

Wang Xu

Overtime Gift

June 28 – August 3, 2019

Overtime Gift, Wang Xu's first solo exhibition at 47 Canal, is a multilayered investigation into the role and significance of public art. While conducting research in Queens, NY; Monterey Park, CA; and Quyang, China, the artist traced the complex afterlife of the classical sculptural tradition in a globalized capitalist economy. Through video and sculpture, he constructs subtle commentaries upon the agency of artists and workers, revealing numerous power tussles in the production of history and civic space.

This exhibition builds on *Garden of Seasons* (December 8, 2018 – March 9, 2019), a solo presentation at Vincent Price Art Museum in Monterey Park, CA. In 2016, Wang gave permission to Equitable Vitrines, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, to use his sculpture *Eve* (2015) for a proposed intervention in Cascades Park, a local community garden. In 1929, the property developer Peter N. Snyder placed a statue of the Greek goddess Athena in the park, envisaging the neighborhood as a segregated, whites-only enclave of Spanish- and Mediterranean-style homes. After Snyder's fortunes collapsed in the wake of the stock market crash, the statue disappeared. It was replaced in 2005 when a new *Athena*, produced in Quyang, China, a region with a rich tradition of stone carving and craftwork, was donated to the city and sited above the park's gentle cascade. *Eve* was produced in the same quarry as this statue, and features the face of an artisan employed in the factory on the body of a biblical Eve.

Today, Monterey Park is an Asian-majority neighborhood, described by Timothy Fong in the 1990s as "the first suburban Chinatown." Another third of its residents are Latinx. Equitable Vitrines believed that *Eve*, when placed in proximity to the park's *Athena*, could encourage reflection on the area's changing demographics and economy. In an April 2017 municipal hearing, however, the nonprofit's proposal was rejected after a neighborhood group gathered over one hundred signatures opposing it. Projected upon one wall of the gallery, *Garden of Seasons* (2018/19) combines footage shot on location in Quyang with documentation of this hearing, and poses questions about provenance, racialization, and cultural legitimization.

The Column of Jerash, a public monument in Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, Queens, provides source material for *Untitled Columns (Plaster Columns from The Room of Spirit and Time)* (2019). During the 1964–65 New York World's Fair, the Kingdom of Jordan donated this thirty-foot-tall Roman column, built in 120 A.D., to the City of New York. Currently in residence at the Queens Museum, Wang has been researching the historical landmark, which, identifiable by its distinctive modified Corinthian capital, commemorates the site of the 1964–65 Jordanian Pavilion. One of the gallery's cast iron columns, which are typical of the factories built across Downtown Manhattan in the nineteenth century, has been cloaked by Wang in a handmade plaster copy of the monument. Another replica is placed nearby. These acts of reproduction and replacement expose an architectural dialogue with antiquity that was, paradoxically, internalized by the U.S. at the moment of its emergence into industrial modernity. Both critical and playfully aspirational, the artworks resituate a *shanzhai* spirit within a Western aesthetic lineage, complicating its assertions of purity and authenticity.

Wang's exploration of the production, and deconstruction, of mythologies is continued by *Untitled Athena (Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future)* (2019). In an associative *détournement* inspired by New York's Statue of Liberty, this scaled-down statue carries a softly flickering torch. Water flows from the eyes of the Medusa on her breastplate. The armor of the goddess of war and wisdom is, in this way, overloaded with affect. The head of Medusa, whose gaze could turn people to stone, was gifted by the hero Perseus to Athena, who placed it on her shield. A recurring motif throughout the exhibition, the gift produces relations premised on reciprocity as well as debt, while creating difficult entanglements of objects, cultures, and worlds. The hand sculpted plaster icon references *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 (LACMA). In a practice that was not uncommon in his time, *The Hope Athena* was elaborately restored by a previous owner, Thomas Hope (1769-1831), who added a figure of Nike, a spear and eyes. LACMA removed these additions. Throughout the works on view, *Overtime Gift* asserts that the forms of the past are malleable and contestable, questioning received logics of preservation and restoration through a practice of sensitive and critical revisionism.