

Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, Jan. 20, 2014

Ai Weiwei exhibit as monumental as Miami's new Perez museum

By Anne Tschida
Special to the Miami Herald

There couldn't be a better exhibition to inaugurate the new Perez Art Museum Miami than the traveling solo retrospective from the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Like the museum, *Ai Weiwei: According To What?* is monumental — physically huge, with a lot to say, and important for Miami.

Contemporary Chinese art has been a hot commodity for more than a decade, but even within this crowded field Ai Weiwei has stood out. He was a founding member of the first avant-garde art group in China, called Stars, in the 1970s, and has since then worked in sculpture, photography, architecture — and political activism. The latter pursuit, particularly his intense criticism of the Chinese government and its corruption after the massive Szechuan earthquake, led to his arrest in 2011. As a result, Ai was not at PAMM to install his show; though his art is allowed to leave China, he is not.

All of this makes Ai's presence in Miami — albeit spiritually — especially relevant. In a city filled with political refugees, enamored with its new skyline and distinctive architecture and not unfamiliar with corruption, Ai's work speaks loudly. To underscore that relationship, one wall in the sprawling exhibit is composed of photographs of the construction of the Beijing Olympic stadium — known as the Bird's Nest — for which he was a consultant with the architects of Herzog & de Meuron. The Swiss firm also designed PAMM.

The introduction to the show is stacked in the museum's second-floor lobby, an installation titled *Stacked* made up of dozens and dozens of silver-coated bicycles. The human-propelled vehicles have long been associated with China; these particular two-wheelers come from the Forever Company, founded in Shanghai in 1940. It's worth noting as well that during Cuba's Special Period, the economic crisis created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than a million bikes were imported to the island from China to literally keep Cuba moving when the oil subsidies dried up.

Much of Ai's work is based in cultural and historical roots, as one discovers moving from room to room. Some of the most beautiful sculptures are made of wood, crafted from old Qing dynasty objects such as stools and temple sidings. Like his ancient forebearers, Ai has employed only joinery to make these sculptures, without nails or cement to hold them together. Look closely, and one of these wooden gems forms a map of China, with the little islands of Hong Kong and Taiwan hanging out at the ends.

Another amazing piece, so tempting to touch, is made of pearls. Hundreds and hundreds of them fill two large bowls on the floor. Once again, pearls are often intricately linked to China, and to wealth. It's not hard to read the message in this one: In a country obsessed with accumulating wealth and power, value is easily diluted. Though one pearl earring can be worth thousands of dollars, what value does it have in

a vat of pearls? Is the individual nugget worth as much anymore? Despite their number, each is quite beautiful, and if a museum guard were not standing hawk-like next to it, many a visitor would have scooped up a handful.

Less handsome, intentionally so, and more biting, are piles of rebar. They come from buildings that collapsed during the 2008 earthquake, including a number of schools where more than 5,000 children died. Mourning over this natural disaster morphed into an unprecedented critique of the government, when shoddy construction and corrupt inspectors were thought to be the major culprits. When looking at this disturbing debris, one can't help but compare it with the superb craftsmanship of the Qing furniture and Ai's reworking of those relics.

Although Ai long has been known for his outspokenness about human rights abuses, his mission to make officials accountable for the earthquake-related deaths particularly rankled the authoritarian regime. On his blog, he listed the names of the dead children; though the Chinese government shut down the blog, Ai has managed to keep the names in view, covering one wall behind the rebar in the museum. Eventually, under the pretense of tax evasion, he was arrested.

By then Ai was already well known within artistic circles, especially after his 2010-2011 Sunflower Seeds exhibit, made from 100 million porcelain seeds, at the Tate Modern in London (it emphasizes the lack of individuality that arises from a country of a billion people and a totalitarian government). But after his detention he became a cause celeb in a broader sense. An award-winning documentary, *Never Sorry*, was made about it in 2012. The newest work in the exhibition is a result of his 81-day imprisonment; a pair of handcuffs made from jade.

There are many other worthy works here, including walls covered in photographs taken in New York when Ai lived there in the 1980s and when he was still free to roam. Outside, in the museum's veranda facing Biscayne Bay, 12 bronze heads representing the Chinese zodiac have been planted, replicas Ai made of sculptures from a 19th-century palace.

As expansive as the retrospective *According To What?* is, there is much more to see at PAMM. **The museum, like Ai, doesn't believe in going small.** The other featured exhibits include paintings from the Modernist Cuban artist Amelia Pelaez; and the diverse group show of modern and contemporary works called "Americana," with important pieces from both North and South America.

While you're there, make sure to set aside 20 minutes to view the film from Israeli Yael Bartana, called *Inferno*. It is a simply stunning, gorgeously shot fictional account of some real attempts to recreate the temple of Jerusalem by evangelicals in (of all places) Brazil. Considering that the first two temples in ancient Israel were destroyed, it's not giving much away to say this story doesn't end that well. Take the time to watch the entire film: Like much else at PAMM, there is a lot here, no need to rush.