

Legacy Mantle: A birth to sartorial presence

Elizabeth Presa

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As an artist, I am always interested in the origins of artworks, the nascence of an individual sensibility and the contingencies, histories and technologies that converge giving rise to new forms. Only very occasionally do such alignments create what might be referred to as an iconic image. This is the case with Sui Jianguo's realist sculptures that fall under the title of *Legacy Mantle* – an ongoing body of work that takes as its subject matter, the Mao jacket. Indeed, if *Legacy Mantle* could be said to have a nascence, on a given date and in a given place it would perhaps be as the series of tentative experiments in carving and casting conducted during Sui's two month Fellowship at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) Sculpture department in Melbourne in 1997.

Born in 1956 in the city of Qingdao, Sui grew up during the notorious Cultural Revolution. Schools were closed when he was 10 years old and he was soon working in factories with his parents. After the death of Mao in 1976, the government relaxed its grip on the people and education reforms were introduced. Sui was eventually able to study art completing a BA at Shandong University of Arts in 1984 before gaining entry into the renowned sculpture school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, where he later became Head of the School.

When Sui arrived at VCA sculpture department he would have found a small department but one which shared with CAFA a commitment to materials and processes and to the idea of sculpture as a distinct discipline. Clay modelling from life, casting, foundry and metal work, carving and construction were considered foundational and closely aligned to the development of critical and analytical skills. I remember Sui sometimes wandering into the life class I was teaching, where students were working with clay. Nothing escaped his attention. Interested in philosophy, in the work of Rodin and Beuys, in materials and technique, it was as though he was always thinking "what can I make of this, in my own way and in translation into my own language as an artist, living at this moment of cultural and ideological transformation." If symbols of democracy were prohibited, as with the *Goddess of Democracy* statue, the figurehead of the 1989 Tiananmen Square student led protests, then perhaps the best way to confront authority would be through the appropriation and ultimately subversion of its own symbols.

Nothing could be more symbolic of China in the 20th century than the Mao jacket. Sui had lived through the time of Mao worship, where Mao was treated as a god. Sui describes a conversation with David Wilson, then head of the VCA sculpture department who asked him why Chinese people worked so hard for money and material possessions. Sui responded describing how over the 20th century the Chinese people endured poverty, war and natural disasters as well the injury suffered from public criticisms and humiliations, but he also remarked "Chinese people in Melbourne, although they wear suits and speak English to me, they are all dressed in invisible Mao Suits".¹ Such was the effect of Mao on the psyche of the Chinese people.

The Mao jacket as a network of significations touching on political ideologies and cultural and values is immediately recognizable by vast numbers of people. Originating in the 1920's during the time of Sun Yat-Sen's Chinese Nationalist party, the Zhongshan suit was designed as a practical adaption of the western business suit combined with features of military uniforms. A photograph from 1945 shows Chiang Kai-shek with Mao Zedong, both wearing the suit with its straight collar, four symmetrically placed pockets with buttoned covers—the two lower pockets large enough to hold books—and the 5 buttons down the front. During the Communist Revolution, the jacket became closely identified with Mao. Erasing gender and hierarchical distinctions, the Mao suit became the ubiquitous uniform of the Peoples Liberation Army and the population at large, a symbol of proletarian solidarity and political allegiance. As if to protest its androgynous design, young female workers sometimes concealed frilly and colourful blouses beneath their jackets. In the 1960's and 70's the Mao jacket became the sartorial choice for the left wing European intelligentsia, signifying a fantasy of revolution and

¹ Quoted from an email sent to me by Sui Jianguo in August 2017.

optimism more to do with western narcissism than with any historical, cultural and political reality. The Mao jacket has since become a haunting spectre of China's history in the 20th century and *Legacy Mantle* its ironically iconic image in art.

What does it mean for an image to be iconic? The term derives from the Greek word *eikón* meaning a portrait, a figure or representation of someone worthy of veneration. The connection between representation and icon in Western art can be traced back to Byzantine times, where the church was forced to develop a dual doctrine of the image. On the one hand the "image-invisible" determined that there was a movement away from the presence of the subject represented, thereby avoiding the accusation of idolatry. On the other hand, the "icon-visible" positioned the image as the site of emotional and intellectual engagement placing it at the centre of political and theological pedagogy. The iconic image thus operates as a site of deep psychological encounter and attachment.

Each sculpture given the title *Legacy Mantle* is a unique variation, a singularity cut from a new cloth as it were, a new material woven with its own textures, sensations, its own weight and volume. Each sculpture materializes its iconicity as an index of associations and experiences stitched together and translated into bronze or some other hard intractable material, thus giving a sensory intelligibility to a history. To measure, to mark, to cut, to layout, to thread and unthread, to stitch and assemble—these are the actions of the tailor, the sweatshop labourer and piecemeal worker. They also become the actions choreographed by the sculptor, setting material to work as flight, uprising or as silent stillness.

The word 'legacy' derives from the medieval Latin words *legacie* and *legatia* meaning the body of a person sent on a mission, a messenger, an ambassador or envoy; or the sense of property or a gift left by will. 'Mantle' comes from the old English *Meantel*, meaning sleeveless cloak and can be translated variously as anything that conceals something; the body wall of a mollusc from which the shell is secreted; or a geological layer of the earth. The title *Legacy Mantle* is thus indexical of the messenger's body, of concealment, and of the gravity of a gift to be given within a juridical context as with an inheritance. But it also implies a broader ethical obligation as a legacy is a gift beyond the mere commercial economy of exchange and reciprocity that must always exclude so many others. *Legacy Mantle*, as the gift that is the work of art offers solicitations to hitherto unseen figures prompting new imaginings and ethical encounters. The work of sculpture lays open a potentially transformative space where the distance and chill of the gaze turns to the hand and to touch. In the spirit of its nomenclature, there is a ghostly coming to presence that touches each of us.

The icon as cloth and garment touches the skin. This is both its intimacy and its force as an image. Woven with a unique warp and weft of significations, the cloth hangs and folds as though from the shoulders of a people who become as one through a collective memory of revolution and struggle.

The logic of the image holds that representation is a relationship to absence – the image withdraws from its subject matter while simultaneously moving towards it. According to this understanding of the image, each work of art restages and problematizes this scene of absence and presence, each work "becomes pregnant with expectations, aporias, certainties and disappointments, joys and sorrows"². In all its variations of scale, materials and processes from metal casting to moulded resin and fiberglass, *Legacy Mantle* is a hollowing out or a concealment. Each iteration is its own anatomy of cloth and collar, sleeves and pockets. In English there is the expression to wear one's heart on one's sleeve³ meaning that by making visible our feelings we risk hurt. There is no heart on the sleeve of *Legacy Mantle*. It is as though from within each sculpture echoes a beating heart and sound of breath—*this is my body* – but there is no god, only flesh and blood beneath a layer of cloth, and "the singular touch of our own exposure: *jouissance* and suffering of being in the world, precisely there and nowhere else"⁴ there in that place we in the west call China and at that moment of its long history.

Time now for all the colours of a Missoni democracy.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, Fordham University Press, 2005. p. 123

³ From Shakespeare's *Othello*, Act 1, Scene 1: "But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve. For daws to peck at. I am not what I am."

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, Fordham University Press, 2005p.123