

Bills, Julie. "Artist Sui Jianguo Interview." *White Hot Magazine*, October 2014. Web.

Artist Sui Jianguo Interview



Sui

Jianguo, Untitled, 2014, bronze

By JULIE BILLS, OCT. 2014

Sui Jianguo (b. 1956 in Qingdao, China) is a child of the Cultural Revolution and a deeply respected *laoshi* (teacher) to the next generation of emerging Chinese sculptors. A multidisciplinary artist known primarily for his work in bronze, he received his MFA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in 1989, a time of severe social and political strife in Beijing. Sui Jianguo taught himself how to think and create like a contemporary artist with global resonance from under the omnipresent shadow of Chairman Mao. His large bronze *Blind* abstractions command a formidable presence not unlike the work of Richard Serra but nuanced with conceptual subtleties on a par with William Anastasi. His more well-known figurative works such as *Legacy Mantle* remind us that Sui Jianguo is living in and responding to China, fully cognizant of the nation's complex history while embracing its future possibilities. An extremely thoughtful and eloquent man (even in English, his second language), Sui Jianguo walked Whitehot Magazine through his first solo gallery exhibition in the United States at Venice institution [LA Louver](#), discussing material abstraction, 20th century German philosophy, and the future of arts education in China.

Julie Bills Let's start with Schwarzwald. How did you make it?

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Sui Jianguo: First I made the shape, then I poured the plaster.

Bills: How much plaster?

SJ: A lot. I made this in the foundry. Around 20 workers helped me.

Bills: This is based on your time in the Black Forest in Germany?

SJ: Yeah, when I finished this, I felt quite heavy. It reminded me of the Black Forest around Frankfurt.

Bills: Why were you in Germany?

SJ: Because I worked with a gallery in Frankfurt. I had two exhibitions there. The gallery had someone drive me around to see the sites, and we went to the Black Forest.

Bills: Did you like it? It was heavy?

SJ: Yes, it's strong. Very strong. In that forest we talked about philosophy.



Sui Jianguo, Untitled, 2014, bronze

Bills: That's where Heidegger is from.

SJ: Yes, yes! I think in the late 19th century there were quite a lot of philosophers in Germany like Kant, and then later of course Heidegger. Quite a lot. I visited the university in Frankfurt, and the classical museums in Germany. That gave me a very deep impression.

Bills: Do you like German philosophy?

SJ: Yes. Heidegger's ideas about being are very deep thinking.

Bills: Do you relate his thoughts to China?

SJ: Yeah in China we also have a long history of thought.

Bills: You have two figurative pieces in this exhibition. This (Right Hand) is Mao's arm?

SJ: Yes, right arm. It's about my memory from my young age.

Bills: You grew up during the Cultural Revolution.

SJ: Yes, when I was 20 years old, it started. I grew in the shadow of Chairman Mao, so the hand was always there.

Bills: But now it's fallen?

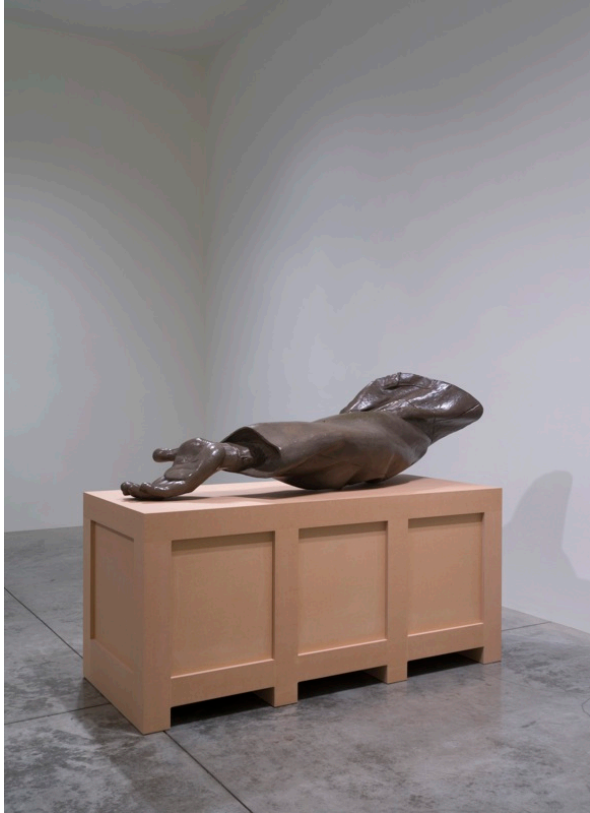
SJ: Yeah it's become a, I don't know the English word, like a stone from a long time ago that you dig from the Earth.

Bills: Like a fossil.

SJ: Yeah it's like that.

Bills: Do you think that Mao's hand is still present in China today?

SJ: For some people, for some normal people, maybe yes, but of course, the idea has changed. Before when I was young, Chairman Mao was a real god. Then around 1980 everyone didn't like him. After some years, I don't know why, some of the young generation now really thinks he's a god. No longer a real god, just something far away. Like a shadow, not a real body. A little bit different.



Sui Jianguo, installation view, 2014, image courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles, CA

Bills: Have you been to his hometown?

SJ: Oh yes, last year I went there. For me I think the influence from Mao stopped when I made the sleeping Mao in 2003. I made Mao sleeping because for me I thought he had become a normal person. I also stand as an independent person. So we finished. Before I thought this was a very special man. He can make all the possibilities for the Chinese. Now I can never think like that.

Bills: So what changed for you?

SJ: For me, I think I should do myself. Of course a long time passed in order to think about this.

Bills: To get out of the shadow of Mao?

SJ: Yes.

Bills: Mao unified China and kind of made modern China what it is today. He's a complicated figure. In the U.S. we believe that Mao is a very bad man. But in China it's more complicated.

SJ: Yeah, half and half. Before for me it was half hate, hate love. You cannot separate very clearly. That's why I made the work.

Bills: Let's look at this one [Bound Slave]. This looks like quite a statement on Communism to me, with the Sun Yat-sen suit.

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SJ: I made this in the year 1997. I had just finished the jacket *Legacy Mantle*. So I tried to know where I'm from, because I grew in the socialist society and tried to become an artist. We went to the school to learn the figurative technique. We were drawing the slave as the model. Everyone was drawing this. We didn't know why we should do this, but everyone did this. So I began to do the jacket, I tried to question where the socialism art was from. So I found this plaster model slave is a way for the Chinese socialist society to change the classical system to be for their society. They moved this from Europe to China then let the young people learn the classic technique to do the figurative work. Let the art become a tool to educate the normal people. That's what I think. I came from that. So I want to make it clear where it is. So I think maybe I can give the jacket to him [the slave]. So then it's not the real piece from Europe, it's become Chinese. Chinese Europe. Chinese classical.

Bills: Sounds like this is more about arts education in China...

SJ: Yeah, yeah. Until now, in most of the art schools the students draw this slave or the *David*. You've been to CAFA? There is a hall full of plaster pieces.

Bills: You changed arts education in China.

SJ: When I was the head of the sculpture department, I changed the situation. I changed the system of teaching. At that time around 1997/1998 I became the head, and I know where it's from, from this work. And then I changed the thought. Not all of it. Because I think even the figurative can be contemporary art language. So I keep the traditional figurative technique teaching and bring the sculpture into abstraction.



Sui Jianguo, installation view, 2014, image courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles, CA

Bills: Where did you learn about the abstract sculpture techniques?

SJ: Myself. In China, if you want to be a modern artist, you have to teach yourself. You learn the figurative technique in school but you want to find a new way. Then you have to find a different material and the way to fix it by yourself.

Bills: How did you find it? Who inspired you?

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SJ: Not an exact person. I found that after June 4 in China, I felt very sad, so I went into the mountains and I brought a class of students. In the mountains I found a stone. Just a normal stone. It's of course silent, it's hard, but it's good to carry my feelings. Then I began to do the stone work. I didn't know how to do it, but I just did it. Then became part of my language.

Bills: So you were inspired by nature.

SJ: Yes I found a way to do different work. It's good. I separated from the Academy, so I made the work in that way for around seven or six years. I made this in 1997. I started the stone work in 1989 or 1990, so around six or seven years I think it took to control that work. I knew how to be a different artist in China. Then with this work, I came back to see the figurative in different way.

Bills: Have you found Western artists that you relate to now that you travel?

SJ: I love some artists, some sculptors like Richard Deacon. We've become good friends and we talk a lot.

Bills: He wrote your catalog essay for this exhibition.

SJ: Yes, he writes very well. It takes a real artist to think about other artists' work. It's very good.

Bills: You're still quite the laoshi in Beijing. All of the young sculptors look up to you.

SJ: Teacher? Yeah I still teach in CAFA.

Bills: Do you think that you're influencing the young generation of artists?

SJ: Of course. That's why I'm still there. I know I need more time to do my own work, but I think I should stay there to pass my ideas on to the young generation. I teach them how to be contemporary artists. You can learn the traditional technique, or you can learn the modern. Then you have to know where you are.

Bills: Do you like their work?

SJ: Yes. I like it very much. Because now the young generation in China are quite different. They now have a lot of information because of the internet and cell phones. They are much freer than our generation. And of course they come into the economic system in China we have now -- half capitalism, half socialism.



Sui Jianguo, installation view, 2014, image courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles, CA

Bills: Communism with capitalist traits?

SJ: Yeah (laughs). It's mixed. Very strange. But it's the real situation. You have to face the situation and know where you are, how to be a normal person or artist in this time.

Bills: Heidegger wrote a lot about being-in-the-world.

SJ: Yes, yes. Heidegger in our generation in China had a deep influence.

Bills: Really? People read Heidegger?

SJ: Yes, yes.

Bills: That's good. Nobody reads Heidegger in the United States.

SJ: They think it's too difficult?

Bills: Mhmm.

SJ: I read the book, I don't know the English name...

Bills: Being and Time?

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SJ: Yes. In 1980, and the end of 1980s, I read it and many of my friends read it. Of course we didn't totally understand it but we read it to find a way of thinking. Now not so many people do that, but in our generation we read. We read Heidegger, Sartre, Hegel, and Kant. We read a lot of philosophy books.

Bills: The younger generation has the internet. Do you think that has a good influence, or a complicated influence, or a bad influence on the art they're making?

SJ: I think it's much better than our generation. Really, really. Because when I was a student, when I wanted to know how I should do something, I just did what my teacher said. "No you cannot do that," then I did it. Now the young generation we never stop them. Where do you want to go, what do you want to do? Just do. So their problem is, "Where I should go? Which people I should become?" Different questions. Much different choices. And of course now it's easy to get out to see the world and easy for information to be exchanged. So I think they are good. They just need examples.



Sui

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Bills: When did you first leave China?

SJ: The year 1991 I went to Japan. First time.

Bills: How old were you in '91?

SJ: I was 35. Very late.

Bills: So you were in Beijing in 1989?

SJ: Yeah. I graduated from my Masters study. You know when I was 16 years old, I went to the factory to be a worker. The year 1972 until 1984. I came to the art college to study sculpture. Before I just learned how to paint Chinese painting.

Bills: What kind of factory did you work at?

SJ: Fabric. To make the clothes. My mother used to work in the factory, then I went to the factory to be a worker. Eight years. Long time.

Bills: What was that experience like?

SJ: I did different work, earned some money. Then I thought I should do something for my soul. Then I found a teacher to teach me the ink painting. That filled me, I think.

Bills: Are you ever interested in fabrics? Your materials are always very hard metals, bronze, aluminum. But I think Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen work with fabric a lot and engage that kind of history. Does that interest you?

SJ: For me any material I can control, no problem. I use heavy materials because I think my inside wants the heaviness.



Sui Jianguo, installation view, 2014, image courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles, CA

Bills: You like the heavy stuff?

SJ: (Laughs). Yes. When I tried to pass the test to enter the art college I had to make a decision to be an ink painting artist or choose the other, I chose sculpture. Because I worked in a factory seven or eight years, I found my hand very good to work. I said okay, I should be a sculptor, to do some big and heavy work. That's my idea.

Bills: Was your family supportive of that?

SJ: No. My mother was very good at using her hands. I don't know the word for it. Her brain and hands connected very well. Maybe I took something from her. Of course my parents are just workers.

Bills: What are you working on now?

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SJ: I do parallel work to this about the material volume you cannot see. When I work I don't want to use vision, you want to see but you cannot see. Like the *Shape of Time*. I dip the bar into the paint everyday. Changes everyday, but you cannot see.

Bills: Do you still do video? I remember that piece we showed [at Pace Beijing] on 8 screens about the train in Caochangdi...

SJ: Yes about the train. It's about space, you cannot see directly but it's there. That's my parallel line. I hope this will be the future. **WM**