

TRACEY EMIN | MIRRORS SHINE | SINGAPORE NOW

ART+AUCTION

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE
FOR ART COLLECTORS

BLOUINARTINFO.COM

JANUARY 2013

WANG KEPING'S GARDEN STUDIO

A Beginner's
Guide to Collecting
ARMS&ARMOR

THE BILLION DOLLAR SEASON

A YEAR OF

- > AUCTION RECORDS
- > LAWSUITS
- > ART FAIR TAKEOVERS
- > GALLERY MOVES
- > ONLINE SALES

WANG KEPING



THE FORMER CHINESE
DISSIDENT CARVES OUT
A UNIQUE NICHE FROM
HIS PARIS STUDIO

BY NICOLAI HARTVIG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED ALCOCK

FOR A MAN WHO works long hours with a chain-saw, Wang Keping is remarkably beatific. He smiles almost constantly, but he pairs his grin with a politely mischievous gaze. On an early summer day, he drives me past unremarkable gates on the outskirts of Paris in his beat-up white delivery van. His rustic studio and home come into view, flanked by an overgrown garden that delivers bird-song to drown out a radio advertisement promising a good price for gold.

Inside, Wang sets about fixing two cups of green tea in the studio's kitchenette. Lucre is not among the priorities for the Chinese artist, whose artistic credentials were fired alongside his political ones. One of his early sculptures landed him at the center of the artists' group Xing Xing, or Stars, which spearheaded a series of historic pro-democracy protests in 1970s Beijing. Wang's *Silence*, 1978—a bombastic wooden head with what appears to be a black eye and a plugged mouth—became an icon of the group's unauthorized 1979 exhibition outside the fences of the National Art Museum.

True to this background, Wang, now 63, has staked out an uncompromising career on the fringe of the art market. "To me, making a lot of money is not important," he says. "I want to create new things, good things. I may not have long left to live, so it's important that I work well. It's nice that my sculptures sell, but I don't need a Porsche. I have the sun, the calm. I don't go hungry. My life is good."

It was not always thus. Conscripted into the Red Guards at age 17 and later sent to northeastern China for "re-education," there was a period when little more than a laborer's life seemed open to him. "It was the cultural revolution," he recalls. "All the universities were closing, all the intellectuals worked in the fields and so did I. When we returned to the cities, all of us young artists were searching for something. I wrote plays and novels, but the censorship was very severe. I wasn't able to stage my plays, so I stopped. Sculpture gave me independence." The artist's first-ever piece, *Long Live Chairman Mao*,

Wang Keping at his studio in Paris, 2012.

1978, was cut from the rung of a chair and shows a face stretched into a desperate scream. An arm and hand rise from the top of the head, clutching Mao's Little Red Book.

It was not entirely fortuitous that Wang started out with a simple scrap of wood he had on hand. During the Mao years, China underwent an extensive deforestation, and wood was rationed in Beijing. As he delved deeper into his craft, procurement became an issue. To obtain his supplies, Wang plied the workers of a small kindling factory with liquor, cigarettes, and movie tickets, and they slipped him pieces of wood on the side. To this day he has no preference for the type of wood, appreciating each piece's individual properties.

Like most Chinese artists of his generation, Wang is self-taught. He had only dabbled in painting before finding his métier in sculpture. His parents—an actress mother and writer father—were only tangential inspiration. It was his association with the Stars, Ai Weiwei among them, that emboldened him to break ground for artistic freedom in China. The government, hoping that the artists would fail publicly, allowed them to stage a full exhibition at the National Art Museum in August 1980. As many as 100,000 people came and saw Wang's *Idol*, 1978, a sculptural riff on Mao, which again raised the authorities' hackles.



Despite Ai Weiwei's continued prominence as a dissident, China's memory of the Stars, which also counted the painters Mao Lizi, Ma Desheng, and Li Shuang, has faded, Wang laments. "It's already almost forgotten. The government won't talk about it. The art teachers don't want the younger generation to know about it. There are many Chinese artists now who sell a lot, and expensively. They say, 'We are the first avant-garde.' They too, don't want to talk about the Stars. From all sides, there is no desire to talk about the Stars."

Wang nonetheless remains well known there and internationally, perhaps most notably in France. The Stars' activism made headlines in the West, too, and Wang was pictured with *Silence* on the front page of the *New York Times*. His arrival in Paris in 1984, with his French wife, Catherine Dezaly (whom he met while she was teaching in Beijing), marked a liberating turn in his work, which became less explicitly political but freer in figuration. He was picked up by Galerie Zürcher in 1986 and has since embraced his passion for nature and the body. Among the most characteristic works of his mature oeuvre are sculptures of voluptuous women, their bosoms bursting forth, equally grotesque and erotic, balanced between

female grace and the symbolic strength of a pugilist's gloves. Several of these were shown in his 2010 exhibition "*La chair des forêts*" at the Musée Zadkine, in Paris. "People see it and say, 'Oh, so you like big-breasted women,'" Wang says. "But in life, it's the opposite. In a sculpture, you need volume, you need to exaggerate."

A strong sexual element also defines his male figures, and occasionally hybrids like *Adam et Eve*, 2006, in which an erection complements protruding labia. Scattered around Wang's studio are more appendages standing at attention. Even the beaks of his animal creations—mainly platypus-like birds—suggest virility. "Women are easy, but making a man interesting is difficult," explains the artist. "You need to add a lot of humor, and that's mainly in the genitals."

He shows me his workspace, which consists of several stone and wood tables in his garden, a tiny carving room littered with sawdust and wood chips, and a conservatory-like annex where he takes refuge through colder and wetter months. In the long daylight of summer, he often works until 10 p.m. He has lost count of how many sculptures he has created. He keeps a small bed in the studio for naps, but his actual home »

60

Top: *Untitled 05-WK 12*, a 2010 piece in poplar, is among the works on view this month at 10 Chancery Lane, in Hong Kong. Below: Keping does his fine carving with chisels.





is upstairs, on the top two floors, which he shares with his wife.

His method is hands-on, harking back to the fundamentals of sculpture. “Today people use their hands less. Even many painters work with photographs and such. I’m pretty useless with computers. I’m primitive,” he jokes. He is also solitary. “Working is like making love,” he says fondly. “I don’t need others to help me with that.” He has shied away from having assistants, judging them too distracting and cumbersome. “It’s very difficult to have another hand working on the pieces. They won’t know that you need to put pressure on this part of the wood and not on the other, sand it down very specifically. If I have to direct them, it’s better that I just do it myself.”

Going it alone has meant some sacrifices, and the image of Wang trekking through the French forests, searching for that perfect tree, is no longer entirely *à jour*. He still leaves for the woods near his home early in the morning to cut down single branches, but the trunks and larger trees he handled in his prime have become difficult. “When the wood is humid, it weighs double,” he notes. “And since I go out very early and travel quite far, I don’t want to inconvenience anyone by nagging them to come along. I’m starting to feel myself aging. I don’t want to make the very large sculptures anymore; midsize is best.” One new sculpture in his workshop particularly captures this mood: a chubby, doglike figure, hunched over to rest from apparent exhaustion.

Sometimes people contact Wang to offer him wood, but he now increasingly sources from lumberjacks, which presents a different challenge. “They cut the trunk and the branches all straight for transport. But I prefer it to have some forms, something with branches and knots,” the artist explains. “With each piece of wood, I feel something. It gives me its inspiration. I will see a piece and say ‘Ah, that’s an angel.’ The forms live according to the imagination.”

When fresh timber arrives at the studio, the artist relies on his familiarity with the capricious material to perform an essential first carving that allows him to control where the wood will crack

during its three-year drying period. “The wood is like the human body. There are soft parts and hard parts,” he muses. “Sometimes it doesn’t follow my guidance. There are always surprises, good and bad.” The seasons have something to say too, with wetter weather producing big cracks and warm, dry heat encouraging smaller fissures, he explains. “Very beautiful,” Wang says.

When the wood is dry and ready, Wang carves it, using an array of chisels, into his signature bulbous figures, then sands it down and scorches it with a blowtorch to impart a dark, satiny patina (his work is often mistaken for African sculpture for this reason). “At this point, I’m covered in sawdust, I’m all black except for my mouth,” he says. “With the fire, the lines come out and it cracks even more. But I don’t want it to look entirely natural—it has to show the artist’s hand. And even if there are mistakes, they add character.”

The end result must be a hit, since misses are difficult to salvage. “Unlike with bronze, you can’t add to it,” Wang notes. “There are limits to what you can do with wood. You have to keep it simple. Still, I always think about re-touching—I will make a figure with hair on both sides, then decide that I only want it on one side. Or I decide to cut deeper to bring out the volume. Sometimes it makes it less good, but that doesn’t stop the urge.”

Creating his art may be slow, but Wang is hardly unproductive. His skylit storage room is filled with sculptures finished and unfinished, in a testament to trial and error. The artist’s scrap wood goes into the fireplace, where it is sometimes joined by unsatisfactory carvings. “Before, when I told friends that I didn’t like some of my work and »



Above: *Silence*, 1978, a 19-inch-tall head carved from a birch log, catapulted Wang to fame when he showed it in the Stars’ renegade exhibition outside the National Gallery gates in Beijing. Right: Before it is ready to carve, Wang roughly shapes the green wood with a chainsaw and lets it dry for up to three years.



With its plump, suggestive form and burnished hue, *Desire*, 2008, a 19-inch-high carving in catalpa wood, is characteristic of Wang's work over the past decade.

was going to burn it, they protested, 'No, give it to me,' and I did. Afterward, some of them added colors, polished the sculptures a bit, and put them up for auction," says Wang, laughing. "I think it's better to destroy them."

The market for Wang's work is something of an anomaly for these hyperactive buy-and-sell times. Most sales happen through his dealers, Galerie Zürcher in Paris and New York and 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, in Hong Kong, at prices ranging from \$25,000 to \$400,000. His secondary market is limited, and on the few occasions when his work has sold at auction, his early political pieces have fetched the most. *Idol* set an artist record at Christie's Hong Kong in a May 2011 day sale of Asian contemporary art, reaching \$HK920,000 (\$118,000). "My gallerist in Hong Kong [Katie de Tilly] says that the collectors are not interested in reselling," says the artist, adding somewhat modestly that "there is not that much profit to be made."

De Tilly praises the artist's "language of personal conviction" and says, "Wang Keping's force as an artist has not changed in 30 years. He continues to defy trends and search deeper into sculptural form."

A show of Wang's work entitled "Wood Flesh Form Nothingness" is on view at 10 Chancery Lane through January 28, and Zürcher is lining up a solo show in New York for the spring. His last institutional exhibition in mainland China was at the He Xiangning Museum in Shenzhen, in

2008, and whereas he will gladly return to visit friends and family, showing his work at home is of little interest. Aside from what he perceives as a faddish, speculative attitude toward art there, "in Chinese art history, painting has always been more important than sculpture," Wang explains. "Intellectualism was revered, physical labor was not. All the emperors' collections were of calligraphy, paintings, and drawings. There haven't been many great sculptors in China for the past 100 years."

Paris, having hosted Rodin, Brancusi, and others, is a different story. But in France, too, Wang notes that a kind of party line prevails in the art world—in its exclusivity, in the preference for installation and conceptual art, and in the French government's cultural politics. The grouching is soft-spoken, but the artist's serene manner belies a deep dissatisfaction, an antiestablishment stance not entirely different from that of his youth. "I'm against official art, in China but also in France," he says. "Here, all the power lies with the Ministry of Culture and the museums, with the curators, the state, and its functionaries. In France, it is bureaucracy before democracy. There is financial support for certain artists, not others. I resist, personally. I don't care about the big museums, and I definitely don't want to conform to curators' ideas to get into a show," he says, eyes flashing for the first time in our interview. "There is a revolt in it, even if I make soft things." 田