

Ai Weiwei



Celebrating the past, looking to the future
19 September-13 December 2015
Royal Academy of Arts, London

AI WEIWEI IS NO ORDINARY ARTIST. Over recent years he has become a household name. His activities are widely reported, as witnessed by the recent coverage when his passport was returned to him by the Chinese authorities. Ai's international profile emerged following the Szechuan earthquake in May 2008, when he started openly questioning the building standards of the local schools which collapsed, killing thousands of children. As part of a Citizens Investigation Ai collated the names of those children and recorded the impact their loss had on their families. These moving works include 'Straight' a monumental memorial constructed of rebar (steel bars used in the construction of reinforced concrete buildings) that he reclaimed from the destroyed buildings. The whole work weighs 150 tonnes and stands in silent testament to the victims of the disaster, and serves as a very visceral reminder of the fabric of those buildings within which they lost their lives.

In April 2011 Ai was detained at Beijing International airport and was prevented from boarding a flight to Hong Kong while on his way to Taipei, Taiwan, where he was planning a major exhibition. For the next 81 days he was illegally detained at a secret location and kept in a small padded room, under the watchful eye of two silent guards. On his release Ai's architectural company Fake Design Ltd. was charged with tax evasion, presented with a demand for over £1 million and given fifteen days to pay. Public donations helped him settle this bill and soon after a number of art works commemorated these experiences. These events, widely covered by the international press, elevated Ai's profile around the world.

Ai's life has over recent years overshadowed his art. His position as a political dissident, a champion of free speech and human rights, as well as a spokesman for the ordinary Chinese, may have brought him global attention, but at a high personal cost. However, throughout these years and despite all these challenges Ai has continued to express himself through his art. The exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts will allow many to see the artist behind the dissident, to witness his creative side. Since his return to China in 1993 Ai has created a wide body of work from photography to film, from sculpture to installation. He embraces a broad range of materials, many of which have a rich association with China's Imperial past, such as marble, jade, porcelain and wood. Through his choice of materials and the skilled craftsmen that produce much of his work, Ai embraces the history and traditions of China, consciously maintaining a link with the past. For instance, Ai reuses wood from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), salvaged from dismantled buildings, and furniture much of which is reconfigured in extraordinary ways, that simultaneously celebrate the past and look to the future. His work is embedded in China, as manifested in his 'Map' series that present the modern geopolitical borders of the country, often provocatively including the island of Taiwan, and in many ways stands as a testament to his father, the celebrated poet Ai Qing.

Throughout Ai does not compromise. His standards are exacting, the workmanship is meticulous. The scale and ambition of his work is often bewildering and the complexity of it likewise defies imagination. He is an artist of great imagination, producing works of some complexity that can be unfurled to recount his own personal experiences and those of others, as well as to critique the rapidly changing face of China as it jettisons its past in order to embrace its future.

Adrian Locke, Senior Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, and co-curator of the Ai Weiwei exhibition.

Circle of animals/zodiac heads: gold
3 October 2015-31 January 2016
Phoenix Art Museum Asian Gallery

Above: Ai Weiwei, *Straight*, 2008-12
 Steel reinforcing bars, 600 x 1200 cm
 Lisson Gallery, London
 Image courtesy Ai Weiwei
 (c) Ai Weiwei

Below (left): Ai Weiwei, *Dragon (detail)*, 2010. Gold-plated cast bronze, 35 7/8" x 18 1/8" x 25 7/8", (right) *Rooster*, 2010. Gold-plated cast bronze, 24" x 14 7/8" x 18 7/8".
 Images courtesy of Ai Weiwei.
 (c) Ai Weiwei.

PHOENIX ART MUSEUM is pleased to announce the exhibition of this major work by China's renowned contemporary dissident artist. The installation consists of a dozen gilt bronze sculptures representing the animal symbols from the traditional Chinese zodiac. Ai Weiwei drew his inspiration from an original set of zodiac animals located at *Yuanming Yuan* (Old Summer Palace), an imperial retreat of palaces and European-style gardens built outside of Beijing in the 18th and 19th centuries, under Emperor Qianlong. Designed and engineered by two European Jesuits, Giuseppe Castiglione and Michel Benoist, the animals originally functioned as an ornate fountain clock that would spout water at two-hour intervals. They were part of the Hall of Calm Seas (*Haiyan Tang*), the most elaborate of these palaces, which were apparently used mostly as showplaces for the emperor and his court rather than actual residences.

Once accessible only to the elite of 18th century Chinese society, the palace was destroyed and looted by Anglo-French troops in 1860 during the Second Opium War, displacing the original Zodiac Heads. Of the seven heads that are known to still exist (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Horse, Monkey and Pig), five have been repatriated to China and the ownership of two remains contested. *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* engages issues of looting, repatriation and cultural heritage while expanding on ongoing themes in Ai's work of the 'fake' and 'copy' in relation to the original. The Zodiac Heads have become fodder for the reinterpretation of cultural objects from the artist's own cultural knowledge and artistic fantasy.

In his own words, he was able "to produce something that is a copy of an original but not an exact copy—something that has its own sensitive layer of languages which are different, and that bears the mark of our own time."

Ai Weiwei (born 1957) is an artist, architectural designer, and social activist who employs a wide range of media. Ai lived in New York City for more than a decade during the 1980s and 90s, where he became interested in grass-roots activism and protest art. He has been openly critical of the Chinese government's stance on democracy and record of human rights violations, investigated government corruption and cover-ups, and was held for 81 days at an undisclosed location in 2011. After four years of house arrest, Ai's passport was returned to him in July 2015, whereupon he departed for Germany in August, where he is currently residing with his wife and son.

The display of this gold-plated 2010 edition of the Zodiac Heads at Phoenix Art Museum will be accompanied by a video about the artist and the production of the works as well as 18th-century examples of Chinese bronze and cloisonné works from Phoenix Art Museum's collection. These works demonstrate the skill of Chinese craftsman at the time that the original bronze Zodiac Heads were created in China, as well as being examples of the type of objects that were carried off during the destruction of the Old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War.

Sponsors for the exhibition include Heather Sacre and James Carona, Phoenix Art Museum's Asian Arts Council, GFWC Desert Jade Woman's Club Endowment for Chinese Art Programs, Marilyn A. Papp, and The Marilyn A. Papp Endowment for Chinese Painting.

Janet Baker, Curator of Asian Art, Phoenix Art Museum.

