

ARTnews

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ARTTALK

Big Bang Theories

On a Friday night in April, a chef, **David Bouley**; a sex therapist, **Dr. Ruth Westheimer**; and Chinese artist **Cai Guo-Qiang** sat together

Everyone, it turns out, likes to eat, make love, and banter about it all through the lens of Cai's art.

The artist, who spoke

igniting—his explosive drawings ran in the background while he spoke about his colorful powders as if they were market-fresh ingredients.

"Every time I draw, it's like making a new dish," he said.

Bouley agreed that the creation of food is an art form in itself. Cai obviously has an intimate relationship with his ingredients, said the chef. And like cooking, Cai's process is "also like

lovmaking," he added. "Putting all the ingredients together, developing technique. It can become emotional."

Dr. Ruth spoke of the endurance Cai needs to set

up his complex artworks and the "final explosion" that happens when they are finished. However, she emphasized, an explosion is not always necessary. "Patience is also important," she said, gently chiding the artist. In response, Cai spoke of his work *Danger Book: Suicide Fireworks* (2008), nine books sprinkled with unexploded gunpowder, to be used at the discretion of the owner. The piece could exist for a long time without exploding, he explained.

When Cai's *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9* (1992), an "explosive event" in which the artist sat in a field as concentric circles of gunpowder erupted around him, came up, Dr. Ruth wondered if he thought about sex at all in the moments before the explosion. Well, yes, said Cai. He added later, "Sometimes, especially during boring meetings, it's all I think about."

—Molly Birnbaum



Cai Guo-Qiang ignites gunpowder to make drawings like *Pine Tree and Eagle*, 2007.

onstage at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The three chatted jovially about their work in "Food, Sex, and Art," a panel moderated by journalist **Arthur Lubow**.

through a translator, compared the act of creating his gunpowder drawings to cooking and sex. A series of slides that showed Cai carefully setting up—and ultimately

Winged Victory

The lights dimmed and, with cues from the drummer, the crowd at Theory's downtown New York store hushed. A video projection lit up a white canvas mounted on the wall, and artist David Ellis darted across the screen, his speedy movements matching the drumbeats. With quick, deliberate strokes, he painted and repainted a sprawling canvas. What started as a colorful kaleidoscope of bulbous shapes transformed into a speckled peacock, a psychedelic landscape, and watery, gyrating swirls of paint. (Ellis's videos and kinetic sculptures are on view at New York's Roebing Hall through the 28th of this month.)

The artist may seem hyperactive on film, but the process behind his new "motion painting," *Baker's*, is far less action-packed. The Theory Icon Project, a nonprofit division of the clothing company dedicated to promoting the arts, commissioned Ellis to spend a week working in a hangarlike structure installed in the Theory store. Shoppers watched as he carefully painted his canvas, a camera overhead capturing the results every eight seconds. Some 25,000 shots

were condensed chronologically to create an eight-minute stop-frame animation. Composer Roberto Carlos Lange sat nearby throughout, recording elements of the performance—Ellis mixing paint, washing brushes—for what would become the work's sound track.



A still from David Ellis's stop-frame animation *Baker's*, made at the Theory store.

Ellis's practice isn't limited to painting, as the crowd learned that April night at Theory. After the screen went black, a man in an owl suit made of straws pushed through the crowd. Played by DJ JTram, the owl took its place in front of a birdlike sculpture made of boxes, water jugs, and beer bottles, hanging near the center of the room. The tribal drumbeats resumed, and the owl challenged Ellis's sculpture to a musical duel—the performance was, after all, billed as a "cockfight."

Ellis pulled a big switch, and the bird fought back, slowly flapping its Corona-bottle wings and generating similar beats from a carefully rigged mechanism within. No one knew whether it was claiming victory or giving up, but eventually the owl waddled away. Regardless, it sounded like a draw.

—Rachel Wolff