

Art: Ai Weiwei sculptures at Princeton



Detail of Ai Weiwei's installation of 12 bronzes, "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," in front of Robertson Hall at Princeton University: (from left) Rat, Ox, Tiger.

By Edward J. Sozanski, Contributing Art Critic

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Ai Weiwei has become China's most prominent international artist in large part because he is also his country's most persistent and popular dissident.

Last year, his growing celebrity prompted the Chinese government to arrest him at Beijing's airport as he was about to depart on a foreign trip. He was detained in secrecy for three months, charged with "economic crimes."

Since being released in June 2011, Ai, whose work was exhibited at Arcadia University in 2010, has been prohibited from leaving China. His art continues to represent him around the world, however. In fact, we seem to be in the middle of an Ai Weiwei boom.

A major outdoor sculptural installation, *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, began an international tour in the fall of 2010 in Brazil. Subsequently it has been displayed in London, New York City, Taipei, Los Angeles, and Houston.

One of the six versions of *ZodiacHeads* is on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington through Feb. 24. A second copy has been installed at Princeton University through next Aug. 1, on loan from the family of an alumnus.

A major survey of Ai's art will open at the Hirshhorn Oct. 7, while a documentary film about him, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, is playing at the Ritz Five in Center City and was shown last week at the Bryn Mawr Film Institute.

Ai Weiwei has annoyed China's rulers by criticizing censorship and the authoritarian control exercised by the Communist Party, and by investigating school collapses after the 2008 Sichuan earthquakes.

Apparently, his collaboration in the design of Beijing's "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium, which generated considerable praise inside and outside the country, wasn't enough to counteract the government's unease over his very public - and popular - challenges to authority.

The stadium project affirmed the artist's pride in Chinese culture and history; in an ironic way, *Zodiac Heads* at Princeton does likewise, even as the heads pose intriguing questions about cultural authenticity.

The 12 sculptures have been installed along one side of Scudder Plaza next to Robertson Hall, which houses the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. The university's art museum also is participating in the project.

Although titled *Circle of Animals* (they have been installed in that configuration elsewhere), the sculptures here have been set down in a line along one side of a shallow pool that contains a sculptural fountain. I presume this was the most practical way to accommodate them on the site.

In any case, they look magnificent. Each zodiac animal (rabbit, tiger, dragon, dog, horse, goat, etc.) is represented by a massive head mounted on a stalk that flares to a circular base. Each cast-bronze sculpture is about 10 feet tall.

Now for the irony. Many Americans may be familiar with the Chinese zodiac, if only through placemats in Chinese restaurants. What might not be evident at Princeton is that these heads were designed in the 18th century by a European, a Jesuit missionary in China named Giuseppe Castiglione.

His patron was the emperor Qianlong. The original, much smaller heads functioned as part of a water clock at the emperor's summer palace at Beijing, called Yuan Ming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness).

In 1860, during the Second Opium War, British and French troops burned the summer palace. The water clock was destroyed, and only seven of the zodiac heads survived. Ai Weiwei has reinterpreted those seven, imagined the missing five in a complementary style, and scaled up all 12 to monumental proportions.

The result is a subtle hybrid - a sculptural suite whose cultural DNA is Chinese but whose original execution reflects Western aesthetic sensibility now reinterpreted by a Chinese artist who is an internationalist.

Yet instead of the expected dissonance, we perceive harmony. The sculptures not only fit perfectly into the campus of an American university next to the modernist Robertson Hall, they also accept any number of interpretations of their symbolism and historical allusions.

Princeton has denoted Oct. 10 as a day when the university will celebrate Ai's artistic achievements and his dedication to human rights. He has accepted an invitation to attend; whether he does will depend on his government. The website www.princeton.edu/aiww will keep you apprised of his status.

One concept inherent in the zodiac heads is the way aesthetic influences infiltrate disparate cultures, either intentionally or by osmosis. A five-minute walk from Robertson Hall brings you to the Art Museum, where this idea is explored more extensively in an exhibition called "Encounters."

This is the kind of thematic exhibition that allows a museum to interpret its collection in a fresh way, by juxtaposing objects that otherwise might not appear to relate to each other.

Throughout the show, borrowing, adapting, or reinterpreting aesthetic philosophies or conventions takes place across time and cultural boundaries.

Just as Ai Weiwei has reinterpreted figures on a Qing Dynasty water clock, in "Encounters" British artist Yinka Shonibare has transformed a famous image by the Spanish master Francisco Goya into an indictment of colonialism.

Shonibare has restaged Goya's famous etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* as four large color photographs in which an appropriately costumed protagonist, instead of being besieged by symbols of folly and ignorance, is bedeviled by the consequences of conquest.

Shonibare's transcription is one of the more self-evident and defensible "encounters" in the show, which sometimes leaves one puzzled as to what the curator had in mind. When that happens, one can always retreat into admiration of splendid objects that are engaging individually, such as a Chinese porcelain bottle excavated in Egypt or a painted steel sculpture by the American David Smith.

"Root & Branch" is another thematic collection show, but one that doesn't require viewers to make any connections; each work speaks for itself.

The conceit here is branching structures, primarily in trees but including other aspects of nature and even schematic or graphic expression. Photography of all periods is the primary medium, and the artists include luminaries from Eugene Atget to Lee Friedlander.

Photographers have long been attracted to trees as primary subject matter, in part, I suppose, because trees can express either sculptural structure (Atget) or complex patterning (Friedlander). "Root & Branch" presents a wide variety of branching imagery without repeating itself; if you love trees, you'll have fun with it.

Art: A Princeton Trio

Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" is installed next to Robertson Hall of the Woodrow Wilson School on Washington Road, which runs through the center of the Princeton campus, through Aug. 1, 2013.

"Encounters" continues in the Princeton University Art Museum, in the center of campus, through Sept. 23. "Root & Branch" continues through Nov. 25.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays; 10 to 10 Thursdays and 1 to 5 Sundays. Closed Nov. 24. 609-258-3788 or www.princetonartmuseum.org.