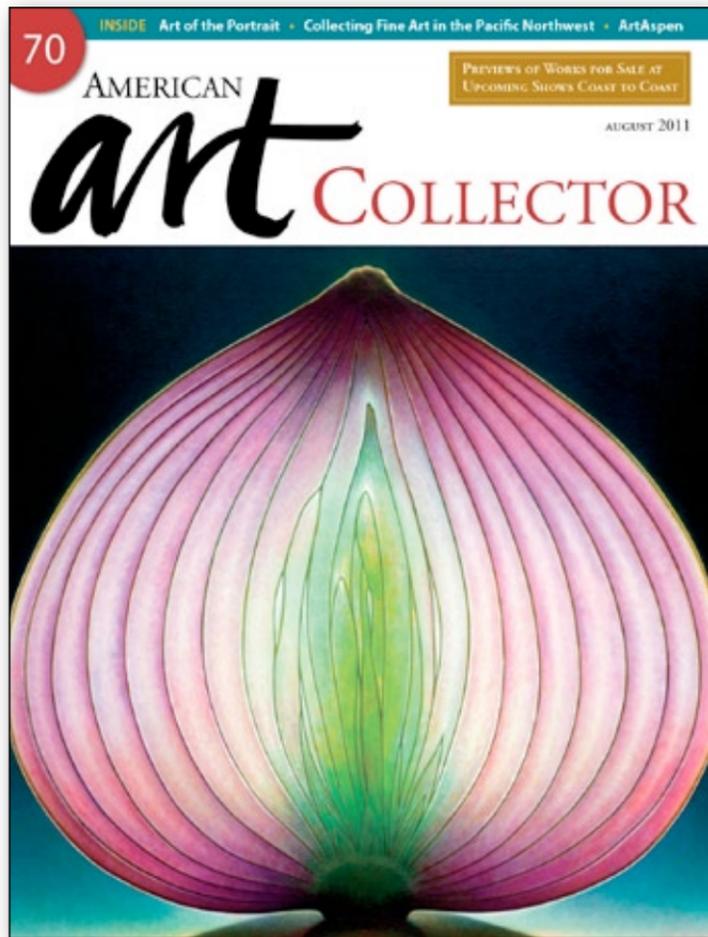


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Circling Back/Circle of Memory

By Jim Balestrieri

Editor's note: Having worked as a gallery director on W. 57th Street for 25 years, Jim Balestrieri spends most of his lunch hours visiting galleries, museums and studios to satiate his hunger for the New York art world. American Art Collector is proud to announce his column, NY See, will now be a regular feature of the magazine.

Taking in Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* takes me back to the hour I spent talking with the Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney when I was a graduate student.

Heaney had come to lecture, ostensibly on "Sounding Lines: Reflections on the Aural Element in Poetry." In a classroom, hours before he is due to speak, graduate students enjoy a private conversation with the poet. The exchange is respectful, brief. I find myself alone with him. I had just returned from a year abroad, teaching in Wales, but for five weeks I had been in Heaney's Northern Ireland, visiting distant relatives. I had walked Belfast and Portadown where beautiful women in gallows glamour were dressed to be killed. I had been searched and questioned at British Army checkpoints—there were no tourists in Northern Ireland in 1986. I had taken a bus to Belfast to see Strauss's *Ariadne Aux Naxos* at the newly reopened Belfast Opera House—I sprang for two tickets, but no one would go with me for fear of Nationalist IRA or Protestant UVF reprisals so I went alone, ate at the Crown, the most beautiful pub on the planet, now that it had been redone after the bombing. Attending the opera—an act of political bravery. My own cousins accused me of spying for the IRA, based on my Italian surname and my refusal to bring anti-Catholic propaganda back to the States. Two guys I'd gotten drunk with at the Portadown Football Club followed me wherever I went. After a few days of this game, I gave them my itinerary every morning.

Heaney's beautiful poems seemed so apolitical as to be out of touch. I confronted him. I was young then.

What he said in that hour, about cultural resistance and continuity, about art as politics with a small "p" enduring through and despite the violence of the moment, about art waiting patiently for dust to settle and blood to stanch, etches itself beneath every word I write. Even these words. That night, despite the printed program, Seamus Heaney did not lecture on the aural element.

Ai Weiwei's bronze heads lean out at me, perched on spikes like the heads of what the heads of some state deem to have been criminals. Not knowing what their crimes were, they are unspecified warnings against unspecified acts and thoughts.

As I take this in, tourists and noontime strollers have their pictures taken in front of their Chinese horoscope sign.

"What are you?"

"I'm a dog... I'm a rat... I'm a tiger."

Good fun.

Ai Weiwei, disappeared, sits in detention somewhere in China, charged with unspecified

crimes. I left the "m" out of that last word. Briefly, it read, "charged with unspecified cries." Maybe that's better: Ai Weiwei, disappeared, sits in detention somewhere in China, charged with unspecified cries.

What did Ai Weiwei do? Among other gestures to freedom, he cried out to name—giving them specific voices—the thousands of schoolchildren who died under the rubble of shoddily constructed schools after the earthquakes that devastated Sichuan in 2008.

The heads of Ai Weiwei's zodiac recreate those in a water clock designed by European Jesuits in the 18th century and plundered by French and British troops from Beijing's Summer Palace in 1860 during the Second Opium War. Few of the original heads have been found. All of these are artist's enlargements and reimaginations.

Water poured from the open mouths of the original heads. These mouths, too, are open. The pig is sleek, angry. The rabbit's ears are



PHOTOS: SPENCER TUCKER

New York City Mayor Bloomberg opens world-renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's historic sculpture exhibition—*Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*—with AW Asia founder Larry Warsh, Cultural Affairs Commissioner Levin and members of New York City's Arts and Cultural Community.



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's outdoor sculpture exhibition *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*.

back, as if he is charging. I wish the empty spherical eyes of the snake or the monkey were mirrored to reflect back a distortion of the pleasant posing by the Pulitzer Fountain.

Is this a lament for a lost connection with natural rhythms? Is it a comment on the irony of Europeans looting cultural artifacts designed by Europeans? Is it an indictment of any arbitrary category that pigeonholes us as charming rats or steadfast oxen?

I take down my copy of Seamus Heaney's poems, the one he signed that day. I remember some lines from the first poem "Digging" and reread them:

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.*

Through the poet's recollection of his father and grandfather and the earth they worked, these lines transform, becoming:

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

The gun is a shovel; the sword is a ploughshare. The politics are there. You dig them out; you fill them in.

Ai Weiwei's *Zodiac Heads* should be in a circle—as the artist intended. Facing in, they would dare us to stand in the center of the barred prison ring and remind us of the artist's dire plight. Facing outward, arrayed like fortress palisades, they would serve as guardians of free expression. ●

Postscript—As this goes to press, it seems that Ai Weiwei has been released on bail, having confessed to the crime of tax evasion.

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, Pulitzer Fountain, Grand Army Plaza, 5th Avenue & 58th Street, New York, May 2-July 15, 2011;

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, September 1, 2011-February 15, 2012; Hermann Park, Houston, TX, Winter/Spring 2012; Andy Warhol Museum & Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, October 1-December 31, 2012; Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., Fall 2012.

More information at www.freeaiweiwei.org and www.zodiacheads.com.

Jim Balestrieri graduated from Columbia University with a bachelor's degree in East Asian Languages and Cultures. His spoken Chinese is worse than the rusted out rocker panel on a Chevy Nova but he loves the art and poetry and calligraphy of China. Based purely on phonetics, his first Chinese teacher named him 白杰明, which translates as "brilliant hero." Jim tries—and fails—to live up to this name every day.