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Ai Weiwei: Artist Circles the Chinese Zodiac

Edward Goldman · Thursday, August 25th, 2011

In the last decade, the name of Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei has become known not only to the art connoisseurs but to a wide public as well. And it has happened both for the right and wrong reasons. Ai Weiwei became a household name during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, as artistic collaborator on the design for the splendid “Bird’s Nest,” the National Stadium, a symbol of the Olympic spirit. However, in one of his frequent conflicts with Chinese authorities, the artist withdrew his name from the project.

In the last few months, the name of this famous dissident artist again has been in the news because of his imprisonment, allegedly for tax evasion. Now, the artist has been released but prohibited from commenting on his case. The good news is that here in Los Angeles, at the County Museum of Art we have a chance to acquaint ourselves with Ai Weiwei’s latest major public sculptural project: twelve monumental bronze sculptures of animal heads, installed in a circle in the museum’s courtyard, each ten feet tall.

This Circle of Animals is meant to evoke the famous 18th century Zodiac Heads installed around the fountain clock in the gardens of the Beijing Summer Palace. Unfortunately, in the 1860, these sculptures were looted by British and French troops during the infamous Second Opium War and, though seven of them have since been found, five remain at large. Ai Weiwei’s Circle of Animals is not a recreation of the original works, but a smart artistic comment on the shameful role of European powers in a messy, painful chapter of Chinese history.

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