

Protraits by Sui Jianguo

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As a sculptor – China’s leading contemporary sculptor – much of Sui Jianguo’s works deal with weight, volume and scale. In his particular case, these qualities combine to an analysis of power, metaphorical, metaphysical and of pressing psychological impact upon all who encounter the work. Confronted with a large pebble-like form tightly encased in an iron mesh, or immense spheres moving ponderously of their own accord in a gallery space, or a large, bleak and impenetrable steel box, the surfaces of which are relieved only by tiny, almost invisible peep holes, the aura of power is an obvious quality. At the same time, aligned with the geometry of the forms, and the choice of materials (iron, stone, steel), it is easily pigeonholed with the masculine sculptural endeavours of 20th-century masters such as American David Smith (1906-65), Britons Anthony Caro (1924-2013) and Henry Moore (1898-1986). The physicality of Sui Jianguo’s sculpture belies its subtle, cerebral sensitivity.

The *Blind Portraits*, an on-going series of monumental “busts” begun in 2008, have something of that monumental quality. These are done, as the title ambiguously suggests, not of blind people, but, rather, “blind”, possibly with the artist wearing a blindfold, or just with his eyes closed. The lumpen, misshapen bulk that results may also intone some relation to the figurative work done by French sculptor Rodin (1840-1917), itself wholly revolutionary for the era in which it appeared. But the fact that Sui Jianguo’s *Blind Portraits* can be described as subversive, rather than revolutionary *per se*, lies in the resistance they represent to looking, or to *seeing*, in the cause of producing likeness rooted in values of realism within the context of China and its specific cultural framework. Sculpture has faced a great challenge posed by new modes of making art, mainly by installation. In China, it took a solo exhibition of the work of British sculptor Tony Cragg (b.1949), held at the Central Academy’s Art Museum in 2013, to revitalise in the immediate locale the power that sculptural forms exert in space, not to mention the physical nature of the human response to such form (and both the texture of the materials and the aura of its presence in a space). Even before this, for China’s leading contemporary sculptor Sui Jianguo’s 2012 solo exhibition, a 25-year retrospective, was long overdue. When the works are exhibited together, it is clear how much of an impact the immediate cultural framework has had on his artistic development, and how the forms result from much revolutionary activity.

Following the landmark series *Structures* (1989-91), what ensued reflects a strong-armed resistance to the aura of socio-political constraint, especially in those works produced in the 1990s and, again, in more recent endeavours. Examples are myriad: the hollow Mao jackets (*Legacy* series, 1997-2003); the extended gesture of the amputated arm (*Study of Clothes*, 2003); the “Made in China” signs (2005-07). There is a precedent for portraiture in Sui Jianguo’s work in the 1989 series of life-sized heads (titled *Portraits*) placed atop a metal pole.

Replete with all the historical references to decapitations and heads suspended as warnings to others, these approximate head-like forms were suitably anonymous. The *Blind Portraits* bring him back to the intuitive power that underscores the *Structures*. There is an earthy quality to their form that is primal to their essence. They do not need to be enclosed in an iron net to highlight the claustrophobic atmosphere in which they were formed and for which they were formed to articulate. A single portrait, first shown in Beijing in 2012 was, in an interior, stifled; the full rise of this phallic monument hard to measure other than in stages. At five metres high, the top was always going to feel oppressed by the ceiling, despite that ceiling height being close on seven metres. It is only when a group is presented, such as the four pieces placed at Central Park South, New York, in 2014, that the full measure of Sui Jianguo's *Blind Portraits* was revealed.

Photographs published to illustrate reports on project showed the artist in the act of sculpting the maquettes for the large works wearing a blindfold, but, for Sui Jianguo, this is an illusion, a visual illustration of an idea, and not the real mechanism for production. He is well trained as a mechanic who can assemble an engine blind, and, should he so desire, could produce a near-perfect rendition of a model with his eyes closed. The formlessness of the heads is, in his way, a response to his experience, a conscious resistance to the strictures of the day that govern not merely the form and style of sculptural expression but all individual expression. When the *Blind Portraits* are seen as intended, as a group rather than singularly, the force of the image is stark: the ominous, looming, overbearing presence of power, each *Portrait* potentially representing one of the chosen few who occupy the seats of power, who are historically taken as subjects of portraits commissioned as aids to national memory, yet are, as individuals, largely without distinguishing features, for by the time a career path arrives at this peak, its owner has learned the rules, how to blend in. The *Blind Portraits* not only question the persona they are intended to embody, then, but all the values that traditional realism, with its perfected surfaces, serves to obfuscate.

So there they stand, these portraits of unknown, anonymous personages, their presence made emphatic by the monumental quality of the hand-kneaded physical features, the implant of a fingertip, a thumb magnified to threatening proportions from clay maquette to bronze artwork. In spite of their apparently upright, noble demeanour, the misshapen features of these *Blind Portraits* project a calamitous aura; they may seem clumsy, unsophisticated, and somewhat impotent phallic objects; the inference, perhaps, beware sleeping giants.