

Press Release

Ai Weiwei *Roots*

2 October – 2 November 2019

27 Bell Street, London

Opening: 1 October, 6 – 8pm

A major exhibition by Ai Weiwei this autumn features a new series of monumental sculptural works in iron, cast from giant tree roots sourced in Brazil during research and production for last year's survey exhibition, 'Raiz', at the Oscar Niemeyer-designed OCA Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo.

Ai worked with local artisans and communities across Brazil, visiting Trancoso in the east to locate roots and trunks from the endangered Pequi Vinagreiro tree, typically found in the Bahian rainforest. Elements of these rare tree roots, some of which could be over a thousand years old, were painstakingly moulded, conjoined and then cast to create striking compositions and bold forms that reflect their Brazilian heritage. While some resemble great jungle beasts or fantastical creatures, such as the three- and four-legged works *Fly* and *Level*, others including *Party* and *Martin* (all 2019) consist of shattered, exploded root forms radiating outwards from a central nexus. The titles all came as suggestions from Ai Weiwei's young son Ai Lao, based on his personal observations or connections made when visiting these tree remains with his father, adding to the sense of surreal displacement and alien disjointedness in the exhibition. This incongruous atmosphere speaks further of the works' depiction of the state of 'uprootedness', one that mirrors not only the artist's peripatetic existence after being allowed to leave China in 2015, but also the plight of the refugees he has spent the last few years documenting, as well as the various indigenous populations that rely on the trees and forests of Brazil for their habitats and sustenance. The deforestation and concomitant purge of peoples and resources relates to previous bodies of work produced by Ai and to the current political realities of many countries, including his native China.

The material employed in making the *Roots* series – cast iron covered in a patina of orange rust – likewise responds to ancient cultures and man's first tools for tree felling and woodworking, rather than to the recent, more polite art history of bronze or steel sculpture. Although originally contorted by their surrounding landscapes, these roots were not born of nature but made and crafted by human hands, using the ancient techniques of 'lost wax' moulding and then iron casting. These methods represent a traditional, largely bygone way of life that has been usurped and upended by industrialisation and relentless modernisation, illustrating how progress can often come at the expense of cultural and societal well-being.

Contrasting with these heavy, land-bound creatures is a number of floating figures, clouds and dream-like vignettes. Ai has been producing delicate sculptures from stretched silk over bamboo armatures for the past five years, employing a group of Chinese kite makers based in Weifang, a city in Shandong province. Purported to have been invented in China around 500 BC by a carpenter and a philosopher, the kite has held many functions throughout history from measuring distances or wind speed, to communication and military usage. Ai's kites refer back to a mythological encyclopaedia of monsters and creatures known as *Shan Hai Jing* (the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*) that also pre-dated Christianity, which depicts fantastical hybrids of chimera, gorgons, unicorns, dragons and griffins. Alongside this bestiary, Ai has added personal and childhood symbols, as well as references back to his own works – *Surveillance Camera* and his one-fingered salutes, the *Study of Perspective* series – and those of his influences, including Marcel Duchamp and Vladimir Tatlin.

Finally, the show ends with a development of Ai's experimentation with LEGO bricks. These new wall-based works feature politically-charged, pixelated renderings of the trajectory of a refugee boat refused docking at Lampedusa after two weeks at sea, the front page of the Mueller report into Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election, as well as a deconstructed symbol of the contentious protests of Tiananmen Square in 1989.

A new book, also entitled *Roots* – featuring contributions from nature writer Robert Macfarlane; the curator of ‘Raiz’, Marcello Dantas; the Chair of Asian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Christina Yu Yu; Brazilian anthropologist Lilia Moritz Schwarcz among others – will be published by Distanz on the occasion of this exhibition, which is presented in collaboration with Ai’s Berlin gallery, neugerriemschneider.

About the artist

A global citizen, artist and thinker, Ai Weiwei moves between modes of production and investigation, subject to the direction and outcome of his research, whether into the Chinese earthquake of 2008 (for works such as *Straight*, 2008-12 and *Remembering*, 2009) or the worldwide plight of refugees and forced migrants (for *Law of the Journey* and his feature-length documentaries, *Human Flow* and *The Rest*). From early iconoclastic positions in regards to authority and history, which included *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and a series of middle-finger salutes to sites of power, *Study of Perspective* (both 1995), Ai’s production expanded to encompass architecture, public art and performance. Beyond concerns of form or protest, Ai now measures our existence in relation to economic, political, natural and social forces, uniting craftsmanship with conceptual creativity. Universal symbols of humanity and community, such as bicycles, flowers and trees, as well as the perennial problems of borders and conflicts are given renewed potency through installations, sculptures, films and photographs, while Ai continues to speak out publicly on issues he believes important. He is one of the leading cultural figures of his generation and serves as an exemplar of free expression, both in China and internationally.

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing and now lives and works in Berlin. He attended the Beijing Film Academy and later, on moving to New York (1983–1993), continued his studies at the Parsons School of Design. Major solo exhibitions include K20/K21, Düsseldorf, Germany (2019); OCA, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); Corpartes, Santiago, Chile (2018); Mucem, Marseille, France (2018); PROA, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); Sakip Sabanci, Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (2017); Public Art Fund, New York, NY, USA (2017); Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2017); Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy (2016); 21er Haus, Vienna, Austria (2016); Helsinki Art Museum, Finland (2016); Royal Academy, London, UK (2015); Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2014); Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN, USA (2013); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., USA (2012); Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan (2011); Tate Modern, London, UK (2010) and Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2009). Architectural collaborations include the 2012 Serpentine Pavilion and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Stadium, with Herzog and de Meuron. Among numerous awards and honours, he won the lifetime achievement award from the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in 2008 and was made Honorary Academician at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2011. His human rights work has been recognised through the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent in 2012 and Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2015.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of 60 international artists across two exhibition spaces in London and two in New York as well as its new space in Shanghai. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as other artists of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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