

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei wins fans in Los Angeles



By Jordan Riefe
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(Reuters) - Dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is living a heavily restricted life in Beijing after being released from detention earlier this year, but his work is speaking volumes to people in the second-largest U.S. city.

Ai's touring installation, "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," opened two weeks ago at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and has been introducing people here to the work of a man about whom, until recently, they may have only read about in headlines telling of his recent detention in [China](#).

The work is a series of 12 massive, 800 lb. bronze heads depicting the animals of the Chinese Zodiac. Standing among them on the museum's sunny North Piazza, people have been posing for photos standing next to the figures, leaning against them, and taking in the surface with their fingertips.

"I think he's questioning everybody, the entire idea of possession and of cultural permission and of nationalism," Franklin Sirmans, a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) told Reuters about the installation.

"You see little kids going up to it and interacting with it in a way that is not necessarily about the same thing you or I might be interested in," Sirmans said. "Of course there are many other layers that come to mind as you learn more about the history behind the objects."

The installation is based on a series of sculptures carved by Giuseppe Castiglione, an 18th century Milanese artist and court painter to Ching Dynasty Emperor Kangxi. The original figures

encircled a fountain in the Yuanming [Yuan](#) garden outside Beijing.

During the Second Opium War in 1860, the sculptures were looted by French and British troops. Of the original twelve figures only seven are known to exist, including two belonging to Yves St. Laurent which turned up at a 2009 auction.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDLY

At the time, the Chinese government protested the sale, claiming the sculptures for China as a point of national pride. But Ai was among the first to ask whether they were even Chinese art, as they were made by Italian hands.

"It's interesting that the Chinese government used that (the auction) to take attention off of what is really happening domestically and sort of instill a sense of patriotism," said Stephanie Kwai of the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

She wasn't the only one to notice.

With "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" Ai chooses the zodiac, a symbol of fate and destiny, to sculpt with his own hands as if to say he and he alone will shape his future -- not a government or ruler.

The internationally renowned artist has taken to Twitter in recent years, freely criticizing the Chinese government on various subjects ranging from the lax response to the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan to the Beijing [Olympics](#).

For comments like those he was arrested in April this year and charged with tax evasion. When released in June after more than 80 days, he was sent home under heavy restrictions. He cannot be interviewed by journalists, meet foreigners, use the Internet or interact with rights advocates for a year.

Still, Ai has refused to stay completely silent. Just this week, he wrote a commentary that was published on the website of Newsweek magazine in which he called Beijing, "a city of violence." He criticized the Chinese government for rampant corruption and its policies toward migrant workers.

Fortunately his work can do a lot of his talking for him, in Los Angeles, and beyond. "Zodiac" will travel to Houston, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. where each new context will likely bestow new meaning on its audience.

(Editing by Bob Tourtellotte)
