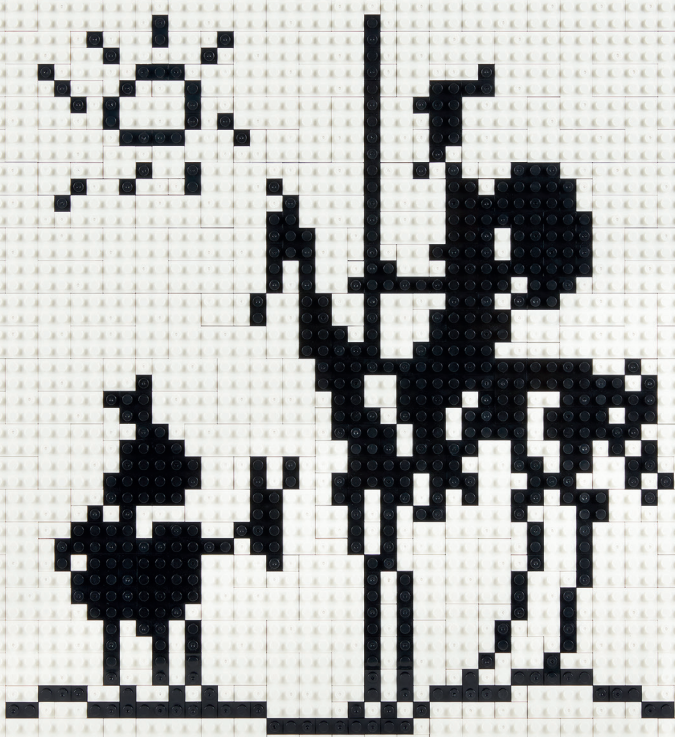


MUSAC

Museo de
Arte Contemporáneo
de Castilla y León

ENG



09.11.24- 18.05.25

HALLS 3-6

AI WEIWEI

DON QUIXOTE

AI WEIWEI



Ai Weiwei. Photo by Gao Yuan. Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

This exhibition offers a sweeping survey of selected works produced over the last twenty years in the career of Ai Weiwei (Beijing, China, 1957), renowned for his ability to fuse art and political activism. It features more than forty installations, videos and pictures made of toy bricks. This is also the first in-depth showcase of Ai's series of pieces made using LEGO: nineteen works in which the artist uses forty colours to produce images that recreate masterpieces from art history or alter photographs culled from the media. Speaking of them, the artist has remarked that LEGO, like fabric and carpet designs, the wooden moveable-type printing of the Song dynasty (ca. 1000 CE) or "ancient Roman mosaics, embodies a sense of timelessness".

The exhibition title harks back to the artist's childhood in the remote deserts of Xinjiang, China, recalling how a vividly illustrated edition of *Don Quixote* that belonged to his father, the poet Ai Qing, sparked his imagination. At the same time, the novel introduced him to a thought system other than the dialectical materialism in which he grew up, showing him that it was possible to construct an entire world of fantasy, even in stark contradiction to reality.

“There are many borders to dismantle, but the most important are the ones within our own hearts and minds—these are the borders that are dividing humanity from itself.”

— Ai Weiwei for *The Guardian*, 2018

Ai Weiwei freely uses readymades and *objets trouvés*, concepts that originated with Marcel Duchamp, which we find here in works like *Lotus* (2016) and *Olive Tree Roots* (2021). He often works with traditional Chinese techniques—as in the two monumental pieces made of bamboo—that transport us to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Along the exhibition itinerary, we also see how Ai translates linguistic tropes from the Chinese language into visual terms. One example is *A Spring with Caomina* (2019), which alludes to the image of an alpaca that has become a symbol of resistance against internet censorship.

The show reflects Ai Weiwei's major humanist concerns, from the refugee crisis and the defence of freedom of speech to what the artist himself calls the decline of humanitarianism, which comes through in much of his oeuvre. Ai Weiwei works in the fields of sculptural installation, filmmaking, photography, ceramics, painting, writing and social media.



Life Cycle

2018

Bamboo, sisal twine, silk

2040 x 450 x 250 cm

In 2013, Ai Weiwei began creating works in bamboo using traditional kite-making techniques. These are produced in the Chinese town of Weifang, where the tradition of kite-making dates to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

This is one of the artist's sculptural responses to the global refugee crisis. *Life Cycle* explores the motif of the poor-quality inflatable boats used by migrants to reach Europe. Using bamboo instead of PVC rubber, Ai Weiwei crafted a large-scale raft packed with figures. Some feature the heads of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac—perhaps an allusion to the waterspouts looted by Europeans from the Old Summer Palace in 1860.

The slim bamboo sticks create a resilient yet ethereal ensemble that addresses notions of transition and compassion. However, while the material evokes strength and buoyancy, it also allows viewers to look straight through the drama.



Crystal Ball

2017

Crystal, life jackets

150 x 150 x 120 cm

Courtesy of the artist and neugerriemschneider (Berlin, Germany)

In popular culture, crystal balls are portable translucent orbs linked to clairvoyance that enable seers to predict the future. Ai Weiwei's oversized sphere is too large and cumbersome to be handled by a single fortune teller; viewers can peek into it and witness a dizzying inverted world where reality is blurry and upside-down.

Heavy yet breakable, the ball rests on a pile of life jackets found on the Greek island of Lesbos, referencing the millions of people who have fled their countries due to political conflicts and unstable economies. Their fortune appears as precarious and ever-changing as the distorted reflections on the polished surface of the glass, perhaps evidencing that the future of humankind is less a matter of fate than of conscious action.



Study of Perspective

2022

Screen print

100 x 133 cm

These twelve screenprints originate with a photography series also entitled *Study of Perspective*. From 1995 to 2011, Ai Weiwei took over 200 photographs in which he raised his left middle finger against the backdrop of various sites of cultural and political power round the world.

While the project originally started in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, it soon expanded outside of China, featuring landmark locations such as the White House in Washington, D.C., the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the skyline of Hong Kong, or the Reichstag in Berlin. To turn the photographs into screenprints, the images were redesigned to feature four to five colours, giving the works a vivid and powerful effect.

The title is borrowed from a common term employed in life drawing and spatial design, thus placing the series decidedly within the realm of the visual arts. It is also a play on words that questions whose perspective prevails: the artist's, the viewer's or the establishment's?



La Commedia Umana

2017-2021

Murano glass, metal

Ø 640 x 840 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Berengo Studio (Venice, Italy)

Ai Weiwei has been working with Murano glass since 2017. This giant black chandelier was handcrafted by artisanal glassmakers in collaboration with the Berengo Studio. Composed of approximately 2000 pieces, the artwork weighs 2700 kilos and measures 8.4 metres high by 6.4 metres wide, making it one of the largest Murano glass objects ever produced.

La Commedia Umana reimagines classic Venetian glass chandeliers by creating an assemblage of mythological figures, human skulls, skeletons, internal organs, bones and animals such as crabs and bats. The artwork springs from the artist's long-term reflections on humanism and humanity, and his outspoken advocacy for freedom of expression. Migratory crises, the threat of current and future pandemics, and devastating global environmental changes feed the artist's ruminations on the alienating relationship between man and nature, the impact of humans on animal survival and the uncertain future of humankind, ultimately redefining the balance between life and death.



Illumination

2019

Toy bricks

304 x 380 cm

Taken in Chengdu, China, in 2009, *Illumination* has become an iconic Ai Weiwei selfie embodying freedom and resistance. The artist was the leading activist calling for transparency in the investigation of fatalities during the Sichuan earthquake on 12 May 2008. With the help of volunteers, who travelled door-to-door throughout the Sichuan province, the artist gathered 4851 names of the 5335 schoolchildren who died.

Ai Weiwei produced the artwork upon returning to Chengdu in August 2009 to testify on behalf of Tan Zuoren, an activist and writer who had been arrested for his involvement in researching the casualties among schoolchildren. At three o'clock in the morning of 9 August, police banged on the artist's hotel room door, woke him up and beat him. As the police escorted him out of the building, he defiantly snapped a selfie of his reflection in the mirrored walls of the lift. Ai Weiwei never made it to Tan Zuoren's trial.



The Third of May

2023

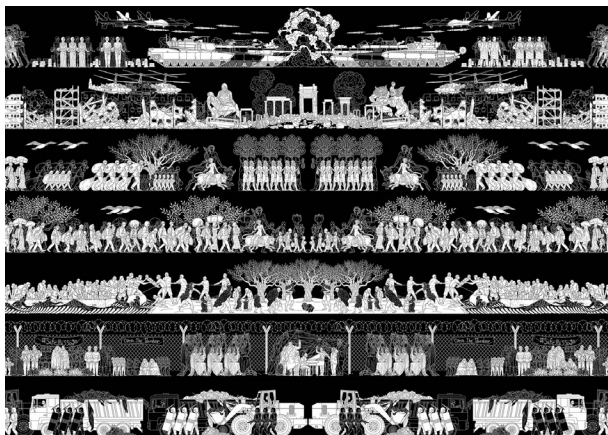
Toy bricks

280 x 360 cm

The Third of May 1808 in Madrid (1814), by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, memorialises the shootings that occurred on that night in retaliation for the uprising against the French staged the day before by the citizens of Madrid. The executions were carried out at 4 am, in cold and wet conditions, at five locations on the outskirts of the city.

Goya's composition evidences the contrast between the faceless and disciplined line of uniformed soldiers and the disorganised mass of prisoners. Their emotions range from disbelief and incomprehension to fear and desperation at the brutal repression.

Among the pile of dead bodies in the left foreground, the features of one of the killed rebels have been replaced with Ai Weiwei's portrait. The artist positions himself among the oppressed by those in power, drawing a comparison between the barbaric events of that night and contemporary acts of punishment and domination.



Odyssey

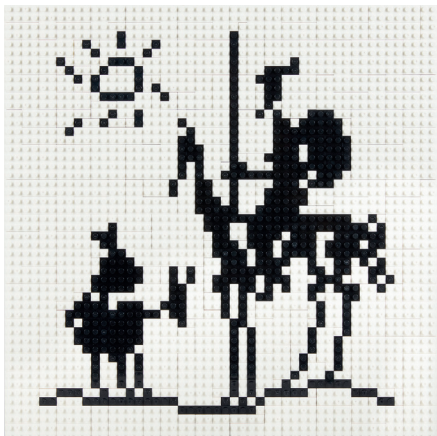
2017

Wallpaper

Dimensions variable

Between 2015 and 2016, Ai Weiwei filmed a documentary about the refugee crisis titled *Human Flow*. *Odyssey* emerged from this ambitious project that took him to twenty-three countries and forty refugee camps and yielded over 600 interviews. This research evidenced that the phenomenon of forced migration was rooted in multiple factors that required a broad and historical perspective.

For the wallpaper, the artist and his team strived to create a visual language inspired by ancient Greek and Egyptian carvings, pottery and wall paintings. This aesthetic framework was then populated with contemporary imagery drawn from social media and the internet, as well as with brand-new content produced by the artist. Following a frieze-like arrangement with a central axis, the work addresses modern conflicts and is articulated around six themes: war, ruins, the journey, crossing the sea, refugee camps and demonstrations. The drawing took over six months to complete due to its complexity.



Don Quixote

2024

Toy bricks

40 x 40 cm

Don Quixote was part of Ai Weiwei's childhood, as his home contained an edition that belonged to his father, the renowned writer Ai Qing. The artist recalls that, living in the remote deserts of Xinjiang, he found the figure of Don Quixote fascinating and exotic.

This work by Ai Weiwei is based on a drawing by Pablo Picasso, published in August 1955 in the weekly *Les Lettres françaises* to mark the 350th anniversary of the printing of Cervantes's novel. It is not the first time that Ai has used this motif; back in 1977 he created another version of the drawing on a ceramic plate. In addition to serving as the springboard of this exhibition, it reminds us of the artist's relationship with literature and the written word, illustrated by the blog he kept on Sina Weibo from 2005 (when he was invited to join) until 2010 (when it was shut down by authorities).

Artist:

Ai Weiwei

Dates:

November 9, 2024
– May 18, 2025

Curator:

Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya

Halls: 3-6

Coordinator:

Carlos Ordás

Descriptions of works:

Montserrat Pis Marcos

Cover: AI WEIWEI. *Don Quixote*, 2024.

All images courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio, unless otherwise specified.

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