THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY

THE COLLECTION BOOK

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The son of the poet Ai Qing, Ai Weiwei was born in Beijing in 1957. During the Cultural Revolution, his father was denounced and sent to a labor camp in Xinjiang, and Ai Weiwei went with him and grew up there. In 1979, he enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. A few years later, he traveled to the United States, living in New York City for twelve years only to return to Beijing in 1995. Wandering around antique markets back home, he noted: “I became interested in how within each dynasty there was a clear definition of shape, color, and marking they wished to put on every object.” Following this line of thought, in 1994 he created Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo. Ai commented, referring to the trademark font and calligraphic style of the word coca-cola, that “the actual form of [the] script, the brush stroke, seemed to follow closely the shape and form of the vase itself.” By combining the commercial logo, a symbol of the global economy and popular culture, with an urn reflecting the culture of Han Dynasty in China, he expressed the duality of continuity and reform of Chinese history and culture.


2 For this piece, Ai Weiwei worked together with Serge Spitzer, an American artist (born 1951 in Bucharest, Romania, living and working in New York), for an installation at the exhibition Territorial at the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, Germany (May 20 to August 27, 2006).

3 Ibid.
Colored Vases
Traveling Light

Glass crystals / silk wood, thread, electric lights
478 x 224 x 178 cm

IN Table and Beam (2002) and Table and Pillar (2002), Ai uses pillars and beams from demolished Ming-dynasty temples and combines them with traditional Chinese furniture. The pillars can be read as a metaphor for the spiritual and belief-systems of the people of the time, and in this work Ai attempts to re-contextualize fragments of history and past spiritual beliefs in contemporary terms.

"History is always the missing part of the puzzle in everything we do," comments the artist. "I think that they only have a momentary truth, and that's the fragment: those momentary pieces."

It's a statement which recognizes that both the present moment and our own lives are but fragments of history, and the task before us is finding a way to combine, reconstitute, or resurrect those separate fragments, or to imagine the whole from those fragmentary parts. In archeology, the fragments of a vase are pieces of a puzzle for reconstituting the vase in its complete form. But Ai Weiwei does not seek to recreate the original. What he creates, instead, in a new kind of game, is a contemporary puzzle.

Traveling Light employs the pillar of a Ming-dynasty temple as a kind of totem pole, combined with elaborate chandeliers that Ai has been producing over the years. The nearly five-meter tall pillar rises straight up from a moveable metal base. The chandelier sparkling at its top is made from five thousand crystal beads specially commissioned for the piece, hanging in two intersecting circles. The beads, in various shapes, are strung in random combinations to create a brilliant sparkling effect. Ai's work with light has evolved over the years, from Chandelier (2002) through Foundation of Light (2007) and Descending Light (2007), but the huge pillar and gracefully drooping, willowy skeins of beads in Traveling Light create, because of the piece’s mobility, a centripetal appeal, visually actualizing the artist’s statement: "This becomes for me like a baldachin, with all the sense of power and associations that go with it."

It is as if, while connecting a fragment of the past to the present, the chandelier illuminates the way to the future that lies ahead of us.

Colored Vases consists of ten vases that Ai has painted with ordinary household paints of various colors in a serial installation he has been creating since 2003. The dripping and running of the uniform colors of the commercially manufactured paints applied to these hand-made, biscuit-fired Neolithic (5,000–3,500 B.C.) urns places the traditional form of pottery, with dripping or running glazes, and the expressionless quality of industrially manufactured products into a new relationship of contradiction, coexistence, and accommodation.

Just as the various urns and vases Ai uses reflect the styles of their respective dynasties, traditional Chinese furniture of the Ming Dynasty—the peak of furniture production in China—the work also reflects its times, in aspects ranging from artistic style and materials to production locales and the social status of the owners. In his Furniture series (initiated in 1997 and still in progress), Ai reassembles traditional pieces of furniture in ways that distort their original uses, creating a kind of visual bending of history itself. What enables him to take apart and reassemble the furniture, however, is the traditional joinery (without nails) that reached its peak in Ming- and Qing-dynasty architecture and was subsequently applied to furniture making as well. Like his other works, Ai’s Furniture series highlights the preservation of intangible traditional techniques and craftsmanship.

Translated by Jeff Hunter.

4 Cited in Nataline Colonello, Fragments (Beijing, Lucerne: Galerie Urs Meile, Timezone 8 Ltd., 2006), p. 11.