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Essay by Betti-Sue Hertz

Tentative Title: **Sui Jianguo's *Blind* series: The Original Model, The Final Original, The Copy, The Imprint and The Multiple**

“The sculptured body embodies something. Does it embody space? Is sculpture an occupying of space, a domination of space?”

—Martin Heidegger¹

“The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation.”

—Rosalind Krauss²

“Does the mind's hand of the blind function the same way as the mind's eye of the sighted?”

—Georgina Kleege³

From 2008 until 2019, the Beijing-based artist Sui Jianguo engaged in simple haptic engagements with clay at the scale of the model,⁴ which he then took through conceptual and technological processes to achieve his monumental sculptures. Dispensing with the visual in the production of

¹ Martin Heidegger, “Art and Space” lecture, 1969, trans. Charles H. Seibert, <https://pdflibrary.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/art-and-space.pdf>.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 33.

³ Georgina Kleege, “The Subject at Hand: Blind Imaging, Images of Blindness,” *Social Research* *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2011): 11.

⁴ Sui shifted to plaster models in 2017 as the newest 3-D printing techniques at that time were able to reproduce significantly more surface detail than earlier technologies.

the original model, his two operations consisted of blind touch and the action of compression on malleable matter. Throughout this period, he repeated this modest process for bringing sculpture into being hundreds of times, resulting in a highly varied lexicon of permutations. For each of the objects made in this manner, the clay's form bears the trace of the hand's bodily impact. Neither overly manipulating or giving way to the clay's entropic capacity—Sui performed an investigation into this almost primordial relationship between body and material world as a first step to creating sculpture in the monumental tradition. Yet, in themselves these original models, as the artist calls them, are both lowly and insignificant. On purpose, they remain (fragile) greenware. Kiln firings would remove them from their indexical relationship with the artist's physical body and they would no longer be the exact record of the moment of contact that is so important to the artist's philosophical intent. At the artist's expansive retrospective *Echo of System: Sui Jianguo, 1997-2019* at the Minsheng Museum of Art, Beijing (Sep. 28- Nov. 1, 2019), a key installation for understanding the process and aim of the *Blind* series is a collection of the original models organized in size order with the largest ones at approximately 12 inches at one end and the tiniest ones at approximately half an inch at the other end of a table approximately 36 feet long and 8 feet wide.



1435 Piece of Original model ,2008-2018 clay and other,Table Size:1440x120cm

Sui Jianguo

Each one unique, yet part of a set, they were all made by enacting the same procedure. Significantly, the largest ones are chronologically the earliest. The decrease in size (initially they

were clay and towards the end of the series, plaster) corresponds chronologically to the government's return to stricter authoritarian controls. As the years progressed, the optimism and liberalization of social norms leading up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing gave way to the slow erosion of those much sought after freedoms in the post-Olympics years. The most recent period of increased repression of critique and dissent and restrictions on creative expression include complicated censorship rules. If these original models are stand-ins for the agency of individuals, then Sui's project, in turn, subtly reflects these changes. While the original models decreased in size, this was not the case for their outcomes—large scale sculptures of their exact blow-ups.⁵ In this way, Sui validated human will no matter what the political conditions.

These original models are not sketches or drafts and the blow-ups are the final originals. The latter is also the copy or imprint and in some cases, the editioned multiple. In this way Sui captures the essence of sculpture—original, copy, multiple—through a set of standards and protocols of his own invention. The final originals retain all aspects of the original model that one expects from a monumental copy. Through this procedure the human hand is amplified into heroic scale. While some have conjectured that this emphasis on scale in relationship to the artist's body specifically, the male body, could be read as self-aggrandizement, that reading is unfortunate. The artist uses his own body so as not to implicate anyone but himself in his theoretical position. As a form of self-portraiture, the artist believes that it is the responsibility of each of us to take responsibility for our actions, whether they be physical or otherwise. As such, these self-portraits are the material presence of the space between the artist's hands. They are a manifestation of the body's physical impact on the space, the air one might say around us. In this sense, the ontological presence of the air around us is concretized, not into another bodily form, but on how bodies put pressure on the spaces we inhabit. Yet these works are not about the self in the traditional sense turned into an object for valuation through likeness or representation. In this sense, these works are anti-representational, as they make ontological sense as material manifestation of what in art historical terms is negative space. In political terms these works reject introspection—they are evidentiary

⁵ While bronze was the preferred material for the transposition of the original models into large-scale monumental sculpture through 2017, the most recent polymer resin works, produced through more advanced 3-D printing techniques, start life as plaster models.

as much as they are indexical—of the impact our bodies and by extension, we, have on the world around us.

One might assume that the physical result of these procedures—namely, a monumental sculpture—would be considered the endgame, the intended outcome, something that both literally and metaphorically stands alone. That his intent for the final object, the sculpture, is for it to exist as an autonomous work of art and circulate within traditional conventions, forming a vaguely affectionate relationship with a public in the manner of any other large-scale work. But what if the artist has a different intention? What if these expressive works are intended to serve as material evidence of a socially critical idea? What if they are first and foremost political works?

Yes, they were originally conceived of clay and bronze—materials that have long been media for sculpture in China, the Middle East, and the West, whose ancient cultural



Bronze horse, Han dynasty

ancestors from the Qin and Han Dynasties, Mesopotamia, and Greece generated distinct figural imagery in the form of heroes, saints, and warriors. The human hand aided these ancient figurative efforts, yet remained secondary—merely a facilitating element—until the advent of Modernism in the late nineteenth century. With the emergence of artists such as the French sculptor

Auguste Rodin, there began to be indicators that artworks were becoming as much about the residue of performative actions of making—manual construction and lost-wax casting—as they were about the figures themselves, who more and more frequently appeared to be in a perpetual state of formation. Rodin’s revolutionary spirit breathed life into European public sculpture, a genre that had become rigid and academic.⁶ We can

⁶ Sui has long been fascinated with Western art. In a 2017 interview he claims: “For me, French culture is the source of almost all modernist art...” Referring to his solo exhibition, *Trace*, at Pace Gallery, Beijing in that same year, he continues, “connoisseurs will clearly see the imprint of Rodin and his artistic thinking on my work...” <https://www.faguowenhua.com/en/news/sui-jianguo-sculptor-ambassador-croisements-festival-2017> Accessed, Jan. 6, 2020. Sui’s *Blind*

conjecture: What aspect of Rodin's revolutionary spirit has been most inspiring for Sui's *Blind* series? When the body makes contact with clay or plaster, the imprint is the simultaneous convergence of forces—of the bodily and the material—putting pressure on each other, one to the other. However, fragmentation rather than the whole, upscaling, repetition and the traces of the creative process itself, are all also present in Rodin's modernist project, yet when adapted to Sui's post-modern practice it can only be conceptually understood as *après Pop Art*.



Legacy Mantle, 1997
Painting cast Bronze
240×160×90cm each
Sui Jianguo



Jurassic Time, 2003
painting bronze and steel
230×250×460cm
Sui Jianguo

Loosely speaking, Sui appropriated Rodin's gestural approach and consciousness of the body of the artist and redeployed it in conceptual terms as a critique of standardization—not in the realm of commodities, as was the case with his earlier work such as *Mao's Jacket* (1997) and his *Red Dinosaur* series (1999) influenced by Pop art—but as a manifestation of his desire to bypass cultural conditioning. Through a trusting of deep awareness and preconscious feeling, the emotive potential of the physical body becomes a vehicle for connecting with oneself as a unique individual as in a work such as *The Blind #12* from the *Blind* series, 2013.

Portraits was exhibited, in a large group exhibition *Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition* at the Grand Palais, 22 March- 31 July, 2017, celebrating Rodin and his legacy.



The Blind #12, 2007-2013 cast Bronze, Sui Jianguo



TV Buddha, 1974 Nam June Paik, installation

His work evokes an enlightened contemporary Buddhism, a spiritual awakening anchored in the present-ness of the body. In that Sui creates objects for reflection through the mirror of self-portraiture, his work could be said to be aligned with Nam June Paik's installation *TV Buddha* (1974), comprised of a Buddha sculpture "looking" at its likeness on a TV monitor.

In the early to mid-20th century handmade quotidian products gave way to large-scale manufacturing, one of the main subjects of Pop art. In the 21st century, digital culture, algorithms and AI would intersect with the digital world and intercede on the primacy of touch, which had been so central to the visual arts. For 11 years Sui glorified the simplicity of making as an expressive individual bodily gesture, not out of nostalgia, but as a way to acknowledge humanness by harnessing the new manufacturing technologies, especially 3D printing, as a technique of amplification of his original models.⁷

⁷ During that same time period, mapping and surveillance of human behavior by governments increased exponentially, weakening the humanist perspective through new forms of data collection and codification. No longer a name and a face, we became data points in complex bureaucratic systems.

Sui has manifested a lifelong interest in adapting the canon of Western sculpture to a Chinese context, yet I propose that considering his work within the cultural milieu in which it is made—China—is essential, and yields a different reading than it does when the work is likened to the sculptural creations of Rodin or Willem de Kooning. While there are of course limitations to analyzing an artwork within a national frame, it is always necessary to consider the cultural and political context in which art is made in order to grasp its full meaning. This kind of culturally specific reading situates Sui's application of the human will on clay (and later plaster) as a dialogue that collapses the binary of East and West. Indeed, I would argue that he is an active agent in this collapse, which began in the early twentieth century, when Chinese sculptors learned techniques for enlarging models to monumental scale from French artists and their fabricators. More on this soon.

I want to back up a moment from broad strokes, and examine some specific conditions of sculptural production. In Sui's work, the State, whether represented as lacking integrity or denying individual freedoms, is portrayed as empty of a moral core and as appropriating legacy icons as vehicles of systematic power. Sui has long created humorous works premised on empty Chinese pop symbols that have come to be associated with government power: a hollow Mao suit, an oversize (sometimes caged) dinosaur, "Made in China" sculptures. In the early 1990s Chinese sculptors began experimenting with materials, demonstrating a new awareness of their physical and



Earthy Force, stone and welding steel 60×70×50cm each 1992-1994 Sui Jianguo

conceptual attributes. Sui's *Earthy Force* (1992–94) was a project requiring intensive, time-consuming labor. Covering stones with rebar (welded-steel rods associated with building projects) in a grid pattern, he bound and constricted nature itself as a response to the trauma of the suppression of the student uprising during the Tiananmen Square

incident in 1989.⁸ “Weighty forms and laborious processes of enclosing, constricting, repairing and mending dominate Sui’s practice of the early 1990’s, as though the artist were working through the implications of his generation’s experience and exerting control over form in lieu of the lack of control within public space.”⁹ Sui and the other Chinese artists who participated in the *Sculpture ’94* exhibition at the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing along with Zhan Wang, Fu Zhongwang, Zhang Yongjian, and Jiang Jie—in their search for how to move sculpture forward began questioning the handcraftsmanship of traditional sculpture and embracing industrial techniques of production. New fabrication strategies were facilitating the quicker and easier creation of multiples, which in turn became a tool for critical approaches to symbols of power.

A few years later, in the summer of 1998, Sui began his *Clothes Vein Studies* series, which exposed academic sculpture’s role as a tool of Chinese socialist ideology. Like Rodin, Sui



study of clothes veins, Painted Fiberglass, Original size 1998 Sui Jianguo

would add clothing after the figure was sculpted in the nude first. He believes that once the figure was clothed in Chinese attire that viewers would identify more closely with sculpture’s pedagogical functions.¹⁰ While the academic style may have evolved from the Greeks through the *École des Beaux-Arts*, it was

also central to the style of Socialist Realism, which emerged in the 1930s as an ideological tool of Soviet communism. In this sense, modern Chinese art was inserted into a Western lineage, while abandoning much of its own art history.

⁸ This was the same year that Sui both graduated with a Master of Arts degree and started teaching at CAFA, serving as dean of sculpture from 1997-2009, and where he continues to be a major force.

⁹ Joe Martin Hill, “Sui Jianguo: Conscientious Observer,” 2008, <http://www.suijianguo.com/bibliography.html>

¹⁰ Email correspondence with the author, Feb. 1, 2017.

In response, in part, to Sui's series, Zhan Wang created a workshop later in 1998, as part of an exhibition where he applied another strategy of appropriation for questioning conventions, this time in an effort to express concern regarding a university art education system that was in desperate need of reform. For the exhibition *Trace of Existence*, he organized a participatory event, *Xin yishu sucheng chejian* (New Art Training Workshop), where "you could be a master." Participants were asked to select one of the school's many plaster-cast busts drawn from the canon of European sculpture and create a new work of art by covering it with clay. Rule number 3: "Although you no longer need ponder questions of modeling, composition, or form, you still can give free rein to your own style and technique, and although your work is inseparable from the original, you can create a new mold on the surface."¹¹ Why copy a bust when you can just cover it with clay and claim it as your own "masterpiece"? While as a form of resistance to the status quo the workshop may sound a bit mild, and it never did enter the daily life of the sculpture studio program. However, it did serve as an intervention toward a rethinking of academic training stemming from the *École des Beaux-Arts* model.

At first glance, Sui's *Blind Portraits* series (beginning in 2008) and his subsequent clay-to-bronze works made in a similar fashion—by putting physical pressure on a lump of clay that is scaled to the hand while blindfolded—seem to be a retreat from the political concerns of his earlier work. There seem to be (but wait!) no references to the external social and political sphere, and from a formal perspective they are nonspecific. Clay's malleability makes it a perfect material for recording imprints by pressing or squeezing—by palms, fingers, knuckles, and the surface of the skin itself. As a conceptual procedure, in these works Sui reduces his physical relationship with the clay to a minimum—sometimes to one single action. The by-product of this action is an imprint of the artist's body. Whereas the earlier works made loose reference to the human body, and possibly to rocks or other natural formations, that kept their "meaning" flexible and in play, in later works the evidence of the human hand is undeniable. And I argue that by accessing touch

¹¹ For more on this see <http://en.cafa.com.cn/the-chinese-academy-and-modern-art-1980-1990s-part-iii.html>.

as the primary sense by which to make these sculptures, the artist opens up other possibilities of knowing. It is through the body's intuitive processes that new forms of knowing can emerge. We cannot know beforehand what kind of knowing it will be and how we will be changed by it. Often after producing ten to twenty objects in one day, Sui will later select a few to keep and destroy the others. This is the first step in his involved process of creating a final work, a process designed to preserve the absolute uniqueness of a physical moment.



Blind Portait, 2008 Sui Jianguo

Of the various visual arts media, sculpture is uniquely available to the blind through touch. Georgina Kleege, a visually impaired scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, who writes about blindness and the visual arts, notes:

“The audio instructions for a touch tour of sculpture at the British Museum advises the blind or visually impaired visitor to move her fingers rapidly up the extended arm of a Roman discus thrower. Rapid motion takes away the factor of the temperature. While a slow exploration of the sculpture with the palms and grasping fingers makes the cold marble most apparent, a quick, light touch with the very tips

of the fingers emphasizes subtle rises and falls in the modeling of the limb and briefly gives the illusion that one is touching live skin.”¹²

In a workshop that I attended with Kleege in the fall of 2016, she augmented her thoughts above with inquiries to the sighted, which she used to build mental images of the works on view. She asked: “Does the mind’s hand of the blind function the same way as the mind’s eye of the sighted?”

The American artist Bruce Nauman offers another approach to the subject of hands in his bronze castings from the 1990s. In works such as *Hand Group* (1997), the hands form a linked and connected ensemble of different pairs, and *Fifteen Pairs of Hands* (1996) displays various permutations. While these hands are not specifically replicating the sign language of the deaf, there is a parallel—a sense that these hands, especially when two join together by their fingertips, are speaking through gesture, communicating. It is not only the masses but the spaces around them that embody the expressive capacity of our arguably most functional body part.



Hand Group, bronze, 1997 Bruce Nauman



Fifteen Pairs of Hands, 1998 Bruce Nauman, from the exhibition

The imaginary potential of touch, as if a sculpture might be awakened through the act, provides a possible window for experiencing Sui’s sculpture in the terms of its making. Sui is purposeful in his reference to Rodin as a touchstone for the *Blind Portraits*. Rodin, who

¹² Kleege.



Man with the Broken Nose, 1863-1864 Cast bronze Rodin

was not trained at the academy and should be considered an anti-academic artist, believed it was important for the artist to bring his personal experiences to the process of making sculpture, which was a radical idea at the time. Rodin relied on his intuitive, somatic, haptic understanding of and respect for the material in his willful shapings of clay into-figural form. Using an improvisational and experimental approach to materials, which

included taking advantage of accidents at any stage in the process—with the clay, plaster, wax, sand and bronze—contributed to the expanded emotional range of his work. For *Man with the Broken Nose* (1863-64), the back of the head fell off when the clay sculpture was in a dry and fragile state, and he left it that way in the bronze version. While his romantic figural works exhibit extreme states of emotion and inner turmoil, they also register a belief that we shape our own universe. His signature surfaces, with their undulating, fluid movements and transitions, are also vehicles for emotional content. The figures' highly gestural poses, in combination with the visibly manipulated surfaces—the rough, expressive, and light-catching modeling—contribute to their vitality. De Kooning's bronze sculptures of female nudes, for instance *Standing Figure* (1969, cast 1984), are a recent and more abstract development in the lineage of Rodin's break with academic traditions.



Standing Figure, 1969, cast 1984 Cast bronze
De Kooning

While it is useful to review the ways that this body of work appears to emulate Modernist values, I would be remiss to position Sui's conceptualizations within these terms. Yet there is something in this trajectory that is worth noting. Coming as they do from the hands of a trained sculptor, his small, inconsequential objects take on a kind of aura, one that is attached to the maker no matter how lacking the objects may appear from the point of view of conventional aesthetic standards. With a brief bonding with the clay—a series of actions,

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namely connection, release, and then separation—Sui taps into preconscious states informed by his expert sculptural sense. The negative space around the clay bears the traces of the positive impression of his hands. With this, these works take a different turn from those of Rodin and de Kooning, as they retain a direct association with the body's role in the process, as self-portraits in the negative. What is left in the wake of Sui's action is an object that was made without willfulness to shape it in any particular way—to mold, to add, or to subtract—that is, operations associated with traditional handcrafted sculpture.



Sui Jianguo Manuscripts, clay, 18x6x8cm, 2009

While the negative was always there, here it is amplified, not only as a dialogue between one's hands and a malleable material, but as a dynamic manifestation of the ontology (existence) of the space between, itself. It is also from this moment, when he started with this new mode of working, that he began collaborating with computer programmers and fabricators to realize his work in a process parallel to that of the Modern masters.

I would like to also consider the possibility of an expressionism that elides the psychological, as I am not convinced we learn much about Sui's inner life from these works. While the anger and bodily exertion of force is present, and the outcomes, the forms themselves organic, odd, twisted, even seemingly distorted, the intention is to access a way of knowing that already exists. His pre-conscious acts are informed by years of mastery in sculpture.

Could it be that while seeming to represent a retreat from the political realm that has fascinated the artist throughout his career, these works are operating through subterfuge as social commentary by other means? Is there a submerged politics here, communicated through abstraction? Can abstraction “hold” political power? Certainly. For the American

Abstract Expressionists—Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, de Kooning, and others—heightened affect, fear, anger, and exuberance of demonstrable emotion through the highly visible manipulation of paint was energized by turmoil in the personal and psychological realms. The work of these artists, however, manifested an abandonment of the political sphere. Whereas I would argue that Sui’s expressionism within his Chinese context today, when the populace is caught or “squeezed” between two political and economic systems—Communism and capitalism—is a direct outcome of, and statement about, the country’s contemporary condition. On the one hand, an authoritative political system determines without public discussion the national laws and values conformity and allegiance, with limited tolerance for dissent. On the other, its accelerating economic system thrives on unique differentiation, generating and driven by a culture of individual need. Perhaps Sui’s works are totems, stand-ins for human beings as transitional entities in the symbolic realm that will be transformed and amplified in their final monumental scale.



Clothes Vein Series, 2012 Sui Jianguo, from the exhibition

Copying has been a common practice globally since ancient times. *Clothed Discobolus* (2012, from the *Clothes Vein* series) is an example of Sui’s “copies” of well-known Greek and Roman statues, which he dresses in traditional Maoist attire. This particular work is a copy of the famous second-century AD marble *Tomley Discobolus* in the British Museum, which itself is a Greco-Roman copy of a bronze original by Myron from the fifth century BCE (the same sculpture that Kleege references in the above quote).¹³ Writing about

¹³ The Tomley Discobolus contributed to, and was coopted by, the Nazis’ master race ideology. While I do not know if Sui was aware of this point when creating this work, I think it useful to

his series, Sui has said: “I wanted to show how through self-reflection I have come to throw off the bonds of the education I received at the Art Academy and its socialist ideology. Instead of these I have created a ‘way of art’ all my own.”¹⁴

Sui’s biography foregrounds why the subject of the copy has such a relevant place in his sculpture:

In 1972, at the age of sixteen, [Sui] was assigned to work in a factory in his native Shandong Province. Coming from a family of intellectuals, Sui’s status during the Cultural Revolution was a lowly one: hence, getting assigned to a factory was the best he could hope for. . . . Returning to work at the factory [after recovering from an injury], he began a personal search for a cultural mission, and eventually sought out the traditional ink painter, Liu Donglun, and asked to be his student. . . . Master Liu accepted and Sui started to copy Old Master paintings from poorly printed black-and-white illustrations. Beginning with the works of the Song dynasty masters, he slowly worked his way through Chinese painting history by copying pictures in sequence, executing hundreds of ink paintings over several years. In 1977 he joined an evening art course for factory workers at the local Workers’ Cultural Palace, and began training in the Western academic style: charcoal drawings, life studies, plaster

mention, as works of art are always open to political uses unrelated to the artist’s intention. While this work does represent a desire for perfection in terms of physical athleticism and beauty in ways that would have been attractive to this vehemently offensive ideology, it is mute, and helpless to defend itself against such appropriations. Sui’s work overlays a challenging iconic Mao suit that has come to represent China, an image that China has alternately embraced and disavowed.

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http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/sui_jianguo%E2%80%99s_discus_thrower.aspx.

cast sculptures, etc. During this time he discovered a passion for sculpture which has informed everything he has done since.¹⁵

The high Modernism of the early twentieth century eschewed the copy as an academic exercise that reiterates past conventions. It thrived on rupture, fragmentation, revolution, and the upturning of convention. As an homage to this break with tradition more than one hundred years ago, the artist Liz Glynn created eight sculptures based on parts of Rodin sculptures in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's collection in 2015 that made this aspect of Rodin's practice visible. The project emerged out of a 2013 performance by Glynn where she spliced together casts from rubber molds derived from the bronzes: "One version of the great Balzac appears like a mischievous child in a bathrobe. In another piece, parts of the writer's hulking form are merged with that of a Calais Burgher."¹⁶ In another series from the same year, *PATHOS (The Blind Series)* Glynn created clay masks through a blind action, by placing a slab of clay and pressing it roughly into her face. After removing the clay, she pinched and poked it to emphasize different emotions as dramatic expressions of Greek theater.

¹⁵ Chang Tsong-zung, "A Secret Anti-Modernist: Sui Jianguo and His Retirement Project," unpublished English manuscript, May 2007 (published in Chinese as "一个秘密的反现代主义者—隋建国与他的退休计划," 点穴: 隋建国的艺术. 岭南美术出版社, 2007年9月第一版, 31-40).

¹⁶ Art in America, Liz Glynn at Paula Cooper.

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/exhibitions/liz-glynn/>



PATHOS, Cast bronze, 2015 Glynn



part of *PATHOS*

Both Sui and Glynn have found creative ways to make visible aspects of Rodin's making process, as an homage to the artist's radical formal innovations, which gave implicit permission to succeeding generations of artists to be generative in their explorations of the copy in dialogue with classical and academic art. In contrast, Pop artists such as Andy Warhol positioned the copy as a product of commodity capitalism and factory standardization in what might have been the act that finally collapsed the separation between art and the marketplace. Sui's earlier work took up this Pop position as a provocation regarding the limits of Communism at the onset of China's opening up to markets and becoming a global hub of product production and manufacturing. His recent sculptures prioritize process over product while reverting back to the ethos of Rodin's early Modernism. In the end, Rodin's copy isn't Sui's copy after all. Sui's Pop copies are about the repetition of factory production at a time when China was becoming the manufacturing capital of the world. His *Blind* series are about the indexicality of the body. It's not really a copy, it's an imprint. But then the blow-up version is a digitized imprint replica, not totally disengaged from a mold copy, yet with new capacities, set apart from it. The question is whether the replica is bringing the body to life or manifesting a fragment of the ontology of space into its own metaphoric orbit.

If the individual is somehow rendered small within the humongous scale of China, then Sui's more recent works, in which he blows-up the result of a seemingly inconsequential human action on clay into bronze, and later, plaster and polymer resin, sculptures, of ten to twenty-five feet in height, honor human emotive capacity. These works are a proposal that individuals can overcome their feelings of smallness in the face of the big hand of China



(a common phrase about the government's overreach vis-à-vis its citizens). The markings of the fingers, the palm, the skin are rendered larger than life—big, important, and thus not



Monument to Balzac ,1891-1897 Cast bronze, Rodin

Garden in cloud(part), 2019 Sui Jianguo
Photosensitive resin 3D printing & steel structure, H6m

to be ignored. A force to contend with. Inconsequential details become massively consequential through their transformation to monumentality. The scale of these works begs comparison to China's numerous sculptures of Chairman Mao, or the four-meter-high palace guards at the Yong Yuling tomb (ca. 1085) of the Northern Song Emperor Shenzong in Gongyi city, Henan.

Standing in person in front of oversize figurative sculpture, such as Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1891–97) or Michelangelo's *David* (1501–4), gives a feeling of the power of scale that rivals that of architecture or nature. We can grasp Sui's works in these terms, but it is poignant that their final monumental form is a material manifestation of not hands but



David, 1501-1504 Marble, Michelangelo

space. What is particularly contemporary about Sui's most recent works is that technology has advanced to a point where 3D computer modeling can capture a much more refined impression of the original than was previously possible. In 2008, the first year Sui was working on the *Blind Portraits*, he used a technique that the Chinese learned from the French in the early years of the twentieth century based on French academic procedures. Several of these works actually resemble portraits in their general formation of a bulbous shape on a trunk or neck. Their production required marking a grid onto the source object, creating a scaffold for the mold based on that calculation, by parts scaling the source object up in clay, and then making a plaster mold that would receive the bronze pour. This process was still based on a manual translation of the smaller to the bigger object.



Process of Blind Portrait production. Sui Jianguo, 2008

From 2009 to 2015 Sui worked with a computer imaging company and a foundry. While they were able to capture the hand markings on the clay in blown-up scale, they were not

able to reproduce the more granular details.¹⁷ While the earlier works featured the undulating forms, crags and crevices, and twists and turns that are associated with Rodin, the works from 2016 to 2018 shook off romantic expressionism and are more realistic renderings of the original haptic act. Using advanced computer imaging technologies as well as 3D printing techniques, Sui is transforming the original model into an ever more literal reproduction of the surfaces, especially the striations and lines, of the hand. The evolution of the imaging technology changed the aesthetics of the work.



Compress Space, cast bronze, 100x56x60cm, 2017 Sui Jianguo

To accentuate this shift, the *Compress Space* (2017) series feature a more definite squeeze of the clay. With the combination of this force and the new technology, the shapes feature a strong expression of physical force, accentuating the space around the object. The grip of the hand is evident, yielding more pronounced spikes and crevices and thus a more pronounced sense of anguish, both formal and emotional. Considering the trajectory of this work, we can see that technology is making reproduction even easier and more exact, yet at the same time, the human and handmade aspects of the work are becoming more distressed, more frustrated. This could not be more literally apparent than in the crescendo of punches, twists, pokes, tears, kneads, pulls, and stretches displayed in the twenty-eight-minute video *Physical Trace* (2017). Whereas the act of bodily performance is implied through the impressions left on the clay, the video makes explicit the importance of



Physical Trace, screenshot of video 2017 Sui Jianguo

¹⁷ Other series, such as *Apostle* (2013), were cast at their original scale.

action as central to the entire project of producing this monumental art.

In 2019, Sui Jianguo had three solo exhibitions: *System: Sui Jianguo 2008-2018* at OCAT Shenzhen (January 19-April 8), *Echo of System: Sui Jianguo, 1997-2019* at the Minsheng Museum of Art, Beijing (September 28-November 1), and *Phenomenon & Suchness: Sui Jianguo* at Yimei Art Museum, Beijing (November 2-January 3, 2020). The final exhibition

in this trilogy focused on very recent work created with the newest 3D printing techniques using a very sensitive polymer resin.¹⁸ The *Garden in the Data Cloud: Way of the Flower* series presented at Yimei Art Museum, ensembles of large-scale works painted in shiny aluminum paint, signal the final chapter of the *Blind* series. Over the past few years, the articulation of skin, the hand's striations,



Blind Portrait, Cast bronze, Sui Jianguo
2014 in New York Central Park

edges, ridges, and indentations, has shifted the viewer's attention to the sculpture's surface. The newest technologies are much more capable of accentuating qualities akin in definition to the fingerprint.¹⁹ ²⁰ New in 2019 are the fixed relationships between the individual objects held in suspension by metal piping arranged in geometric configurations. The final originals can no longer sustain themselves as singular objects (even when clustered) as was the case with the large-scale bronze *Blind Portrait* works shown in 2014 New York's Central Park.

¹⁸ These three exhibitions took place at privately funded museums. OCAT Shenzhen is one of several museums across China funded by Overseas Chinese town opened in 2005 and has built a reputation for Chinese and international contemporary art exhibitions. Yimei Art Museum opened in 2019 local in the Zhongguan Cun section of Beijing and the Minsheng Museum of Art, Beijing is one of two museums funded by China Minsheng Bank. The other one is in Shanghai. [Please complete the information about these museums.]

¹⁹ The aluminum paint was first employed in the end of 2017. The support structures first appeared in the OCAT Shenzhen exhibition.

²⁰ These works emerged in a similar timeframe as the extensive fingerprint requirement at border control in China, the US and elsewhere.



The Burghers of Calais, 1884-1886 Cast bronze, Rodin

With this earlier grouping the distinctly individual sculptures retain autonomous integrity as in a manner more similar to Auguste Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*. In works such as *Trace #3*, the relationship between objects, no longer upright forms, appear as fragments, like irregularly formed asteroids that have spun off into the atmosphere. They are suspended as if anti-gravitational, except that they are paradoxically tethered

to the scaffolding. How does this new structural element change our understanding of the individual sculptural elements?



Trace #3, 2019 Sui Jianguo
Photosensitive resin 3D printing
H600cm



Garden in cloud-way of Flower, 2019 Sui jianguo
Photosensitive resin 3D printing & steel structure
Photographed in Yimei Art Museum, Beijing

The polymer resin does not have the strength or durability of bronze and therefore required new solutions for their presentation. No longer able to hold their own weight, they are dependent on supports. The forms have, over time, become free of the verticality of portraiture, returning to the rock forms of Sui's earlier work. The metal piping is the cage that keeps them from drifting away. The largest element of *Trace #3* twists and turns as if the original model in plaster was squeezed and pushed towards the horizontal through rotational force. It is situated near an element that is less about the pressure of the fingers and more about the impact of palm and the thumb resulting in an irregular squarish volume. In these two examples one can recreate in one's mind some semblance of the process by which they were made. This is not as apparent in a third one. While some of the thick liquid of wet plaster meets the hand and is imprinted by it, blobs of leftover plaster form an undifferentiated shape and surface. The fourth element seems to have been formed more quickly, as if its making was not particularly consequential. This is one of the several works that represent the final stage of Sui's extensive period of investigation. While it does not hint at the artist's exhaustion, that it now requires significant support from an exoskeleton may be a clue to the collapse of Sui's original desire to locate a practice where individuality was so central. The old technologies (scaling to monumental bronze) derived from 19th century techniques at the beginning of Modernism were able to support these desires. The



Dream Stone, stainless steel, H250cm, 2010 Sui Jianguo



Body in 3D #2, 2019 Sui Jianguo

Photosensitive resin 3D printing ,200x200x200cm

new technologies (scaling with 3D printing of polymer resin) represents another philosophical logic more closely aligned with fast prototyping, changeability, group think and malleability.

From 2008 to 2018, Sui engaged in a research project on sculpture's special relationship with embodiment, and the human body as a measure of individuality. Expressionists affirm individuality by trusting that their physical body makes unique use of materials at a particular moment in time. They prioritize affective subjectivity as a vehicle for communication. No

longer a quote or a stance

at a distance from the qualities of clay and the legacy of Rodin, Sui's works up until 2019, in what began as a conceptual project, wholeheartedly embraced heroic human will. Then in 2019, something shifted. As he became more deeply involved in 3D printing as was particularly evident in his exhibition at the Yimei Art Museum, two works broke with over ten years of belief in the power of the digital imprint as a record of bodily exertion on matter. With 3D #1 and 3D #2 Sui moved into new territory where the sculpture is derived from a digital magnification of a single pixel of the image of



Body in 3D #2, 2019 Sui Jianguo

Photosensitive resin 3D printing

200x200x200cm

an original model. The corporeal is all but absent as a result of this operation. Up until this point, the work I have discussed combines the body's physical and cognitive labor with technology and production. Earlier works such as *Earthly Force* (1992–94) emphasize the shaping of materials to human will. The Pop works prioritize manufacture and multiplicity. 3-D #1 and 3-D #2, while reminiscent of works such as *Dream Rock No. 3*, 2010, are removed from the material world that has been such an important source for Sui's creative energies. No longer an imprint based on "the real," they rematerialize a mere speck and represent an existential quandary about the

dematerialization and rematerialization of matter.²¹ The human has (practically) disappeared, submerged into the spheroid shape more reminiscent of minerals or diamonds. As inert as it is beautiful, they manifest as a digitally constructed rock, returning not to earth but to some other unknown galaxy.

Sculpture is still a necessary tool for probing existential questions and continues to open up new pathways. It still takes us to places we didn't know we wanted to go. While individuality within the Chinese context held out hope in 2008, by 2019 sculptures of fragments now in need of structural supports represented humanity's beleaguered condition as we came face-to-face with the rigid relational systems of data collection coveted by societies of control. In these new systems of identification, individuality based on identity's distinctive characteristics, cultural specificity, nuance, the ineffable and moral imperatives have been replaced by quantifiable data sets of physical qualities, opinions, and behaviors. Sui humbly began this journey with a sense of wonder and hope that one person's engagement with matter could be an expansive quest to better understand the power of the body as a maker of things in concert with technology. At the end of Sui's extraordinary run, he was forced to grapple with the problematic uses of dehumanizing technologies. He astutely came to the conclusion that the original project was buckling under the pressure of these new realities. Yet, what is remarkable about this has always found ways to learn from and incorporate new knowledges into his quest for an expanded language of sculpture. The *Blind* series and its newest descendants provide a solid foundation for that next chapter.

²¹ Sui Jianguo explains: When observing the 3D scans of one of my original models on the computer screen, I noticed that when the image was magnified, I could see countless interconnected triangular forms on the surface of the scanned object shape. Using high precision scanning technology (based on the STL soft file & PLA scanned file) for accuracy and magnification, a triangular surface appeared on the 3D printed resin modeling surface. The 3D file actually contains countless triangular surfaces that make up the object shape, but they are so tiny that they are not visible to the human eye. In all my 3D printed work, although I have strived to achieve a fine smooth the surface texture, fact is that countless triangular surfaces are hidden under their delicate surfaces. (Email to the Author, February, 22, 2020)
