

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ai Weiwei: Life Cycle at the Marciano Art Foundation

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, October 3rd, 2018

Ai Weiwei's current exhibition introduces this international superstar artist to Los Angeles on a grand scale. An acclaimed architect, draughtsman, filmmaker, performance artist, photographer, sculptor and human rights activist, he was born in Beijing in 1957. Currently, Berlin is his base. He attended the Beijing Film Academy, moved to New York (1983-1993) and studied at the Parson School of Design. He acknowledges Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns as inspirations. Although deeply attached to Chinese culture, embodying it in his work, he is more internationalist than nationalist or regionalist.

Ai Weiwei is a product of Post-Cultural Revolution China. In the 1970s the Cultural Revolution devastated Chinese society and manifested Maoist conformity thought control dictates. Not to say that there is freedom of expression in China today, as a human rights advocate, Ai Weiwei has tested those limits and tangled with Chinese government officials. On April 3, 2011, he was arrested at Beijing Capital International Airport, concurrently, police searched his studio, removing laptops and hard drives. While state media originally reported on April 6, that Ai was arrested at the airport because "his departure procedures were incomplete," the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on April 7, that Ai was arrested under investigation for alleged economic crimes and was later incarcerated. He was in detention for six months. There were protest demonstrations in New York, Hong Kong, Germany and Taiwan. There was a petition with 90,000 signatures calling for his release. Until 2015, he remained under surveillance, finally being issued a Chinese passport.



Shanghaiing, 2015 by Ai Weiwei

With roots in China, America and Western Europe, he is an internationalist who manages to bridge effectively these three distinct worlds by incorporating thematic juxtapositions representing them. He functions as an independent artist who collaborates with other artists, intellectuals, architects and filmmakers. In recognition for his political activism, he received the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent from the Human Rights Foundation, New York, in 2012 and the Ambassador of Conscience Award from Amnesty International in 2015.

The current exhibition, *Ai Weiwei: Life Cycle*, is the culmination of ten years of work. On a monumental scale it demonstrates his diverse interests: mass production, antiquity, mythology and the global refugee crisis. The exhibition is divided into five sections: Sunflower Seeds, Pipes, Windows, Shanghaiing and Windows. Thematically, they share Ai Weiwei's penchant to create art that reflects current social crises while drawing comparisons with both Chinese and European social history.

Sunflower Seeds, 2010

This is an excellent example of Ai Weiwei's ability to enrich conceptual art with socio-political overtones and Chinese cultural history. Here we find a vast sea of 49 tons of individual black and white porcelain sunflower seeds covering 4,000 square feet. Ai Weiwei speaks with pride that they were produced by 1600 artisans in the ancient porcelain production center in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province. This installation expands on recurring themes in his work: authenticity, the individual's role in society along with geopolitical, cultural and economic exchange. Thematically, it echoes propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution depicting Mao Zedong as the sun and Chinese citizens as sunflowers turning toward him.



Sunflower Seeds by Ai Weiwei

It was exhibited previously at The Tate Modern, London, from October 12, 2010 to May 2, 2011.

Spouts, 2015

Here, thousands of antique tea pot spouts, some dating back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279), are spread across the gallery floor. This is another demonstration of Ai Weiwei's use of repetition and duplication to convey his relevant historical/contemporary social message. It can be seen as a mass of mouths, a metaphor for the widespread yearning for freedom of speech despite its restriction in many societies. In this sense, his metaphor becomes physical reality.

Life Cycle, 2018

This is the most recent and monumental work in the exhibition. It is Ai's response to the current global refugee crisis in which thousands of desperate people risk their lives in fragile inflatable rubber boats attempting to find freedom and improved living conditions for themselves and their families on distant shores. His message relates to current conditions; however, he adapts a traditional Chinese technology – bamboo kite making – to convey it. He has constructed a bamboo simulation of the kind of inflatable rubber boat used by Africans in their attempts to reach the European continent. The message is unquestionably clear. There are a number of quotations from historical and contemporary historians, philosophers and writers which add to the universality of his message.

There are striking similarities between the design of the inflatable rubber boat simulation using bamboo and the design of the 2008 Beijing National Olympic Stadium. Its nest design was a joint venture among architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron of [Herzog & de Meuron](#), project architect Stefan Marbach, and artist Ai Weiwei.



Spouts by Ai Weiwei

Although Ai Weiwei does not allude to them, there are certain Western European historical precedents for artists creating polemical works dedicated to human tragedy. Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War*, a series of 82 prints created between 1810 and 1820 depict the mayhem created by Napoleon's armies when they invaded Spain. Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, documents the destruction wrought by Nazi airplanes bombing the Basque town of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. It projects powerful never-to-be-forgotten images of human destruction.

Top image: Life Cycle, 2018, by Ai Weiwei.



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