

Ai Weiwei's 'Map of China': setting a new benchmark

The star lot at the Pavilion of Art & Design fair is not for sitting on.

By Benjamin Secher
Published: 12 Oct 2010



Ai Weiwei's 'Map of China'

On Wednesday, Berkeley Square, a patch of green in central London, gets a new bench. Four metres long, made out of wood salvaged from a Buddhist temple, and carved so that its cross-section replicates the outline of China, this is no ordinary piece of furniture.

Unlike the square's other permanent benches – sat on, rained on, visited by pigeons – this one isn't staying long, comes with a title (Map of China), and will arrive by airplane from New York accompanied by a high-rolling Manhattan art dealer, Mark Benda. It is one of the big-ticket items in the so-called "Pavilion of Art & Design London", an upmarket satellite event of the city's annual Frieze Art Fair, hosting 50 international dealers of modern art, design and photography.

Map of China, which Benda says we should think of less as furniture and more as “a major sculpture... a highly desirable conceptual piece” is the work of Ai Weiwei. Little exhibited in this country until now, Ai is China’s most famous living artist, and the man responsible (with Herzog & de Meuron Architects) for Beijing’s “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium.

This week he will also become the eleventh artist to fulfil Tate Modern’s annual Unilever commission, unveiling a new piece befitting the vast dimensions of the gallery’s Turbine Hall, the nature of which remains secret.

Map of China is at the other end of the scale, although, weighing in at 635kg, it is far from insubstantial. The 2008 work fits neatly into the artist’s oeuvre, reflecting his dominant obsessions: toying with national iconography (here, in the form of a map), and “recycling” antique artefacts. Reduced to serving as an uncomfortable bench – the contours of China’s northern Mongolian border are far from easy on the buttocks – the temple wood nevertheless gets off relatively lightly; for an earlier work, Ai got his hands on a 2,000-year-old Han Dynasty vase – and smashed it.

Benda has owned Map of China for a year, after “chasing it around the world for months”. As he talks about it, how he “cherishes” it, how he liked to drop in on it in his gallery’s warehouse after work, just to spend a few minutes in its company, it’s easy to forget he is in London to sell it. But buy it you can – assuming your budget stretches to seven figures. Just don’t even think about sitting on it.