

REVIEWS APR. 25, 2013

Wang Xieda

NEW YORK,
at James Cohan

by Carol Diehl



Shanghai-based sculptor Wang Xieda's first exhibition in the United States, "Subject Verb Object," featured 19 spindly cast-bronze abstract sculptures, tabletop-size, that clearly reflect the influence of David Smith and Giacometti. Xieda's pieces are wrought with a grace and intention that sets them apart from the work of these artists—as well as a distinctly Chinese countenance that derives from his attempt to bring into three dimensions aspects of the pictographs and ideographs from which Chinese writing evolved, characters originally carved into wood, bamboo or stone. A positive outcome of globalization is that the example of Western art can sometimes give Asian artists the permission they need to express

themselves in ways their own traditions might not foster, with the result that their cultural identity is not consumed but enhanced.

Composed of slender elements that vary in thickness like tree branches, Xieda's sculptures are basically line drawings in metal, almost gestural in their awkwardness

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and seeming spontaneity. As if to emphasize their group status, the bronze pieces, made between 2004 and '07, were arranged on a U-shaped, nearly waist-high, white base that filled the room. The surfaces are barklike, lumpy (no doubt cast from clay squeezed by hand) and matte, with occasional shiny areas that suggest having been rubbed by many hands. While the patina resembles that of primitive artifacts, the sculptures' overall abstract quiriness links them to modernity.

Considering the inert material in which they are cast, the bronzes are surprisingly animated. Much of this has to do with their stances, which always seem to be shifting balance, like a tai chi practitioner moving through his form. In a way the objects seem to be striking poses, each one projecting a different persona. The thin legs of some are rooted in bronze slabs, while others prick the white base like a Louise Bourgeois spider.

As with all good abstraction, Xieda's sculptures evoke numerous associations. The round knobs topping off some elements could refer to human heads, while other sections resemble birds, trees, weaponry or prehistoric tools. There are architectural aspects as well: arches, implied portals, ladders that lead to nowhere.

Xieda's most evocative sculptures are the most simple: *Sages' Sayings 052* (2004-06) is an unpretentious square supported by two skinny legs that list to one side. Despite a subtle upward thrust that lends a sense of tentative optimism, it exudes a tender vulnerability. On the other hand, *Sages' Sayings 059* (2007) is firmly planted like a cannon, with a long sharp proboscis that could be a sword—or a beak. And as with all of these pieces, the shapes made by the negative spaces (which, of course, change as the viewer moves) are a significant part of the experience.

On its own pedestal, facing the display of bronzes like a magistrate, was a lumpen, white, pulp-paper piece (*Sages' Sayings 1205*, 2012) that looked as if it could have been roughly hewn from stone, and presented a satisfying contrast. Placed elsewhere in the gallery were two larger paper-pulp works (one 11 feet tall and the other nearly 5) that, as with the bronzes, were sticklike. They recalled gangly adolescents next to their more poetic bronze counterparts. The pulp-paper pieces are the 45-year-old artist's newest venture, and perhaps not yet fully developed to the level of dynamic lyrical clarity that characterizes his earlier work.

Wang Xieda: Sages' Sayings 059, 2007, bronze, 131/4 by 191/4 by 111/4 inches; at James Cohan.