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The Kid Stays in the Picture

The Hirshhorn mounts Ai Weiwei's first U.S. survey of activism and art. | *By Tiffany Jow* |

In a political town like Washington, most people know Ai Weiwei as a dissident. His recent work, like the Mao-inspired 100 million sunflower seeds he commissioned from Imperial porcelain artisans or the MRI scans of his cerebral hemorrhage post-assault by Chinese authorities, offer direct commentary about his native China, where he currently lives but cannot leave (he's under investigation for pornography, bigamy and other alleged acts). The world waited anxiously when he disappeared in April 2011 for "tax evasion," and his July 2012 critique of Beijing's summer Olympics opening ceremony four years earlier, which he said celebrated superficial patriotism, raised more than a few eyebrows. But this month, in presenting the 54-year-old's inaugural U.S. solo exhibition, the Hirshhorn refocuses attention back on Ai's art. Plans for the showcase began three years ago, before the artist's tumultuous relationship with the law unfurled in the international spotlight—a testament to the museum's forward-focused eye.

Opening October 7, "Ai Weiwei: According to What?" discerningly displays Ai's attitudes toward contemporary art, society and ethics. Based on the Tokyo-based Mori Art Museum's 2009 exhibition of the same name, which was Ai's first solo museum show, the survey includes highlights from his diverse creative palette spanning architecture, sculpture, photography, installation and video. While the materials are ever-changing, the prodding of Chinese identity is a constant. There's *Crabs* (2010), which nods to the word's pop-Chinese translation—someone who wrecks havoc via Twitter—

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with 1,000 porcelain crabs. His grassroots project to list the names of 2008 Sichuan earthquake victims, who were mostly children in poorly built schools, *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen Investigation* (2008-11), compliments *Snake Ceiling* (2009), a wriggling installation of backpacks in homage to them. The industrial paint-splattered Han Dynasty pottery in *Colored Vases* (2007-2010) and whimsically arranged antique Qing Dynasty stools in *Grapes* (2010) look at both China's artisan past and its quickly modernizing future.

The viewer is left to infer from the whole of Ai's pieces that he believes this latest "progress" is perhaps too quick for the potential human impact. It's this kind of criticism that has made him dangerous in his homeland.

The 35 works on view for the first time in the United States are complimented with the Hirshhorn's concurrent exhibition of Ai's *Zodiac Heads* (2011), a majestic circle of 12 bronze-cast animal heads of the Chinese zodiac that've been on view since April 2012. "The installation allows visitors to experience Ai's work in different ways," says the Hirshhorn's deputy director and chief curator Kerry Bougher. "One can see the CONTINUED...



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1. Ai's "Cube Light" (2008), will shine at the Hirshhorn in October.
2. An homage to the children lost in the Sichuan earthquake, hundreds of backpacks comprise "Snake Ceiling" (2009).
3. Twenty-five Han Dynasty vases covered with industrial paint feature in "Colored Vases" (2007-2010).



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4. The Hirshhorn is the only museum to host both Ai's *Circle of Animal Heads* (2011) and *According to What?* concurrently.
5. Forty whimsically arranged antique stools from the Qing Dynasty make up "Grapes" (2010).
6. Seven chests made of Huali wood comprise "Moon Chest" (2008).
7. Ai working on a Han Dynasty vase, part of "Colored Vases" (2010).

...CONTINUED link between his more intimate, object-oriented work and more monumental pieces, but also interact with them differently by viewing them in the galleries and in the plaza."

The exhibition's opening weekend panel discussion, Art and Social Change, will feature an enviable cast of characters: foreign policy expert Zbigniew Brzezinski, literary critic and Columbia University professor Gayatri Chakravoty Spivak, Documenta 12 director Roger Buegel, and perhaps, Ai himself. The Hirshhorn optimistically applied for a visa to bring him stateside in May though few believe it will be granted. Breakout director Alison Klayman, who's recent film *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* unveiled the personal life of the artist, and artist Vito Acconci will also speak of their collaborations with Ai, who's arguably one of the most important bridges between China and the West.

Bougher worked closely with Ai's studio and Mami Kataoka, who curated the original show, to revise and update the Mori exhibition for 2012. "The development of this exhibition was in tandem with all those changes of Ai's social condition," Kataoka says. "2009 was just the beginning of his deeper commitments to the Sichuan Earthquake Civil Investigation Project, and it didn't take long for the tension between him and the authorities to become more real." The biggest challenge for the curators was to

incorporate this progression. "During his detainment, we proceeded with the initial plan, but we made a lot of changes after he was released," Kataoka explains. "We tried to incorporate as many of Ai's experiences from that time as possible." Nearly one-third of the works on display in Washington differ from the Mori show.

Ai played an active role in organizing the exhibition as well. "He's very charismatic with a wonderful sense of humor," Bougher says. "In every aspect of laying out the show, he has been thoughtful, and even poetic." In a statement prepared for the Hirshhorn exhibition, Ai underlines the significance of his first proper U.S. show (he spent a dozen years in New York from the late 1980s) and how political struggle constantly re-shapes his approach. "These reflections give new strength to my work," he writes. "I have always believed it is essential for contemporary artists to question established assumptions and challenge beliefs."

At a time of global social and political change, Ai's perspective will resonate with the American audience, and perhaps even more so contextualized in the nation's capital. "While deeply rooted in Chinese culture and tradition, Ai's work transcends East and West," Bougher says. "He isn't afraid to ask questions pertinent to the world today, specifically those about the meaning and place of art and its relationship to society, human rights, and freedom." ■