

Zodiac creatures by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei invade the Cleveland Museum of Art



Look out: Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's bronze sculpture of a roaring tiger, one of a dozen zodiac creatures on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art, looks mean enough to bite.

Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- They're big, fierce and fascinating.

An exhibition of massive bronze sculptures of **Chinese zodiac** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_zodiac) creatures by dissident artist **Ai Weiwei**, the most famous contemporary artist from China, went on view Thursday at the Cleveland Museum of Art, two full days before its scheduled opening Saturday.

The show is the first exhibition in the museum's **big new atrium**, which opened last August as the centerpiece of the museum's \$350 million expansion and renovation.

"I really hope this is a first step in programming the atrium with art," said **Reto Thuring**, the museum's associate curator of contemporary art, a native of Switzerland who just completed his first year at the museum. "Its a monumental and substantial exhibition of work by one of the most important artists in the world."

Ai, 56, is widely known for braving the wrath of Chinese Communist Party officials in works that poke and criticize the government.

They've jail him and confiscated his passport, but he still gets his message across.

"You arrest Ai Weiwei and he records it on video and posts it the next day and it makes him more glorious," Thuring said. "The more and more people listen to him, the more they [the authorities] try to shut him down."

The zodiac show has been touring museums for several years, Thuring said.

It's unlikely that Ai will be able to leave China to participate in a symposium on his work the museum is organizing in September, but Thuring said he hoped that the artist might hook up via Skype.

Mounted on columns resembling tree branches, the sculptures are lined up against the north façade of the museum's 1916 building under a vast skylight, creating a striking visual effect of dark bronze against white marble.

The show is a chance to gaze at creatures most often encountered by Americans on placemats in Chinese restaurants – the pig, monkey, the dog, the tiger, the snake.

Curator Reto Thuring at the Cleveland Museum of Art with an Ai Weiwei sculpture of the curator's personal zodiac symbol, the monkey.

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And it's a chance to engage with Chinese art, politics and culture on a grand scale.

The sculptures are based on sculptures of the zodiac creatures that were **looted** (<http://www.clevelandart.org/events/exhibitions/ai-weiwei-circle-animalszodiac-heads>) by European forces during the **Second Opium War** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Opium_War) in China in the mid 1850s, according to the museum.

France and England waged the war to force China to accept the crippling trade in opium, and to exempt foreign imports from tariffs.

The zodiac heads, including a fierce tiger, a barking dog and a savage-looking dragon, could be viewed as symbols of wounded Chinese pride, which has helped to drive the country's ambitions under one-party rule in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Thuring said there's more to consider. The sculptures make him think of the inseparability of China from the West.

"This is Chinese history and we are part of that history," he said.

Thuring said he viewed Ai as a global artist steeped in the conceptual and performance art traditions of modern Western artists including Marcel Duchamp, Josef Beuys and Andy Warhol.

Like Warhol, for example, Ai draws no distinction between his personal life and his art. The two are one and the same, Thuring said.

Of course, at the most basic level, the museum show focuses attention on the Chinese zodiac.

Thuring said he's proud to be a monkey, "because of all the zodiac signs, it's the closest to being human."

But he confessed that he'd love to be a dragon.

"I could spit fire and fly," he said.