

Wang Xu

Review (Translated)
2019.07.15

Wang Xu's solo exhibition *Overtime Gift* appears at first glance to be comprised of two parts: while one builds upon a sculptural project that the artist presented in Monterey Park, California, the other consists of a replica of the Column of Jerash, originally located at the Flushing Corona Park in Queens. However, as the viewer delves into the folds and crevices of Wang's journey, they will find that they are not merely seeing two stories, but rather many, each bleeding into one another, their afterlife extended by the artist's nomadic travels, inquisitive undertakings, and the complex network of relationships he forged in the process. His sculptural objects bear the traces of memories, both personal and collective, that is at once tied into a global circulation economy.

Taking up an entire wall in the gallery, *Garden of Seasons* (2019) is two-channel video projection that juxtaposes a tense courtroom drama with breathtaking exteriors of factories and stone quarries in China. In 2016, Wang was approached by Los Angeles-based non-profit Equitable Vitrines, to propose an intervention for Heritage Falls Park, a historic site situated within Monterey Park. He then focused his attention on Athena, a statue in the park, combing through its forgotten history. In the 1920s, she was the hallmark of a hybrid Greek antiquity style envisioned by California real estate developer Peter N. Snyder, who planned to build a lavish garden community there. After the stock-market crash, Snyder's grand vision foundered, and with it vanished Athena. It was not until 2005 that a new statue re-filled the void atop the fountain. With records that showed the origins of the new Athena to be Quyang, China—the very place that Wang created *David and Eve* (2015)—Equitable Vitrines proposed to temporarily place Wang's statue of Eve alongside its sculptural relative. However, in no way did the artist and the non-profit anticipate that their proposal would be rebuffed so vigorously and theatrically at a municipal hearing held on April, 2017. The predominantly Asian residents of the community did not want an outsider to disrupt what they have come to embrace as the immutable signifier of their community, even though it had at one point been the emblem of white superiority. Footage of the courtroom made its way into Wang's video, in which proponents and opponents of the motion solemnly took the stand, debating over their understanding of art and the significance of public monuments. On the other channel, the camera cuts to a sublime aerial view of a massive stone quarry in Northern China, where marble is harvested and transported to factory sites in Quyang, where Wang and other artisans transform the raw material into a life-size statue of Athena. What the artist attempts to show, is not opposing sides, but rather the intertwined and dislocated threads of circumstance, bound by class, conservatism, and reterritorialization of meaning, as well as coincidences and ruptures in the global circulation economy.



Wang Xu, *Untitled Athena (Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future)*, 2019

The other part of the exhibition touches upon the relationship between public sculpture and architecture in an almost inverse way. Wang made plaster replicas of the “Whispering Column of Jerash”, which the Kingdom of Jordan gifted to New York during the World’s Fair from 1964 to 1965, and wrapped it around one of the gallery’s cast-iron support columns, a typical structural element to 19th century industrial buildings. The second oldest outdoor monument in New York City, the column’s origins harkens back to 120 A.D. Wang’s handcrafted objects are irregular and fragile, just like the scaled-down Athena installed in another room, named *Untitled Athena (Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future)* (2019). Standing atop a water urn, she holds a lit torch; with the head of Medusa embedded on her breastplate, water softly flows out of Medusa’s mouth. Even though the work synthesizes attributes from the Statue of Liberty and the *Hope Athena*, which is housed in the LACMA Collection, it lacks the monumentality of the two, and is instead marked by a delicate fragility. Suspended between past and future, *Untitled Athena* seems out of place, out of time.

In her book *One Place After Another*, Miwon Kwon traces the way in which Richard Serra’s *Tiled Arc* on Federal Plaza and John Ahearn’s bronze sculptures on South Bronx’s Jerome Avenue revealed changing perception towards aesthetic autonomy, site-specificity, and the effectiveness of public intervention. Unlike the abrupt way Serra attempted to break down urban functions for purposes of critique, Wang’s sculpture more or less resembles Ahearn’s approach, starting from localized research and critical reflection, then unintentionally revealing conflicts within the community and cultural representation itself. Though Wang’s work did not sit atop the cascades, it nevertheless captured the vulnerability of contemporary racial politics and collective belonging. The primary elements of fire and water illustrated by his Athena sculpture, brings forth implications of origin, resistance, and continuity. Conflict and collision do not always suggest stasis, but rather serve as a reminder of how we can struggle to co-exist within overlapping, even hostile environments today.

– Banyu Huang

王旭

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王旭个展“逾时的礼物” (Overtime Gift) 初看上去由两部分组成：一部围绕艺术家在位于加州蒙特利公园市一处公园内的雕塑项目展开；另一部分则是他将复制的纽约皇后区科洛娜公园内的杰拉什石柱挪进了画廊空间。不过，当观众深入作品的种种褶皱和缝隙中时，会发现他们所体验的不止是两个故事；多层的叙述相互渗入，其生命周期被艺术家本身的流动、探求，以及这过程中积累的复杂关系网络延伸。王旭的雕塑往往留有记忆的痕迹，不管是个人的还是集体的，而且都与全球化经济流通捆绑在一起。

双频录像《四季花园》 (Garden of Seasons , 2019) 占据了画廊主要空间的一整面墙，将在一场听证会上演的紧凑剧情和在中国拍摄的工厂和采石场的户外风景并置。2016年，王旭受洛杉矶的非盈利组织Equitable Vitrines之邀，以雕塑的形式介入蒙特利公园市的Heritage Falls公园。他从公园中的一尊雅典娜雕塑为出发点，梳理其被遗忘的历史。1920年代，她是加州地产开发商Peter N. Snyder计划在此开拓的豪华花园社区中古希腊风格的标志。美国股市大崩盘后，Snyder梦想破灭，他的雅典娜也随之杳无踪影。直到2005年，市政府才用一尊新的雕塑填补了原本的空缺。而这座新雅典娜的生产地恰好是王旭创作他2015年的作品《大卫和夏娃》的地方——河北省

的石雕之乡曲阳。Equitable Vitrines于是提议把王旭的夏娃暂时放置在雅典娜的不远处，让“姐妹”雕塑重逢。出乎他们意料的是，该提议在2017年4月于该市举办的听证会上受到了声势浩大且戏剧性十足的阻挠。这个以亚洲移民为主体的城镇里的居民并不想让一个局外人来破坏他们奉为社区象征的雕塑，尽管一百年前它曾经是白人优越观的标志。王旭将听证会的视频剪辑到他的作品中，动议辩护者和反对者陆续走到证人席上辩论他们对于艺术的理解以及公共雕塑的意义。另一个频道上，镜头剪切到在中国北方露天作业的采石场的鸟瞰图，在那里开采的大理石被运到曲阳，接着王旭和多位工匠将原料雕刻成1.5倍真人大小的雅典娜。艺术家试图在这里展示的并非双方的对立，而是人及物命运的错位、缠绕和连接，以及其中体现出的保守主义和阶级概念对人的再辖域化约束，全球经济流通中的巧合和撕裂。

展览的另一部分以几乎反向的方式触及了公共雕塑和建筑的关系，王旭用石膏复制了约旦哈希姆王国于1964到1965年纽约世博会期间赠与纽约市的“低语的杰拉什石柱”（Whispering Column of Jerash）——这尊石柱的历史可追溯至公元前120年，是纽约市内第二古老的户外纪念碑——并将其包裹在了画廊典型19世纪工业建筑风格的铸铁支柱外部。王旭手工打造的这些复制品不规则且易碎，正如安置在另一个房间中名为《无名雅典娜（过去的骄傲，未来的信念）》（Untitled Athena [Pride in the Past, Faith in the Future], 2019）的小型雅典娜雕塑。她立在一支水瓶上，手持点燃的火炬，胸前甲冑上嵌有美杜莎的头颅，水从美杜莎的口中流出——尽管这件雕塑综合了自由女神像和洛杉矶县立艺术博物馆收藏中的《希望雅典娜》（Hope Athena）的元素特点，却缺少两者纪念碑式的不朽，反而多了一种精细的脆弱感。无名的雅典娜悬在过去和未来之间，显得不得其所，不合时宜。

作家权美媛（Miwon Kwon）曾在《一处又一处》（One Place After Another, 2002）一书中通过对比理查德·塞拉的《倾斜的弧》和约翰·哈恩的写实雕塑阐释公共艺术项目介入城市空间时的美学自主性、在地性和艺术介入有效性等问题。王旭的雕塑没有像塞拉通过破坏城市功能来达到批判的目的，而更像哈恩一样，以思考和在地调查为初衷，无意中反映出社区内部和文化表现的矛盾。他的雕塑虽未能如预期般进入社区，却捕捉到了当今公共艺术中显露出的集体归属感和种族政治的脆弱和破裂。他的雅典娜雕塑携带水与火的原始元素，蕴含了起源、抗争和延续的意味。矛盾并不一定指代停滞，而是提醒我们，如何在相互叠改、甚至冲突的环境中辗转共存。



王旭，《无名雅典娜（过去的骄傲，未来的信念）》（局部），2019，高强度石膏水泥、木头、水泵、塑料管、水、油、棉芯，195.58 × 39.37 × 39.37 cm；摄影：朱陶乐；图片由艺术家和纽约47 Canal画廊提供。



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.