



Bean Gilsdorf: *Soft Actor*

Essay by Patricia Maloney

Introduced and codified by political scientist Joseph Nye, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Clinton, the term *soft power* refers to a nation's persuasive capacity to influence the political agenda of foreign states using means other than force or coercion. It frequently refers to the application of culture, economic assistance, and an emphasis on shared political values to indirectly shape foreign policy. Soft power's effectiveness is largely dependent upon the perceived influence of the actor—whether it be a nation-state, NGO, or even corporation—in cultivating diplomacy and public opinion.

Nye initially coined the phrase in the late 1980s at the end of the Cold War and refined it following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The intervening years saw the United States' ascendance as a dominant soft power actor on the international stage, a position it still retains. The term's easily perceived antecedent is Reagan's presidency from 1981–88, during which the threat from nuclear proliferation by the Soviet Union was waylaid not only by the U.S.'s demonstration of military technology but by globally embraced cultural manifestations of its burgeoning neoliberal ideology.

Nowhere was this ideology more clearly embodied than in President Reagan's masterfully self-crafted mythology. The perception of rugged individualism that underscores the nation's industrial might was core to his cultivated public image; a man of steely resolve committed to honest work, freedom, and self-actualization. The fact that Reagan's cowboy image emanated from his years starring in Hollywood westerns did little to dampen its viability.

In the textile-based sculptures and wall hanging that comprises *Soft Actor*, artist **Bean Gilsdorf** playfully and pointedly encapsulates the projections and contradictions that drove Reagan's brand of soft power. She draws a straight line between the actor in *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) or *The Last Outpost* (1951), the white-hatted rancher at Rancho del Cielo, and the statesman standing at Brandenburg Gate in 1987. She also underscores how subsequent American leaders have warped his political acumen by emptying his mythology of its ideology and idealizing the man himself as myth.

By minimizing her representation of Reagan to his most salient features—the slightly pompadour, the upright salute—and by employing fabric's structural pliability and tension to maximum effect, Gilsdorf highlights the absurdity of the contemporary political climate, in which Reagan's incarnation as the iconic cowboy has morphed into the iconization of

Reagan himself. In *Untitled (Hair)* for example (all works, 2016), the pucker and pull surrounding the silhouetted coif immediately invites us to imagine the visage it so famously surrounded while emphasizing the outsized attention it received in defining his persona. The enlarged pixilation and reference to Ben-Day dots in the printed fabrics also keenly aligns Reagan's cinematic image-making with Pop Art's elevation of consumer objects and mass media representations.

In the bulging and slumping *Untitled (Bust)*, Reagan's elevation to mythic statesman becomes a grotesque burden unable to hold up under its own weight. Its semi-deflated form suggests a hollow symbolism: Reagan as standard-bearer for any number of competing policies. We see at once the printed landscape that backs the portrait, an intimation of how essential Rancho del Cielo and California as a constructed or psychological state of being were to Reagan's political point of origin. The bucolic scene and absurd softness of the bust's construction further underscores the extent to which his political legacy is propped up by convenient attribution. In imploring Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall in 1987, Reagan does not just contrast peace and liberalism against totalitarianism, he conflates them with U.S.'s economic prosperity. But the capitalism-as-freedom that Reagan held out as a beacon at the apogee of American values in 1987 would have a more explicit and cruder expression fourteen years later, when President George W. Bush—a more comical and less convincing cowboy—exhorted Americans to thwart terrorism by going shopping.

Six Waves takes a more subtle turn. Representations of the President's outstretched arm saluting the public become flaccid props aligned on the wall. Gilsdorf hints at the superficiality in the disused gesture, not through the arms themselves but the images of Reagan from which they are drawn. In each, the President has already turned away and retreating from the public eye. The wave is an afterthought and almost a defensive stance, the arm thrown up to create distance. The suggestion is one of caution; no public persona can be maintained unwaveringly. Reagan as the pre-eminent soft power actor could unceasingly frame the agenda on the world stage and elicit positive attraction. Reagan as contemporary political symbol continues to do the same for greater and lesser coercive aims. Perhaps only a former actor could fully comprehend the full extent to which image-making could be put into service for ideology, diplomacy, and ultimately, history. With *Soft Actor*, Gilsdorf invites us to consider the limits of power such images have, the point at which they become diffuse and illegible, and the absurdity that arises when they are ignored.

[Bean Gilsdorf: *Soft Actor*](#) is on view at Museum of Contemporary Santa Barbara January 22 – April 30, 2017. Exhibition co-organized by Patricia Maloney, director of Southern Exposure, San Francisco, and Brooke Kellaway, associate curator at MCASB.