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**The Heart Of Wood: Wang Keping * The
Fourth Sculpture Biennale Ein Hod, Israel
* UCLA Sculpture Garden * Reviews**



In The Heart Of Wood

A veteran of Beijing's influential Stars Group in the late 1970s, Wang Keping has refined his themes and techniques as a sculptor since his move to Paris in 1984.

By John Millichap

In 1979, the *Stars (Xing Xing)* exhibition in the park to the east of the China Art Gallery in Beijing provided the forum for a new art hitherto unseen in China. Although short-lived, the show enjoyed great popular success and presented for the first time an alternative Chinese art that, in its often savage forms and direct social commentary, stood outside official orthodoxy. More remarkable, it took place at a time when the dissemination of Western ideas on art and art history in China had yet to take place on a broad front, and in this way it was an entirely unique expression of Chinese "Modernity" with little Western influence. Today, it is difficult to imagine the impact of the show on those who first saw it. Its influence, however, on the development of contemporary art in China and, perhaps more important, the *idea* of contemporary art in China, cannot be underestimated, ultimately pointing the way for successive exhibitions and art groups such as the important New Wave Movement of 1985.¹

Born in the same year as the founding of the People's Republic of China, 1949, sculptor Wang Keping was one of the original members of the *Stars* Group. Now resident in Paris, he recently returned to China to present a new exhibition of his sculptures at Hong Kong's University of Science and Technology that included both new works and those included in the original *Stars* exhibition.

Made up of 50 works executed entirely in hard, dark wood—Wang's preferred medium and one from which he rarely departs—the exhibition took the form of a mini-retrospective tracing his sculptural development from the late 1970s to the present. Sadly, the far from adequate conditions of the University's exhibition hall did little to accentuate the

individual qualities of the works, which are, with only a few exceptions, made on a relatively modest and easily handled scale, inviting a more intimate relationship with the viewer than the echoing and cavernous hall could accommodate. Indeed, one of the strongest and most immediate impressions the visitor had of these works is of the exquisite surface finishing, a quality which is crucial to Wang's sculpture, and something that would have been better-served by smaller and more distinct series of groups than the rather incoherent mass formation that was seen there.

Typically, and particularly in the case of his more recent works, the forms in Wang's sculpture are "accidental" in the sense that they derive from "found" pieces of wood, in which interference by the artist in the formal integrity of the piece is kept to a minimum. It is then the finishing of the works—the drawing out or modifying the natural qualities of the wood—which is one of the principal roles of the artist. This Wang does using a variety of techniques that most often includes burning and polishing with wax to bring the surface of the works to a high shine. The burning process also has the effect of darkening the colors to a rich brown that, without the evidence of the wood grain, in some cases suggests bronze. "In the large pieces I make them rougher, but for smaller pieces I try to make the viewer want to touch it [the work], to handle it," says Wang. "There are three good things about burning the wood. Firstly, it makes the works look heavy, almost like bronze. Secondly, it won't get dirty, and the third point is the texture that is produced. Burning the wood also helps to stabilize the wood so that it won't decay."

Crucially, it is also this exacting process which distances the works by a few steps from their natural state, giving them an independence and a distinct and unique life of their own. In this way,



Wang Keping, *Big Mouth*, no date given, wood, no dimensions given. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.



Wang Keping, *Couple X*, 1996, 54 cm (H). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

similarities can be drawn between Wang's sculpture and the concept of the traditional Chinese "scholar's rock," in which meditative and spiritual significance was ascribed to found pieces of stone or rock that, through their naturally occurring forms, suggested the image of animals or landscapes. What we then observe in Wang's work is a sophisticated balance between the preservation of the spontaneous and serendipitous natural forms and the forceful articulation of their innate energy through the discreet intervention of the artist.

In a work such as *Couple X* (1996), Wang conjures the image of a couple embracing, the chance occurrence of knots and contortions in the wood conveniently resembling intertwining limbs and orifices, while in the animalistic *Big Mouth*, which also includes some carved alterations by the artist, the snout-like head and gaping mouth are the assimilation of chance features in the wood. In both these cases, however, as elsewhere, the blurring of features which could loosely be described as human, and those which recall more animal forms, lend the works a strongly spiritual dimension that suggests primitive icons and alludes to the basic forces in nature—an earthy sexuality and eroticism, and a mysterious unseen

life force. And, although this kind of essentialism is a common feature of much stone and wood carving by contemporary Chinese artists, it is difficult to think of many who manage it in such an adroit manner. "The newer works are more simplistic in form, but emotionally stronger," says Wang. "They express a general side of human nature—not just sex or love, [but a] more general quality. Some of them are obviously human and some animals, but there are some in between: a mixing of the two."

In this manner, Wang's sculptures achieve a form of universalism, as a result both of their principal themes and the way in which they are presented to the viewer, in much the same way that the work of sculptors such as Matisse, Brancusi, and Henry Moore contain a resonance that transcends national and cultural boundaries (drawn as they are from such a variety of disparate cultural sources). And, while there are quite profound differences between the work of these artists and that of Wang Keping, he does admit that they became important influences and reference points in the development of his own work. And, it certainly takes no great scholar to spot the thematic and formal similarities between Matisse's celebrated *Back* series and Wang's own translation of the theme in his *Back of a Woman* series, or the sensual reclining figures of Henry Moore and Wang's similarly wide and curvy treatment of the female form. "The thinking and the idea behind the work is really very simple," says Wang, "and is like the kind of essentialism you see in [the work of] Giacometti and Brancusi. I also like Matisse and his *Back* works were probably quite influential for me."

But despite these very distinct influences, as Wang points out, audiences often have quite different reactions to his work. "When Chinese people see my works, they see something Western in it," he says. "But in shows in France, visitors say they see something Chinese in them. Some people even say they look African, so there is perhaps a mix of everything. The most important thing is that they come from me."

Certainly Wang's development as a sculptor does not follow the typical pattern

of most artists who come up through the art colleges. As a young man he was a Red Guard and during the Cultural Revolution worked on the land and in factories before becoming a scriptwriter in the 1970s. It was not until 1978 that he first began experimenting seriously with sculpture and carving in wood. "In 1978, there were a lot of foreigners coming into China from Hong Kong," he



Wang Keping, *Woman I*, 1996, wood, 50 cm (H). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

says. "We used to like to exchange gifts with them, but because I couldn't exchange a script, I decided to make little sculptures out of wood."

Impressed at his proficiency and the small works he was making, his friends told him that he shouldn't be exchanging his sculptures for tapes of Teresa Tang (the late Taiwan pop star). It was also at this time that the seed for the *Stars* exhibition was first sown. "During the late 1970s, China began to open up after the Gang of Four. At that time, there was a bunch of artists; poets and visual artists, most of them self-taught, who were very motivated and less influenced by Western culture. They were young kids making art because they wanted to."

"The idea of the *Stars* exhibition was to demand artistic freedom and break from the official form of art. Some of the works might seem quite naive by today's standards, but they had a great deal of importance for artists [in China] at that time. Later, during the 1980s, artists became more influenced by the media and sources from the West. In the 1970s, artists had to be more self-motivated."

Also included in the current exhibition in Hong Kong is *Silence* (1978), the work Wang contributed to the *Stars* exhibition and which stands in stark and gruesome contrast to his current sculptures. Similarly executed in wood, it features the head of a figure whose mouth is filled by a large wooden plug which appears to be thrust right inside the figure's head. It is a fairly unsophisticated, but at the same time frightening and powerfully direct protest at the effective silencing of alternative art forms in China at the time of its making, and in its "angry young man" stance, is certainly some way from his recent, more lyrical works. It is, however, a succinct crystallization of a popular feeling and the frustration felt by many at a system that was out of step with the changing times. In this, and his other caricatures, including *Idol* (1980), the image of a grim-faced soldier or official, Wang first shows his ability to access and present in a condensed form a "general

idea" or tone, and in this way, these works indicate the pattern of his evolving work, if not the subject matter.

Shortly after the demise of the *Stars* movement, and as a result of an environment which Wang felt was increasingly inappropriate for the development of his sculpture, he decided to leave China for Paris, the city

to see what was happening outside, so I made the move to Paris as a way to broaden my mind."

Despite this move Wang has kept his eye on the changing conditions for artists in his native country and the work which has emerged over recent years. While critical of the general level of awareness in China to sculpture, he is guardedly optimistic for the future. "Chinese [people] haven't got a good knowledge of sculpture. They like to see [the work of] famous sculptors, but they don't recognize the artist's position in art history. They only recognize the artist's name but don't take the artist's position in art history into account. Sculpture is not so widely followed and there are not so many sculptors and even fewer good sculptors."

"The work of Ju Ming [from Taiwan] is quite good. The *Taichi* series is okay and there are a lot of them, but his other works are often a little superficial and lack the feeling of human nature. Another point is that everything large looks good."

"Art development in China is similar to the rest of the world and also to the course of art history; as good artists are sometimes not discovered until a long time afterwards, so it is difficult to see."

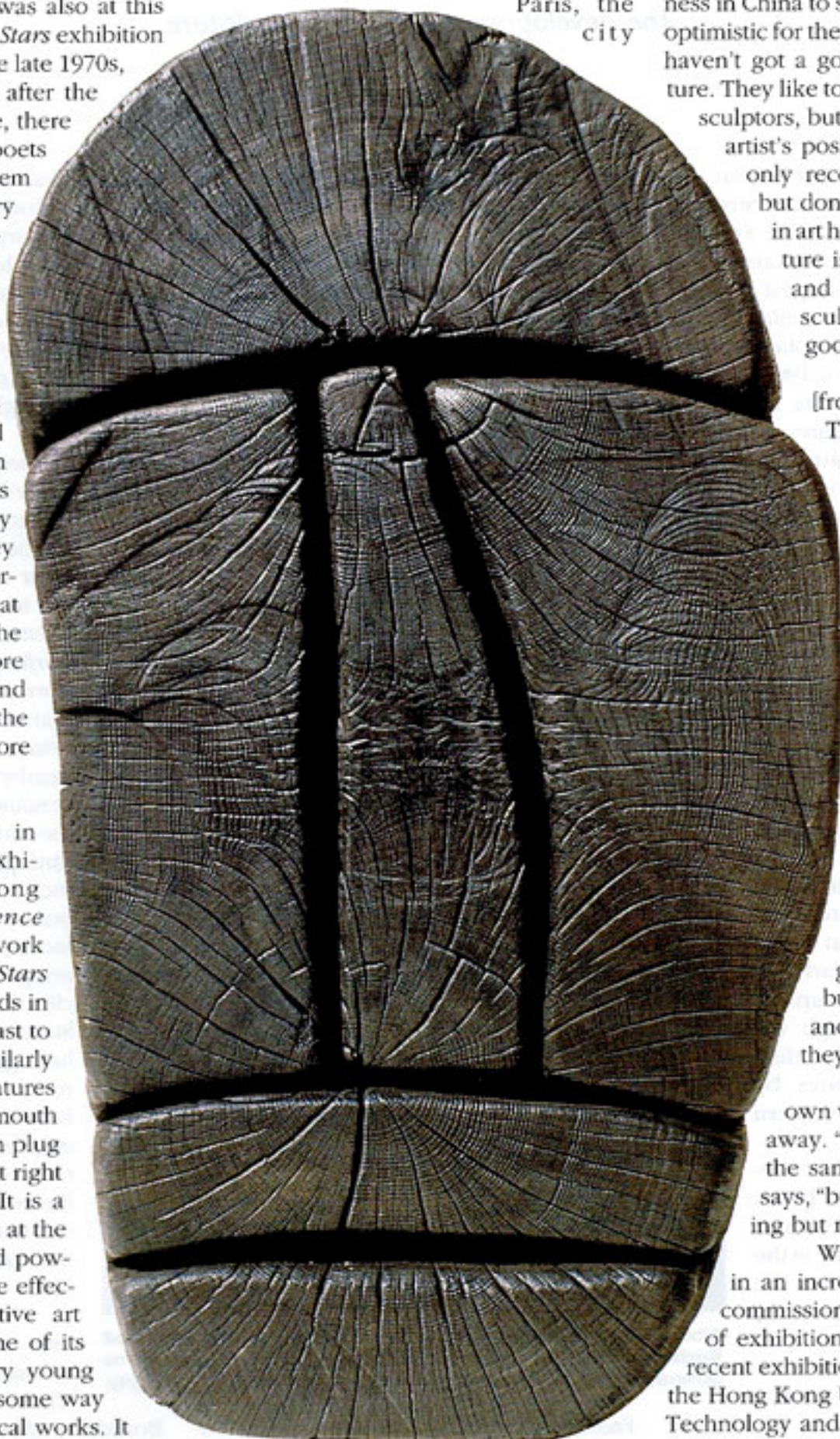
There definitely are some good sculptors in China but they are quite low down and don't get the support they should do."

For the future of his own work Wang is giving little away. "I will continue moving in the same direction as now," he says, "but will go ahead discovering but not repeating."

With Wang's involvement in an increasing number of public commissions and a steady program of exhibitions in the future, with the recent exhibition of the works shown at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and later at Alisan Fine Arts, the opportunities for Wang to move ahead has perhaps never been greater. Δ

Note:

1. Li Xianting: Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art, *Chinese New Art Post 1989*, Hanart T Z Exhibition Catalogue, 1993, Hong Kong.



Wang Keping, Head, 1996, wood, no dimensions given. Photograph: Courtesy of Alisan Fine Arts.

which has remained his base for the past 13 years. "At that time, during the late 1970s and the early 1980s in China, it was hard to develop your art because there was political pressure," says Wang. "It was hard