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Ai Wei Wei comments on his art: 'My work is always ready-made. It could be cultural, political, or social, and also it could be art – to make people re-look at what we have done, its original position, to create new possibilities. I always want people to be confused, to be shocked or realise something later. But at first it has to be appealing to people'.

In this work, Ai has touched on a sensitive subject to the Chinese with the zodiac heads. The originals were originally part of a 12-part water clock rendered as over life-sized sculptures of the Twelve Zodiac Animals. The heads were fitted atop seated, robed figures and served as the spouts for water, which ran for two hours each as part of the 12 hours of the Chinese 24-hour calculation. Situated in the Haiyantang of the Xiyang Lou area (Westernstyle mansions) of the Old Summer Palace (Yuan Ming Yuan) grounds, the figures were arranged in a curved position on high platforms in front of and below the curving double staircase leading up to the mansion, designed by the Italian Jesuit and Imperial Court Painter, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), for the Qianlong Emperor. The Haiyantang was one of the several European Baroque buildings within the expansive confines of the Old Summer Palace and its imperial gardens and buildings outside Beijing.

The building only survived 101 years before it was destroyed and its contents, including the 12 heads, were either stolen or destroyed by invading French and British troops in 1860 during the Second Opium War. Of the original twelve, only seven are known to exist, four of which have recently bought by the Poly Group, the business face of the People's Liberation Army, from sales in Hong Kong at Sotheby's and Christie's.

As a ranking Conceptualist artist, he chose the subject of these heads as an opportunity to use his creative talents to reinvent the five missing heads and he has done so with vigour and one of the best examples is the dragon's head which is supported on a wavy base, the ridges of which gather in the middle and are twisted like a scarf into a tall support the snarling head of the mythological beast.

Circle of Animals, 14 September to 2 March 2014 at the Crow Collection of Asian Art, 2010 Flora Street, Dallas, Texas 75201, www.crowcollection.org