

HONG KONG

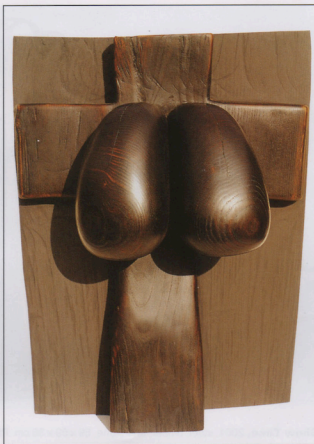
Wang Keping at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery

This gallery, with its high ceilings which give a feeling of spaciousness and light, was well suited to the works by the Paris-based Chinese sculptor, Wang Keping, 52. Though moderate in size, his sculptures give an impression of elemental power. The sculptures were in a variety of different woods, including ash, maple, wild cherry, oak, walnut, chestnut, and acacia. Most focused "the woman-goddess," the artist's favorite subject, and it is worth quoting his preface to the collection:

Woman is the incarnation of beauty / Divinity is the aspiration of the soul / The goddess unites femininity and divinity / To touch a sculpture of a woman / Is not to caress a woman / To sculpt a woman / Is not to recreate a woman / It is rather to give material form to femininity / And to feel the presence of a divinity.

Looking at these perfectly balanced forms, with such a sense of ease and harmony, it was hard to recall that Wang Keping was once best known as a revolutionary artist. On September 27, 1979, he was a prominent member of the dissident *Xing Xing (Stars)* group who tried to exhibit their work in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Beijing. When they were refused as "unofficial" artists, they draped their work on the railings of the Museum in a heroic gesture of defiance against artistic censorship. Although these artists were mostly untrained, they were politically and conceptually sophisticated. Their rejection of official art and enthusiasm for Western ideas were to become the basis for future Chinese avant-garde artists. In 1980, they were finally given a show inside the Museum but this leniency was only temporary. The Stars dissolved and many sought artistic freedom abroad, including Wang, who left for Paris in 1984.

At that time, Wang was



Wang Keping, *Déesse Criux*, 2000, acacia, height 47 cm. Photography: Courtesy of 10 Chancery Lane Gallery.

an amateur artist, whose sculpture career began with pieces of wood scavenged from the street, a penknife and a rusty saw. Soon he would develop a passion for wood. Much of his early work expressed bitterness and protest: his *Idol* (1978) was a satirical depiction of Mao Zedong sculpted in the image of the Buddha. In France, however, his work has developed away from political themes. By 1999, his giant but calm wooden figures were exhibited along the Champs Elysses.

Today his work is that of a mature artist who shows concern for the traditional values of sculpture—the balance of volumes, proportions, strength, and structure. One is reminded of the master Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), whose work coincidentally was recently displayed in Guangzhou alongside works by modern Chinese sculptors, who urged artists to "conceive form in depth". Wang's forms of women, or couples, as well as works on other themes such as *Oiseau* (1994), *Vase* (1999), or *Cravate I and II* (1999), have an instinctive unity of conception and feeling of wholeness.

The beauty and sensuality of Wang's figures are achieved largely thanks to a reduction or simplification of

form, in which the artist often focuses solely on the beautiful shapes of the woman's inclined head and full breasts, as in *Femme Assise* (2000). Detail is ignored in favor of the creation of a dominant rhythm. Thus, the artist conveys the very essence of the subject. In this respect, Wang's work is reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi's (1876-1957). "Simplicity is not a goal," Brancusi said, "but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, as one approaches the real meaning of things." Often this simplicity takes the form of a symmetry based on pairs: the spreading wings in *Ailes* and *Ailes II* (1999) echo the duality of *Fruit Mûr* (1999), as well as the breasts of *Femme Enceinte* (2000). Or, as in the striking *Cri* (1993), the only work in this show which expresses any anxiety, the focus is all on the open mouth, to the exclusion of any other facial features.

As well as the ideals of simplicity and purity, Wang shares with Brancusi a deep respect for the nature of his materials. Rather than dominating the wood in an aggressive way, Wang allows the sculptures to emerge and evolve "from within" the medium, respecting the individual characteristics of different woods and using every root, branch, knot,

and blemish as an integral feature in his work. In *Femme Debout* (2000), for example, a natural twist in the wood becomes a smooth coil of hair. The grain of the wood, too, is always exploited, even giving the illusion of plumage in *Oiseau* (1994). As a result, he produces very tactile works that evoke emotions of tenderness, as in the *Maternité* (2000), or passion, as in *Couple II* (1999), and display a perfect harmony between form and content. This unity of man and nature in Wang's work owes as much to the philosophy of Taoism as it does to Western art influences. He also acknowledges the influence of folk art figures.

Wang represents a complex organic form—woman—in a very simple way, with a complete understanding of, and communion with, his organic medium. Through his creative energy, each work thus becomes in a sense more than just a depiction of a woman, but rather a concentration of a vital force. Displaying the traditional sculptural values of solidity and substantiality, Wang's works with their smooth, voluptuously rounded contours of shoulders, arms, legs, pregnant stomachs, and pendulous breasts express a *joie de vivre* that engages the viewer. They are also reminiscent of primitive statues of the mother goddess, possessing a timeless, archetypal quality.

Hilary Binks