



Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: 'Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads' at LACMA

August 31, 2011 | 6:00 am



Given all the harsh news about dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei in recent months, including his 81 days of grim incarceration by Beijing authorities under circumstances whose details are still not fully known, there was one thing I did not expect from his new sculptural installation on the plaza at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). I did not expect it to be characterized by goofy charm.

Yet, there it is, sweet and silly. Twelve grinning, colossal heads of zodiac animals are arranged in a ring around the elevator shaft that arises from the museum's underground parking garage. As the glass-enclosed lift pulls up to the plaza, it's an earthly version of a mythic journey from the underworld to an array of celestial constellations. Museum visitors invariably pose for a steady stream of cellphone camera pictures.

The gigantic, sleekly crafted head of a rat perched high atop a 6-foot post comes into your direct line of sight. With its pared-down features, trumpet-like ears and rows of perfect, tiny teeth, its identity doesn't immediately register. To recognize the beast takes a few moments of inspection. For all its detailed refinement, this character could be Mickey Mouse's cousin.

In the traditional Chinese zodiac, according to a slim volume published with the exhibition, those born under the sign of the rat are "charming, clever and have excellent taste." (Ai was born in 1957, not a year of the rat but of the rooster -- "profound thinkers; talented and capable, they can also be eccentric.") Depending on your superstition threshold, these attributes may or may not apply to viewers, but they do seem to fit the sculpture.

At least, they do until another association bubbles up. The 12 heads -- ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, dog and boar are the others, rendered in various degrees of realism -- stand atop bronze posts that rise out of circular bases. Stylized striations on the posts yield two suggestions: flowing water, as if a fluid jet is rising from a pool to hold each head aloft; or the rough bark of a slender tree limb. (They've been likened to an abstracted lotus stem, too, but the comparison is hard to see.)

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Water recalls Ai's original source for the sculpture: a famous zodiac fountain in a royal summer palace outside Beijing. The palace -- Yuanming Yuan, or Garden of Perfect Brightness -- was looted and burned in 1860 by British and French troops in retaliation for the kidnap and torture of a group of British diplomats during the Second Opium War. The Chinese regard the pillaging as an act of national humiliation, opening an era of foreign imperialism.

Yuanming Yuan had been built a century before by the Manchu Emperor, who engaged Italian and French Jesuit missionaries to design one of the many palaces in a European Baroque style. Imagine a kind of skewed inversion of Europe's colonial-era taste for chinoiserie.

An 18th century engraving reveals an extravagant, cross-cultural hybrid. Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), a Jesuit artist and architect from Milan who became a court painter to China's emperor, designed the elaborate fountain, which also functioned as a water-spouting clock. Twelve robed figures topped with zodiac animal heads sit perched atop Mannerist pedestals, each embellished with a cartouche, flanking a Chinese-style mountain crowned by a massive Baroque seashell. The fantastic ensemble is as grandiose as any constructed for the Sun King at Versailles or for Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este at his lavish villa outside Rome.

In Ai's rendition of the zodiac animals, the suggestion of a wooden post is more implacable than the playful inference of water jets, with their fanciful, multicultural whimsy backed by sober sociopolitical history. After all, a head ceremoniously planted on a post for display in a public place is unmistakably an intimidation -- a warning of the fate that will befall an enemy who dares to contravene authoritarian law.

Such barbarism isn't merely historical or rhetorical, referencing the past. Just six weeks ago, the Associated Press carried an account of soldiers for the new regime in Ivory Coast, who captured a supporter of the recently ousted president: "They cut off his head, mounted it on a stake, and placed sunglasses over the eyes and a cigarette in the decomposing mouth."

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Ai's sculptures merge fact and fiction. Seven of the original, looted animal heads are known to still exist -- two from the estate of the late fashion designer, Yves Saint-Laurent, turned up at a controversial 2009 auction -- but the other five have long since disappeared. Ai's horse differs in many details from the existing original; it's jauntier, a bit bulkier, rather more cartoon-like than the stylized original shown in a catalog photograph. It's also far larger. (Ai's 4-foot bronze heads weigh in at about 800 pounds.) His fancy dragon's head, already mythic in subject, is a complete fabrication since the original is lost; and it's based on beastly examples hundreds of years older than Castiglione's fountain.

Some Chinese officials have agitated for the return of the seven scattered heads, sort of like calls for the Elgin marbles to be sent back to Athens from London. Others have engaged in patriotic protest: The Saint-Laurent auction was disrupted by a \$40-million winning bid from a mainland Chinese collector who, it turned out, had no intention of paying the tab.

Ai's sculpture shoots a glance, at once playful and jaundiced, in that nationalist direction. His gathering of celestial signs stares down an underlying ideology that the state is of primary importance. These playful but subtly incisive works, crafted by a Chinese rather than Italian artist, eloquently beg to differ.

"Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-6000, through Feb. 12. Closed Wed.
www.lacma.org

-- Christopher Knight

Photos: Ai Weiwei, "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," 2010, bronze, installation views. Credit: Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times

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