

Lifestyle

New sculptures create sense of place

By Molly Glentzer | March 1, 2012



Photo By Thomas B. Shea

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Seemingly tailor-made for its spot near the entrance to the Houston Zoo, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's 'Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads' is already a draw. The 10-foot-tall bronze pieces depicting the animals of the Chinese zodiac will be displayed through June 3.



Suddenly, it's a place to be.

Even before the crew installing Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" in Hermann Park left Wednesday afternoon, people gravitated to the 12 bronze sculptures beside McGovern Lake.

Families took photos with the sculptures, which depict the animals of the Chinese zodiac. Children climbed on the 10-foot-tall pieces, which, with their water-spout-inspired bases, weigh about 1,000 pounds each.

Mergen Shubalov, a native of Kazakhstan, was enjoying the warm day with his wife, infant and sister-in-law. "It's really good so people can know which one is their symbol," he said. (He's a rat.)

"Circle" is the first major public sculpture by Ai, a renowned Chinese artist whose political activism keeps him in trouble with his government, which imprisoned him three months last year and still doesn't let him travel internationally. Though it looks tailor-made for this spot steps from the zoo, it's a touring exhibit, presented through June 3 by the [Houston Arts Alliance](#) in partnership with the city of Houston, Houston [Parks and Recreation Department](#), Hermann Park Conservancy and AW Asia.

It's also been displayed in Sao Paulo, Brazil; New York, London, Los Angeles and Taipei, Taiwan; and travels next to Princeton, N.J.; Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh and Tel Aviv, Israel.

HAA executive director Jonathan Glus was thrilled with the early response.

"When you have art of this caliber in a really public space, you feel more comfortable engaging in it," he said. "And there's not a more culturally diverse place. If Hermann Park is the heart of the city, this is the heart of Hermann Park."

"Circle" is inspired by bronze heads that once sat on carved stone figures around an 18th-century "fountain clock" in the Western-inspired Garden of Perfect Brightness at Yuanming Yuan palace near Beijing. The palace has been in ruins since 1860, when British and French troops burned it. The fountain's stones were then pillaged - or re-purposed, you might say - for decades by local farmers. Seven of the zodiac heads turned up at auctions; the remaining five still haven't resurfaced.

Glus's interpretation isn't literal, and he's re-imagined the missing five. In the exhibit catalog he explains to interviewers that the original heads were designed by an Italian and crafted in France. He doesn't consider them Chinese national treasures.

"My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity, what the value is, and how the value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings," he says.

He wants viewers to enjoy "Circle," which is intentionally humorous, on a more basic level. "It's something everyone can have some understanding of, including children and people who are not in the art world," he says. He wouldn't even mind it if you see a little bit of **Mickey Mouse** in the heads. "They're just animals. Eleven real animals and one mystic animal (the dragon)."

Dynamic 'Mirror'

At **Rice University's Herring Hall**, Spanish sculptor **Jaume Plensa's** recently installed "Mirror" also engages viewers and creates a more dynamic sense of place.

In stainless-steel powder-coated white, "Mirror" consists of two monumental seated figures who face each other - communicating, to reflect the passing of knowledge between people on the campus as well as the relationships between the large live oaks under which they sit.

"This project was made in a very emotional way, thanks to my friendship with Bill Sick (the Rice alum who donated the sculptures)," Plensa said. They met when Plensa installed his celebrated "Crown Fountain" at Chicago's Millennium Park, "and he wanted to offer a piece of mine to Rice," Plensa said.

"Mirror" is composed of alphabet letters from eight languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, Hindi and Latin) - a Plensa signature. He said the letters represent universality; they, too, are "collaborating" to create a whole.

Relationships

Also about a dialogue and relationships - although perhaps in a quieter sense - is artist **Lee Ufan's** new "Relatum - Signal," which was installed Wednesday at the new **Asia Society Texas Center**. (It opens to the public in mid-April.)

Lee, a renowned Korean minimalist, expressed himself a lot through his slender fingers as he spoke through an interpreter. He was there to oversee his work's installation in a dedicated outdoor space on the second floor.

"Relatum - Signal," his first public-space commission in the U.S., features two elements: an 1,800-pound, rounded boulder from a quarry in East Hampton, N.Y., and a 3,712-pound, square steel plate turned diagonally, so it appears diamond-shaped. The tip closest to the stone turns up slightly, as if blown by the wind.

Lee said the work of art is "the entire space," including the east wall of Jurassic stone, the west wall of contrasting black and white materials and the bamboo that will eventually fill in the open north side. What matters is how all the elements interact - the "soft vibration" of the space.

The stone and steel are not exactly centered. "The center is reserved for the gods," Lee said.

Viewers will be able to see the installation only through glass, so they won't be able to touch it. But Lee cares deeply about how people engage with it. Stone and steel have the same origin, he noted, but one is natural and one is man-made.

He wants viewers of "Relatum" to contemplate that relationship. "Encounters between industry and nature have caused a lot of problems for the world," he said. He lives in Tokyo. Last year's tsunami and resulting nuclear disaster in Japan loom large in his mind, but the issues affect all of humanity, he said.

"These are things that can't be answered in chaos. It takes pondering, individually, the silence."

Plensa, too, aims for emotional reactions with his public sculpture.

"You create a mental site, not just a physical site. It's everything inside the brain of every visitor," he said.

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