

Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads
At Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden to Feb. 24, 2013

Perspectives: Ai Weiwei
At Arthur M. Sackler Gallery to April 7, 2013

If all you do is laugh at Ai Weiwei's art pranks, the joke's on you.
By Kriston Capps • May 18, 2012



Ai Weiwei, "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Head"

Proponents of American hegemony could take a page from Ai Weiwei's notebook. The Chinese artist has gained global notoriety for works that criticize Chinese totalitarianism with humor, wit, and elan, and in every conceivable medium—even through a cell-phone pic he snapped as he was detained in 2009. He was very nearly beaten to death by Chinese police that year.

Paradoxically, and yet somehow predictably, the Chinese state has accelerated Ai's stellar rise in the art world by its efforts to suppress him. So much of Ai's work reflects this David vs. Goliath conflict—not that Western viewers can always tell. When "According to What?," a retrospective of the avuncular artist's work, comes to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in the fall (the first such survey of his work in the U.S.), some of it is bound to slip by his audience. Viewers just don't know enough about China, or contemporary art, to keep up with Ai.

Take the two works the Hirshhorn and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery have installed as teasers for the big fall survey. Visitors to the Hirshhorn's "SONG 1" video installation will have noticed that Doug Aitken isn't the only artist enjoying the museum's courtyard. The museum has installed Ai's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," a 2011 series of sculptures based on the 12 figures of the Chinese zodiac. The 10-foot-tall bronze sculptures, each one a head mounted on a pole set in a ring facing out from the museum's courtyard

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fountain, are part re-creation and part interpretation of the 18th-century Zodiac heads by Giuseppe Castiglione that once graced the Old Summer Palace near Beijing.

In China, the original sculptures are a sore subject. They were taken or destroyed by English and French troops who sacked the Old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War. A few of the original Qing monuments have resurfaced at controversial auctions, a situation that rankles in China. But provenance is an issue that Ai appears to find delicious. In reimagining these zodiacs, he's returning them to the public realm, a gesture critical of both jealous Chinese authorities and unconscionable French collectors alike.

The Zodiac heads are more than a public political gesture, though: They're kitsch worthy of Andy Warhol. The heads are overlarge and cheesy, like Robert Indiana's LOVE sculpture in Philadelphia—or, hell, the Rocky Balboa statue. We can certainly guess what the Zodiac heads meant to Qing Dynasty elites, but that original meaning is lost today—on the Chinese, on us, on the artist. Ai has imposed his own meaning by thumbing his nose at the people who would take official symbols too seriously, or keep them for themselves.

At the Sackler, Ai's "Fragments" is a bit darker, and more urgent. This 2005 installation also looks back to China's Qing period through the lens of contemporary politics. And while it's also a sculptural piece, "Fragments" showcases Ai's architectural talent. That might be the area in which his work is now best known: Working with the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron, Ai designed the iconic Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games. (Ai is collaborating with Herzog & de Meuron to design the 2012 Serpentine Pavilion, a prestigious annual architectural commission in London.) Ai's studio made "Fragments" using pieces of pillars from Qing temples that have been disassembled by a China that is aggressively bulldozing over its historic fabric.

Ai is addressing what is squarely a Chinese architectural problem. His work echoes Wang Shu, the only Chinese architect to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the top award in the field. Wang and his wife, Lu Wenyu, formed Amateur Architecture Studio after Wang spent years learning materials as a construction worker. Known for its work in Hangzhou, Amateur Architecture repurposes the casually discarded, traditional building materials left in the wake of a rapidly transforming industrial power.

There are incredible parallels between Ai and Wang's architectural work, especially the focus on craft; the balance, joinery, and routing work of "Fragments" is surely any carpenter's dream. But Ai's "Fragments" pavilion deviates from Wang's work in important ways: Ai looks West, where Wang does not. (The pavilion is a hot design trope in Western architecture today, for example.) Ai can't help but inject a little humor into his work, and here, that's a pair of Siamese stools conjoined at one leg. It's a funny but critical inclusion: It helps frame the work for viewers, at least some of whom have never seen a Qing Dynasty temple. The stools, along with a couple chairs and a table that have been molded into the superstructure, reinforce the notion that the space is enclosed—that it's a building made of other stuff.

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Ai Weiwei, "Fragments"

There are two easy access points to Ai's work, and "Zodiac" and "Fragments" offer good examples of both. One is humor: The physically robust artist cuts a slapstick figure, often appearing nude in self-portraits or otherwise making light of his life-threatening detentions. Another is austerity. Through his art and architectural references to Chinese history, Ai expresses a profound appreciation for China's history while carving out the future of his form. For some 40 years, he has managed to serve as a singular representative of postwar Western art practices to a nation of more than a billion people—an access point for art-savvy audiences. But at the end of the day, his austere work, like "Fragments," is political, and his zippy work, like "Zodiac Heads," is political. Laughter and Zen disguise a deeper meaning in his work.

Make no mistake: Ai can be outright brash. He's not just the West's favorite Chinese contemporary artist; he's also China's favorite online activist. As a blogger, he has frequently made use of a Chinese symbol, something like a 401 error, that pops up on websites suppressed by the state. He explained his appropriation of the symbol, which roughly translates to "anti-China," in 2009. "If you aren't anti-China, are you even human?" Ai asked.

"We haven't seen a ballot in 60 years; there is no universal education, no medical insurance, no freedom of the press, no freedom of speech, no freedom of information, no freedom of movement, no judicial independence, no oversight by public opinion, no independent trade unions, no national army, no constitutional protection," Ai wrote three months before the state cracked open his skull. "All that's left is the 'grass-mud horse.'"

"Grass-mud horse" is a Cantonese pun: The characters for "cob horse" are a homonym for "fuck your mother." Ai's work in Washington may be light—but do not fail to take him seriously.

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