

City Room



May 13, 2011, 7:15 AM

Before Fame, or Jail, Ai Weiwei Was a New York 'Starving Artist'

By COREY KILGANNON

Twelve statues installed in fountains opposite the Plaza Hotel were ceremoniously unveiled this month: the bronze animal heads at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street were made by Ai Weiwei, 53, a prominent Chinese contemporary artist.

Across the street from the statues is a stretch of sidewalk where Chinese immigrants can be found working as sketch artists, turning out quickie charcoal portraits of tourists for a few dollars apiece.

Mr. Ai himself worked there as a street artist during the dozen or so years he spent as a young artist in the United States before returning to China in 1993.



Ai Weiwei in New York in 1985.

"He was a better painter than sketcher," recalled a 50-year-old sketch artist who emigrated from China in 1985 and still sets up his sketch pad and stool on the sidewalk near the horse-drawn carriages outside an entrance to Central Park.

The artist refused to give his name, noting that even for longtime Chinese immigrants in New York it is considered dangerous to speak publicly about Mr. Ai, a vocal critic of the Chinese Communist Party who has not been seen publicly since he was detained on April 3 in Beijing by the Chinese authorities.

He said that Mr. Ai, who would sketch there, and more often in Times Square, "had a personality that attracted other artists — he was authentic."

Kilgannon, Corey. "Before Fame, or Jail, Ai Weiwei Was a New York 'Starving Artist.'" *The New York Times*, May 13, 2011.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

Mr. Ai was one of many young Chinese artists trained at top art schools in China who came to New York in the early 1980s for artistic freedom, as well as the chance for fame and fortune. Many resorted to earning a few easy dollars by using their charcoal-sketch training to become street portraitists, rendering in minutes a caricature of a customer, who would buy it for as little as \$5. Some of these artists — the 50-year-old near the Plaza included — wound up getting locked into the street art game permanently to support themselves.

“If you want to create good art, you have to make a change,” he said. “On the street, maybe your skills will improve, but your ideas will not. Your creative abilities will not develop. Your work will not reflect any new art, because you’re doing the same thing every day, just going through the motions, and also, there is the financial pressure.”

“It is hard to make money, and the police give us problems,” he added.

Back in the early 1980s, Mr. Ai was not the familiar rotund artist with a long beard that much of the world now recognizes. He was younger and leaner and testing the artistic and political waters with his creations.

He was already an upstart “rascal” in the art world, and once in New York, he was stimulated by exposure to the work of Warhol and Duchamp and other innovators and styles, “and he became an inheritor of all that,” said Ethan Cohen, an art dealer and collector who became a patron and friend of Mr. Ai’s at the time.

For Mr. Ai, New York offered artistic freedom and stimulation, but it was a tough place to survive financially.

“New York was an important part of his intellectual development and artistic career, and it reaffirmed many of the values that he had,” Mr. Cohen said. “It was a watershed moment in his life.”

Early on, Mr. Ai found a cheap basement apartment in the East Village where he worked and kept his door open to many up-and-coming Chinese artists, filmmakers and composers. He also used various shops and stores around town, including a locksmith and a frame shop as work spaces after befriending the owners.

He roamed art galleries and was intrigued by local activism, like the 1988 riots in Tompkins Square Park, which he photographed extensively. He sold photographs to the newspapers, often turning his lens to protests and encounters with the police.

Kilgannon, Corey. “Before Fame, or Jail, Ai Weiwei Was a New York ‘Starving Artist.’” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2011.

When his more serious art was not selling, Mr. Ai would work as a street sketcher “to make a day-to-day living,” said Yao Jicheng, a sketch artist who is one of dozens of artists and vendors who set up each evening on 42nd Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, after 6 p.m., since the police tend to chase them off during the daytime.

“His technical skills were so-so, but he was a modern artist, he did pop art,” said Mr. Yao, one recent evening as he quickly sketched a caricature of two British tourists.

This was not exactly a desirable line of work at the time, because of street crime and strict police enforcement.

Mr. Ai would set up an easel in Times Square and draw portraits for customers, at \$15 to \$25 per drawing and could make perhaps \$200 a night, estimated Mr. Cohen, who conceived of a show in the late 1980s he named “Survival,” which included Chinese street artists sketching portraits for \$20 apiece at a SoHo gallery.

“I did it to bring notoriety to their plight, that they were starving artists trying to survive, to pay their rent,” Mr. Cohen said.

Mr. Ai also happened to be a skilled blackjack player, heading regularly to Atlantic City, Mr. Cohen said. [An article on the Web site Blackjack Champ](#) quotes a veteran gambler as claiming to have befriended Mr. Ai. The player said Mr. Ai was a highly rated blackjack player who could count cards and win money consistently.

Mr. Ai did sell numerous works in New York and had pieces shown in gallery shows. Still there were times when Mr. Ai seemed discouraged with the artist’s plight. In 1991, [he told The New York Times](#) that, “After 10 years living here, I don’t think there’s so much opportunity.”

Kilgannon, Corey. “Before Fame, or Jail, Ai Weiwei Was a New York ‘Starving Artist.’” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2011.

The article in which Mr. Ai was quoted focused on the killing of a fellow Chinese street artist. The artist, a 34-year-old man named Lin Lin, was killed near Times Square while drawing a portrait in the early hours of a Sunday morning. A passer-by provoked an argument, and Mr. Lin was shot in the chest when he answered back.

At the time, Mr. Ai told The Times that Lin Lin's living conditions were "worse than just about anything you would find in China."

Speaking of street artists, he said that "a lot of people already had broken dreams" and added that "people come here because they are always hoping to improve things for themselves even if they have to live in terrible circumstances."

Mr. Ai left New York to return to Beijing in 1993, after getting word that his father, a celebrated poet, had taken ill.

Last week, the 50-year-old artist working across from the dozen bronze sculptures near the Plaza Hotel was asked his opinion of the work.

"I think it's very good," he said. "It shows he loves China."

Kilgannon, Corey. "Before Fame, or Jail, Ai Weiwei Was a New York 'Starving Artist.'" *The New York Times*, May 13, 2011.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760