

Ai Weiwei: In the spotlight

By **Kate Hubbard**
The Asian Reporter

The Portland Art Museum recently opened a display of sculptures by Ai Weiwei, China's most famous contemporary artist — and also its most controversial. Some may know his name from his collaboration with architects on the design of Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Others may remember the uproar caused when the artist was filmed intentionally dropping a priceless vase, or when he dripped paint over Han Dynasty vases. Upon learning more about his history, his body of work starts to paint a fascinating story.

"Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold (2010)," a display of a dozen gold-gilt bronze sculptures by the artist and activist, opened May 23 and remains on view through September 13.

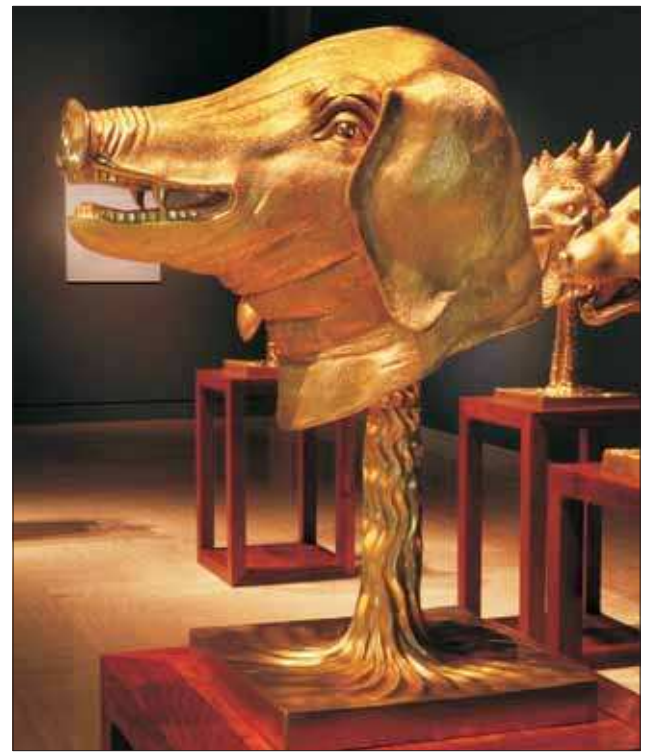
Ai was born in 1957, the son of a famous poet. When Ai was a child, his father got into trouble with the government and was sent to live in internal exile in China. The family struggled to survive for 20 years before they were allowed out. Imagine living your formative years in exile, then finding your voice through art. It's no wonder his creative vision is so powerful.

The Chinese government thinks so, too. Ai has been held in secret detention, beaten up, and had his studio burned down. He is currently prohibited from leaving China without permission. Luckily he spent more than a decade in New York in the 1980s and '90s honing his craft and gaining exposure to a different world. When he returned to China, it was with a new perspective.

Ai is known for working with different mediums using multiple layers of meaning to make his point. As ongoing themes emerge, he plays with contradictions while using his art as a catalyst to inspire social awareness and change. He is also China's most outspoken homegrown critic; his political commentary puts him at constant risk.

Staying in the international public spotlight actually helps Ai in a number of ways. It makes it harder for his government to make him "disappear," draws attention to issues that might otherwise stay hidden in his country, and helps him stay funded and able to pursue his artistic freedom. Currently, there are multiple sets of Ai's zodiac animal heads rotating through international exhibits, which help him keep a high profile.

The dozen gilded bronze animal heads on display at the Portland Art Museum are reinterpretations of zodiac animal heads that were part of a spectacular fountain at Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace), a vast complex of gardens and pavilions in Beijing. In 1860, the palace was



TREASURES ON TOUR. A dozen gold-gilt bronze sculptures created by artist and activist Ai Weiwei are currently on view at the Portland Art Museum. The pieces represent animal symbols from the Chinese zodiac, including the Snake (left photo) and the Boar (right photo). Ai drew inspiration for the 12 heads from those originally located at Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace), a vast complex of gardens and pavilions in Beijing that was looted and destroyed in 1860. The exhibit is open through September 13. (AR Photos/Jan Landis)

looted and destroyed; currently, only seven of the original sculpture pieces have been recovered.

The fountain was designed in a European style by Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione, so as Ai has pointed out, it does not truly represent Chinese cultural heritage, which is a hotly debated topic in China. Be sure to read a description of the controversy while visiting the museum.

In the display, Ai plays with the concepts of ownership, looting, and who really owns cultural heritage. What if it's fake, or only a copy? He makes brilliant commentary on the market for artifacts and archaeological relics, but also participates in and benefits from that same market.

The heads on display toy with the cultural fetishization of historical artifacts. The gold patina transforms them instantly into objects that beguile, as humans have historically gone crazy for gold and done horrific things to attain it.

Walking into the gallery is like stumbling into an archaeological treasure trove. The gold heads glow with warmth while the cool light of the room feels like an oasis. The detail on each piece highlights not only that Ai is talented at making political and social statements, but he is also a highly skilled artist. Each animal is worthy of an

exhibit of its own, but shown together, the collection is a breathtaking reminder that contemporary art doesn't have to assault aesthetic sensibilities. It is work that is both intelligent and beautiful.

For the exhibit, the Portland Art Museum decided to present Ai's work in a different way. Instead of displaying the sculptures in a long line against a wall, the curator carefully arranged them in a circle, which allows viewers to have full access to each one. The pieces are also arranged in the order of the lunar calendar, with each animal representing two hours of western time.

The sculpted animal heads are painstakingly rendered, from the scales of the Snake to the feathers of the Rooster and the whimsical expression of the Rabbit. These are more than copies, they are cultural artifacts for a new digital world that is constantly changing. This reporter recommends watching some of Ai Weiwei's online videos before spending time at the exhibit, as they might give visitors a different perspective on the pieces, as well as on contemporary art.

"Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold (2010)" is on display through September 13 at the Portland Art Museum, located at 1219 S.W. Park Avenue. To learn more, call (503) 226-2811 or visit <www.portlandartmuseum.org>.

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