

## Ai Weiwei's Small Exhibit Has Haunting Impact

By JOANNE BRIANA-GARTNER Aug 10, 2018



*Figure 1. "Rebar and Case," a sculptural installation by Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, is on view through August 30 at the Fine Arts Work Center's Hudson D. Walker Gallery in Provincetown.*

Since 2001, wreckage from the World Trade Center Towers has been distributed to all 50 states to be used for memorials and tributes. Wikipedia estimates that there are at least 700 memorials around the country to the victims of the September 11 attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people.

By contrast, there is one memorial in China dedicated to the 70,000-plus people who were killed in the 2008 earthquake in the Sichuan province. It sits on the site of a school that collapsed in the quake, killing more than 1,000 students and teachers. It's estimated 5,000 schoolchildren were killed in the quake.

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Controversial Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, troubled by his government's lack of accountability in gathering and recording the names of the children who were killed in schools that collapsed in the quake (because the schools were constructed of inferior building materials), gathered, with the assistance of other volunteers, the names himself and recorded them on his blog; the blog was eventually shut down by the government.

In addition to recording the names of the children, Ai Weiwei covertly purchased 200 tons of twisted rebar, or reinforcing bar, recovered from the collapsed schools.

Over the course of several years, Ai Weiwei has used the rebar in several exhibits, including straightening and stacking the actual rebar, creating gold jewelry in the shape of rebar, and in "Rebar and Case," recreating the twisted metal in marble and placing the distorted pieces atop large cases made of huali wood, a type of rosewood used in Chinese furniture of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

It takes little imagination to make the leap from the short pieces of bent metal to the broken bodies of children, crushed in the devastating earthquake. The cases, which also take the unnatural shapes of the rebar, become tiny coffins. The show consists of eight pieces: four rebar sculptures atop wooden cases, and four empty wooden cases. Again it's not difficult to surmise that the empty cases might represent children whose bodies were not recovered from the quake or simply the government's lack of accountability in the tragedy, empty promises, and vanished futures.

"Rebar and Case" was first displayed at Chambers Fine Art in New York in 2014 when Ai Weiwei was unable to leave China, having had his passport revoked. Shortly after the government returned his passport in 2015, Ai Weiwei left China and moved to Berlin where he is currently based. His studio in Beijing was destroyed by the Chinese government earlier this week.

He has had a wide range as an artist: he's done sculpture, made films, done performance art, photography, design and more, along with his outspoken political

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activism; these have made Ai Weiwei one of the most well-known contemporary artists creating works today.

“Rebar and Case” is currently on view through August 30 in the Hudson D. Walker Gallery at The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. The artist was honored with an award for artistic excellence at the work center’s annual summer awards celebration in July.

The two rooms that house the art are small. The silence is broken only by the humming of air conditioning. The docent was sitting outside the gallery on the day I visited, so, if you are willing to wait for other visitors to leave, you can effectively be alone with the display.

In addition to the eight pieces, the gallery has installed special wallpaper for the exhibit. In 1995 Ai Weiwei began a photo series he later titled “Study of Perspective,” in which he photographed his middle finger extended toward various monuments and institutions of cultural and political power. The gesture, recreated as a line drawing of an arm with extended middle finger is reproduced in several patterns, some of them forming mandala-like circles or spokes radiating outward. The effect is both mesmerizing and subversive.

It’s well worth the trip to Provincetown, even in the summer, to view this small but haunting exhibit.