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Artist Ai Weiwei explores definition of freedom at Alcatraz



Most people who take the ferry to Alcatraz are going to tour the legendary former prison in San Francisco Bay. They may be surprised to find seven new works by Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei, who was detained by Chinese authorities for nearly three months in 2011. Special correspondent Mina Kim of KQED reports.



TRANSCRIPT

JUDY WOODRUFF: Finally tonight: A world-renowned artist barred from leaving his home country of China explores the idea of freedom in a new exhibit in America's most notorious

prison.

San Francisco Public Media KQED's Mina Kim's takes us behind the scenes.

MINA KIM: So much about this exhibit is different, beginning with how you get there, by ferry to an island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Most of these passengers are going to tour the legendary former prison Alcatraz.

Within its crumbling walls, they may stumble upon seven new works by superstar artist and Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei. We came to see the process of installing one of the exhibits.

And this exhibit with the kites will take up an entire space?

CHERYL HAINES, FOR-SITE Foundation: An entire space. There are more than 100 kites that comprise the body of the dragon.

MINA KIM: Exhibit curator Cheryl Haines dreamed up the idea of bringing Ai's art to Alcatraz three years ago. The artist had just been released from an 81-day detention by Chinese authorities for alleged tax evasion. Ai's supporters say it was more about suppressing his relentless criticism of China's government.

CHERYL HAINES: I mean, really, one of the baseline concepts of this exhibition is, what is freedom? And as you walk through the various works, you will get a sense that this is a very central theme, very important idea that he is addressing here.

MINA KIM: Ai has been unable to leave China since 2011, after authorities confiscated his passport.

Finding freedom within constraints is a worthy challenge, Ai said from his Beijing studio. Still, his inability to leave the country is hard.

AI WEIWEI, (through interpreter): For an artist to be unable to see the venue and to be unable to interact with the audience, if I had to imagine the toughest restriction of an exhibition, that would be it.

MINA KIM: Ai Weiwei conveys the situation in this giant dragon kite installed inside a prison where prisoners once laundered uniforms for the army.

CHERYL HAINES: It will be suspended above the viewer. It will be flying. It will be free, but it's also restricted within the building, so this is a really interesting conversation between control and freedom.

HOWARD LEVITT, National Park Service: But what does it mean to be in prison? What is a prison?

MINA KIM: So much about this exhibit is different, beginning with how you get there.

HOWARD LEVITT: For most visitors to Alcatraz, this is probably the only prison they are ever going to be close to. And so what thoughts are evoked when they come to a prison? And we felt that the Ai Weiwei exhibition would be an opportunity for visitors to explore those thoughts a little bit.

MINA KIM: The Park Service had to seek clearing from the U.S. State Department to host one of the most vocal critics of China's government on federal land.

The challenges of bringing the work to Alcatraz only add to the intrigue. The entire island is a historical site without a power grid or a freshwater source.

AI WEIWEI (through interpreter): We basically cannot touch the walls. We cannot touch anything. We cannot add anything. It's a hanging installation. Like the prisoners themselves, it is only there for a period of time.

MINA KIM: This piece was shipped by barge, then pushed up a 13-story hill. The five-ton transforms solar collectors from Tibet into a massive bird's nest.

Some of Alcatraz's best-known prisoners include Chicago gangster Al Capone or the Anglin brothers, who plotted a daring escape. Less known are the political prisoners held on the island during the time Alcatraz was a military prison.

Nicki Phelps oversees visitor programs at Alcatraz.

NICKI PHELPS, Golden Gates National Parks Conservancy: During the military prison era, around 18925, there was a group of Hopi Indian elders that were brought to Alcatraz because they had refused to send their children to school under the Army's direction. They wanted to raise their children in the Hopi tradition.

MINA KIM: Ai references that history in the sound installation. A Hopi chant echoes against the walls of a former psychiatric observation cell.

Here, a row of decaying cells is the setting for the poetry and music of people imprisoned around the world for expressing their beliefs, the late musician Fela Kuti, who decried police repression in Nigeria, and feminist rockers Pussy Riot, who criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In a piece titled "Trace," the faces of more than 175 dissidents are fashioned in LEGOs. Many are largely unknown. Ai wants to make them familiar.

CHERYL HAINES: And to have the opportunity to find out more about their lives and their personal stories has been deeply enriching.

MINA KIM: The exhibit includes biographies of these men and women being held in the Middle East, Africa, Asia.

And there's Edward Snowden, wanted for leaking U.S. classified documents. Some consider him a patriot, others a traitor. Here, visitors are being asked to write pre-addressed postcards to exiles and people Ai deems prisoners of conscience.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Chad Coerver says Ai walks a fine line.

CHAD COERVER, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: There's a huge debate in the art world about exactly who Ai Weiwei is, in the sense that there's the folks in the art world are deeply concerned that he's too much of an activist and not enough of an artist. The folks in the activist world think that he's too much of an artist and not an activist.

MINA KIM: There's no doubt that Ai benefits by being both. His activism has given him a stardom that few other artists enjoy. His artwork is in high demand and a staff of dozens implement his ideas.

But will Ai's work effect change?

CHAD COERVER: Art done well has the ability to communicate viscerally issues that — or to snake its way into us through beauty or through the way we view it that a stray demonstration or a poster would never achieve.

MINA KIM: The show runs until the April 26.