

# Art in America

## Wang Xu's Carved Animal Sculptures Have a Welcoming Aura of Cuteness Mixed with Kindness

By Simon Wu May 9, 2023 10:51am



View of the installation "Garden of Seasons," 2018–19, at the Vincent Price Art Museum, Los Angeles.  
PHOTO MONICA OROZCO/COURTESY 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

The animals in Wang Xu's compact, pastel-colored soapstone sculptures engage in a behavior rarely seen in contemporary art: kindness. In one, tiny birds line up and wait their turn to climb the neck of a friendly-looking giraffe; in another, a fish balances the moon on its puckered lips, taking care not to let it fall. The show was perhaps best captured in a comment on Instagram from artist Ajay Kurian, who wrote that the sculptures reminded him of his favorite children's books, "the ones you remember because they treated their reader as both young and old at once.... You apprehend them once as a child and apprehend them again as an adult apprehending your child-self apprehending [them]."

Wang began carving these animal sculptures in New York in early 2020, working outdoors in the

city's parks. When a monthlong trip to his native Dalian, China, for Lunar New Year turned into two years there under lockdown, the sculptures became a source of succor, the sweet scenes depicted in them a respite during a difficult time. A video he made at that time, *Seven Star Road* (2020), alternates between close-up shots of him carving the pieces in his apartment and views of the streets of Dalian from his window. The peaceful sculpting process is a stark contrast to the turmoil and distress in the city outside. Lockdown was still in place when Wang first unveiled the pieces, along with the video, in a virtual exhibition on 47 Canal's website. Alongside them, he displayed poems he'd written that refer obliquely to the sculptures, and to the circumstances of their creation: "Outside the glass wall, on the lawn, on the ceiling," one reads, "statues and art / Nothing to do with me."



Left, *Flood Land*, 2020, and right, *Memory of Plenty Island*, 2020.  
PHOTOS JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

Like much of Wang's work, the animal pieces are a way of confronting the history of classical figurative sculpture, a tradition Wang knows well, having been trained in realist sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing before earning an MFA at Columbia University. After Columbia, Wang returned to a historic quarry in China, recovered a couple of discarded sculptures of biblical figures, and re-carved their faces as portraits of the Chinese workers who made them. Those sculptures became embroiled in a controversy over the attempt of a Los Angeles arts nonprofit to place them in a public park in an area of the city that had once been white-dominated, but had become majority Asian; a staunch group of locals nixed the project. (The sculptures were eventually exhibited at LA's Vincent Price Art Museum.)

In a 2019 show at 47 Canal, Wang showed a small-scale version of the Athena sculpture that currently stands in the park—a figure carved, ironically, in stone from the same Chinese quarry—along with a video documenting the aborted park project and, particularly, the local backlash. He is interested not just in artworks, but in their supply chains. He uses his own productions to challenge the lofty ideals of beauty, civilization, and human achievement often associated with stone sculpture. Instead, he unearths traces of what we tend to think of as comparatively minor quotidian themes: humor, cuteness, a sense of belonging, and, of course, kindness.