

Lifestyle

HAA raising funds to show work of detained sculptor Ai

Bronze pieces by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei to be exhibited in 2012

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Photo By Houston Arts Alliance | AW Asia

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Ai Weiwei's sculpture depicting the head of a dragon is part of his public art exhibition Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, which will be displayed in Hermann Park in 2012.



As controversy mounts over how art institutions should respond to the Chinese government's detention of internationally renowned artist **Ai Weiwei**, the **Houston Arts Alliance** has started fundraising for its 2012 exhibition of his first major sculpture project.

"I think this (exhibit) is a way that his own art may bring him back out because of all of the attention that (Ai's arrest) is getting," said **Marshal Lightman**, board chairman of HAA, the nonprofit organization that manages the city's civic art programs.

Known for his pointed criticisms of the Chinese government, Ai, 54, was charged with tax evasion May 20, seven weeks after his April 3 arrest. He is among dozens of artists, writers, lawyers, bloggers and activists who have disappeared or been arrested or detained by the Chinese government in what **Human Rights Watch** has called a crackdown to avert "a Middle Eastern-style 'jasmine revolution.'"

A spokesman for the Chinese consulate-general in Houston declined to comment on the exhibit.

Described by HAA as "a commentary on looting and repatriation," the 12 bronze, two-edition sculptures

comprising the outdoor exhibit *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* appeared in Brazil's São Paulo Biennial in September before embarking on two simultaneous tours this month in London and New York. (Ai's arrest disrupted a plan to cast four more editions of the works.)

The sculptures on view in New York will travel to Los Angeles before arriving in Houston in January, going on view March 1 through early June, HAA development director **John Bradshaw** said.

The bronze Chinese zodiac heads, each weighing about 800 pounds and standing 10 feet tall with its base, are Ai's large-scale re-creations of animal heads designed by two European Jesuits for the Qianlong emperor in the 18th century. Originally functioning as a water-clock fountain for the Old Summer Palace, they were pillaged in 1860 during a ransacking by British and French troops.

The city will pay 11 percent of the exhibit's \$180,000 budget, an HAA prospectus reports. Individuals will contribute 50 percent of the cost, with 36 percent coming from corporations and foundations and 3 percent from in-kind gifts.

The tours begin as U.S. art museums take varying tacks in responding to Ai's arrest. On June 11, the **Milwaukee Art Museum** will open a loan exhibition from Beijing's **Palace Museum**, which also has an agreement for staff and exhibit exchanges with the **Virginia Museum of Fine Arts** in Richmond.

Though the Milwaukee and Virginia museums' directors have defended their plans as a way to further cultural dialogue, last week the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego** organized a 24-hour sit-in. Participants sat in wooden chairs similar to a pair of sculptures from Ai's *Marble Chair* series the museum recently voted to acquire.

But since Ai's arrest, the **San Diego museum** has been unable to determine how to wire the funds to complete the purchase. Wednesday the blog **Modern Art Notes** reported the terms of an export-license provision may force the San Diego museum to return the artwork, which it had received from China in March.

Ai's touring zodiac heads, which belong to a private collection in the U.S., don't face such issues. Ai's work has been far more widely collected in Europe than in the United States, but American museums and private collectors have been racing to catch up. The **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** announced an Ai acquisition in April and will host *Circle of Animals* starting in August. The **Berkeley Art Museum** in California is displaying a recently acquired Ai work without reference to his detention.

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Asian art curator **Christine Starkman**, who has met Ai, said borrowing and spotlighting Ai's works could be a way to show strength in numbers. Though Ai's already scarce pieces are getting more expensive — a piece sold for nearly \$560,000 at a February auction - she said his detention has intensified her long-held desire to acquire one of his works for the MFAH. She said Ai's ongoing dialogue with traditional Chinese art fits perfectly with the museum's approach of juxtaposing ancient and contemporary Asian material.

"Maybe this is the way for museums to (express) solidarity, is to have exhibitions or do acquisitions (of Ai's work)," Starkman said. "If 10 museums in the U.S. all have a show, what are (Chinese officials) going to do? Call us all up and say, 'Take it back?'"

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