

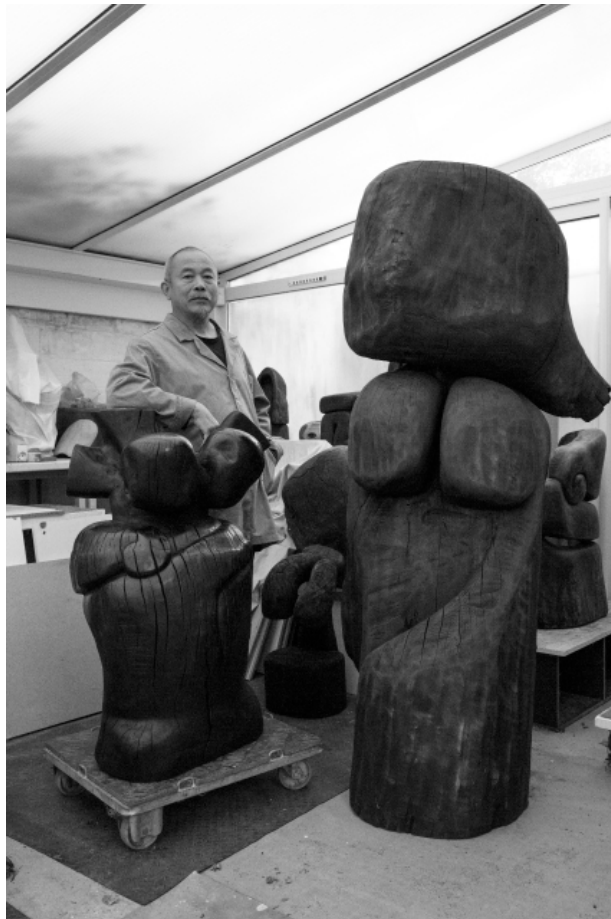
GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

WANG KEPING

Simplicité - Nature - Sensualité

January 26 - March 31



Wang Keping in his studio. July 2014 © Michel Lunardelli

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is very pleased to present *Simplicité-Nature-Sensualité*, Wang Keping's first solo in Belgium. An exclusive event since the artist, born in Beijing in 1949, is one of the founding fathers of Chinese contemporary art and recognized as such in his own homeland despite his political exile in 1984. In France, his adoptive land, he has since then built a work internationally considered among the most impacting and original contributions to contemporary sculpture.

While still a student, Wang Keping was enrolled as a Red Guard in 1966 at the beginning of the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, before being deported in the countryside in order to be "reeducated" under very rough circumstances. Back from the North-East of China, Wang Keping tried to find his place as an intellectual within the Chinese society, first as a comedian, then as a scriptwriter for China Central Television in Beijing. But seeing his writing ambitions quickly impeded by the regime censorship, he briefly turned to painting before dedicating himself to sculpture as a self-taught artist. Wood being a rare material in China, his very first piece was made out of a chair stretcher. An arm stretched toward the sky coming out a screaming face and holding Mao's Little Red Book, as a reference to the agitated context of the Cultural Revolution. Stunned by this first sculpture, Bai Jingzhou, a painter and friend, encouraged him to continue.

Wang Keping had found his signature medium and his small studio-house quickly filled up with a wide range of sculptures inspired by drama and politics. Artists Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Acheng, Qu Leilei and Li Yongcun, who were the firsts to see them, immediately invited the young prodigy to participate in their art exhibition project against official art. A group of non-conformist artists was born. They called themselves "Xing Xing" (The Stars). "We were the only glimmers in the middle of an endless night", remembers Wang Keping.

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Their infamous deed was an illegal exhibition on the metal gates of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing on September 27th, 1979. Prohibited the following day, the exhibition was immediately dismantled. On October 1st, the Stars gathered to denounce the censorship of which they were victims and loudly protested to ask for the “freedom of Art” on the symbolic day of the 30th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China.

Because it was the first of its kind in China, the event received international media coverage, especially in the New York Times that chose Wang Keping’s sculpture entitled Silence for its issue cover of October 19th, 1979. This media exposure immediately turned the work into a symbol of artistic dissidence in the world. This icon of the first Chinese contemporary art represents a head distorted by pain and obstructed in its vital functions: one-eyed, deprived of nostrils with a mouth sealed by a cylinder. For Wang Keping, this face was and still is the “symbol of our lack of freedom”, “the impossibility to express what we hold deep inside”.

A year later, the Stars were back at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing thanks to the support of the president of the official artists association. On this occasion, Wang Keping presented a second manifesto entitled Idole, a portrait of Mao Zedong as Buddha, which, for the artist, refers to the “deification of the communist party and the cult of idols during the Cultural Revolution”. During sixteen days, over a thousand people came to visit, a lot more than for any other art exhibitions ever organized in China. This unexpected success spread panic among the upper reaches of power. A wave of repression followed, which marked the end of the Beijing Spring and with it, that of the Stars, which founding members mostly went into exile; to the United States for Ai Weiwei, Acheng and Yan Li; Switzerland for Ma Desheng; Japan for Huang Rui and the United Kingdom for Qu Leilei. As for Wang Keping, he followed his wife Cathering Dezaly (a French teacher at the University of Beijing) to France in 1984.

Two things struck Wang Keping when he arrived in France: the amount of goods in shops and the vastness of forests. He also rushed to museums where he discovered primitive arts and Western modern art he knew nothing about. The only sculptor he then knew was Auguste Rodin. Henri Moore, Alberto Giacometti and especially Constantin Brancusi, to whom he is most often compared for his art of simplifying shapes, had not entered his artistic pantheon yet. What was most remarkable in this sudden exposure to Western art is that it confirmed the exiled artist in the search of his own path. “Visiting museums gave me a better knowledge of myself”, he explained. “I understood that I was completely different and continued to follow my own path”.

This belief takes root deep down in his Chinese culture imbued with Chan philosophy (became Zen when imported from Japan), which praises meditation, withdrawal and detachment. Bertrand Lorquin, curator at the Musée Maillol in Paris, explains that “this personal philosophy of life, leaving the mind its freedom and independence”, allowed Wang Keping “to develop the barest, most direct and essential sensitivity”. His constant search for simplicity translates into the simplifying of shapes. Even tough symbolic, his works flirt with abstraction but keep a figurative dimension which reveals itself only when taking the time to interpret the depth of the organic matters from which the works originate.

To reach purity, Wang Keping mostly listens to nature, his great source of inspiration. “Wood whispers secrets in my ears”, he says. “Trees are like human bodies, with rough and soft parts like bones and flesh, sometime strong sometime fragile. I cannot go against nature. I can only follow it for it agrees to work with me.”

This struggle with the living matter of wood gave life to essential shapes from which some recurring themes emerged like the representation of femininity. Before leaving China, the female body was already one of his frequent topics: given that any form of remotely erotic expression was prohibited by the communist regime, it was already an act of protest and revolt.

In the quietness of his new French studio, the dissident artist was able to put his political fight on hold and entirely dedicated himself to formal experiments. “In the female body –which, for the artist, is the origin of representation and of the desire to create- (he found) the simple, full and primal shapes he wanted to sculpt: life, energy, germination and growth” as explained by Sylvain Lecombe, curator of the Wang Keping retrospective exhibition held the Zadkine Museum in 2010.

Wildlife is another of Wang Keping’s favorite themes. “I represented a lot of animals but it was not with realistic intentions. I was looking to capture wildness, like these birds with big mouths always open. Besides, there is a link between the branch and the bird, like there is one between figuration and abstraction, primitive and modern art.”

Choosing pre-existing wood shapes and “revealing” them is a great challenge for a sculptor looking to reinvent representation. In order to succeed, he paradoxically choses to evoke the past: that of his spiritual and artistic ancestral heritage. Taoism, one of the three pillars of Chinese thinking infuses his vision of nature, while ancient statuary from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.- 220 A.C.) as well as folk art from Chinese countryside remain the matrix of his work.

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“In my sculptures, I am looking for what might be universal in the primitive Chinese form, and the farthest back I go in the origin of this art, the closest I get to my vision of contemporary art”, explains Wang Keping. Bertrand Lorquin well understood the conversion of this heritage into a singular creative approach, which, according to him, goes beyond “any notion of style”, except that of nature itself. It is the reason why Wang Keping’s works always keep something of the shape or look of the wood piece they came from. “Part of it was already sculpted by nature.”

The other part –which cannot go unnoticed- is the extreme attention and care Wang Keping gives when shaping the surface of his sculptures. First, his polishing process erases all tool marks. This step enhances the grain, cracks and knots of the wood the artist so skillfully works with. The wood is then carefully burned to reach a unique hue. “I use blowtorch like a paintbrush: applying light strokes” he explains. The texture thus obtained is an invitation to feel the material become as smooth and soft as skin. It is precisely his ability to enhance the carnal dimension of wood that inspired Wang Keping the title of his exhibition “La Chair des forêts” (the flesh of the woods) held at the Zadkine Museum.

The present exhibition held at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia of Brussels gathers about twenty exclusive artworks by Wang Keping and captures the essence of a work admired for nearly four decades. Witness of its quiet birth, British historian of modern and contemporary Chinese art Michael Sullivan (1916-2013) has warned us against too much explanation and theoretic analyses to describe Wang Keping’s sculpture. It “can stand on its own”, he wrote, since “its meaning lays in its form. And what a form!” Wang Keping’s sculptures exude a sort of primitive aura that inspires viewers a feeling of fulfillment.



Wang Keping, Couple, 2011. Carved yew wood, 47 × 53 × 30 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Born in 1949, Wang Keping lives and works in Paris (France).

Wang Keping was born in 1949 in Beijing. His father was a writer and his mother an actress. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) shattered millions of families and crushed the hopes of the young Chinese intellectuals for the decade to come. Like thousands of students, Wang Keping was swallowed in that vortex: first enrolled as a Red Guard, then sent to the countryside to undergo a “firm” reeducation. Ten years later, back in Beijing, Wang Keping tried to find his place as an intellectual within the Chinese society, first as a comedian and then as a scriptwriter for China Central Television. As his writings were systematically censored, he turned to sculpture, which was to become his signature artistic and anti-establishment medium.

In 1979, in the context of Beijing Spring, which brought some shifts in the political climate, along with other anti-conformist artists (like Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, and Ai Weiwei) Wang Keping founded the Stars art group (Xing Xing): small glimmers of hope in the dark and endless night of cultural obscurantism. The Stars became one of the very first expressions of the Chinese artistic avant-garde looking to question the standards of official art, social realism.

The Stars organized two lightning exhibitions: the first one took place on the gates of the National Art Museum in Beijing from September 27th to 29th. Wang Keping exhibited Silence, a cutting-edge artwork that the activist artist considers one of his “political talismans” to. In reaction to the quick dismantlement of the exhibition forbidden by the regime censorship, the Stars protested on October 1st 1979 – the day of the 30th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China- to speak in one voice and ask for the “Freedom of art”.

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The event, first of its kind in the history of modern China, received big media coverage all over the world, and the New York Times chose Wang Keping's sculpture for its issue cover of October 19th 1979. The Stars' second exhibition took place from August 20th to September 14th 1980, this time in the National Art Museum in Beijing. In front of its unexpected success among the Chinese people, authorities pressured the Stars' members and pushed them into exile. Wang Keping left for France in 1984.

From this year on, Wang Keping entirely dedicated himself to sculpture, with wood as his signature medium. Over the course of more than four decades, he developed his own uncompromising and sharp artistic language, as reflected by his international career. In 2015, France, his adoptive country, rewarded Wang Keping's work by naming him Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres.

Wang Keping started exhibiting at the Paris-based Galerie Zürcher in 1985, which represented the artist until the death of its founder Bernard Zürcher in January 2017. He has also been represented by the 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong-Kong for more than fifteen years. In January 2018, Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris/Brussels will hold Wang Keping's first exhibition in Belgium.

In the course of his career, Wang Keping has enjoyed many great museum monographic shows in France and abroad. In 1989, the Asia University Museum of Modern Art of Taichung (Taiwan) organized his first solo show, followed by the Chinese Modern Art Center of Osaka (Japan) in 1990 ; the Aidekman Art Center of Boston (United States) in 1993 ; the Museum für Kunsthandwerk of Frankfurt (Germany) in 1994 ; the HKUST Center for Arts of Hong Kong (China) and the He Xiangning Art Museum of Shenzhen (China) in 1996, the Asian Art of Nice (France) in 2008 ; the Zadkine Museum of Paris (France) in 2010 ; and the Ullens Center for Contemporary Arts (UCCA) of Beijing (China) in 2013.

Wang Keping was also invited to take part in numerous major group shows, among which several shed light on the importance of his work within the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art, such as « Painting the Chinese dream, Chinese Art 30 years after the Revolution » at the Brooklyn Museum (United States) in 1983 ; « Les Étoiles 10 ans » at the Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière Chapel in Paris (France) in 1990 ; « Face à l'Histoire » at the Pompidou Center of Paris (France) in 1996 ; « Vision 2000, Chinesische Gemälde un Skulpturen der Gegenwart » at the Linden-Museum of Stuttgart (Germany) in 1998 ; « At the new century. 1979-1999 China Contemporary Art Works » at the Modern Art Museum of Chengdu (China) in 1999 ; « Modern Chinese Art, The Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection » at the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford (United Kingdom) in 2001 ; « Mahjong – Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg » at the Kunstmuseum of Bern (Switzerland) in 2005 ; « China Onward, The Estella Collection, Chinese Contemporary Art 1996-2006 » at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art of Copenhagen (Denmark) in 2007 ; « Origin Point, The Stars 30 years » at the Today Art Museum of Beijing (China) in 2008, as well as « China Gold, Art contemporain chinois » at the Musée Maillol of Paris (France) ; « Blooming in the Shadows, Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985 » at the China Institute of New York (United-States) in 2011, and « Artistes Chinois à Paris » at the Cernuschi Museum of Paris (France) ; « Light before Dawn, Unofficial Chinese Art 1974-1985 » at the Asia Society of Hong-Kong (China) in 2013 ; and, more recently, « An/other avant-garde, China-Japan-Korea » at the Busan Biennale (South Korea) in 2016, along with « M+ Sigg Collection. Four Decades of Chinese Contemporary Art » at M+, Hong-Kong museum for visual culture (China). In 2016, Wang Keping was invited to exhibit his monumental sculptures at the Centre for Arts and Nature of Chaumont-sur-Loire (France). In November 2017, he also took part in the inaugural exhibition of the Powerlong Art Museum of Shanghai (China).

Wang Keping's works are featured in a great number of public and private international collections such as the Pompidou Center and the Cernuschi Museum (Paris), the Centre d'Art et de Nature du Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, the Château de la Celle-Saint-Cloud (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the collections of the City of Paris as well as those of the Département de Seine-Saint-Denis in France ; the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), in the United Kingdom ; the Aidekman Art Center (Boston), in the United States ; the M+ Museum (Hong-Kong) and the He Xiangning Art Museum (Shenzhen), in China ; the Museum of Modern Art (Taichung), in Taiwan ; the Museum of Asian Contemporary Art (Osaka), in Japan ; and the Olympic Sculpture Park (Seoul), in South Korea. In 2016, twenty-seven years after the Pompidou Center exhibited Silence, Wang Keping's work Etreinte entered the museum collections thanks to the generosity of the International Circle of the museum's friends society.

Wang Keping has been represented by the Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris/Brussels since 2017, and since 2001 by the 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong-Kong.

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Galerie Nathalie Obadia
Bruxelles

Wang Keping

Simplicité - Nature - Sensualité
January 26 - March 31

Joris Van De Moortel

April 18- June 9

Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Paris

Clôître Saint-Merri

Eugène Leroy et Sarkis

Intérieurs, exposition conçue par Sarkis
January 12- March 17

Jérôme Zonder

April 7 - May

Galerie Nathalie Obadia

Paris

Bourg-Tibourg

Luc Delahaye

Sumud et autres histoires
February 7 - March 31

Agnès Varda

April 14 - March 31