

Home / Lifestyle / Arts & Entertainment / Art

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# How artist Sun Xun prepared for his residency at the MCA Sydney

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Artist Sun Xun in his studio in Beijing: "My work is about the universe, space and time, not about politics or China politics," he says. MOOI Studio (Irina&Ale)

  
by **Michael Smith**

The usual rules of time and space do not apply when visiting Sun Xun's studio on the outskirts of Beijing.

After an hour driving through dusty back streets, passing through wooden toll gates so old you still have to get out of the car to open them by hand, and hundreds of abandoned factories, my taxi pulls up at the address I have been given to meet the young artist.

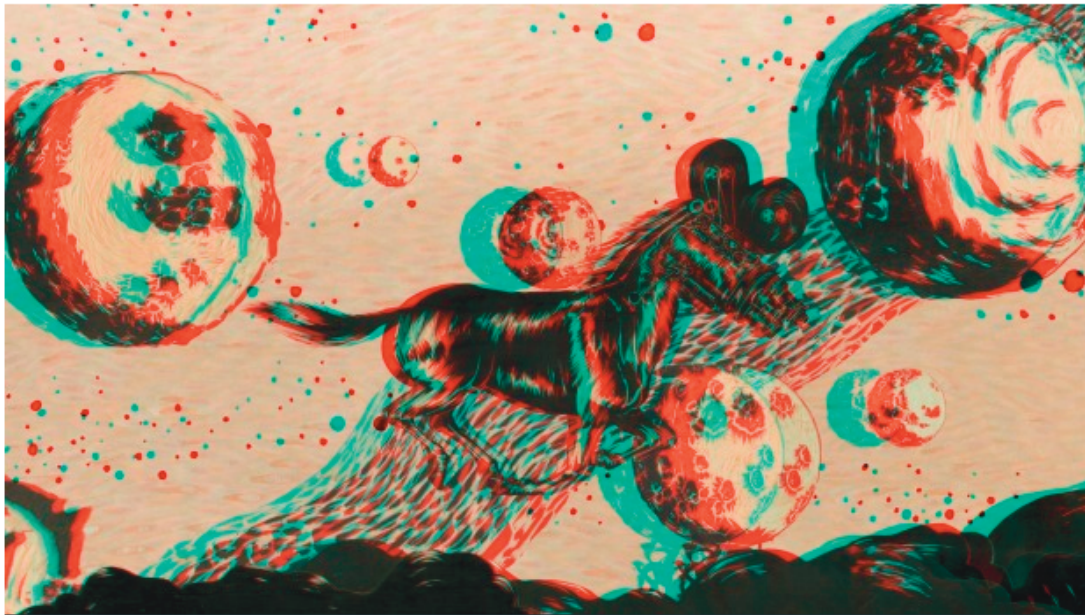
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There is nothing there except an empty block of land covered with debris and one concrete wall daubed with the Chinese characters for "56 Art District".

In 2016, Sun [told \*The New York Times\*](#) that his studio would be "destroyed" to make way for a government construction project. His prediction came true; we are at the site of the artist's old studio. It takes another hour to locate his current lodgings.



A still from *Time Spy* (still), 2016, one of Sun Xun's best known animations.

The three-storey warehouse is modern structure with concrete floors and high ceilings. It could be a trendy graphic design studio in Surry Hills or New York's Soho except that the entire building is overflowing with weird and wonderful art, posters, sculptures, and images. It's clutter at its most creative, a disorderly mish-mash of Sun's work but also his collections, which range from old movie posters to taxidermied animals and military figurines.

We are ushered upstairs to Sun's animation studio, where a dozen staff are hunched over computers or sketch pads working on his next big project: a feature-length 3D animated film. But although we are already an hour late there is still no sign of the artist himself. When I ask where he is, I am given a pair of 3D glasses and sat in front of a huge Apple computer

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to watch *Time Spy*, Sun's famous digitally-animated film which incorporates woodblock printing with modern technology. I have watched the film before on YouTube but it seems even more surreal here absorbing this kaleidoscope of dystopian landscapes, mythological beasts and spinning planets while waiting for the creator himself.

### **'I'm very hungover'**

When Sun finally arrives, he is upfront about why he is two hours late. "Sorry, I'm very hungover," he grins bleary-eyed before lighting a cigarette and inviting myself, a photographer and a translator to sit down for tea. The over-flowing ashtrays, cracked leather sofas and coffee table heaving with pots of paint brushes, marker pens and a collection of miniature teapots transports me back to my student share house days.

But despite his crew cut and casual manner, the 36-year-old is no impoverished student. He is one of China's most talented rising artists and one of the most prolific of this new generation of contemporary artists. He works in almost every medium from drawings, traditional ink paintings and woodcuts to enormous installations where his surreal animations are projected. His work has been part of more than 100 major exhibitions around the world, including 30 solo exhibitions.



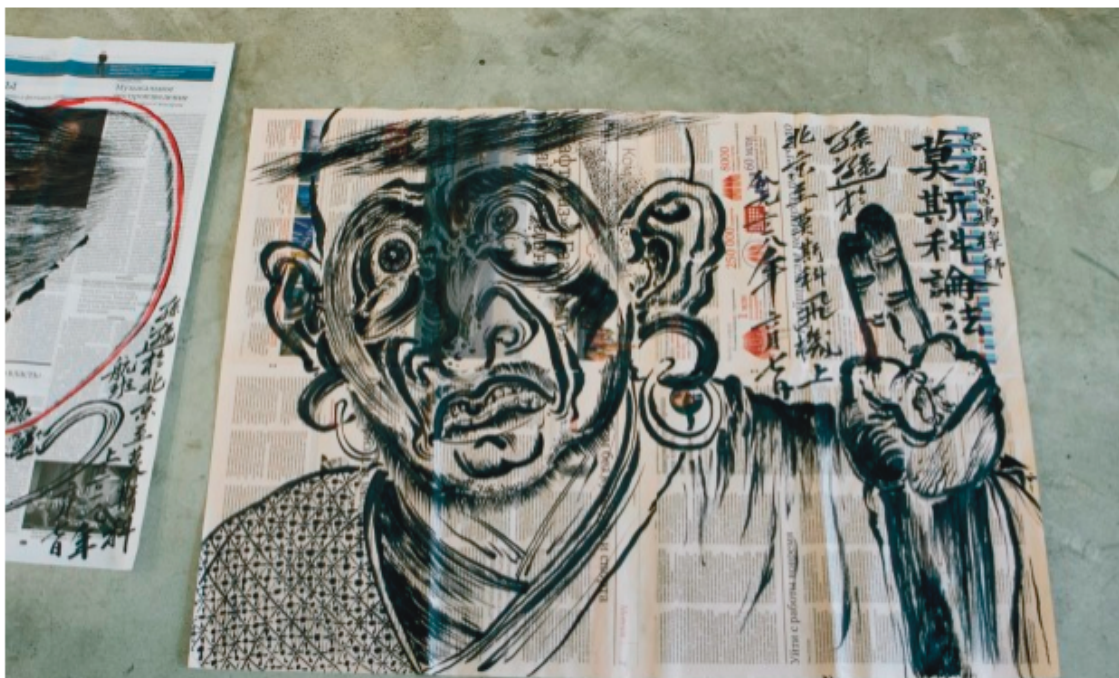
Still from *21 Grams*, 2010. Images of the industrialised north-west where Sun grew up feature in many of his animations and drawings.

His [first Australian solo exhibition](#), which opens at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art on July 9, features two of his best known works: *Maniac Universe*, a 40-metre-long painting on handmade mulberry bark paper, and *Who First Saw the Stars?* which consists of 25 woodcut paintings with glow-in-the-dark pigment. He will also be working at the museum by Sydney's Circular Quay for 10 days to produce a new installation that is influenced by his time in Australia.

Like his demolished former studio, Sun is obsessed with the idea that everything is temporary and that society is deluded by focusing on the present. These ideas are reflected throughout his work and perhaps explain why he is two hours late for our interview. "We should look to the future and also out of the moment. People are quite limited. Nothing in the world is forever. Only space and time is forever," he says.

### 'I am not a Chinese artist'

In Sun's world, modern history is just a blip in time and politicians, countries and entire civilisations have an inflated sense of their own importance.



A work in progress at Sun Xun's studio. MOOI Studio (Irina&Ale)

"I want to make fun of people's failings. People say we are great, we are better now than in any moment in history," he says when asked about the abstract landscapes of *Time Spy*.



Sun, who travels for nine months of the year, does not see himself as a "Chinese artist" because he draws inspiration from the dozens of countries he is invited to exhibit in each year. While an interpreter is present, Sun speaks in English for most of our interview.

"China is so big and there are so many artists. I am only one person. I am a totally wild artist, I am not a Chinese artist. I don't want to be constrained by one country. A country is very short. A country is nothing. It is only for several hundred years and then there is another country."

His work draws heavily on traditional Chinese forms and mediums such as calligraphy and ink-and-brush painting, which he learnt at art school in Huangzhou (at the age of 16, he ran away to the city of 10 million people, several hours from Shanghai, to attend the school). His often surreal work incorporates everything from charcoal and ink to woodcuts.



**Sun Xun's installation Path to the Time Vivarium, 2017.**

The industrialised north-west where he grew up is a feature in many of his animations and drawings: factories belching smoke in polluted Dickensian landscapes recall the environmentally-ravaged Communist Party heartland which remains one of China's poorer regions.

## Another world

Sun's residency at the MCA in Sydney is just the latest in a string of such commissions. He has worked at the Guggenheim Museum and Sean Kelly gallery in New York, where he spent three months. In 2016, he was commissioned by Swiss watch making company Audemars Piguet to create a big budget installation for Art Basel at Miami Beach. The end product was *Reconstruction of the Universe*, a huge installation with curved walls created from 1300 bamboo poles which became a screen for his 3D animations. For the whole of July last year, his *Time Spy* animation was projected onto billboards in New York's Time Square.

Sun says he does not know what he will create at the MCA until he gets to Australia. It will be his third trip to the country but his first extended stay.



Sun Xun at work on *Invisible Magic*, 2018, a commission by the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and the Edouard Malingue Gallery. Deng Jing

"I never bring an idea from my studio. This is why I do residency work. When I get there I talk to local people and I learn from the location and history and then I decide. Australia is a very exciting country. It is peaceful. It is not just different to China but different to anywhere. It is another world. I like it."

While art is heavily censored in China and monitored by the Communist Party, Sun does not see this as a problem. He says he is not a political artist although many observers see metaphorical references to Chinese politics in his work.



"My work is about the universe, space and time, not about politics or China politics," he says. "That's too small. I cannot waste expensive time to do that. I take care of bigger things. Politics is a moment in history. I'm sure after 100 years, there will be no Communist Party in China. Things will always change."

Asked whether he believes freedom of expression is being curtailed in China, he says this is not a problem confined to one country. He says the United States is particularly restrictive on many issues around race, while poking fun at religion in Italy is offlimits.

He has starting on his first feature film about international politicians where he promises to make fun of Donald Trump and others. He is also talking to the authorities in North Korea about taking part in Pyongyang's international film festival. "I'm talking with them but it is very strict. It is not easy. They have to check your story and check your images."

While we are talking, Sun gets a message saying his installations have just arrived safely in Sydney. He looks relieved. His work is incredibly labour intensive and often difficult to transport so he accepts residencies wherever possible.

"Shipping people is cheap but shipping work is more expensive, so I try and work in the space. The curators like it, it saves them money."

Over lunch, Sun becomes more animated and talks about Russia, which has also influenced his work. After the meal he is keen for his assistant to give us a tour of the studio before we continue our interview. I return to find the artist curled up in a ball fast asleep on the couch. I don't have the heart to wake him and so, without ceremony, we head back to the city by a less circuitous route than the one we arrived by.