



Wang Xu: Overtime Gift

by Barbara Pollack

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Currently on view at 47 Canal, New York is emerging artist Wang Xu's latest show *Overtime*, demonstrating how politically charged art can become when bought into the public sphere. In this intriguing exhibition, Wang focuses on his experience with a failed public art project in Monterrey Park, California in 2016.



Wang Xu, *Untitled Athena (Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future)*, 2019. Hydrocal plaster, wood, pump, plastic tubing, water, oil, cotton wick, 77 × 15 ½ × 15 ½ inches (195.58 × 39.37 × 39.37 cm)

Classical statuary has a long tradition of placement as public art, even in venues in the United States that have little linkage to ancient Greece. Today, many of these sculptures situated in suburban parks and local courthouses are mere replicas of originals, fabricated in foundries located in China. This globalization of western classicism is the subject of Wang Xu's practice which has evolved from his roots as a CAFA-trained realist sculptor into a more conceptual approach to installation and video art.

In this intriguing exhibition, Wang Xu focuses on his experience with a failed public art project in Monterrey Park, California in 2016. There, his sculpture, *Eve*, was proposed to be placed at the bottom of a cascading waterfall, looking up to a niche at its peak containing a pseudo-classical rendition of the Greek goddess Athena. Both *Eve*, whose face was modeled on an

ordinary laborer, and the goddess came from the same marble quarry in Quyang, China. The dialogue between the two figures—one typically Chinese and the other generically western—raised issues about the roots of the community, originally exclusively white, now more recently, a suburban Chinatown.

Organizers hoped that such an art intervention would stimulate discussions in Monterey Park about the nature of public art and its responsibility to reflect the community in which it is situated. But, at a public hearing of the city council, the proposal was defeated on grounds that it would “deface” a cherished part of the local landscape.

Several museums had voiced favor with the proposal and one, the Vincent Price Art Museum, offered Wang Xu a show for which the artist made his own Athena, far more accurate to Greek mythology than the version on view in Monterey Park. He based his version on The Hope Athena, a 2nd century A.D. Roman copy of a 5th century B.C. Greek statue, currently in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Again, the marble and its fabrication came from Quyang where Wang supervised its production which was presented at the museum in the exhibition Garden of Seasons in 2018.

Here at 47 Canal, Wang Xu paired a two-channel video installation with a miniature model of the finished statue. The figurine is rendered beautifully with a helmet and shield bearing the face of Medusa from which water flowed while her left arm held up a flickering torch, not unlike the Statue of Liberty. In the video, he juxtaposed documentary footage of the hearing at the city council with images of the production of his Athena at its source in China. Demonstrating the formidable feat of making a realist sculpture in this day and age, this modern day goddess is transformed from a block of marble cut from the walls of a quarry. Opposing the wonder of creation, the political hearing distorts the need for community involvement in public art projects by ignoring the voices of its Asian residents as well as the opinions of arts leaders and museum directors. Ironically, the council members sit beneath a wall text claiming, “Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future.”

The other half of the exhibition was a result of a residency at the Queens Museum, located in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in New York City, the site of the 1964 World’s Fair. There Wang Xu became fascinated by a thirty-foot-tall 120 A.D. Roman Column, donated by the King of Jordan to the city on the occasion of the fair which still resides in the park. Again, updating ancient statuary to contemporary times, Wang cloaked a cast iron column in the gallery space with a handmade plaster copy of the monument. Another replica of the column was situated nearby. The pair provided a commentary on the endurance of certain architectural elements of antiquities and the ways that fundamental symbols of western classicism are inescapable even in contemporary times. The two columns were presented against a backdrop of a video



Wang Xu, Untitled Athena (Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future) (detail), 2019. hydrocal plaster, wood, pump, plastic tubing, water, oil, cotton wick. 77 x 15 ½ x 15 ½ inches (195.58x39.37x39.37cm)

capturing the dancing waters from the fountain surrounding the Unisphere, a monumental globe of the world, also situated in the park.

The strength of this exhibition, but also its limitation, is the story surrounding the creation of these works, which demonstrates how politically charged art can become when brought into the public sphere. Any variations proposed by an artist to the cherished traditional of classical statuary is subject to criticism, even when the work in question mimics the original in every facet. That there are now large numbers of the population for which this tradition is not their own makes no difference in the public debate. For Wang Xu, a Chinese artist now living in New York, finding a place within this debate is essential to his survival and this quest fuels his work with a strong conceptual charge. But without knowledge of this background, his meaning can be lost. Hopefully, in the future, his projects will be able to move forward without political protest and he will be able to explore this rich territory to a greater extent.