

THE ASIAN ART  
NEWSPAPER  
Vol 8 Issue 1  
Published by  
Asian Art Newspaper Ltd,  
London

EDITOR/PUBLISHER  
Sarah Callaghan  
The Asian Art Newspaper  
PO Box 22521,  
London W8 4GT, UK  
sarah.callaghan@  
asianartnewspaper.com  
tel +44 (0)207 229 6040  
fax +44 (0)207 565 2913

ART DIRECTION  
Gary Ottewill Editorial Design  
gary@ottewill.demon.cd:uk

CORRESPONDENTS:  
Thomas Bachman, Switzerland  
Hilary Binks, Hong Kong  
Bonnie Engel, USA  
Kalpana Kartik, France  
Olivia Keith-Mitchell, UK  
Prakash Khanal, Nepal  
J May Lee Barrett, USA  
Jasleen Kandhari, UK  
Iola Lenzi, Singapore  
Martin Lorber, USA  
Filippo Salviati, Italy  
Olivia Sand, USA  
Stephanie Tasch, Germany  
Linda Tsang, UK

SUBSCRIPTIONS  
AND ADMINISTRATION  
Asian Art Newspaper  
P O Box 22521  
London W8 4GT  
United Kingdom  
info@asianartnewspaper.com  
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040



# Wang Keping

WANG KEPING (b. 1949) came to fame in 1979 as a member of the 'Stars', a group that staged the first truly contemporary art exhibition in Beijing. Exhibiting their work outside the China Art Gallery in Beijing, the Stars became equally known and respected as a promising avant-garde group within art circles in China, and despised by the government, who saw in their work nothing but provocation. Since 1979, Wang Keping's work has matured considerably, becoming one of a handful of young sculptors that have emerged from that period. Following a more discreet path than some of his contemporaries, Wang Keping has lived in Paris since 1984. In the following interview with Olivia Sand, he discusses his work, and shares his views on the art market.

*Asian Art Newspaper:* Amongst the various media available for sculpture, you opted for wood. Why wood and not metal or stone?

Wang Keping: When I was still living in China, steel and iron were almost impossible to obtain by a private individual. Wood, for example, in the 1970s, was still controlled by the government, and consequently, it was not easily available. However, sometimes, if you were lucky, you could still find some pieces in the city. In my case, I was fortunate in that downstairs from where I lived there was a coal factory. In order to operate and produce coal, the factory needed wood to light the fires. As is often the case with factories, some wood was left over – this I quickly gathered for

AAN: How do you relate to the work of other artists who also use wood for their sculpture? George Baselitz or Stephan Balkenhol for example.

WK: I would tend to say that the main difference in our work is that they apply colour onto the wood. They rarely use or take advantage of the wood's shape and structure. I use wood and rely on the material's quality: the material comes from nature, it is very intimate and smooth. I play with the contrasts of the wood, making some parts more shiny, and others darker. The shiny parts tend to be the parts that people like to touch when looking at the sculpture. I think this makes the final result more striking. I want to make sure that my work looks very natural and try not to insist too much on the details. I want to show the power of nature, and I follow the pattern of the wood (a branch may become a leg for example). Also, the facial parts should remain very simple.

AAN: What do you think is the reason that amongst all the emerging artists presently internationally active, only very few decide to become sculptors?

WK: My feeling is that currently a lot of people are interested in sculpture, but very few really understand the medium. Good sculpture tends to be scarce these days. I may be old fashioned, but I believe that good works of art have to bear the trace of the artist's hand, be the expression of the artist's feelings, and contain all of the artist's heart, blood, power, and passion

of quality. Really good works of art are like gold, they are very scarce. I may sound very critical, but to me, mediocre artists are steel – they can never replace gold. This explains why there are very few interesting exhibitions focusing on sculpture these days – there are simply very few good sculptors out there.

AAN: In 1984, you left Mainland China in order to move to France. Why did not stay in China, when the 'open door' policy was already an ongoing process?

WK: Going to France was an excellent move for my artistic career. In China, at the time, the working conditions were not that good, and there were no opportunity to see any of the masterpieces from the West. Now that I have been in the West for quite some time, I have seen some of the great masterpieces, which literally opened my eyes. Having viewed a lot of art, I now have a clearer vision of the direction that my work should take. It was key for me not to be locked into either the Chinese traditional style or the Western style, but to find my own path.

AAN: Several exhibitions highlighting the Chinese avant-garde have taken place over the past two decades. Why were you not included in any of them?

WK: I think it is mainly due to the fact that the 'China Avant-garde' artists did not think that my work qualified as 'avant-garde'.

AAN: Within sculpture, which Western artist do you admire?

WK: Without hesitation, Brancusi. Originally, I was given a book on his work. I then discovered his work and fell in love with the very simple nature of his pieces. Brancusi certainly 'moulded' my taste and opened up new horizons to me. Creating a breakthrough in sculpture today is very difficult, because so much has already been achieved. However, I still believe one can find new ways.

AAN: Have you considered teaching in China, and are you planning to exhibit there?

WK: I think it is fairly difficult to introduce my work. Furthermore, today's art students have no idea who the 'Stars' were and what they accomplished in order to pave the way for China's contemporary art scene. Since 1979, the Stars have been considered a rebellious group, so we are not part of the official curriculum. Today, very few people know about me in China. Also, the teachers of the Academy of Fine Arts tend to treat the artists very unevenly. A few years from now, they may revise their judgement regarding my work and find it interesting, but at the moment that is not the case. It is just the development of the market, where everything has become very commercial.

AAN: What type of wood do you prefer to work with when working on a piece?

WK: I live in Paris, both in the city and in the surrounding countryside. In both places it takes me a long time to find the right wood to create a piece. Today, unfortunately, a lot of the wood has been treated or processed. What I am interested in is a strong, hard, solid, and natural wood. Of course, hard wood is more difficult to carve than soft wood, but the end result is outstanding. I like to work with many types of wood, as long as it is hard and has a challenging texture and structure.

AAN: Very little has been written about your past. How did you become a sculptor in the first place?

WK: My mother was an actress, and my father was a writer. During the Cultural Revolution, I was a Red Guard and I was sent to the countryside. I became a soldier for the People's Liberation Army and then became a worker in a factory. Because of the Cultural Revolution, I did not go to college. I started to write screenplays, but they all ended up being censored. As one of my friends was a painter, I tried painting a few pieces, but I clearly did not have my friend's talent to paint. By accident, I stumbled over a piece of wood, which I used to carve a small work of art. My friends all found the piece excellent, and encouraged me to continue to sculpt. I kept carving various pieces, and I learned quickly and studied everything I could about the medium.

AAN: Amongst the younger generation of artists in China, photography has become a very popular medium.

WK: Indeed. Photography is a very easy and fast medium. However, when a medium becomes too popular, there is always a risk that the quality of the art suffers from it. My feeling is that it is fairly easy to become a good photographer as opposed to becoming a good painter. Photography may be a very hot medium right now, but it still seems to me that the great works are still quite rare.

AAN: Do you keep in close contact with other Chinese artists based in Paris?

WK: There are a lot of Chinese artists in France now. However, I have almost no contact with them. These Chinese artists, who are part of the avant-garde, often exhibit together, but I do not mix with them. Everybody has his or her own direction – every artist wants to sell his art. In my opinion, the key point is what goal is one pursuing with one's art? I try to look for style, a unique style different from other people's. I want to continue learning, discovering, and to be satisfied with what I am doing.