

CONTEMPORARY ARTS COUP

## Get ready for 800-pound heads: Ai Weiwei's Chinese zodiac art headed to Hermann Park

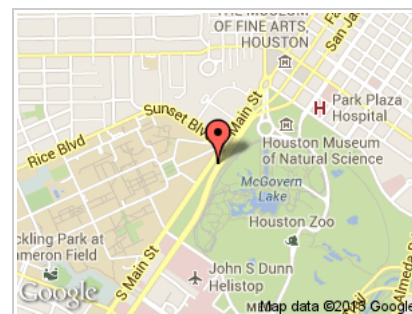
BY [STEVEN THOMSON](#) 3.12.11 | 2:08 pm



A zoo of Chinese zodiac animal heads will soon rise above the green of [Hermann Park](#). The artwork, "Circle of Animals/ Zodiac Heads," is the first significant public art project by [Ai Weiwei](#), one of China's most celebrated contemporary artists.

[ARTINFO](#) reported that the sculptures will be unveiled in May at Central Park's Grand Army Plaza, at the footstep of the Plaza Hotel, before embarking on a world tour. And though it hasn't been announced yet, it turns out that Houston is one of the stops.

The installation is rooted in China's colonial past: In the 18th century, a fountain clock was installed at the [Yuanmingyuan](#) gardens outside Beijing by two European Jesuits under the order of emperor Qianlong. Opulent animal heads of the Chinese zodiac gushed water every two hours. Tragedy struck during the Second Opium War, when French and British soldiers absconded with the creatures' heads. The boar, horse, monkey, ox, rabbit and rat have been



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recovered, but five are still lost in the art world's underbelly.

Through "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," Ai is setting out to right this imperial wrong. A dozen cast bronze heads, about 800 pounds apiece, stand on matching bases, creating a 10-foot high spectacle. "It's very interesting to offer this complete set," Ai tells the [New York Times](#). "People can really appreciate public art on different levels."

As the artist explains in an [interview](#) with filmmaker Alison Klayman, contemporary Chinese art expert Phil Tinari, Larry Warsh of the art organization AW Asia and Beijing-based New Yorker correspondent Evan Osnos:

My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity and value and how value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings. I think there's a strong humorous aspect there."

Adding another layer to the work is a Feb. 2009 Christie's auction, in which the original rat and rabbit heads were bid on in the sale of Yves Saint-Laurent's estate. A representative of China's National Treasures Fund, [Cai Mingchao](#), repatriated the objects for \$19 million, but then [neglected](#) to write the check.

A [dedicated website](#) to the artwork provides more information. The installation was arranged by the [Houston Arts Alliance](#) as part of a new Temporary Civic Art initiative. (At the time of publication, representatives of Houston Arts Alliance did not respond to phone calls.) Doreen Stoller, executive director of Hermann Park told CultureMap that the sculptures will potentially be unveiled in conjunction with the [opening of the Asia Society Texas Center](#) in spring of 2012.

"We haven't finalized a date yet," says Martha Blackwelder, executive director of Asia Society Texas. "We want to work together," she says, hinting at a March 2012 opening date.

Along with Central and Hermann parks, the sculptures will travel to London's Somerset House, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Pittsburgh's [Warhol](#) Museum and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

The Houston visit represents a bit of a coup for local audiences, as Ai Weiwei has enjoyed mounting art world attention for his installation of thousands of porcelain sunflower seeds at the Tate Modern's turbine hall. He also worked in collaboration with architects Herzog & de Meuron on the iconic Beijing National Stadium, commonly called the "Bird's Nest" for the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Ai has also drawn attention to Chinese censorship policy: His public criticism of government corruption precipitated Shanghai officials to raze his studio in January of this year. Explains the [New York Times](#), Ai considers his friction with authoritarian officials as a form of performance art.