

rate economic or political successes). The phrase “grass mud horse” is another pun, being phonetically similar to “f*** your mother”. Here, it could be seen that the Central Committee is being encouraged to do just that. The use of a “grass mud horse” toy to cover your privates thus becomes an obscenity aimed at the most serious and sacred body at the centre of state power.

Ai went further. He took pictures of more and more people together, all naked except for a grass mud horse. They were artists, internet users, lawyers and activists, and included Shanghai civil rights campaigner Feng Zhenghu. Ai’s creative talent and his inclination to nudity reinforced each other through the use of political metaphors.

On April 3, Ai was seized by security agents at Beijing airport, as he was about to board a plane to Hong Kong. After he disappeared into incarceration, internet users, including government-paid agents (the “50-cent crew”) searched frantically for nude pictures of Ai. One series of images became widely known under the online moniker “One Tiger, Eight Breasts”. Many interpretations of these images have been offered.

The classic interpretation of the group image runs like this: Ai sits in command at the centre. His manner is straightforward, but almost accidentally his hands cover the vital parts, which evokes an illusion to the Central Committee. Ai’s hands rest on his left knee, indicating a resolute leftist stance.

The long-haired young woman on the left of the picture sits with her legs crossed on a backless chair. She symbolises the intellectual, since she has her own position and posture, but she has no backing and cannot be relied on. She’s playing with her hair while her body is inclined towards the party centre, which means whatever intellectuals are playing at, they will always be dragged away by the government.

The woman on the right (Ye Haiyan, an activist from Wuhan, Hubei province) has a well-rounded figure and wears a jade pendant and a watch, so she’s the bourgeoisie; she has a position, which can be relied on. Her hands are kept at her right side, hinting at her rightist standpoint. In the composition of the whole picture, there is an obvious distance between the party centre and the bourgeoisie. They are on polite and formal terms. The figures of the bourgeoisie and the party centre can be seen in other pictures, with different postures, meaning they have secret dealings.

The short-haired woman in the centre, sharing a seat with Ai, doesn’t have her own position to sit on, so she must have been standing and smiling politely before she was pulled in and made to rest with the Central Committee. She is the media, kept in her place by the party. Finally, the girl at the back having to hide all the way behind the chairs is a migrant labourer and therefore in a classless position.

It’s all in the eye of the beholder, whether you see moral turpitude, a romantic situation or a tableau of political hints.

This picture continues the style of Ai’s other nude art projects. There is a natural and carefree attitude in the poses and expressions of the models. The pictures are not indecent – and the interpretation above does seem to be rather far-fetched, on the whole.

The group picture was taken when Ye Haiyan (her name means “sea swallow”) visited Ai in his atelier last year. The other women were online fans. They had come to know about each other on Twitter.

Ye was deeply impressed by Ai’s documentaries from the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and also by his film on Yang Jia, who had broken into a police station and stabbed six policemen to death. Yang was sentenced to death but received a lot of public sympathy, pointing to widespread anger and frustration.

After seeing those documentaries, Ye searched the web and learned about Ai’s art – chairs with three legs, modified ancient tables and coffins – and found pictures of Ai and his (male) artist companions in the nude. She was impressed by his approach and took her daughter to a gathering for earthquake victims, organised by Ai and his friends.

Later, Ye went with a friend to Ai’s Beijing studio. The artist often invited visitors to take part in his performance pieces. When her friend suggested it, Ye agreed to do it.

“Apart from the photographer, there was no one else around,” Ye wrote in an internet posting, on April 20. “We took our clothes off there at the atelier. It was a serious occasion for us. We felt natural, as if we were wearing clothes, but if you’ve never had such an experience, maybe you can’t even face a human body, because you feel weak, or filthy. We were very proud when we had finished. Ai named it *Open Encounter*.”

About the picture, she wrote: “I don’t think there is any allegory, it’s very simple, just about the human body; but I don’t reject any interpretations, you can try out how far your thoughts will take you.”

Ai’s nude projects may have some spiritual common ground with aspects of Zen and chivalry in ancient China. Some Zen monks liked to

bare their chest and shed their clothes. Zen carries a tradition of seeking direct access to the heart and soul, stripping away anything else. “See the basic nature and attain Buddha-hood” is a known phrase. There is a certain theatrical aspect in Zen Buddhism, with abrupt language and actions. Irreverence is very important. The spontaneous and carefree attitude exhibited in Ai’s performances comes close to this clownish aspect of Zen. And the chivalrous tradition, originating about 2,000 years ago during the Han dynasty, stresses a few basic values, which I also see expressed in Ai’s championing of basic rights.

WHO IS AFRAID OF AI WEIWEI? Ai has many names. “*Wei*” is a basic character, one of the 12 earthly branches used for time-keeping; commonly, “*wei*” means “not yet”. The family name Ai is also a simple character, a name Weiwei’s father, Ai Qing, chose for himself at the beginning of his artistic career. To confuse government-paid internet agents, Ai has used the Chinese characters for “*ai*” and “*wei*” in many combinations. The most common abbreviation in roman letters is aiww, as used for his Twitter account. Who is afraid of Ai Weiwei? Well, one thing is clear: Ai himself acted as if he feared nothing and no one.

“When state power concentrates its affections on you, you feel important”



Ai does not just like to get naked by himself or with friends, he has also helped to lay bare “China”, from the Central Committee to regional administrations. His approach is different from the serious mien of the traditional dissident intellectual. He has his own brand of indignation, mixed with an easy humour, to face the violence of state power.

Ai knew prison was waiting for him, that he could even lose his life.

“Who says I am not afraid? I am very much afraid, but if I stop and do nothing, it would feel even more terrible,” he told me in 2009, at the opening of an exhibition of his in Munich, Germany. Ai had a bandage on his head after having had emergency surgery as a result of a beating he’d received from police in Chengdu, Sichuan province.

Ai’s 40-odd collaborators have a strong team spirit. In 2009, artist Yang Licao, who worked at Ai’s studio, told Taiwan’s *China Times*: “Ai Weiwei is not just one man on a quest. There is a band of fellow Don Quixotes riding along with him, and behind every one of them is a very dedicated crew. And behind all of them are untold and unseen masses of people. They have no other common goal than to lead a decent life.”

Ai has two historic achievements: he is the most well-known and internationally influential Chinese artist and he is the most well-known protester and opposition force in mainland politics. In these dark days, he has become a mythical figure, riding forth, naked on his trusted grass mud horse. ■

Translation by Jacqueline and Martin Winter

Lu Qing, who would become Ai’s wife, is pictured in Tiananmen Square, on June 4, 1994, the fifth anniversary of the bloody crackdown.