

## Wang Xu

*a garden has feelings*

October 20–November 23, 2022

47 Canal presents “a garden has feelings,” Wang Xu’s second solo exhibition at the gallery, comprising 33 new works which are carried by the question of how to “overcome separateness, achieve union, and transcend one’s individual life.”

The fox is a solitary animal known to wander great distances in its search for food and a place to live. Two foxes populate “a garden has feelings,”: in *upon perspective* (2022), a lone fox gazes upward with its tail wrapped about its legs while in *believe the wing* (2022) another fox looks towards the horizon, bushy tailed with two feathers flanking its torso, giving it the appearance of being winged. These works and others in the exhibition emerge from the artist’s experience of confinement and restive movement, when what Wang intended as a short trip to visit family in Dalian, China became a two-year stay at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. When quarantine eased, the artist traveled across China collecting soapstones and sculpting animal figures, carrying these in his suitcase as he went and noticing other rovers who, like him, were experiencing “that animal feeling.”

One of the artist’s primary preoccupations during this period of wandering was relation. In the gallery space, Wang’s sculpted animals rest on their individual pedestals, and there is a degree of solitude in this. Yet a tiny bird, fruit, or celestial object rests on many of the animals, attached by magnet. This gesture speaks to the potential for symbiotic relationships, like that between an oxpecker and an elephant where the bird feasts on the parasites that might otherwise harm the host. Other pairings repeat across the sculptures: in *two of swords* (2022), a squirrel bears a pair of feathers; a pair of kangaroos are locked in gaze or exchange in *mirror and shadow* (2022); and *sleep of transcendence* (2022), a blisssed manatee balances a pineapple on its belly. Wang’s use of contrasting colored stone in many of these works, underscores the distinction, and the complementarity, between the animals and the moons, stars, and clouds they carry. The artist’s inquiry into how empathy, or being for the other, might enable our relationships subtends these works and their presentation.

Wang’s animal forms resemble their real world counterparts, however exactitude in figuration is not the emphasis. They do not strain towards “elegance, emptiness, or neatness” nor are they rough hewn. The touch that has formed their surfaces is deft and exacting while tender, attuned to softness and humor. Such formal simplicity invites attention to the material, with soapstone’s characteristic striations and veins evoking the markings on an animal, for instance the brown and black stone the artist uses to sculpt a boar. In other works, the interplay of color within the stone itself lends certain animals an otherworldly aura — as with the flesh-colored elephant whose pink torso fades into ecru legs so that it appears to float. (Wang takes particular care with each figure’s vivid eyes, often deciding on their expression only after prolonged meditation.) Wrested from rationality or the performance of virtuosity, these works form an invitation to play. This, too, returns to the artist’s inquiry into relation, as it is through play that we experiment with how we might be, speak, or interact in and with the world.

Where Wang’s earlier presentations *Dream Animals (Lianghui)*, 2020, and “Overtime Gift,” 2019, featured video, language, and references to mythology and monuments, “a garden has feelings,” marks Wang turning wholly to raw stone, which he describes as “the beginning of a sculpture.” This is the element that precedes human imagination, the artist’s idea, the sculpture’s eventual form, or any ascribed meaning. This process of attentive communion is described by the poet, Mary Oliver, of whose oeuvre Wang read widely during this period. In *Our World*, she writes, “Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness — an empathy — was necessary if the attention was to matter.” Wang’s re/turn to the raw stone is an effort at relating anew by understanding the subjective world of others, and rebuilding fractured connection. Hopeful and open, attentive and playful, Wang offers the 33 sculptures of “a garden has feelings,” as prayers “for family, friends, and lovers,” and for strength to traverse the unknown.

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**Wang Xu** (b. 1986, Dalian, China) received his BFA in sculpture from Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, before pursuing an MFA at Columbia University in New York City. He has had exhibitions at the Vincent Price Art Museum, Monterey Park, CA; Shanghai Project, Shanghai; Jewish Museum, New York; and SculptureCenter, New York. He is a 2018 resident of The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and The Socrates Sculpture Park, New York.