

Buhmann, Stephanie, "New York – Wang Xieda: James Cohan Gallery," *Sculpture Magazine*, July/August 2013.

## sculpture



hand manner in which he fashions his square or rectangular constructions belies their sophistication. Given as they are to an agreeably rough presentation, it would be easy to see his works as entirely improvisatory; close inspection, however, reveals a sharp formal intelligence at work. Osman looks for ways to tweak or skew the formal plane that faces us, using paper to add color to structural components that range from small blocks to planks of wood. In consequence, he foregrounds the detritus of the studio and street in order to construct complex, intelligently designed assemblages. Both the tabletop sculptures and the one big piece in the show allude to David Smith's "Cubi" series without succumbing to his influence.

The work clearly develops from an additive process. *Compass* (2013), a comparatively epic work among the smaller sculptures, consists of an open square with a rectangle on top, delineated by long planks and blocks of wood colored by paint or laminated paper. Its seemingly ad

hoc, of-the-moment energies make it pleasingly improvisatory; the viewer is encouraged to stand facing either side of the open spaces (its sides are of lesser interest). The depth of *Compass* shows us that Osman is careful to build a work whose implications draw us into a genuinely three-dimensional space. Our practical knowledge of the sculpture enables us to follow him in his explorations of the *depth* of what is essentially a forthright, frontal plane. This is where Osman's work differs from Smith's: the "Cubi" sequence demonstrates a nearly painterly, two-dimensional reality. By making historically aware high culture from throwaway materials, Osman presents a contrast that feels very contemporary even as he looks back on sculptural tradition.

The smaller works achieve their effects in similar ways. *Stack 1*

**Above:** Jim Osman, *Stack 1*, 2012. Gouache, paper, and wood, 9 x 9 x 7.5 in. **Right:** Wang Xieda, *Sages' Sayings 026*, 2006. Bronze, 37 x 33.5 x 11.75 in.

(2012), composed of gouache on paper and wood, offers two open, vertically aligned rectangles, the empty space of the larger one invaded by a piece of rounded wood with its bark intact. The other open rectangle is created by the angles of its green-painted frame. The emphasis is again on frontality, but not completely—two pieces of wood, which also act as simple pedestals, hold up *Stack 1*'s configuration, lifting it up and adding depth. *Forest Stack* (2012) is also constructed as a frontal arrangement of wood with some depth to it; a short branch, still with its bark on, forms the right vertical and likely inspired the title. The other vertical consists of four small, stacked blocks of wood, two of them papered. A torn piece of dark-blue paper, with a white rectangle outlined in its center, occupies the middle of the composition. Again offhand proficiency yields to prolonged looking. Osman's sensibility asserts formalism by means of a backhanded compliment, and the results are compelling.

—Jonathan Goodman

### NEW YORK

#### Wang Xieda

##### James Cohan Gallery

Based on the title of Wang Xieda's first New York solo show, one might expect a focus on figurative or narrative content. Describing a grammatical construction, "Subject Verb Object" seems to imply the depiction of subjects engaged in actions that further involve objects. Wang's works, however, do not encourage a quick, literal interpretation. Visually (at least to Western eyes), the sculptures of the Shanghai-based artist appear non-objective. They are experienced abstractly at first, and it is only after discovering Wang's source of inspiration that the exhibition title begins to resonate.

Cast in bronze or paper pulp, the sculptures embrace biomorphic forms that nevertheless follow the rules of geometric organization. In Wang's work, a curvilinear form still hints at the grid. Overall, his works reveal a sensibility evocative of Western Modernism. His affinity for clarity and fine linear movement, as well as his ability to imbue his works with a sense of weightless-





ness, connect him to a range of well-known predecessors. Giacometti's surfaces, Arp's potent simplification, and the considered balance in the sculptures of David Smith plausibly stand behind Wang's work. The substantial group of works gathered in his American debut made clear that his stylistic choices are consistent. His voice is confident and convincingly conscious of its cultural heritage.

Despite the fact that Wang's work fits visually into a Western context, its objective is very much rooted in Chinese culture. He has spent the past 20 years studying the history of the Chinese written language. The works of his so-called "Sages' Sayings" series are inspired by Chinese calligraphy of the fourth century, when the brush was introduced as a writing tool. Brushed calligraphy added a new form of expressive individuality to the existing repertoire of characters carved in wood, bamboo, or stone, and the "Sages' Sayings" bronzes are derived from these ancient forms. By translating calligraphic forms into sculpture, Wang creates a fascinating link between ancient and contemporary Chinese culture.

In this show, his bronzes occupied a long, U-shaped pedestal that spanned almost the entire main exhibition space. Accentuating the elegantly elongated forms, the installation allowed for a two-fold experience. Works could be considered separately or in sequence, one after the other, which related the act of viewing to the act of reading.

"Subject Verb Object" also featured several recent sculptures made from rattan and paper pulp. At times suspended in mid-air, these comparatively ethereal white works were primarily defined through interplays of light and shadow, while the bronzes focused instead on form. Overall, Wang's work is characterized by nuanced distribution of mass, as well as contemplation of positive and neg-

ative space, dark and light, and biomorphic and geometric principles. These are, of course, some of the most important and longstanding fundamentals in art, but Wang succeeds in reinterpreting them to create works that generate a sense of timelessness and permanence.

—Stephanie Buhmann

## QUEENS, NEW YORK

### "Civic Action"

#### Noguchi Museum and Socrates Sculpture Park

"Civic Action," though much smaller in scope, celebrated the same spirit of activism and social engagement on view at Documenta XIII in Kassel, Germany, and Manifesta 9 in Genk, Belgium, last summer. Countering the art world's obsession with commodity and status, all three shows presented an alternative vision of current practice based in collectivity and community.

Organized by independent curator Amy Smith-Stewart, the two parts of "Civic Action" took place over the course of a year. The first part, at the



Noguchi Museum, consisted of drawings, installations, and models that presented the collaborative brainstorming of artists, architects, writers, historians, urban planners, scientists, and ecologists in response to the rezoning, residential construction, and environmental disruptions brought on by development in this area of Queens. Socrates Sculpture Park hosted part two, which featured installations by the four artists involved in the collaborative discussions. Ranging from reflective "stepping stones" tracing an underground river and a bamboo and steel staging space for serving food and presenting community activities to a wooden bench along the East River and a tree with its own office space, these

Above: Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Bike Share*, 2011. Below: Natalie Jeremijenko, *Grid Xing*, 2011. Both from "Civic Action."

pieces were intent on demonstrating the validity of creative collaboration and socially engaged sculpture. Socrates Sculpture Park proved an apt site for these reclamation art projects: 25 years ago, its parcel of land was nothing more than an overlooked industrial dumping ground in a poor section of Queens. Transformed, over many years, by Mark di Suvero, other artists, and community leaders, it has grown into an important local resource, with a public park, outdoor museum, and artist residency. A large upscale condo-



TOP: NASRA NIMAGA, COURTESY THE ARTIST / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST