

Ai Weiwei is branching out

Yorkshire Sculpture Park has a coup on its hands, and a tree in 99 parts, as the Chinese artist's work returns to Britain

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Ai Weiwei in the Chapel/ Ursula Von Rydingsvard

Yorkshire Sculpture Park; Thursday
to 2 Nov / 4 April until 4 Jan

Out in the countryside, among sycamores and laurels jewelled with bright raindrops, stands a tree of another kind entirely – not born of nature but made by many human hands. Its boughs open like gesturing arms. Its iron trunk is turning the colour of rusty lichen in the English weather, and each branch ends expressively, as if making a point. A thing of metal, it looks improbably alive.

Ai Weiwei's *Iron Tree* has come all the way from Beijing. Its 99 component parts are cast from the branches, roots and trunks of many trees gathered by many people across China. Even if you didn't know this, you would sense the great convergence of individual elements, all pieced together, all joined with nuts and bolts and delicate welding that looks like silver stitching in the rainy sunlight. Everything unites in the vast body of the trunk; everything comes together.

It is a vision of hope – one people, one body – and majestically beautiful, a tree that speaks for its many selves.

It is also a coup for Yorkshire Sculpture Park. The show of Ai's work opening at YSP this week is

his first in a British public gallery since *Sunflower Seeds* at Tate Modern in 2010 (the tree was still receiving its last branch, so that no photograph was yet available), after which the artist was imprisoned on false charges for 81 days. He remains in virtual house detention, prohibited from travelling outside Beijing. Yet his art travels where he cannot – all over the world.

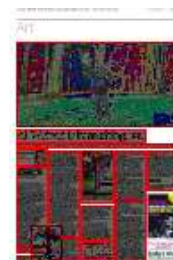
In Yorkshire, Ai's work is positioned in and around an 18th-century chapel in the open parkland. St Bartholomew's has been restored to its former beauty, a miniature Palladian church with high white spaces and black woodwork where nothing decorative detracts from the secluded austerity.

In the aisle, Ai will be showing 45 Chinese chairs dating from the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), each different – and separate in its own forcefield of space – and yet the same, so that the connection between the sitter and the seat, as well as the individual and the human race, is irresistibly evoked. Some are larger, or more ceremonial, than others, inspiring thoughts of all the different Chinese people who once sat here before the modern viewer.

For you will be invited to take a seat, a freedom not open to your Chinese contemporaries (a freedom not permitted in most public galleries, where we're not allowed to touch the art). These chairs were the preserve of the privileged, but now they

represent democracy: come on into the body of the kirk.

Readings from the poems of Ai's father will be given throughout the show. Ai Qing, considered one



of China's most important 20th-century poets, was sent with his entire family (including the baby Ai) to a labour camp for "rightism" under Mao. This seems a most sympathetic tribute from YSP across the world to the artist.

And in return, Ai has sent a white marble sculpture of one of the scarlet Chinese lanterns with which he has festooned the CCTV cameras that have been permanently trained upon his house now for several years. The ephemeral becomes permanent – a mordant joke, given this relentless surveillance – and strongly defiant. "The art always wins," says Ai. "Anything can happen to me, but the art will stay."

Art can take you anywhere, but it can also bring the lives of others home to you: a fragment of China, and of Ai's endurance in that faraway land, is suddenly here on a green hill in Yorkshire. And as the year turns, the iron tree will continue to change colour and appearance, susceptible to the shifting seasons, to moisture and

the hands that touch it. Like the form – and the citizens – it represents, the tree will alter and grow.

Ai's tree is serendipitously twinned with an immense sculpture standing sentry at the entrance to the park: a towering growth that seems very like an ancient tree yet also like an ancient rock – the Old Man of Hoy, say, or a spire in Monument Valley. It is the work of the American sculptor **Ursula von Rydingsvard**, and it looks as if it must have taken almost as long to make as to grow.

Assembled out of several thousand chunks of hacked cedar the span of a hand, all cast together in bronze, it has a patinated surface that recalls agates and geological strata. At night it's lit from within, so that the lacy filigree seems to glow; an overwhelming sight.

The sculpture is called *Bronze Bowl With Lace*, which says something about Rydingsvard and her art. Spoons and shovels, bowls and blankets, it has a

humble humanity at its core even when the works are 40ft tall and resemble crags or tornadoes.

Blackened Word is characteristic: a colossal cliff, undulating like coastal strata, it is tough and monolithic and yet kindly – you can shelter, or play, in its folds.

Rydingsvard, now in her 70s, has been working with cedar – sawing, chiselling, hacking at the obdurate wood – for so long that she has become allergic to her material and is forced to wear protective suits. But still she continues, making these grottoes, cliffs and enclaves, these forms that resemble rockpools or baths, or contain both in their multitude and which combine architectural scale with intimate detail.

Even when the pieces tend towards gigantism – a roiling tidal wave of wood, or a rough-hewn spoon fit for some greedy Colossus – they bear the marks of her hard-working hands. This is apparent in the hacking and chiselling, the human proportion of each chunk and the rapid movements of her saw, blade and file. Each piece is put together with immense care like the patches in a quilt or the cobbles in some old road, and each piece is part of

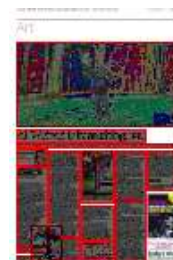
some almost overwhelmingly complex and monumental whole.

Yet the most beautiful piece here is not much bigger than a human being and by far the most delicate vision. Made in the same way as all the others, but cast in ice-blue resin, *Elegantka II* resembles some kind of climatic uprush, something like a small tornado, yet also like a vertical glacier rising out of the earth. Twinkling, faceted, exquisite, it takes the Yorkshire light into its crystal core – a floating body of blue air.

Online gallery

For more images from Yorkshire Sculpture Park go to: observer.co.uk/new-review

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Ai Weiwei's Iron Tree, 2013, which will be the centrepiece of YSP's show.



'Like a vertical glacier': Elegantka II, 2014 by Ursula von Rydingsvard. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Lelong and YSP/Jonty Wilde



Ai Weiwei in Kassel, Germany in 2007 with a Qing dynasty chair. He is currently forbidden by the Chinese authorities from leaving Beijing. Photograph by Andreas Dahlmeier

