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CHINA

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AI WEIWEI SCULPTURES IN TORONTO

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The exhibition of Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei's sculptures in Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square is the highlight of the city's summer cultural season. It is a collection of 12 spectacular bronze animal heads representing the traditional figures of the Chinese Zodiac.

“Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is an incredible piece of public sculpture and a living testament to Ai Weiwei’s belief that art is for everyone,” said Matthew Teitelbaum, director and CEO of the AGO.

The heads are installed in order according to the Chinese zodiac: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. Standing 10 feet high, each sculpture ranges in weight from 1,500 to 2,100 pounds and is supported by a marble base weighing 600 to 1,000 pounds.

While circumnavigating the sculptures, I was overwhelmed by the beauty, finesse and immense power of these beasts, especially the dragon, which is my own sign (see above photo).

Crafted in China, Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads recreates a series of sculptures designed in the 18th century by Italian artist Giuseppe

Castiglione, which once adorned the famed fountain-clock of the Yuanming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness), an imperial retreat outside Beijing. In 1860 the original zodiac sculptures were pillaged by invading French and British soldiers during the Second Opium War and only seven are known to still exist. Five have been repatriated to China, but ownership of two remains contested.

Organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario, the sculptural installation precedes the AGO's summer exhibition, "Ai Weiwei: According to What?", which will open on August 17, 2013. The AGO is taking other initiatives to draw attention to Ai's remarkable work.

"Say Their Names, Remember," will be a live reading of the names of the thousands of schoolchildren who perished in the devastating earthquake in China's Sichuan province on May 12, 2008, and is inspired by some of Ai's art works. Nathan Phillips Square will host another Ai Weiwei work this fall with the installation of a new edition of Ai's Forever Bicycles (2013), a sculpture of more than 1,000 bicycles.

At least half of the many visitors to Ai's sculptural exhibition today were Canadians of Chinese origin, quite a number of whom I spoke with or listened to. As they gazed in awe at these magnificent beasts, and took photos with their friends and family, they exuded great cultural pride -- and quite rightly so. At the same time, many insisted to me that they are now Canadian. Clearly, they appreciate the free, open and tolerant environment of this wonderful country.

Their reactions only served to highlight the tragedy of poor Ai himself who is under constant surveillance and has been unable to leave China since the government confiscated his passport in 2011. And this also served to highlight the anomaly of China's new president, Xi Jinping, and his desire for the US and its president Obama to treat China like a true major power -- while at the same time, the Chinese government is frightened of an artist, political activist and champion of freedom of expression like Ai, who has been publicly critical of the Chinese government's record of human rights violations.

It is through events like this, perhaps more than all others, that we glean an insight into the inherent fragility of the Chinese state.