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Wang Xieda

by Stephanie Buhmann

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Sages' Sayings 026, 2006, bronze, 37 x 33 1/2 x 11 3/4 in.
Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, NY

Based on the title of Wang Xieda's first New York solo show, one might expect a focus on figurative or narrative content. Describing a grammatical construction, "Subject Verb Object" seems to imply the depiction of subjects engaged in actions that further involve objects. Wang's works, however, do not encourage a quick, literal interpretation. Visually (at least to Western eyes), the sculptures of the Shanghai-based artist appear non-objective. They are experienced abstractly at first, and it is only after discovering Wang's source of inspiration that the exhibition title begins to resonate.

Cast in bronze or paper pulp, the sculptures embrace biomorphic forms that nevertheless follow the rules of geometric organization. In Wang's work, a curvilinear form still hints at the grid. Overall, his works reveal a sensibility evocative of Western Modernism. His affinity for clarity, fine linear movement, as well as his ability to imbue his works with a sense of weightlessness, connect him to a range of well-known predecessors. Giacometti's surfaces, Arp's potent simplification, and the considered balance in the sculptures of David Smith plausibly stand behind Wang's work. The substantial group of sculptures gathered in his American debut made clear that his stylistic choices are consistent. His voice is confident and convincingly conscious of its cultural heritage.

Despite the fact that Wang's work fits visually into a Western context, its objective is very much rooted in Chinese culture. He has spent the past 20 years studying the history of the Chinese written language. The works of his so-called "Sages' Sayings" series are inspired by Chinese

calligraphy of the fourth century, when the brush was introduced as a writing tool. Brushed calligraphy added a new form of expressive individuality to the existing repertoire of characters carved in wood, bamboo, or stone, and the “Sages’ Sayings” bronzes are derived from these ancient forms. By translating calligraphic forms into sculpture, Wang creates a fascinating link between ancient and contemporary Chinese culture.



Sages' Sayings 0902, 2009, Rattan, paper pulp, ink, silica gel
57 x 20 1/8 x 11 5/16 in.
Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, NY

In this show, his bronzes occupied a long, U-shaped pedestal that spanned almost the entire main exhibition space. Accentuating the elegantly elongated forms, the installation allowed for a two-fold experience. Works could be considered separately or in sequence, one after the other, which related the act of viewing to the act of reading.

“Subject Verb Object” also featured several recent sculptures made from rattan and paper pulp. At times suspended in mid air, these comparatively ethereal white works were primarily defined through interplays of light and shadow, while the bronzes focused instead in form. Overall, Wang’s work is characterized by nuanced distribution of mass, as well as contemplation of positive and negative space, dark and light, and biomorphic and geometric principles. These are, of course, some of the most important and longstanding fundamentals in art, but Wang succeeds in reinterpreting them to create works that generate a sense of timelessness and permanence.