

Dissident Design

Powerful messages hide within Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's simple structures

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Ai Weiwei's "Fragments" installation is just one of the Chinese artist's works now on view in Washington.

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has been on the conceptual art and architecture scene for decades. His name made international headlines in 2008 when he helped design the distinctive “Bird’s Nest” stadium for the Beijing Olympics — and later denounced the event as a government propaganda stunt.

Angered by the Chinese government’s failure to reveal information about victims of the Sichuan earthquake that year, Ai published online a list of the more than 5,000 schoolchildren who died in the disaster. He expanded his activism to Twitter, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers. Last year, he was taken into police custody and imprisoned for 81 days. When he emerged, he was charged with tax evasion and confined to his Beijing studio as part of a bail agreement. He still lives under heavy police

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surveillance.

But Ai's artwork can travel freely, and much of it is making its way to Washington.

"Fragments," an angular 2005 installation of antique wooden poles and furniture, is already here, on view at the Sackler Gallery through April. "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," a dozen 800-pound bronze animal heads with exaggerated, lifelike features, is also here until February, arranged around the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's courtyard fountain. And "According to What?," a retrospective exhibition featuring more than 25 of Ai's pieces in various media, will open at the Hirshhorn in October.

Ai's recent political activism presents one lens through which his works can be viewed. But even at face value, his works are designed to raise questions about culture, history and appropriation. (His "Zodiac Heads" are proving to be an irresistible public photo op, but the sculptures are actually much darker than they seem at first glance.)

"[Ai] uses art to question all of society's institutions," says Carol K. Huh, the Sackler's assistant curator of contemporary Asian art. "Who decides what is of value? What is of material importance to society? What is heritage? He's asking those kinds of questions."

The "Zodiac Heads," modeled after the 12 symbols of the Chinese zodiac, are oversized interpretations of original 18th-century sculptures designed by European artists during the Qing dynasty to decorate the imperial "Garden of Perfect Brightness" outside Beijing. Pillaged in 1860, only seven of the pieces have ever been recovered. It's still a sore subject for China. But Ai sees that response as hypocritical and even "humorous."

"It has nothing to do with 'national treasure,'" Ai is quoted as saying in press materials for the show. "It was designed by an Italian and made by a Frenchman for a Qing dynasty emperor, which actually is somebody who invaded China. So, if we talk about 'national treasure,' which nation do we talk about?"

"Fragments" similarly challenges notions of cultural ownership. Formed loosely in the shape of China, the installation is made from salvaged wood: pieces of dismantled temples, homes and worn-out furniture. In former lives, some of these materials held spiritual and functional significance; now, they have been liberated into open-ended meaning as art. (Between those two states, they were simply stripped parts on the resale market.) "It's really three different realms of assigning value to the same material," Huh says.

The piece's construction adds another layer of meaning: Ai worked with master carpenters using traditional building techniques to fuse the structure together with hand-drilled holes and pegs rather than nails. (The painstaking process is reminiscent of Ai's "Sunflower Seeds," a 2010 installation at the Tate Modern museum in London, for which he hired 1,600 artisans to hand-paint 100 million sunflower seeds made out of porcelain.)

"He's someone who has a lexicon, a language that he draws from," says Mika Yoshitake, assistant curator at the Hirshhorn.

But Ai's works also invite connection on a simpler, more visceral level as well. Walk carefully through the open spaces in "Fragments" and inspect the details on the antique wooden beams; find the "Zodiac Head" that corresponds with your birth year on the Chinese calendar. Ai's work is complex and multilayered, Yoshitake admits, "but it's important to see it as accessible."

The Works

Fragments: This installation is one of a series of works Ai Weiwei built using wood from dismantled Qing dynasty (1644-1912) structures. Though it might look like a jungle gym from afar, the piece poses deep questions about China's past, present and future.

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When viewed from above, the installation recalls the shape of China. This 16-foot-tall beam could mark Beijing, theorizes Sackler Gallery curator Carol K. Huh.

A stool included in the piece could represent China's Hainan province or the island of Taiwan, Huh believes. It also references some of Ai's past works, which play with furniture made nonfunctional.

To build "Fragments," Ai collaborated with master carpenters. The wood is held in place by wooden pegs in hand-drilled holes, not nails.

Ai collected salvaged wood from dismantled structures such as ancient temples. The carvings in the piece are original to those elements.



Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" is on view at the Hirshhorn.

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: With this project, Ai reinterprets a dozen animal-head sculptures that adorned the "Garden of Perfect Brightness" outside Beijing in the 18th century. The pieces were stolen in 1860 and five have not been recovered. The animals depicted are (in order of the traditional Chinese zodiac): rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and boar.

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To view the 12 sculptures of “Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads” in order of the Chinese zodiac, start with the rat and walk clockwise. Chinese mythology casts the rat as a symbol of intelligence and innovation, though it can also represent corruption.

Ai modeled some of his animals from life and others from objects and images in his studio. The ram was modeled from a small stone goat he owned, according to Hirshhorn assistant curator Mika Yoshitake.

All of the animals’ mouths are open. Why? The original versions (the 18th-century bronzes that inspired Ai’s) were part of a fountain, so water would have spurted out from their mouths.

Yoshitake theorizes that the ropelike stems that support each animal head are intended to read as “organic” structures, making the heads appear as if they are growing out of the earth.

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Jefferson Drive and 12th Street SW; free, through April 7, 2013; 202-633-4880. (Smithsonian)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue and 7th Street SW; free, through Feb. 24, 2013; 202-633-1000. (L’Enfant Plaza)

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