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Chinese artist Sui Jianguo puts Mao to rest in colorful metaphor

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Chronicle / Eric Luse

When [Sui Jianguo](#) needed a folkloric clay [Mao Zedong](#) from which to cast his fiberglass Mao, he went to the source: Yanan, the once-remote Chinese city where Mao and his [Communist peasant army](#) retreated and holed up after the grueling, deadly Long March of 1934-35. It became the spiritual center of the revolution they won 14 years later.

Mao statues are made there in profusion. But Sui, a Beijing sculptor with many things on his subtle mind, had a hard time convincing the craftsman he hired to make this Mao lying on his side, lost in sleep. The late Communist leader was always depicted standing, often with an arm extended in a gesture of paternal omnipotence. To show him lying down like a mortal didn't seem right, even more than two decades after his death. But once the artisan saw the connection to famous images of the sleeping Buddha, he did Sui's bidding.



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Sui with his piece Legacy Mantle 3-10, 2004 painted fiberglass

"Mao always seemed like a god," says Sui, 48, a slim man with a mustache and small, under-the-chin goatee, standing near his monumental "Sleeping Mao" at San Francisco's [Asian Art Museum](#). "Now, he sleeps like everyday people. I'm putting him to rest. This way, I can grow up."

In this cool-looking piece, the man who was at the center of his nation's convulsive history for a half century rests atop a roiling bed of colors made with 20,000 toy dinosaurs made in China. These masses of marching green stegosaurus and blue triceratops -- handy symbols of the so-called "rising economic dragon" that supplies and

consumes a large chunk of global market goods -- form a map of Asia. Mao dreams as the disorderly continent churns beneath him.

"It's life moving," says Sui, who apologizes for his poor English but gets the point across. "Maybe someday he'll wake up, I don't know," the artist adds with a laugh.

A professor at Beijing's [Central Academy of Fine Art](#), Sui was trained in Western-based Socialist Realism during the Cultural Revolution. These days, he tilts that tradition on its ear in ironic works that address China's modern past, its cultural and economic transformation and the dead utopianism of its once-deified leader.

The Asian Art Museum is showing 14 of Sui's pieces in a show called "The Sleep of Reason." The title was cooked up by guest curator [Jeff Kelley](#), who thought of Goya's famous etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" after seeing Sui's disturbing piece.

The show also features giant empty Mao jackets that carry suggestions of contemporary [fashion](#) and hollow philosophy, and dinosaurs of varying size and substance that deal with the illusory nature of things and the danger of omnivorous economic expansion. Life-size Michelangelo figures, cast in fiberglass and painted white to suggest marble, come draped in Mao suits.

Then there are big, gun-metal-gray jackets, stout headless forms he titles "Legacy Mantle." "Yes, they're shells," Sui says. Once a symbol of the revolution -- the plain suit was designed as a statement of democracy by the early 20th century leader [Sun Yat-Sen](#) -- the Mao threads Sui makes suggest "the utopian idea now is a shell." (Kelley thinks of them as empty suits, with all the phrase connotes).

"The social situation has changed a lot," says Sui, standing before a row of gleaming jackets in candy-colored blue, lime and orange. "From symbol of revolution 100 years ago, it's become very -- I don't know the word -- like fashion. Some movie stars or musicians wear them."

In other works, Sui confounds one's sense of scale and weight. A small orange brontosaurus and blue T. rex appear to be standard plastic toys. They're lead-filled bronze.

"For me," Sui says, "it's like something in your life, that seems light, seems colorful, but in fact, it's very heavy, not like surface."

A similar disjunction is at play in the comically menacing 13-foot red dinosaur, baring its teeth behind the bars of a red steel cage parked in front the museum's Larkin Street entrance. The clawed, bubble-skinned beast, which has "Made in China" stamped on its belly, looks like some overgrown plastic import. But it's bronze. Sui, for whom red means revolution and force of spirit, was unfamiliar with the phrase "red menace," but he seemed to appreciate it.

The red monster suggests China's growing capitalist economic power, "which in some ways is not so good for China, for the environment and human life," Sui says. "I don't

want him to continue getting bigger. You know, when the big dinosaur is out of the cage, it's like a big toy. But when I put it in a cage, in some ways it seems to have a life."

Sui Jianguo: The Sleep of Reason: Through April 24. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco. \$6-\$10. (415) 581-3500, www.asianart.org.