

Galerie

Ai Weiwei Recreates Canonical Works of Western Art Using Lego Bricks

by Caroline Roux
April 26, 2024



Installation view of Ai Weiwei's exhibition "Neither Nor" at Galleria Continua.
PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO

The intricate assemblages are included in the career-spanning exhibition "Neither Nor" at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy, through September 1

While Galleria Continua occupies spaces all over the world, including Beijing, Havana, São Paulo, and Rome, its beating heart is in a former 1930s cinema in San Gimignano, the Tuscan hill town encircled with 13th-century walls that boasts a number of extraordinary medieval towers. Here, the gallery hosts a major artist every summer, this year being no exception, and its intriguing interior and garden—with a spectacular view over the Tuscan landscape—is filled with the work of Ai Weiwei.

The latest creations by Ai are full-size renderings of world-famous paintings made using Lego bricks, something he started last year with Monet's *Water Lilies*. For an artist who frequently works with found objects—poles, porcelain, and wooden stools are all incorporated into other works displayed here—it's perhaps no surprise that even Western artworks for Ai have the same readymade availability.

Sometimes there's even a doubling of the game: At the entrance, is Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, with an addition of a Duchampian coat hanger dropped beneath her naked

torso. When asked if it alluded to the current conversation around abortion, Ai says "My political impulse is never clear, but I'm defending freedom of speech which is an essential right for humans." Casting himself as Judas in his version of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, he declares that it was "to tell people not to trust me."

For the opening in April, the 66-year-old Ai had brought a team of Chinese chefs to prepare a lunch in a local Italian restaurant. He is currently living in Portugal, which he appeared to enjoy, although he is known to change his mind about these things, loving and then leaving Berlin among rants about racism. As for his use of Lego, that too has proved a provocation, with the Danish company trying to prevent him from using their product "for political reasons."

"But I said: well, that's political too, and made the case against them and won," says Ai. This means that, although he can use the material, he buys all the Lego for his work, which assumably runs into thousands of bricks for each picture. And Lego is not cheap. "No material matters unless it is a success," he says. And indeed, here it rather surprisingly is. Most of the works are extraordinary, with Ai's version of Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* playing out like a Pointillist pixelated joke.

AI WEIWEI

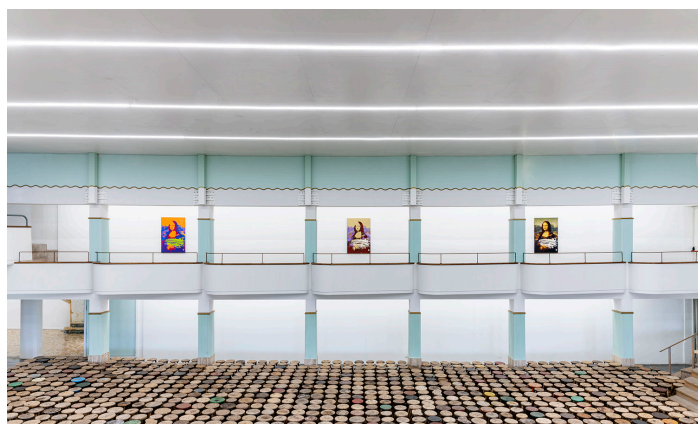
In the main hall is an older work from 2013, a dense arrangement of wooden stools, which repeats the same pixelated format. "Finding old household objects started in 1993, when I returned to China after time in the U.S. Because of censorship, I couldn't become an artist, so I became a collector. I'd go to the antiques market every day and come back with vases. They cost nothing. It drove my mother mad," Ai says. "Now I need to have old material around me to prove I still exist. These old stools have belonged to other families. I can imagine who they were and what their life was like."



Installation view of Ai Weiwei's exhibition "Neither Nor" at Galleria Continua. PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO



Pickup Sticks (2006) by Ai Weiwei, included in the Galleria Continua exhibition "Neither Nor." PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO

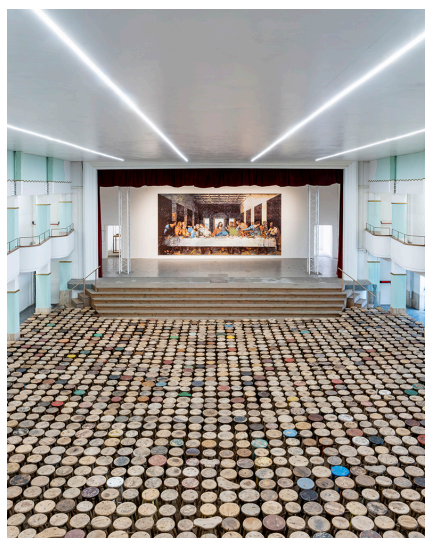


Ai Weiwei's 2023 works, *Mona Lisa Smearred in Cream in Orange*, *Mona Lisa Smearred in Cream in Beige*, and *Mona Lisa Smearred in Cream*, in the Galleria Continua exhibition "Neither Nor." PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO



Installation view of Ai Weiwei's exhibition "Neither Nor" at Galleria Continua. PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO

The show's title is "Neither Nor," because, according to the artist, the situation we currently find ourselves in—troubled and tending to extremes—is too complex for a 'yes' or 'no' answer. And while he contests any possibility of losing faith, "because I don't have any faith," he says, Ai surprised the crowd who had come to San Gimignano for the opening with an outpouring of approval for the present Pope. "Politicians are dishonest and inhuman," he stated, "But I admire the Pope. He is worthy of respect, a very unique person." Next stop, the Vatican?



Ai Weiwei's *Stools* (2013) and *The Last Supper* (2022) in the Galleria Continua exhibition "Neither Nor." PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA/OKNO STUDIO