

Web Review *Subject Verb Object*

By Jonathan Goodman

For the past 20 years, Shanghai-based artist Wang Xieda has studied calligraphy, concentrating on the fourth century when the brush replaced the carving tool as the means of recording language. In his first show in the United States at James Cohan Gallery, that closed in February, Wang presented bronze and paper-pulp sculptures modeled after these Chinese pictographs and ideographs. Arranged on long, white, waist-high pedestals parallel to the gallery's four walls, the sculptures from the series "*Sages' Sayings*" (2002–) initially suggested lines of writing. Upon inspection, however, the works were not legible—rather they were symbols that translated calligraphic beauty into sculptural expression.

The thin poles of bronze clearly demonstrated the influence of Alberto Giacometti's works, with some of Wang's sparser pieces even appearing as human outlines. *Sages' Sayings 033* (2006), for example, from one angle, looked like a person sitting down with arms extended outward. Wang's works, moreover, by marrying traditional and modernist forms, called upon both the very old and very new—a strategy employed successfully by many artists in China today.

Xu Bing, for example, also uses Chinese characters, but while Xu does not stray far from the meaning, Wang abandons it, taking bold risks by appending small pieces—such as balls and rectangles—to the thin poles of bronze that serve as the structural basis.

Sages' Sayings 026 (2006) comprises a group of interconnected, vertical bronze poles, with one pole forming part of two square outlines that share a horizontal pole. Inside the lower square is a solid, flat metal rectangle, while in the upper square, a thin appendage loops around the shape. Other pieces evoked ancient seal script. *Sages' Sayings 013* (2006) consisted of three, interconnected, vertical bronze poles, one of which formed a right angle before ending on the sculpture's rectangular base. In the upper half of the sculpture, a set of three horizontal poles extended into a fork-like form. From the other outer pole, a short branch supported a shorter vertical pole.

The paper-pulp sculptures felt dense and volumetric in comparison to the linear bronze works. But they, too, played with the visual structures of early characters. *Sages' Sayings 1205* (2012) was a textured white work, much like a squared zero with a hole in it.

Wang's show captured the spirit of ancient writing, but with a brilliant feeling for developments in modernist and later sculpture, making the past available while also seeking the new.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Jonathan Goodman is a teacher and writer who specializes in Chinese art and has contributed to Art in America, Sculpture, and Yishu. Currently, he teaches at Pratt Institute and the Parsons School of design in New York City.



WANG XIEDA, "Subject Verb Object" installed at James Cohan Gallery. Photo by Jean Vong.
Courtesy James Cohan Gallery.



WANG XIEDA, *Sages' Sayings 033*, 2006, bronze, 42 × 36 × 18 cm. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery.

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WANG XIEDA, *Sages' Sayings 013*, 2006, bronze, 86 × 36 × 15 cm. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery.