

## With Lego bricks against oppression

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Old and new works built from Lego: Ai Weiwei has recreated his 1995 action with the plastic bricks, and is exhibiting it together with new *Zodiac Heads* works in St. Moritz. Photo by Stefan Altenburger

The world-famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is currently exhibiting at the Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz. Titled *Zodiac*, the works in the exhibition are made of surprising materials.

Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai Weiwei's work deals with the serious changes taking place in China since the country's economic opening. Core themes are human rights violations, freedom of expression, economic exploitation and environmental pollution. The cosmopolitan, social activist, creative visionary and provocative artist deals with injustice and truth, stands up for humanity and fundamentally confronts economic, political and social systems of power.

His oeuvre consists of installations, sculptures, photographs, performances, documentaries, architecture, public art projects, and social media advocacy. Ai Weiwei's works are multi-layered and rich in content, reflecting his admiration for the readymades of conceptual art co-founder Marcel Duchamp as well as his interest in historical artifacts. With *Zodiac* the artist wants to invite us to think about original and copy, authenticity and forgery, beginning and end of authorship.

### **From plastic to gold**

Since 2007, Ai Weiwei, who was present at the opening in St. Moritz, has repeatedly worked with Lego bricks,

because he finds that they make his work more accessible and possess a playful sensibility. A triptych can be seen in St. Moritz, a reinterpretation in Lego bricks of one of his most provocative and groundbreaking works ever: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. In the original work, he had photographically recorded the smashing of an ancient urn as his most personal reaction to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Now, the Lego bricks create a pixelated effect that is reminiscent of surveillance camera footage and intensifies the image's message.

For the first time in Switzerland, gold-plated *Zodiac Heads* from the series *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Bronze and Gold* are on view. These have been exhibited in over 45 locations worldwide. The artist was inspired to reinterpret and reinvent twelve Chinese zodiac sculptures of a water clock fountain that adorned an imperial palace in Beijing. They were created after French Baroque models and looted by Anglo-French soldiers in 1860; most of the originals are still missing today.

In contrast to the original models, Ai Weiwei's figures have no bodies; the shiny gold heads seem to be impaled, are as fascinating as they are threatening, and convey an almost solemn atmosphere. In stark contrast, simple jute sacks stand in the corners of the room, filled with potatoes. "I asked about the history of the room," Ai Weiwei explained at the opening, "and wanted to make a connection to the former potato cellar."

### **Twelve Signs of the Zodiac**

Ai has created hundreds of large-scale portraits out of Lego bricks, depicting activists and lawyers, political prisoners and victims of crime. In the square paintings of the *Zodiac* series, on view for the first time in this exhibition, he has built the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac out of Lego in bright colors. In terms of content, this relates to the bronze sculptures. These are fascinating works full of intensity, which blur in view when approached, become clear again at a greater distance, and allow every viewer their own perspective and interpretation. Especially children are fascinated by the works.

"We are happy to be welcoming some school classes," the gallery manager Sara Forsythe mentioned in conversation, "but please after prior registration".

Ai Weiwei: *Zodiac*. Exhibition until Saturday, April 8. Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz