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Liang Shaoji, Moon Garden, 2015. Installation detail at Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq, 2016
Picture: Wen- You Cai, courtesy Cai Studio

ART

Desert roses: Doha's art scene blossoms

Two contrasting shows this month bring arresting art projects to Qatar, discovers Caroline Roux



BY CAROLINE ROUX
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The Chinese artist [Cai Guo-Qiang](#) is known for extremely big gestures. For the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, he designed 29 large-footprint firework displays (one for each Olympiad) which were fired off in dramatic succession, shooting high over the city's skyline. In 2015, he created a pyrotechnic ladder in his hometown of Quanzhou which climbed up, rung after rung of dazzling pink light, to 1650 feet.

So it's hardly a surprise that when asked to curate an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art for the [Al Riwaq Gallery](#) in Doha by Qatar

Museums, he spent 3 years researching the project and has delivered a show on a very grand scale indeed. Called “What about the art?”, Cai (pronounced “Tsai”) had one aim: to extricate the discussion of his country’s art practice from the purely socio-political in which it tends to get embedded. “Issues come and go, and there are always new ones,” said Cai at the exhibition’s opening, appearing rather younger than his 58 years in a smart black jacket and powder blue trousers. “This is looking at the creativity involved in responding to those issues.” By including 15 installations by artists, who range in age from 34 to 71, the idea was to reveal a series of unique voices.



Liu Wei, *Big Dog*. Installation view at Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq, 2016

[Enlarge](#)

The opening gambit – a vast array of nearly 600 small clay sculptures, arranged on steps that evoke the terraced paddy fields of China, but are carpeted with sand from the Qatari desert – certainly does that. The creator, Hu Zhijun, born in 1952, had never show work before. A peasant farmer all his life, he only started making naïve figures in clay after his retirement to reconcile himself to the loss of his wife. Cai commissioned this magnum opus specially for the Doha show, asking Hu to recreate iconic moments from contemporary Chinese art, such as Ai Wei Wei’s 1995 performance of dropping the Hang dynasty urn. While Hu’s previous offerings had often depicted love-making (“there’s not much else to do in the countryside,” he told one critic), this new work – an outsider’s look at several decades of practice – suggests a prolific art scene that roams freely across painting, performance and everything else besides.

A result then, since that’s what Cai wants the whole show to do, too. And variety is key here. Jennifer Wen Ma’s work, for example, is exquisite in its production values and exacting in content. The walls of a large space are lined in plexiglass panels – not unlike Chinese scrolls – painted with silver and black garden scenes and within them two glass vessels swing dangerously near to the heads of visitors, containing a man’s and a woman’s voice. These are key elements from *Paradise Interrupted*, a full-length Chinese opera by Ma that will presented in full at the Lincoln Center in New York later this year.



Hassan Sharif, *Cloth, paper and glue* 1987

[Enlarge](#)

While Ma has all the polish of an American artist (she studied at Pratt in New York and is based there and in Beijing), Liang Shaoji seems to come from a world entirely of his own making, and frequently describes himself as one of the silk worms he uses in the creation of his work. “I select the best worms,” he says, of those he requires to weave their almost invisible strands of silk across plexiglass and over jagged objects. “And then observe society and community at work. I observe life via my worms.”

Elsewhere there is Sung Yuan and Peng Yi massive water tank inside which a large hose thrashes around when the water supply is turned on. Aggressive, nihilistic and seductively powerful, the hose is meant to represent the strength and confidence of Chinese ink painting too. There is a vast installation of

architectural models made of dog chews by Liu Wei that's about the historical relationship of power and buildings and an even bigger octopus-type creature made in resin that's squeezed into another cavernous space, like a Louise Bourgeois spider on growth hormones, by Huang Yong Ping.

It is indeed a monster show and while it might dispel some prejudgements about Chinese art, but you may come away feeling a little bit winded. If that's the case, head to the [Mathaf Gallery](#), also part of Qatar Museums, and get quietly lost in the work of Hassan Sharif. The artist, in his mid-60s and Dubai-born and -based, studied at St Martin's in London. His composite works, consisting of hundreds of almost identical pieces of folded card, or ribbon-threaded clay, sit delicately on the floor. Every component bears the mark of the artist, but the installation is the work of the curator who can install the work however he or she wishes. As a reconciling of the material and the immaterial, it has a subtle lightness that's hard to beat.

What About the Art? Is at Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq until 16 July, Hassan Sharif is at Mathaf until 4 September