**Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace: Weekend Oct 2, 2014**

Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace? I’m not imagining it. Until December 14, work by China’s most famous dissident artist is on display in the stately home of the Duke of Marlborough. It is hard to imagine a more unlikely location for Ai Weiwei’s largest ever UK show. Lord Edward Spencer Churchill had a long held ambition to launch a contemporary art programme at Blenheim. This internationally significant exhibition is the result. He founded the Blenheim Art Foundation with the aim of breaking the segregation between historic houses and galleries and has admirably achieved his aim: the Ai Weiwei exhibits sit beautifully in the spaces allocated.

Like all of his generation and background, Weiwei and his family spent many years in difficult circumstances exiled from Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. (1966-1976) *Marble Chair*, the empty chair in the second state room is poignant because one of the few objects his family was allowed to keep in exile was a traditional yoke back chair.

After the death of Mao in 1976, Chinese artists began to see Western art often for the first time. Ai Weiwei began his artistic career in 1979 with a group of frustrated radical young artists who called themselves The Stars, (Xingxing). They mounted an illegal exhibition on the railings outside the National Gallery in Beijing. When it was closed down by the police, they marched to Tiananmen Square demanding artistic freedom to be met by serried rows of white uniformed police. They survived, were celebrated and many including Ai Weiwei left for the West.

From 1983 −1993 Ai Weiwei honed his art in the USA. In The Gallery you’ll find 55 photographs from that period alongside never before exhibited photographs taken by Andy Warhol on his visit to China in 1982. With echoes of Warhol, Ai Weiwei painted − Coca Cola style − a pair of Han Dynasty vases with a Caomina logo. They are easy to miss because they look classic on the table at the side of the Great Hall. What you can’t possibly miss is the impressive nine meter high *Chandelier* (2002) which took three days to hang.

Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing when his father was taken ill. He pioneered a new wave of warehouse studios and at that time was appreciated by the government who commissioned him to design the Bird’s Nest Stadium for the Olympics. 2008 was the year when everything changed because the artist championed the parents of children who died in the Szechuan earthquake (because of poor quality school buildings). Since then he has been badly beaten up, arrested in 2011 and was held for 81 days without charge. His passport has been confiscated so this exhibition has been designed in a ‘virtual’ world. Successfully − as demonstrated by the site specific *Soft Ground* wool carpet leading to the China Ante−Room and the seminal *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*: *Gold* made in 2010 lined up by the dining table in the salon. It is entertaining to spot one’s own birth sign.

The placing of the smaller objects has been equally well chosen. The artist has created a new work called *Cao –* the Chinese character meaning grass*.* Each grass - like sculpture is carved from a single piece of marble. These beautiful pieces are located in the passage leading to the library next to the Blanche de Chine − perfect!

Porcelain was invented in China and plays a large role in this exhibition. The most fun has to be the 2300 small porcelain crabs in the Red Drawing Room overlooked by a Van Dyke.

There are more sombre pieces. Located on the bed in which Churchill was born is a pair of wooden handcuffs: a reminder of the metal ones used on the artist during his detention in 2011. The large porcelain *Cube* in the chapel appears beautiful but somehow feels like a cage. I’d love to describe all the exhibits located inside and outside but space doesn’t permit so you’ll have to go and see for yourselves!