

Jailed Chinese dissident's art unveiled in New York

By **Jesse Solomon**, CNN
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Ai Weiwei exhibit unveiled

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Ai Weiwei was noticeably absent from his own exhibit in New York

He was detained by his government last month for unspecified "economic crimes"

Ai's work was nonetheless celebrated by Manhattan's art aficionados.

New York (CNN) -- A Chinese artist was noticeably absent from his own exhibit in New York after having been detained by his government for unspecified "economic crimes."

Ai Weiwei, considered among China's best-known contemporary artists, was arrested at Capital Airport in Beijing on April 3 by state authorities.

But his absence from the exhibit opening on Wednesday did not deter Manhattan's art aficionados from celebrating his work.

"Today, we stand in solidarity with the millions of people around the world who are hoping that Ai Weiwei is quickly and safely released," New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg told reporters.

"Even though he could not be here physically, he continues to speak to us, to delight us, and to challenge us through his art."

The exhibit is called "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" and consists of 12 large bronzed animal heads, which represent the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac.

The mayor said Ai's work is an effort to reinterpret a water clock-fountain that once stood at Yuanming Yuan, an elaborate imperial retreat of the Qing dynasty in Beijing that was pillaged by British and French troops in 1860.

Situated atop marble bases, each sculpture stands approximately 10 feet high and weighs nearly 1,000 pounds.



Revered Chinese artist branded criminal

Ai, who has remained in detention, has been unreachable to family and friends, according to Larry Warsh, founder of Abbey Warsh Asia, a private organization that promotes Chinese art.

Warsh said that while Ai has been a harsh government critic, his work exhibited on Wednesday is rooted more in Chinese nationalism.

"He uses the old historical motifs and invents another language of communication."

"People might be a little scared or fearful of having his art if you're in mainland China," he added. "But in five or ten years, I think he will be a hero and an icon, just like father."

Ai was raised in a labor camp in China's remote northwestern region of Xinjiang. His father, Ai Qing, was a nationally regarded poet who was purged in the 1950s after being denounced as "an enemy of the state and a rightist."

The younger Ai helped design the iconic Bird's Nest stadium for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, but he later called for a boycott of the games because he said it was being used as propaganda.

"They crack down on everybody who has different opinions -- not even different opinions, just different attitudes," he told CNN last year. "Simply to have different opinions can cost (dissidents) their life; they can be put in jail, can be silenced and can disappear."

The pieces from Wednesday's exhibit are located on the Pulitzer Fountain, near Manhattan's landmark Plaza Hotel, where they will be on display through July 15.

Similar works are expected to be displayed in London, Los Angeles, Houston, Pittsburgh and Washington D.C.