and China.

HUGO SHONG – PRODUCER

Hugo Shong is the founding General Partner of IDG Capital Partners and Chairman of IDG Greater China. Shong publishes more than 40 magazines in China and has invested in more than 300 companies. His film credits include *Pavilion Of Women* (2001); *Already Dead* (2007); *Hutong Days* (2008); *Red River* (2009); *Turning Point 1977* (2009); *Under The Hawthorne Tree* (2010); *Snow Flower And The Secret Fan* (2011); and *21 And Over* (2013).

FISHER STEVENS – PRODUCER

Fisher Stevens is an actor, producer, director, and environmentalist who has been working for over 30 years in the industry. Stevens began his career acting on the stage, appearing in over 40 Broadway and Off-Broadway shows. He parlayed his stage success into television and film, most recently in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and the upcoming Coen Brothers' film, *Hail Caesar!*

In 1996 he co-founded Greene Street Films, where he made his film directorial debut with *Just A Kiss*. He went on to produce over 15 films including the acclaimed documentary, *Once In A Lifetime*. In 2008 Stevens produced and co-directed the Independent Spirit Award-winning documentary, *Crazy Love* and in 2010, the Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Cove*. Also in 2010, Stevens co-founded Insurgent Docs. To date, they have completed the 2012 SXSW Grand Jury Prize-winning, *Beware of Mr. Baker; Before The Spring, After The Fall* for PBS; the critically lauded *Blank City*; American Masters' *Woody Allen: A Documentary*; and the Netflix Original, *Mission Blue*.

Most recently, Stevens produced the follow-up to *The Cove*, *Racing Extinction*, which was broadcast worldwide on The Discovery Networks and co-directed *Bright Lights* for HBO with Alexis Bloom. He is currently filming an untitled environmental documentary alongside Leonardo DiCaprio.

ALICE HENTY – CO-PRODUCER

Alice Henty has worked as a Line Producer/ Producer on feature documentaries for a decade and a half, beginning with the Oscar- and Emmy-winning *One Day In September* directed by Kevin Macdonald and produced by John Battsek.

Alice has since line produced the award-winning *Hacking Democracy* (HBO); Emmy winner, *The Tillman Story*, which premiered at Sundance 2010; and *Buck*, which won the 2011 Sundance Audience Award. In 2012, she met Fisher Stevens when she co-produced *Beware Of Mr. Baker*, which won the SXSW Grand Jury Prize in 2012. Between 2012 and 2014 she line produced *Citizen Koch*; *Supermensch: The Legend Of Shep Gordon*; and *Happy Valley*, and co-produced both *What Is Cinema?* and *The Magician* directed by Chuck Workman. She is proud to have worked as Post Supervisor on Motto Pictures' recent documentary *Life, Animated*, which is also premiering at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

SHANSHAN XIA – CO-PRODUCER / ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Xia Shanshan is a director and producer. She has been documenting artist Cai Guo-Qiang's life and art story for five years. She is the founder of 33 Studio, which specializes in working with top international artists, key art museums, and institutions around the world to produce art videos. 33 Studio has become one of the leading studios recognized widely by the international art community for its excellency and creativity. Art videos produced by Xia Shanshan have won a number of international recognized awards.

ROBERT YEOMAN – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Robert Yeoman has worked as a cinematographer on a wide range of motion pictures and commercials for over 30 years, starting as Second Unit Director of Photography on William Friedkin's 1985 film, *To Live And Die In L.A.* This led to many other independent features, including Gus Van Sant's acclaimed *Drugstore Cowboy* for which Robert was awarded an Independent Spirit Award for Best Cinematography in 1990. Yeoman has collaborated with Wes Anderson on all of his live action films including *Bottle Rocket*, *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic*, *The Darjeeling Limited*, *Moonrise Kingdom* (for which he was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award), and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, for which he was nominated for a BAFTA and an Academy award. His studio comedies include *Yes Man*, *Bridesmaids*, and *Get Him To The Greek*. His most recent film is Paul Feig's *Ghostbusters*. Yeoman is a member of the American Society of Cinematographers and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. He has also served as a juror at the Sundance Film Festival and the Gotham Awards.

NICK EMERSON – EDITOR

Nick Emerson began his career editing television news before moving into documentary films. After ten years working on television projects and short films he edited his first feature film, *Cherrybomb*, starring Rupert Grint. Recent credits include the BAFTA-nominated *Good Vibrations* and David Mackenzie's critically acclaimed *Starred Up*, for which Emerson received an Irish Film & TV Award nomination for best editing. In 2014 Emerson edited *The Hallow* for director Corin Hardy (Official selection, Sundance 2015) and has just finished *I Am Not A Serial Killer* starring Christopher Lloyd and is currently cutting *Lady Macbeth* starring Florence Pugh.

ADAM BISKUPSKI – EDITOR

Adam Biskupski is a freelance editor from London, specializing in independent and documentary film. His feature debut *The Goob* premiered at Venice Film Festival (2014). His shorts include Lynne Ramsay's BAFTA-winning *Swimmer; Jonah*; and *Ekki Múkk*. He recently finished two commercial campaigns for Apple Music and Calvin Klein, and is currently in post on Neil Gaiman's *Likely Stories* directed by Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard (*20,000 Days*). First assistant editor credits include *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, *Mr. Nice*, and *Unmade Beds*.

ALEX HEFFES – COMPOSER

Alex Heffes came to international prominence with his scores to Kevin Macdonald's Academy Award-winning films, *One Day In September* and *The Last King Of Scotland*, in addition to *Touching The Void*, *State Of Play*, and others. Alex has worked with directors such as Stephen Frears (*The Program*); Justin Chadwick (*Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom*, for which Alex earned a Golden Globe nomination); Peter Webber (*Emperor*); Catherine Hardwicke (*Red Riding Hood*); Mira Nair (*The Queen Of Katwe*); Tim Burton (*Sweeney Todd*, contributing additional arrangements to Steven Sondheim's show), and many others. Heffes received his first BAFTA nomination for the HBO drama, *Tsunami: The Aftermath*, and in 2011 was awarded Discovery of the Year by the World Soundtrack Academy. In 2012 Heffes won the Ivor Novello Award for best film score of the year.

RUCHI MITAL – ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

Ruchi Mital comes to documentary filmmaking with a background in writing and social justice. In 2014 Mital produced the feature documentary, *We Could Be King*, which won an Emmy for Outstanding Sports Documentary, as well as the follow-up short documentary series, *Hell Week*, broadcast on ESPN. Her experimental short films *Making The City* (2010) and *Raga For The Light* (2012) have screened at festivals from NYC to the UK.