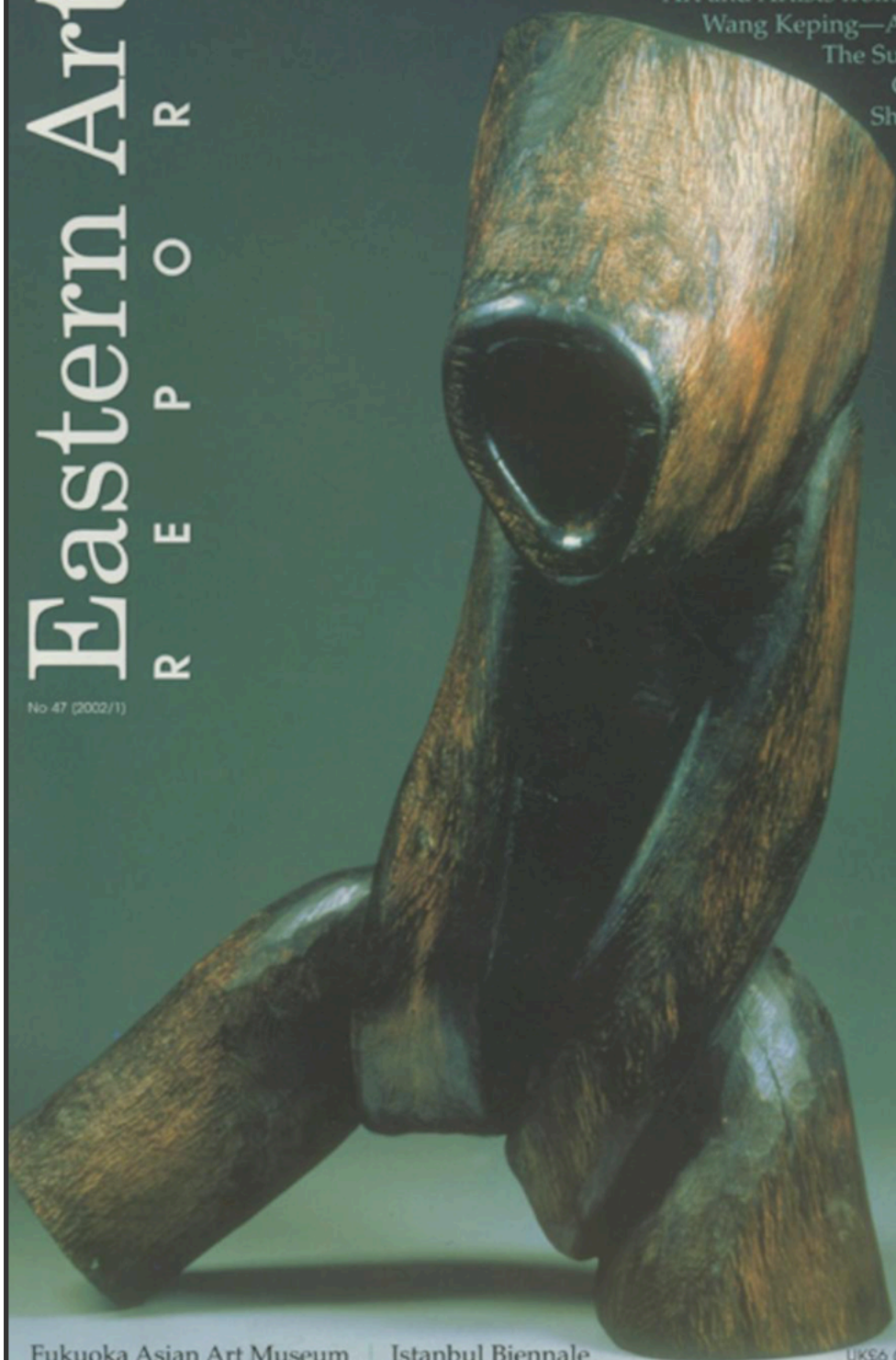


Eastern Art

R E P O R T

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Art and Artists from South Asia
Wang Keping—A Life in Art
The Sullivans and
Chinese Art
Shirin Neshat



Fukuoka Asian Art Museum | Istanbul Biennale
Text & Subtext | Ten Thousand *Li* | Floating Chimeras

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Woman seated against wall, 2000, chestnut, height 33cm

A Life in Art—Wang Keping in Conversation

SAJID RIZVI

Wang Keping looks extremely fit, as a man handling large chunks of wood ought to be, though it isn't something you expect upon your first encounter. Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui uses chainsaw for his particular style of sculptural creations, jagged edges all over in contrast to Wang Keping's smooth rounded forms, and probably less calories per cubic metre of new work created, but he too appears to be purpose-built for his vocation. Soon it may be possible to distinguish, say, in a gathering of recent art graduates the painterly slob from the DIY enthusiasts turned to respectability through the pursuit of sculpture.

Back to Wang Keping, however. He has the smirk of a man about to tell a

joke who would be quite happy if you went first. He would even laugh at a rotten story, just out of politeness. Easygoing. Accommodating. Content. And sharp as a laser.

We met in the backroom Michael Goedhuis uses as his Mount Street gallery office. Conversation was aided by an interpreter, Mandarin interspersed with French and English. Halfway through, as the talking went on, one interpreter withdrew and another helpfully took charge.

Before the interview I had been informed by Michael Sullivan's writings on Wang Keping in particular and the Stars group in general. Here in our midst in London resides another Stars member, Qu Leilei, so the antecedents were not unfamiliar.

In an introduction to the catalogue published by Hong Kong's new 10 Chancery Lane Gallery,¹ Sullivan relates how he first met Wang Keping in Beijing. When, in the autumn of 1979, Wang Keping and his friends in the Stars group hung their work on the railings of the National Museum of Fine Arts "no one, least of all Wang himself, could have imagined that twenty years later, his monumental sculpture would be displayed on the Champs-Élysées in company with the work of other leading sculptors from around the world. How did it happen?

"A year after the Stars' first groundbreaking exhibition," Sullivan writes, "they were allowed a show at the National Art Gallery, the authorities convinced that they would be

humiliated by its failure, and mend their ways. In fact, the exhibition drew such crowds that they were not allowed to show again. The Stars dissolved, and several of their leaders found refuge, and freedom, abroad."

Wang Keping took Sullivan and his wife Khoan to see a small room filled to the ceiling with pieces carved from "any pieces or lumps of wood he could scrounge." Sullivan recalls, "We were astonished by so much energy packed into a small room, by his passionate dedication to sculptured form, by his sense of fun. It was an exhilarating moment."

Although Sullivan does not mention the specific date of that meeting, it was during this period that Wang Keping produced the one piece that would have made his continued stay in China very uncomfortable indeed. *Idol*, 1978, presented a cynical view of the Mao Zedong era, turning the strongman into a Buddha-like figure and not quite as benign in appearance as the Buddha.²

The eventual migration to the West was nothing like a Solzhenitsyn-style homecoming, even though the Stars had been seen (often unfairly and inaccurately) to be taking their cue from western art trends, and the art market, news of which had been filtering through before the Internet. Wang Keping told Sullivan it was tough going for many years, having been relegated to the centre stage to the fringes of an audience.



"The temptation to attract attention by making his work

more 'Chinese' or by following current art fashions, was great," Sullivan writes. "But Wang Keping — and this is one of his most admirable qualities — never succumbed to such inducements. He never compromised. As a result, his road to recognition was long and hard.

"But it has come. Quite unspoil, unchanged -- in fact deeper and mature -- is his instinctive feeling for sculptural forms so powerful that his figures seem almost to burst through their skin — enlivened by his optimism, his sheer *joie de vivre*. We look at his work and feel, 'here is a happy man, at peace with himself and the world,' and he makes us feel good. No longer in the audience watching the show, he has once more become part of it."

Wang Keping



Wang Keping on the Champs-Élysées

But receiving Wang Keping while being seated in the West is not easy. There are things you would have seen earlier than his work, and they persist in your memory while you examine Wang Keping's creations and try to fathom his meanings. Anish Kapoor faced similar lines of enquiry after his Tate show that catapulted him to fame. His audience had one look at his Indianness, another at the earthly pigments of his sexually charged paintings, and drew conclusions. But more is known, or assumed about, Indian art in the West than about Chinese art's origins, and Wang Keping has had to cope with readymade comparisons with the familiar forms produced by western sculptors — Brancusi, Epstein and even Rodin. But, as Paul Serfaty writes in the catalogue cited earlier, "Wang Keping is not afraid of cues which reflect a wide range of cultural inputs. While remaining decidedly his own, his style echoes African and 'primitive' art, and modernism's adaptation of that art."³ Coming from a friendly reviewer/essayist, that would seem to sum up Wang Keping's art well. But during a long

conversation, Wang Keping remained firm on individuality. Edited excerpts:

Do you prefer any particular kind of wood?

WK. No

Do you still work with found wood as you used to do?

WK. Not really, because I find it more difficult to work with found wood.

Your work has evolved over the years. What has been the main source of inspiration?

WK. Mostly thinking and reflection, but I enjoy working under pressure. My work has also been inspired by a lot of political pressures. Furthermore, it has also evolved in response to another problem: having to cope with people's interpretation of my work, and being told, for instance, that my work copies Rodin or someone else. That adds to the pressures because my work, in fact, is my own, born of my genuine feelings and not derived from anyone else's work. That is an important point I would like to make.

WANG KEPING

1949 Born in Beijing, China
1979 One of the founders of the *Stars* group
1984 Moved to Paris

Individual Exhibitions

1979 Stars Group, Beijing
1980 Stars Group, National Museum of Fine Arts, Beijing
1983 Brooklyn Museum, New York
1985 Galerie Gérard Laubié, Paris
1986 Galerie de Graaf, Chicago
1987 Art Waves Gallery, New York
1988 Blue Hill Cultural Centre, New York
Hanart 2 Gallery, Hong Kong
Galerie Thomas, Munich
Galerie Zürcher, Paris
1989 Salon de Mars, Galerie Zürcher, Paris
Hanart 2 Gallery, Hong Kong
Hanart Gallery, Taipei
1990 Monte Gallery, Tokyo
Galerie Zürcher, Paris
1991 Galerie Leuenberger, Zürich
Galerie Zürcher, Paris
1993 Galerie Zürcher, Paris
Chinese Modern Art Centre, Osaka
Aidekman Art Centre, Boston
1994 Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt
Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt
1995 Galerie Zürcher, Paris
Centre d'Art Santa Mónica, Barcelona
FIAC - Galerie Zürcher, Paris
1996 Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York
1997 Alison Gallery, Hong Kong
1999 Galerie Jacques Barrère, Paris
2001 Galerie Zürcher, Paris

Joint Exhibitions

1986 Brooklyn Museum, New York
1989 Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
1990 Hanart Gallery, Hong Kong, Taipei
1992 Salle Saint-Jean, Hotel de Ville de Paris
1993 Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo
1994 Zürcher Gallery, Paris
1996 Michael Goedhuis Gallery, London
1997 National Museum of Fine Arts, Beijing
1998 Contemporary Art Museum, Stuttgart
Michael Goedhuis Gallery, London
1999 *Les Champs de la Sculpture* (1970-2000), Champs-Élysées, Paris
2000 Fondation d'art Contemporain Guerlain, Paris
Contemporary Art Museum, Chengdu
Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo
2001 *Salon de Mars*, Galerie Leda Fletcher, Geneva
China Without Borders, Goedhuis Contemporary at Sotheby's, New York

Public Collections

Ville de Paris
Parc des Jeux Olympiques de Seoul, Korea
Tufts University, Boston, USA
La Maison de Paul et Camille Claudel, Villeneuve-sur-Fère, France
Museum of Modern Art, Taichung, Taiwan
International Park of Sculpture, Pu-Yeo
Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka

性 品

女人是美的化身
神是灵魂的希求
女神是女性與神的結合

摸一個雕刻的女人
不同於摸一個女人
正如雕刻一個女人
不是再做一個女人
而是在作一個女性
也是一種對女神的向往

王克平
2001 春

XING PIN

La femme est l'incarnation de la beauté
La divinité est l'aspiration de l'âme
La déesse réunit féminité et divinité

Toucher une femme sculptée
N'est pas caresser une femme
Sculpter une femme
N'est pas recréer une femme
C'est plutôt matérialiser la féminité
Et sentir la présence d'une divinité

Wang Keping
printemps 2001

The originality of my work is clear to anyone who understands sculpture, is familiar with the art form, while it is possible for those who are not fully conversant with sculpture or those who have only a superficial knowledge of it to think in terms of other influences on my work.

Do you think that these comparisons make your job more difficult?

WK. An artist who is original will always be original irrespective of the epoch in which he works. I have in mind the example of theatre which has room for originality no matter what period it relates to.

In earlier comments you have been quoted as having said that you expect to make work according to the expectations of your collectors, and that since people expect erotic content you are quite happy to provide it.

WK. I have been misinterpreted! I create work as I like and not in response to requests.

To what extent are you influenced by the traditional sculpture in China?

WK. Not much, because sculpture in China was mainly the preserve of the rural craftspeople, not a high art as in other cultures, while artists concentrated on calligraphy and painting. In that sense the influence of indigenous Chinese sculpture on my work has been minimal. Whatever traditional sculpture was in evidence, such as Buddhist sculpture, was too figurative for me. Also, art education in China was very much in the hands of Russian teachers in those days, and

there was little one could draw from that.

Is simplicity of form central to your work, especially in the way you strike a fine balance between the figurative and the abstract?

WK. Yes, and it requires great care and sensitivity to maintain that balance.

Do you think that you enter into a dialogue with the material, a lump of wood or whatever, as soon as you begin working with it?

WK. The act of making a wood sculpture is like making love to a woman, it is like disrobing your beloved, it is a gradual process that of necessity summons up a lot of feeling, sensitivity and passion. However, I don't think there is much premeditation involved in that, as in the act of true love. The biggest problem, of course, is that you have to take care not to cause the wood to develop cracks in the process.

Have you considered using any materials other than wood for your sculptures?

WK. Clay as well as bronze, but wood presents a much greater challenge than bronze; also the richness of colours of wood is unmatched by any other medium. Working in wood, however, requires extraordinary care and different kinds of wood present different challenges. Wood requires you to be very alert as to its risks and possibilities. It's not like bronze at all; with bronze you can do literally what



Couple, 1999, maple, height 40cm

you want. On the other hand, there are things that you can only achieve in wood. Of course, it is not always possible to achieve a wood sculpture with a single piece, but that again presents problems. How to match the textures and colours, and how to maintain harmony and balance?

The erotic content of your work comes across in a very specific way. It is impossible to avoid, due to the scale of things, such as those overpowering breasts, and yet it skirts obscenity.

WK. Everyone seems to be doing something or other that borders on the erotic, while I want to do something that is entirely mine and, of course, different.

Do you use models?

WK. No, not at all. It's all the work of my own imagination.

Do you have any preferences in the kind of wood available to you?

WK. Not really. I am not that particular about the kind of wood I use, I use all kinds of wood, but obviously I like it to be dry and ready to work with.

What's your daily schedule like?

WK. I have my studio at home and start at sunrise and usually begin by using my hands

Do you work on several different pieces concurrently?

WK. Usually, yes.

One of your predecessors in France, Wu Guanzhong went back to China after many years, saying France did not suit him but ended up influencing Chinese art profoundly. Do you think that you might return to China and want to live there permanently?

WK. If an artist is successful it does not matter where he lives. But I would of course like to have my work exhibited in China.

And, perhaps to teach there?

WK. A good artist must not teach, but keep on creating new work!

What kind of reception do you receive from China?

WK. They all tell me that I should not worry, since I am the best!

Notes

¹Wang Keping (catalogue). Hong Kong: de Tilly-Biaru, 2001.

²Gao Minglu, ed. *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

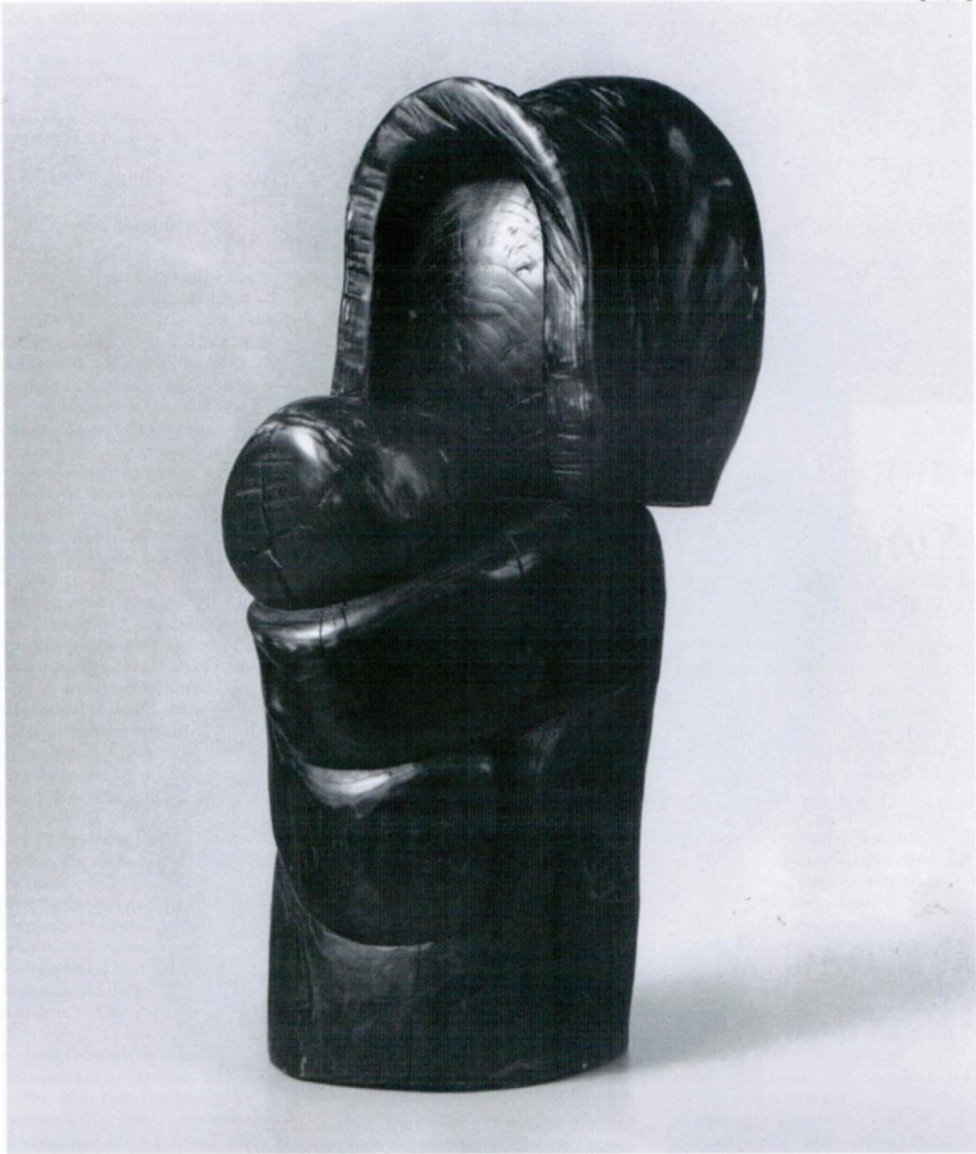
³Wang Keping (catalogue). Hong Kong: de Tilly-Biaru, 2001.



Bird, 1994, ash, height 48cm

Wang Keping

Wang Keping



Woman and Child, 1998



Wang Keping

Seated Woman, 2000, ash, height 41cm