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# Ai Weiwei

Works by the ubiquitous artist are surprisingly scarce in the marketplace.

By Rachel Corbett

WHEN OFFICERS RAIDED Ai Weiwei's Beijing studio in 2011, an employee inside tweeted that there were "police at the front and back doors, no way to go in or out." After that, no one heard a word (or tweet) out of Ai for 81 days. Supporters believed that the artist's persistent criticism of the Chinese Communist Party on blogs and social media had led to his arrest, and so petitions circulated, a documentary, *Never Sorry*, was shot, and an exhibition tour was scheduled—all of which generated an unprecedented level of international attention for Ai, including a runner-up mention as *Time* magazine's 2011 "Person of the Year," by the time he finally resurfaced.

Although authorities confiscated Ai's passport, his art has continued to travel the globe, with a recent inclusion in the Venice Biennale. Although Ai's persona has never been more public, his market still operates very much behind closed doors. His auction record, set at Sotheby's New York last year, is \$782,500 for one ton of porcelain sunflower seeds similar to a set exhibited at the Tate Modern in 2010–11. Yet collectors and dealers report that his work, particularly the rarer and larger pieces, can fetch more than five times that amount on the private market.

"There haven't been many major works to come up at auction," says Christopher Tsai, president of Tsai Capital Corporation and a collector of Ai's art. "The houses are still looking for that right piece."

There has been no public sale on the level of, say, Ai's set of 12 four-foot-high bronze astrological creatures, *Circle of Animals/ Zodiac Heads*, 2010, which is his priciest series, reportedly selling for upwards of \$6 million in an edition of six. A smaller version, in an edition of eight, goes for about \$3 million.

The Western market was introduced only relatively recently to the 56-year-old artist's widely varied output, which includes film, sections of salvaged rebar, photographs of performances, painted and Pop-ified Neolithic vases, domestically scaled marble sculptural objects, and monumental accumulations of furniture, ceramic crabs, and sunflower seeds. China, on the other hand, has long been aware of the artist's explicitly activist artwork, especially his exhibition of the names of children who died in shoddily designed schools during a 2008 earthquake in Sichuan.

According to Edward Tang, a specialist in postwar and contemporary art at Christie's London, "Ai's auction market

*Ai Weiwei's He Xie*, 2010, was installed at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden last fall as part of the traveling exhibition "Ai Weiwei: According to What?" the first North American survey of the artist's work.



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Clockwise from top left: *Hanging Man in Porcelain*, 2009, one of the artist's smaller ceramic works, which sell for around \$70,000 at Lisson Gallery in London; a snake from *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold*, 2010, in an edition of six, commands upwards of \$6 million; the artist in his Beijing studio, 2010.

is still younger than that of the other Chinese artists," such as his contemporary, the painter Cai Guo-Qiang, whose auction record stands north of \$9.5 million. "He's also not as prolific in terms of churning out work," Tang notes.

Ai's name first appeared in a Western auction catalogue in 2006 when interest in Asian art—both curatorial and speculative—was exploding. Sotheby's had just introduced contemporary Chinese, Japanese, and Korean art sales in New York and it seemed to be "a great time" to try a sale of his works, according to Xiaoming Zhang, the former head of contemporary Chinese art at Sotheby's and now an independent auction consultant. She adds that it also helped that Ai "makes his works more available to the international market than the domestic market, which is not so transparent."



Zhang was already familiar with Ai by reputation: His father was the renowned modernist poet and political exile Ai Qing. When Zhang met the artist in 2000, they bonded over their shared experience as expatriates in New York, where Ai spent most of the 1980s and early '90s, studying at the Parsons School of Design by day and dealing blackjack by night.

The dealer Ethan Cohen gave Ai his first solo show in the city in 1988. In those early years Cohen sold only a handful of the artist's works, including some of his deconstructed Ming Dynasty furniture pieces and coat hangers bent into the profile of Marcel Duchamp, mostly in the \$500 to \$10,000 range. But a few sculptures from those early years, including a Coca-Cola vase, found their way, fatefully, into the hands of Swiss collector Uli Sigg, probably the biggest patron of contemporary Chinese art today.

"It was a challenge trying to get people interested in Chinese art at the time," says Cohen. "But when Weiwei became friends with Uli Sigg, who was one of my early clients, Uli introduced him to many other collectors and really propelled his career." Through Sigg, Ai met the Swiss architect duo Herzog and de Meuron, who hired him to help design the stadium for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

As Ai's popularity flourished in Switzerland, other Western nations began to take note. In 2007 he showed his 1,001-chair installation, *Fairytale*, at Documenta; this was followed by solo exhibitions over the next three years at New York's Mary Boone Gallery, Munich's Haus der Kunst, and Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Today his work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Fukuoka Art Museum, and Germany named Ai its selection for this year's Venice Biennale (Sigg wrote the catalogue essay).

But after Ai's arrest in April 2011, European and American auction houses quietly ceased offering his work. "The houses were respectful »

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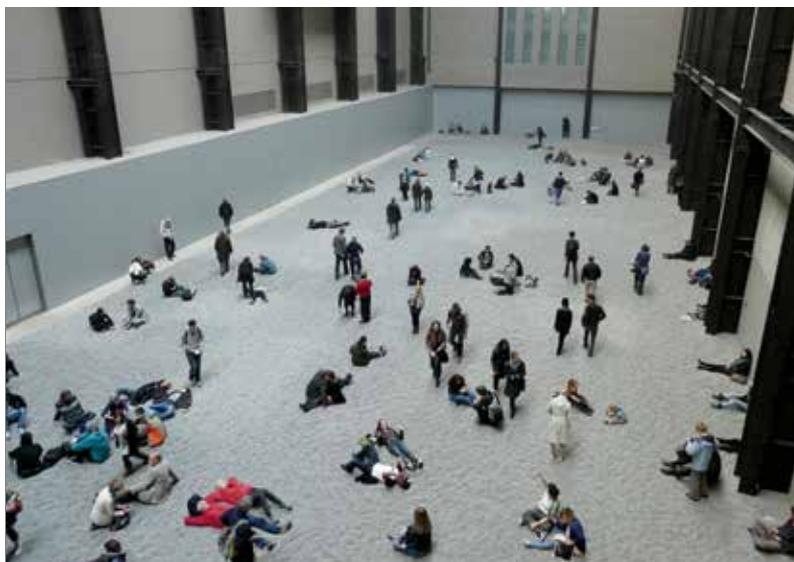
- + Ai's auction record was set at \$782,500 last May at **Sotheby's** New York for a one-ton heap of hand-painted porcelain seeds.
- + Following his cover video for the Korean pop hit "Gangnam Style" last year—which authorities banned in China—Ai released a pop-protest album titled *Divine Comedy* in June.
- + Editions of Ai's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* have been purchased by Indonesian-Chinese collector **Budi Tek** and, reportedly, by the Mercury Group, which owns **Phillips**. Gold-colored versions, which are currently touring, go on view in 2014 at the **Detroit Institute of Arts** and the **Brooklyn Museum**.
- + Upon Ai's release from prison, China ordered him to pay \$2.4 million in back taxes—a fine he appealed, and lost, last year.

of his time in prison and didn't want to take something to auction at that point," says Tang of Christie's. Some observers have speculated that the decision was made in order to protect his activist reputation, which might have been compromised by exorbitant price tags that were approaching the mid six figures at that stage.

Some galleries took his work off the market as well. "I was frankly just so disgusted with the aggressive, almost speculative manner in which people were approaching the gallery during that time," says San Francisco dealer Cheryl Haines, who has worked with Ai for the past five years. "People who were never interested in the work before were suddenly calling and pressuring us to sell."

Business picked up upon Ai's release, and today his prices are steadily on the rise. According to Greg Hilty, curatorial director of the Lisson Gallery, which represents Ai in London, the artist's smaller ceramic works currently sell for around \$70,000, while his larger painted vases go for about \$400,000. Still larger works, such as his marble doors and wooden trees, sell for roughly \$600,000. In the past year Ai's furniture pieces, which he has made since the early 1990s, have sold at auction for prices ranging from \$62,000 for a pair of wooden Qing Dynasty chairs to more than \$200,000 for two conjoined stools.

Ai's most sought-after works rarely come to market: his early ceramic vases painted with the Coca-Cola logo, photos



of the artist dropping a Han Dynasty urn, originals from the coat hanger series. "There's not a lot currently available," says Hilty. "Some of the works he's known for, like the Coca-Cola vases, are done, really. He's made several versions, but he wants to move on to other things."

*From top: Iron Tree, 2013, which was presented by Neugerriemschneider gallery at FIAC this October; an installation view of The Unilever Series: Sunflower Seeds, at the Tate Modern in London in October 2010; and Kui Hua Zi (Sunflower Seeds), 2009, a jar of 1,000 hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds—produced in an edition of 30, plus 12 artist proofs—which sold for \$27,500 at Christie's New York in March 2012.*

Collectors will still have a chance to shop Ai's more accessible works next month at Art Basel Miami Beach, where galleries will no doubt capitalize on his touring survey "According to What?" opening at the Pérez Art Museum Miami on December 4. Lisson Gallery plans to include Ai's wares at its booth, as does Berlin's Neugerriemschneider gallery and Galerie Urs Meile of Lucerne and Beijing.

In the meantime, collectors and dealers seem to agree that Ai's auction prices are likely to catch up with his primary sales soon enough. "That's changing now," says Tsai, who notes that auction houses regularly approach him about consigning works from his collection.

"His works are relatively young in the secondary market, and he consistently comes up with challenging and bold works that people continually talk about and collect," says Edward Tang of Christie's. "There is no doubt his prices will continue to hold and grow." ▣