Nov 19 2015

Provocative, honest, fierce: A review of Ai Weiwei’s London exhibition
Leila Nasr

By Kim Nelson*

Ai Weiwei’s art situates itself within the cold reality of human rights in China. The very material used within his work is suggestive of the authorities’ hold upon the political and economic freedom of its citizens. In his recent exhibition at the Royal Academy — the largest showing of his work in the UK — important issues have been raised relating to governance, human rights, and freedom of expression within his country.

Weiwei’s art is derived from his own experience of China’s political and cultural history. His father, Ai Qing (1910 – 1996) was a poet sent into exile during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, a time when the arts became the practice of a hidden and oppressed minority. Living within a ‘Democratic’ movement of artists from an early age, Weiwei became an important figure in preserving freedom of expression in China.

In the exhibition, Ai Weiwei presents a diverse collection of his work dating back to the early 1990s. His approach combines traditional practices in Chinese craftsmanship, alongside his own minimalist influences. Ai Weiwei is open to a variety of emerging mediums. As both an artist and activist he has embraced multimedia and has gained a vast and loyal following on Twitter and Instagram (most recently, thousands of people offered to contribute LEGO for a upcoming exhibition in Melbourne, Australia). This is particularly significant in the face of China’s crackdowns on social media in 2009.

Though perhaps speaking from a West-centric perspective here, it seems the most emotive sculptures within the exhibition were those that spoke of real, and often deeply personal situations within the artist’s home country. For instance, one of the most striking pieces in the exhibition, Straight (2008-2012), tells a story of the artist’s response to a specific human rights issue in China. The sculpture is comprised of over 90 tonnes of straightened steel rebar – an otherwise simple building material – stretching across the floor, as one coherent and undulating form. Yet beyond its aesthetic quality, the story of this artwork becomes clear. This sculpture stands as a political monument.

The salvaged rebar that formed this sculpture were found in the rubble of the 2008 Earthquake in China’s Sichuan province, which left over 80,000 people dead. In the face of such complete desolation, Ai Weiwei felt compelled to expose the corrupt, incompetent and clandestine nature of the Chinese authorities in response to such a humanitarian catastrophe. One significant
In many ways, Ai Weiwei is a voice for people who continue to fight for human rights within their countries. His work stands as an important reminder of the fragility of these values in the face of such uninhibited and coercive state power.
The exhibition at the Royal Academy in London continues until 13 December 2015.

*Kim Nelson is a MSc Human Rights student at LSE, and an editor of the LSE Human Rights blog.

This entry was posted in Activism, Art, Culture, Events. Bookmark the permalink.