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Art Radar

"Prediction Laboratory": Chinese artist Sun Xun at Yuz Museum, Shanghai'

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"Prediction Laboratory": Chinese artist Sun Xun at Yuz Museum, Shanghai

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Sun Xun's latest exhibition is on show at Yuz Museum until 15 January 2017.

Launched in November 2016 and curated by New York-based art critic and independent curator Barbara Pollack, "Prediction Laboratory" is a select space for investigation and experimentation.



"Sun Xun: Prediction Laboratory", 19 November 2016 – 15 January 2017, installation view at Yuz Museum, Shanghai. Image courtesy Yuz Museum.

Born in 1980 in Fuxin in north-eastern China, **Sun Xun** is an eloquent champion for creative liberty, a visionary in the tradition of William Blake and Hieronymus Bosh. Graduating from the printmaking department of the China Academy of Art in 2005, he has made the uncommon leap from experimental animated film into the field of contemporary art, joining South African **William Kentridge** as a young champion of the medium.

The tradition of animation as a gesture of freedom, breaking constraints and pushing art to work in an expanded field has a long history in western avant-garde activity, from Futurists such as Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna in the 1910s to the Cubist cinema of Walter Ruttmann and Hans Richter and experimental works with the form by Oskar Fischinger, Germaine Dulac, Norman McLaren, Robert Breer and Jan Lenica.



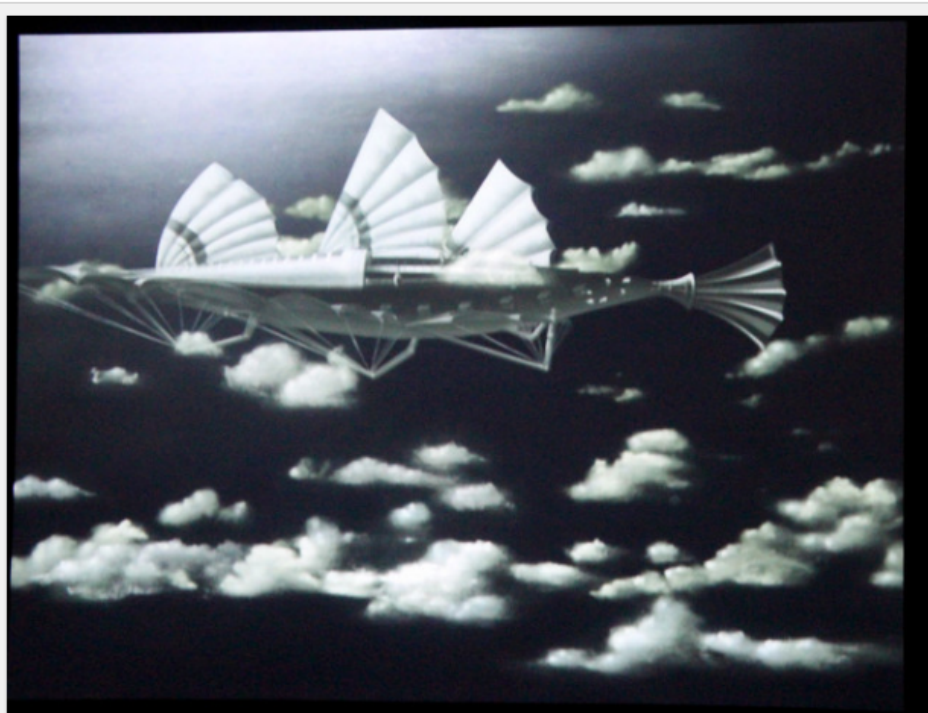
"Sun Xun: Prediction Laboratory", 19 November 2016 – 15 January 2017, installation view at Yuz Museum, Shanghai. Image courtesy Yuz Museum.

By rejecting contemporary digital methods, in favour of individual handmade drawings for each frame, Sun Xun's approach resonates with older works and feels quaint. The films shifting overlaid images, disrupted sequences and mixed media techniques, emulate the fervour of experimentation associated with the modernist sensibility. Sun adds a wilful twist to this tradition by rendering some animations, frame by frame, with woodcuts, traditionally a painstaking medium. In this gesture he sutures animation to the Modern Woodcut Movement, doing for this Chinese form what Te Wei did with a radical use of traditional ink painting in the Shanghai Animation Film Studio classic *Little Tadpoles In Search of Their Mother* (1960).



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Feeding on the iconography of his animations, Sun's other works also defy conventional categories with a fluid range of means. The work connects with 19th century symbolist attitudes; these artists also audaciously crossed between literary, graphic and fine art forms and valorised an aesthetic lifestyle alongside their creative production. **"Prediction Laboratory"** at **Yuz Museum** in Shanghai, Sun's second museum show in China, includes butterflies and a stuffed parrot that chime with the fantastical jewel encrusted tortoise in Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel, *Against the Grain* (1884).



Sun Xun, '21G', 2010, (animation still). Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.

Sun and curator **Barbara Pollack** have changed the white cube museum environment into a dense transitory space that requires the audience to continue the momentum of the work. Like the sardonic protagonist in Huysmans' book, who isolates himself in a temple of sensation, Sun has a totalising vision that eclipses a direct view of the world. The works allude to universal issues, to social, political or religious dynamics, but all specific historical narratives and actors are veiled in dense allegorical imagery.



"Sun Xun: Prediction Laboratory", 19 November 2016 – 15 January 2017, installation view at Yuz Museum, Shanghai. Image courtesy Yuz Museum.

Located in a long passage of galleries down one side of the **Yuz Museum** the exhibition evokes a ritual procession or right of passage. Before you enter the first space the smell of phosphorous draws your attention to a wall where the Chinese characters of the exhibitions title (濞语实验室) are picked out in clusters of matches. These have been ignited flashing a ghost image in a flare of carbon onto the wall. The space leads to a wide corridor where a retrospective of 12 animated films play simultaneously with booming overlapping sound. It is a challenging space in which to 'enjoy' the multiple competing works.

These include, *Some Actions Which Haven't Been Defined Yet in the Revolution* (2011), which was recently censored from the show **"Everyday Legend"** at Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum. Here cacophony and the flickering distraction of adjacent films obviates any controversial content – this content was probably, in fact, the final sequence of masturbation.

From this passage a closed door leads to an antechamber. In this space a picture of a man in a suit is overlaid with the face of an owl. It has been drawn directly on the wall with an urgency that suggests the swift annotation of a fleeting vision.



Sun Xun, left to right, 'Beyond-ism', 2010, 'Clown's Revolution', 2010 and 'Peoples Republic of Zoo', 2009. Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.



Sun Xun, foreground: 'The Fable of Jing Bang Sea World', 2016, (detail), background: 'Silver Universe', 2016, (detail). Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.

Two openings go out of this space into a square room bracketed by two huge apocalyptic scenes, *Lie Machine and Fire* (2016) and *Silver Universe* (2016). The former shows a black landscape where inexplicable heaps of material burn, the latter contains several owls with a figure on horseback central in the composition. The blackness of the drawing, its allegorical imagery and panoramic format echoes Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) but Sun provides no clue as to the references of the image, other than the title that may evoke the decadence of classical art, the so called Silver Age, extending to the death of Marcus Aurelius, whose famous equestrian monument is mirrored in the pose of the mounted figure.

Indeed, in an introductory talk for this show, and in other recent interviews, Sun disavows direct symbolic meanings, preferring history to be mediated through human experience rather than inscribed as fact, just as he experienced the conflict between taught and oral histories in the 1980s when he was at school. He sustains that "works of art are primarily considered as one for productive circulation rather than a means of intellectual reflection."



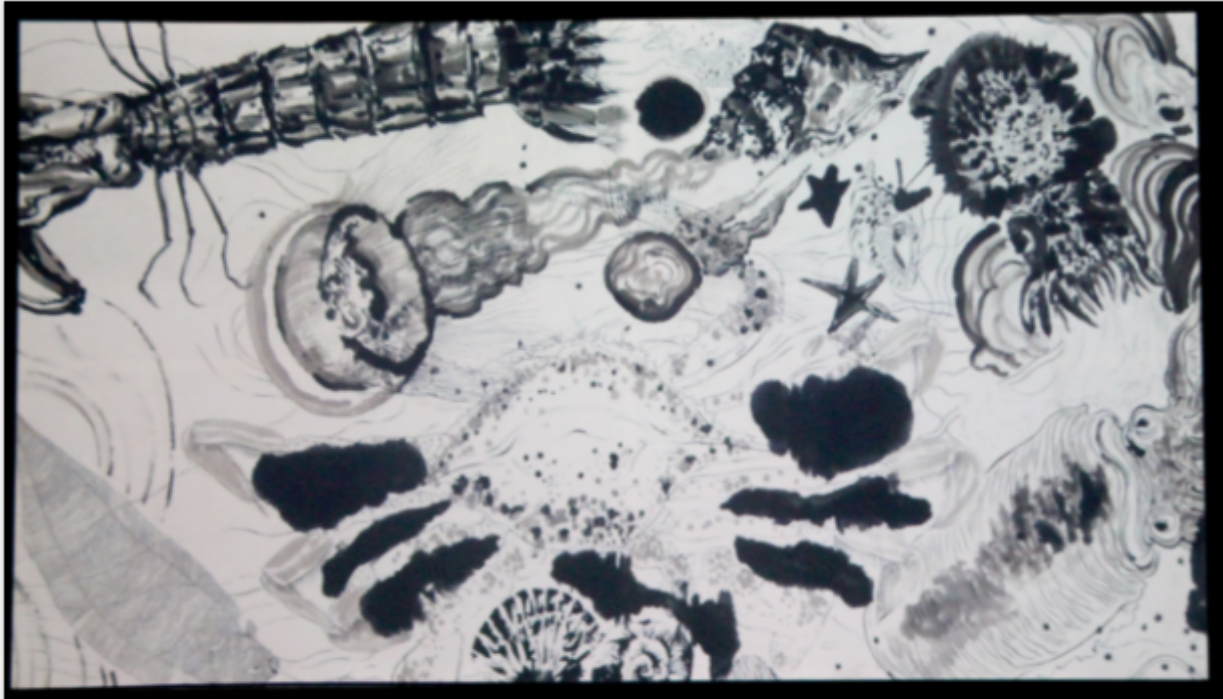
Sun Xun, 'Prediction of Skyline', 2016, (detail). Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.



Sun Xun, above: 'Prediction in Nether World', 2016, below: 'The Fable of Jing Bang Sea World', 2016 (detail). Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.

Cutting across this room is a low suspended shelf in the form of an arc. It supports an opened out folding book, *The Fable of Jing Bang Sea World* (2016). A metal panel displays two further multimedia works. There is a feeling that these works are connected but only the sense of disquiet and disruption is explicit. The sheer quantity of imagery, lacking an overbearing narrative, defies a static reading.

Sun has previously specified the significance of some recurring figures, such as the magician – a metaphor for a politician, a professional liar. As his work has matured he has become coy about explicit symbolic meanings; the audience has to decide. In this exhibition the reference to the Laboratory invites visitors to probe for interpretation. His comments, such as "art is a dream that emerges from an accumulation of continuing failures", point to an ethos where the rich emblematic content of his oeuvre is carried in a creative wave rather than formulated as a programme.



Sun Xun, 'Beyond-ism', 2010, (animation still). Photo: Andrew Stooke. Image courtesy Andrew Stooke.



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The 12 films cover a period of ten years from, *Utopia of the Day* (2004) to *What Happened in Past Dragon Year* (2014). Each is a self-contained work but Sun suggests you do not watch them individually but be immersed in the overall mood of fragments and changes, "an all encompassing environment [...] a tunnel of light and sound."

Sun has made a 'post-truth' museum. He parodies the modern museum that embeds knowledge in media displays, combinations of artifacts and contextual material. The conventional museum visit evokes an understanding of the past; this experience confirms the foreboding confusions and anxieties of the present.

Andrew Stooke