

T MAGAZINE

15 Minutes With Ai Weiwei

By AIMEE FARRELL JUNE 17, 2016



Ai Weiwei walks among his tree sculptures at Downing College at Cambridge University, England. They are made from real dead trees, and some have as many as a hundred parts. Ioana Marinescu

Five shadowy, ominous, twisted wooden sculptures loom over the neo-Classical backdrop of the Downing College Chapel in Cambridge, England. Ai Weiwei has come to town — and he’s brought his “Trees” (and “Cubes”) with him. Earlier this week, the artist, wearing an equally dark linen suit, was unperturbed by the fact that two trees were still at large, en route from London where they went on view last summer as part of his blockbuster show at the Royal Academy. Before that, they’d been hidden inside his Beijing studio for years. “We’ve been getting a tree a day,” quipped John Tancock, the guest-curator of “Ai Weiwei: Trees and Cubes,” which opens today. During the installation, the artist caught up with T — until being stopped short by a fire alarm. (Weiwei maintains he had nothing to do with it.)

What is your first impression of Cambridge and how does it feel to see your “Trees” in the setting of Cambridge University

compared to the Royal Academy in London?

My first impression of Cambridge is that it's a very comfortable school. It's serene — it's a nice place to be. It's very different from the city of London. Here it's more like the countryside. Being a university space, it's very quiet and undisturbed.

Is the artwork any less valid in this very comfortable and privileged setting?

Any kind of work can be valid when it has a contradiction to different realities. I think artworks need to be challenged by very different human conditions that's an interesting part of our work. We are living in a very complex society. It puts me in a complex frame of thinking.



The artist stands in front of a screen inside the Heong Gallery showing "On the Boat," a less than 10-minute short shot on the island of Lesbos, Greece. Ioana Marinescu

This exhibition also features a short film shot on the island of Lesbos, where you have spent many months in refugee camps. Is it a taster of the feature-length film you are in the process of making on the plight of the refugees in Europe?

That's a work I produced at the beginning of many long months deeply entrenched in refugee conditions. As my first gesture, I jumped onto an abandoned boat in the middle of the ocean to try to feel what it's like to be alone out there. And it feels very tense, you feel very fragile and hopeless even though there was very good weather, and no wind. You can imagine if there are 50 people on that boat in much worse conditions. I saw children's milk bottles, a woman's scarf and even a Bible abandoned on the water.

Do you feel hope for the refugees in Europe?

I think it's never as they imagine. They leave the war zone, but this is a different war. They leave behind the bombs and explosions, but they see deeply in their hearts and their minds how humanity is a wasteland. When they enter Europe, they see how they've been abandoned. It's really tragic. Children have to stay out of school for years, and all they know is the camp. Their parents have no jobs and no money except for the few euros of support from the UN.

What is the role of the artist in this kind of humanitarian crisis?

The artist is someone who is involved, but detached at the same time. We are parallel to the conditions and we try to examine and learn from them. We give our passion and our sensitivity to another person who has to pass the night in a cold tent, with wet socks and no light; and for the children, no milk. They can't even find a place to take a shower, or use the bathroom. They stay there for months, but no one tells them where to go or what to do. I've been told there are 60 million refugees in the world. A few of them have been really taken care of, very few, less than 1 percent, maybe.

Can you see a similarity between the idea of Britain leaving the EU and the rising popularity of Donald Trump in the States?

You can see this intention to go toward the right wing in politics that's taking place. But it will only bring us to a darker place, and a rainier season. Whenever humans lose their courage, it's always followed by all kinds of tragedies.

Tell me about the progress of your feature-length film about the plight of the refugees, whose working title is "Human Flow."

The film is almost bigger than I can manage. The topic is so complex and has such a long history. It's so much about humanity and this large historical development. Right now we have around eight teams filming in different location, some very remote places in the Middle East and across Europe. I have hundreds of hours of footage and hundreds of interviews, 90 percent of which I conducted myself. It's still ongoing — we have many more places to go.

What's the most shocking thing about arriving in the refugee camps in Lesbos?

The most shocking thing has always been the fact that it's a very different world. The rest of the world is still separated. There are these two very different layers — one has purposefully been cut off from the other. One is very indifferent and very cold to what's happening. I don't know how long that can go on.

You are a prolific [Instagram](#) user. How important is it to you as a medium?

I don't enjoy it so much, but it's a way to relate to reality. Sometimes you think maybe this goes too far, so you always want to see or turn back to the place from which you started. This is why I keep posting. It's like a diary for me. When you sit down you have to have some solid sense of time and place and image — you have something in your mind. No artist has a sketchbook now. I'll use it not only for my feature film but for writing a book or compiling images for an exhibition. In the future Instagram will be used as a way of understanding mammals.

[FIRE ALARM SOUNDS]

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Correction: June 22, 2016

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated the title of an artwork. It is "On the Boat," not "Film On The Boat, 2016."

"Ai Weiwei Cubes and Trees" is on view June 17 — October 9 at the Heong Gallery at Downing College, Cambridge, dow.cam.ac.uk.