

4 December 2016

The Telegraph

'Sun Xun's "Reconstruction of the Universe" for the Audemars Piguet Art Commission unveiled at Art Basel Miami Beach'

Link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/art/sun-xuns-reconstruction-universe-audemars-piguet-art-commission/>

The Telegraph

Sun Xun's "Reconstruction of the Universe" for the Audemars Piguet Art Commission unveiled at Art Basel Miami Beach



'Reconstruction of the Universe' by Sun Xun for the Audemars Piguet Art Commission

By Caroline Roux

4 DECEMBER 2016 • 3:35PM

The Chinese artist Sun Xun knew he would be an artist from age of three. “I was making paper birds, and I really wanted to make them fly,” he says. Now at 36, and with around 20 films to his name – collaging everything from ink drawing and charcoal to oil painting, woodcuts and existing footage into compelling animations – flying birds are just a part of it all.

A cast of characters appears again and again, from blinking owls, to a man in a stove pipe hat and a magician, desiccated landscapes and twirling planets. “The magician is the one who is allowed to lie, because you pay to see him lie,” says Sun. I think we all know what, or who, he means.

His latest work, *Reconstruction of the Universe*, which was premiered in Miami this week during Art Basel, will enhance his reputation further as one of the most exciting artists to emerge not just from China, but from anywhere. The full piece, a generously financed commission from the upscale watchmaker Audemars Piguet, includes an elaborate architectural set of low curving walls, hung with woodcuts and interrupted with sleek glass balls, inside which delicate ink-wash films of birds and fish, pebbles and explosions, are projected, the whole installation topped by a dramatic swoosh of a roof made of bamboo. Beyond is a large screen projecting the 3D animation, *Time Spy*. As Sun Xun’s name jumps out of the screen, a carnation unfurls at its side.

Sun Xun works from his own studio in Beijing’s Black Bridge Village, with a staff of six, which swells to 20 during productions. On this occasion, though, 100 more assistants, some students, some off-site, were co-opted to help create the tens of thousands of woodcuts that make up the film’s frames which play at an old-fashioned, and quivering, 15 to 18 frames a second.

When I ask him why woodcuts, he simply says, he likes to try different things. “You don’t eat bread every day,” he says. “Maybe I’ll do sculpture next.” He later admits, though, that Albert Dürer, the master of the woodcut, was a great influence in his student years. “Not for the technology he used, but how he understood the world,” says Sun. “It’s important that artists make a world view.”

Sun's latest animation offers an abundance of imagery from the houses he saw in Le Brassus, when he visited Audemars Piguet's chilly headquarters in the Swiss Jura, to petrified forests, fast-flowing rivers, musical instruments with wings, and animals with old-style movie cameras or loud speakers for heads. Deliberately ambiguous, the frequent appearance of the yin yang symbol reminds us to read everything in two ways. (Those wise owls, in Chinese symbolism, also mean secrets and death.)

As watch geartrains appear to pulse right out of the screen, and snow falls, we can assume that this is a story about the speed of life, the plight of old industry (Sun grew up in China's north where the remaindered coal mines have left most people unemployed), the plight of the planet and the many untruths that are spun out by the powerful. "All films are a lie," counters Sun, borrowing knowingly from Picasso's "Art is a lie that enables us to tell the truth."

For a Chinese artist ambiguity is a useful tool, as observations and criticisms are delivered subtly, though those camera- and speaker-heads aren't exactly hiding their message about politicians who peddle in the false. Particularly intriguing is the interweaving of conspicuous western artistic icons – George Méliès man in the moon, for example, and Tatlin's towers. Does he see them as triumphs of western art, or are they just our tropes of civilisation? "The artist asks the questions," he says. "He doesn't give the answers."

Sun says that drawing and making woodcuts is his religion. "I'm talking with god. My god, a spirit god." But he also researches deeply – during a three-month residency in 2013 with his New York gallery Sean Kelly, he immersed himself in the Metropolitan Museum, and the one at West Point military academy. (Kelly describes him as manic about his work, but no prima donna.) He says that it is travel that has allowed him to grow (not, he insists, develop or evolve, but grow) and he won't accept anything as real until he's seen it for himself.

Sun's family's story is one of the cultural revolution's less than happy outcomes. His grandfather had been in the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party of China), which meant his father was never allowed to do more than work in a factory. While previous work has touched on this, he now says, "You have to keep a distance from history, because you can't change it. And a lot of it is sad." Instead he is interested in China's future. "I think things will start to go slower again, and there will be more freedom. China is waiting for its moment – it has a huge population, it takes time."

But he doesn't see the prejudices of the rest of world getting any less. He chose bamboo for his installation's roof because it is grown locally. "It comes from southern Florida," he says. "But you look at it and you see China and pandas." He is, of course, as in many things, quite right.

"Reconstruction of the Universe" by Sun Xun for the Audemars Piguet Art Commission is open 1-3 Dec, 5pm - 10 pm at Miami Beach Oceanfront, between 21st and 22nd Streets