

Sui Jianguo, Giant Void: Beyond Human Sensibility

With Sui Jianguo, it is not a question of the depth of my impressions, because I am quite familiar with him, and know all of his artworks and the trajectory of his artistic development. His works are now moving constantly forward, and we have been communicating throughout this progression. His works began to enter into this state in the process of “blindly kneading” for the *Blind Portraits* (2008).



Sui Jianguo Blind Portrait (Images of Project Process) 2008

Before this, he was mainly working on *The Shape of Time* (2006). At that time, he had entered thinking on fundamental questions: why does sculpture even exist, and what role does time play in it.



Sui Jianguo, Shape of Time 2006-now

Before that, Sui Jianguo engaged in all kinds of explorations, which is necessary for any artist. When he began his blind kneading, his aim was at first to knead out a shape, though the artist did not know what that eventual shape would be. The form would unconsciously emerge from nothing. But in his sculpting, he quickly transformed sculpture from an embodiment of the human will into a negation of the human will. In this way, his works began to break through their existing boundaries.



Sui Jianguo, Physical Trace (Still from Video) 2013

Having broken through these boundaries, Sui Jianguo turned his work into a giant tower-like construct. This “tower” is not commemorating some established, existent thing, or some idea already visualized, but a suspended possibility that has not yet taken form or meaning. But it certainly is a memorial, a tower commemorating a freedom that cannot be limited. A new meaning began here, and he then went on to further experience it and expand it.

His recent works are simply the result of grasping clay in the palm of his hand. The hand is the fullest, most sensitive embodiment of human nature in all manner of circumstances, and the palm is the part of the hand that is most able to “grasp”

things. Yet no matter how hard you grasp, there will always be emptiness. In the process of embodiment, “sculpture” re-creates a piece of emptiness, and this emptiness is embodied by sculpture as the specific structure and markings in the clump of clay. When this structure stands before our eyes, magnified 1,000 times, all of its self-negating meaning is transformed in the human awareness as a presentation of emptiness, a flashy emptiness, a display of a state of freedom. What this display presents us with is a kind of non-presentation, non-will, and non-control.



Sui Jianguo Shape of Void 3D Craft Polystyrene, H700cm, 2023

This power is what we mean when we say that as we destroy and liberate, this liberation does not necessarily become a new controlling power due to the success of the liberator; the process of liberation liberates “liberation” itself (the process of liberation becomes a liberation of liberation). That is because at the time of liberation, there is a subject that is destroying and dissolving the power and presence that is oppressing it. Once this “subject” is successful, and completes this process of liberation, it is prone to immediately devolve into a new myth, once again accepting divinity and respecting force to become a new controlling power. This controlling power puts down the original oppressors, while also becoming an oppressor and ruler of others.

We were always talking about what the biggest problem was with Joseph Beuys. This was the most important aspect of the arduous spiritual exploration around the time when the concept of China’s 85 Art Movement was coined, and after Beuys’ death in 1986. We realized that after Beuys became an artist, he was always playing the role of spiritual leader, sending out his call. He was a sorcerer, a guide, a teacher.

He was always telling people that “everyone is an artist,” but by the time he sent out this discursive edict, he had already changed. When the spirit of resistance came under his regulation, he became a kind of new pope under these regulations, a spiritual dictator. Under these circumstances, people lost their true self value in the face of these artists, because you are no longer a person, but a viewer, and when you are a viewer, you are a follower of the artist, a worshiper, just the flock driven by his whip, engaging in thoughts and ideas under his spiritual drive. You have lost that most fundamental freedom—self-awareness. This is a very dangerous thing, the last juncture of human inequality, the place that divides our inborn speed, height and sensitivity of artistic perception and insight, and at this moment, human inequality becomes the most fundamental psychological source for mutual oppression. The resolution to this issue is a contribution made by a generation of Chinese artists and Chinese contemporary art to the world.

There are many artists and theoreticians in this generation whose contributions have not been summarized and sufficiently recognized, people who now continue to act and create. This is why we should discuss Sui Jianguo.

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