

Sui Jianguo: “Physical Trace” – I am Going Home!

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On March 9, 2017, Sui Jianguo’s new solo exhibition “Sui Jianguo: Trace” opened at Pace Beijing Gallery. This marked his first solo exhibition since his retirement from the Central Academy of Fine Art, unveiling works by a true “professional artist”.

The Chinese title of the exhibition loosely translates to “The fleshy body becomes the way”, suggests strong religious connotations that embodies Sui Jianguo’s credo in sculptures. What is the essence of sculptures? This question has always been central to the artist. Those who know him well are aware that he’s not a pedant. His enquiries and in – depth thoughts on what constitutes sculpture often provoked heated discussions among his peers. What people perceive is often the tip of the iceberg, like throwing a stone into the ocean, as much as the ripples may stir up waves of accolades, being resolute of sinking to the bottom of the ocean is what’s truly admirable.

A piece of clay is the first step in making a sculpture; it’s where the clay will be molded into forms, where any sculptor would have to start. In contemporary China, unlike many sculptors, Sui has never ceased to hone sculpture making ever since he first started. Since the “Clothes Vein Study” series, Sui Jianguo has been exploring the contemporary possibility in the realistic representations of clay sculpture. With the work “Shape of Time”, he explored the temporal parameter that a sculpture possessed; “Motion and Tension” addressed the relationship between sculptural form in space and its relationship to people; in his 2015 solo exhibition, “Touchable”, he explored the impact of external force and gravitational force on physical materials, that were then translated into “sculpture”. With these clues, his devotion and exploration on this seemingly humble material is intractable. And finally, his solo exhibition “Trace” at Pace Gallery Beijing fully embodies the genealogy of his art practice since 2008, a series presented as the result of thinking and researching since “Blind Portrait”. Sculpture, may signal a power to a space to some; to their creator however, it’s a physical intrusion.

Clay, in the hands of a sculptor, has to potential of coming to life. Not only because it can be the subject onto which the sculptor projects his sense of beauty, more so it can preserve the traces of the sculptor’s actions or even the temperament of his hand. There is literary portrayal of this genre, where a woman walks barefoot in the mud, and the man behind her steps into her footprint, to convey a tender sensation that language fails to fully express, or perhaps that’s the magic of the clay. The artist’s creativity does not only draw from his sensitivity, but also the determination in his mind. As early as 1995, Sui Jianguo saw the works of Rodin at the National Art Gallery for the first time, where he had noticed a disconnect to the physique of the body in Rodin’s later works, as the artist turned towards making purely clay figures. He said, “In 2008, I had a sudden flash back to these memories, hitherto I only wanted to mold clay – kneading it however I wanted with my eyes closed, and accept the outcome. For clay sculptures, this is perhaps the most genuine approach.”

Molding with one’s eyes closed implies Sui Jianguo had to relinquished visual engagement. Instead he relied on the instinctive movement of the body. Compare to painting, the parameter for sculpture is

bound in its tangibility. It is with this point of departure Sui Jianguo elevated the notion of sculpture to a metaphysical level in the rift of modernism and post – modernism. Based on his hands – on approach, Sui’s practice is not a conceptual evolution, but an exploration of

The pile, piece and even stud of clay kneaded willfully seemed succinct and common from any given perspective. How has Sui Jianguo transformed the pedantic to legendary? In this exhibition, the series of monumental bronze sculptures were as if kneaded by the hand of a giant, leaving visible fingerprints from the artist. As much as the work comes from the hands of the artist, the actual piece was achieved through a new high – definition 3D scanning technology and light sensor digital printing. The sculptor had been immersed in the satisfaction of making something, while Sui Jianguo on the contrary destroys the deceptive glory of fabrication from one’s hands. The accuracy and sophistication from mechanical reproduction not only provides unprecedented sensational shock, but also throws in a tinge of loss, as if subjectivity was lost at once. Perhaps this is also a question that the artist is interested in addressing. In “Blind Portrait” series, from molding while blind – folded (eliminating any visual interruption), to kneading at one’s will, from relying on compositional experience that writes large the two – dimensional drawing, to the accurate reproduction by machines, Sui Jianguo has gradually dismantled the romantic and representational elements in his former works, so he could turn towards a truthful objectivity. The elimination of subjective input implies releasing the most potential in the quality of the material and artistic medium. A release that helps us to understand what sculpture is.

Unlike minimalist works in which the artist often fully released one’s subjectivity, Sui Jianguo chose to manipulate the extent to which he was absent from the site. He allowed his subjective intent and aesthetic ideal to be absent, in order to fortify the physical effect of the body movements, so the physical body could lead the way. Sui Jianguo’s notion of “I am therefore I think” avoids falling into the trap of “I think therefore I am here”. It is important to clarify that Sui Jianguo has not forcefully inhibited the production of aesthetics. His formally apparent work “Hand Trace” and a video work from the same period, “Trace” provide sufficient evidence to this end. He used a high – speed film camera to record every moment in molding the clay. With the artist’s hand movements, in which the smoothness and tension, sophistication and crassness of aesthetics are made apparent. Sculptors are inclined to work with materials, and most of the materials demand the artist to command their own will to a certain degree. Whereas, when Sui Jianguo holds clay in his hands, it is only to the human body that the material was subdued. Whether it is the hundreds and thousands of pieces of clay in front of the exhibition space, or the bronze sculptures that had been writ large in a dozen fold, the body has always been present with or without any invisibility. The documentary film took on a different language to channel the absence of the body.

“Trace” inverts the Christian notion of “incarnation”, in which God had sent his love to humanity through the flesh of his beloved son, Jesus Christ, that the spirit of the God was incarnated in a physical body. Whereas, “trace” seems to resemble Wang Yangming’s theory of “knowledge and action should come hand in hand”. The abstract notion of the “way” is not revealed through the practice of the body, but reflected through the exploration of the body, and be continuously integrated and renewed. This makes Sui Jianguo’s progression from “making portraits” blind – folded to willfully molding forms without any “conscious” input. This shift can be divided into two parts, one is the artist’s conceptual evolution, the other the technological evolution in the industry 4.0. When many

peers showed skepticism about high – definition 3D printing, who worries about its potential impact on sculpture art, Sui Jianguo chose a more liberal approach to embrace new innovations in this industrial revolution. Just as photography has had great impact on the classical realist paintings, where a rift is ripped open for the ancient medium, would 3D printing bring about the same kind of revolution to the ancient art of sculpture? Sui Jianguo has obviously put down a piece on a different chessboard.

Looking at the gestation of a work of art, it was as early as a decade ago, Sui Jianguo has already molded clay with his bare hands like the ones today, perhaps the only difference is the way in which he had writ large these works or their presentation. So was the last decade of exploration was devoted in pushing towards sophisticated technological outbreak? Obviously, that's not the case. Those hundreds and thousands pieces of clay studs manifest the artist's existing mode of understanding once he isolated his behaviors. The first piece of clay molded at will and the one thousandth are not variant formally, but characteristically unique. Because the intentional sense of making sculpting is gradually replaced by the subconscious body movement. If many people were still obsessed with what one molds: then what you are molding is not important, but the ways in which one does, Sui Jianguo has already realized that was also not important, but to forget the act of molding. It's as if you are speaking without noticing that you are actual speaking. Remarkably, this has challenged the material way of thinking about sculpture, aimed at ascend to the level of metaphysics.

In fact, this progress has caught the tail of modernism. As painting style shifted from expressionism and surrealism to abstraction and minimalism, revealing its core essence one at a time, having little to do with other artistic, painting essentially remained as colors and brushworks on a surface. Likewise, sculpture is essentially objects and materials that occupy space and have a mass. The focus of modern sculpture often adopted industrial materials such as steel, plastic and etc., or unprocessed natural materials such as stones and wood, meanwhile the clay, a widely and continuously used material is often ignored. Because in the mind of a sculptor, clay is often considered the formative material from which the piece will become in stone or metal. As a substitute, it is rarely presented as a final product before the audience with an independent character. Sui Jianguo's unique insight has pushed this substitute under the spotlight, right before the eyes of its viewer. Many people tend to be at loss when looking at contemporary art, while being in front of Sui Jianguo's "Trace", spares them from feeling that way. As it's rather straightforward – they look like clay, but are classic cast bronze. Without any of the artist's intended works, or any pretentious suspense, the fingerprints have been left there from molding.

If sculptors are used to imitating the objective world with clay, then what would it take to imitate it? With this very question, Sui Jianguo adopts the potential of technology and new artificial materials to offer his response. In the past, people have taken thousands of years to transform the nature into something artificial with natural materials, whereas nowadays artists can adopt artificial to recreate natural objects, at least they attempt to do so conceptually.

As the ancient adage goes, "At age fifty, one becomes aware of his predestined fate, and at age sixty, one will have to comply to one's fate." Having seen "Shape of Time"; and at age sixty, Sui has resigned from his pedagogical and administrative responsibilities and daily business from the art academy, so he could spare more effort in considering the "shape of sculpture". From "Inter Structure", to "Legacy

Mantle”, to “Dinosaur”, he’s refined the forms of his sculpture works, from “Great Acceleration” and “Motion and Tension”, which offer counterintuitive evidence that the shaping of sculpture has become more opaque. And with the exhibition, from the piece “Blind Portrait” to the current “Trace”, he’s reintroduced the shape of sculpture to viewers. He’s constantly configuring the shape of sculpture, one in which that configures his own shape. This lucid and majestic figure is a flagship in the field of contemporary sculpture in China. His works are embodiments of remarkable social affects, as a professional artist returning to the public’s eyes, Sui Jianguo has gradually erased the marks society and history had left on him. The opaque shadow of Sui Jianguo is about to return.