



Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" on view at the Sao Paulo Biennale (image via canablog.com)

What's your sign? Chinese artist and international icon Ai Weiwei will be bringing his own custom-designed set of Zodiac sculptures to New York City's Pulitzer Fountain at the Plaza Hotel (59th Street and 5th Ave) May 2 through July 15, [reports the New York Times](#). The works seem harmless, but they have a historical context that gives them a deeper meaning.

Initially presented at the Sao Paulo Biennale, Ai's zodiac sculptures are based on a historical work, the 18th century fountain-clock created at the [Yuanming Yuan](#), an imperial retreat outside of Beijing. The *NYT* explains,

Designed in the 18th century by two European Jesuits at the behest of the Manchu Emperor Qianlong, the fountain-clock featured each animal of the Chinese zodiac, spouting water at two-hour intervals. In 1860, French and British troops ransacked the Yuanming Yuan, pillaging the heads. Seven of them have since been located — the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, horse, monkey and boar — the other five are still missing.



Of course, the political background of this piece goes unstated in the short write up (which initially called Ai "Mr. Weiwei," now corrected). The original 18th century Zodiac heads have been slowly resurfacing over the past decade. The tiger, ox and monkey heads came up at auction by [Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2000](#), and the sale raised an instant controversy among Chinese demanding the return of the pieces (or repatriation) to their rightful owner, the Chinese nation, on the basis that



The Plaza Hotel in New York, where the Zodiac heads will be installation (image via [wirednewyork.com](http://wirednewyork.com))

remain at Christie's as the auction house tries to find a home for them. Taiwan refused them as a gift, not wanting to raise the ire of mainland China.

The fact that Christie's refuses simply to return the works to Beijing when it is already willing to give them away is ridiculous. This isn't about the government, it's about a nation's people and a shared history of art and cultural production. In my view, the pieces should by all rights be returned to China just as classical Greek artifacts and Aztec and Mayan works are being repatriated to their respective countries. It's a testament to cultural hubris that more haven't been returned.

Given this context, the subtext of Ai's reconstruction Zodiac piece is the reconstruction and reclaiming of a Chinese artistic and historical identity. What might look like anodyne fun to viewers in New York City is actually an eminently nuanced political gesture as Ai makes his own restored version of a still-fractured Chinese artifact.

*Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" sculptures will be installed at the Pulitzer Fountain beside the Plaza Hotel (59th Street and Fifth Ave, midtown Manhattan) from May 2 through July 15, 2011.*

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