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

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ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN **WHAT'S ON**

Artist Sun Xun: 'I take pride in the fact that no one can catch me'

By John McDonald

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"Whenever I find people putting a tag on my work I try to prove it untrue," says Sun Xun. "I take pride in the fact that no one can catch me. I will change the medium of my work or the style of my work. I'll aim to be different every time, so that nobody can define me."

For most artists this would be a recipe for languishing in obscurity. Artists become known for signature styles and iconic works. If they persevere with the same dull routine for long enough it will eventually be considered profound.

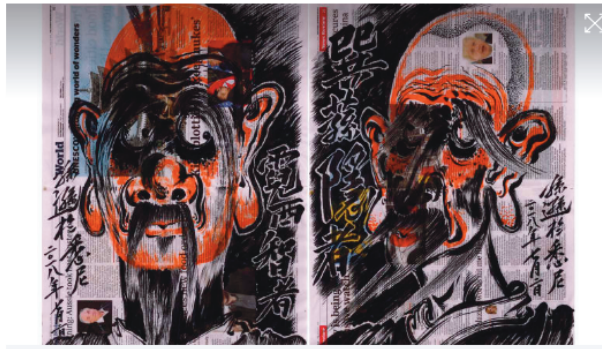


Sun Xun at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

Yet for Sun Xun, shape-shifter extraordinaire, variety and ambiguity have been the keys to a rapid rise to international prominence. The other building blocks of a short, brilliant career have been hard work and imagination.

At the age of 37, Sun Xun has become one of the boom artists of a Chinese art scene that is one long display of fireworks. Short and stocky, with a close crop and spectacles, dressed in jeans and T-shirt, he could be either a labourer or an intellectual. After talking with him for a few minutes one realises he's a bit of both: a workaholic who enjoys his toils; a philosopher who uses his art to express complex ideas in an immediate, accessible form.



Work (detail) by Sun Xun created for the cover of Spectrum. The words translate to: Wise Sydney in conversation with invisible Sun Xun.

Photo: Sun Xun

The leading artists in China astonish visitors with the size of their studios and the scale of their productivity. Xu Zhen has a six-storey office block on the outskirts of Shanghai, a studio as big as an aircraft hangar, and a staff of 50. Zhang Huan's operation is even bigger, and Ai Weiwei's bigger still, although this notorious provocateur now makes his home in Berlin.

Sun Xun is not quite on that scale. Not yet. He does, however, employ hundreds of people who work to turn his fluent ink drawings into animated films – though not all at the same time, or in the same place. His Pi Animation Studio in Beijing is a busy art factory, where a dozen assistants sit huddled over drawing boards in one room while the boss works in a spacious, dusty office, surrounded by artworks, curios, books and knick-knacks. The floor is covered with sheets of newspaper festooned with ink drawings.

When he travels, as he does for eight to nine months every year, Sun Xun takes a travelling art kit with him on the plane. He picks up newspapers and magazines in foreign airports and draws on them while flying. By the time he arrives he has enough for an exhibition, if that were the limit of his ambitions.

Upon his arrival in Sydney for his survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sun Xun will most likely have completed a new body of work. Some of it may appear in a show that features a range of earlier pieces and a 40-metre-long painting on bark paper that he intends to create while in residence, along with a series of woodcuts.



Sun Xun working on Invisible Magic (2018) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Photo: Deng Jing

The exhibition will not include *The Republic of Jing Bang*, the installation based on an imaginary nation that took up an entire floor of the White Rabbit Gallery during its recent exhibition, *The Sleeper Awakes*. But it will feature his 3D animation *Time Spy* (2016). These works caused such a stir that White Rabbit extended the duration of the show. For the MCA it means that Sun Xun is already known by a large audience.

Even without this introduction, MCA curator Anna Davis would have wanted to show the work of "a deeply curious and philosophical artist" whom she sees as no less relevant to contemporary Australia than to China. She recognises that while Sun Xun may be a new name to many people, the first experience of his work will be overwhelming.



Sun Xun's *21 Grams* (detail), 2010.

Photo: Supplied

Sun Xun dazzled a new audience when he won the title of best young artist at the 2010 Chinese Contemporary Art Awards. The catalogue that came with the prize revealed an astonishing quantity of work in different styles and media. Already Sun Xun had developed his own unique lexicon of signs and symbols – a multitude of animals, real and imaginary; mosquitoes as carriers of viruses, or viral information; top-hatted figures he calls "magicians". In his most ambitious works we discover a parallel universe.

One secret of Sun Xun's productivity is that he comes from a town that presented a great incentive to escape. The artist was born in Fuxin, a coal-mining centre in cold, barren Liaoning Province, near the North Korean border. His parents were factory workers who recognised their son's artistic abilities and allowed him to travel to the south, where he was enrolled in a high school that specialised in the arts before graduating to the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

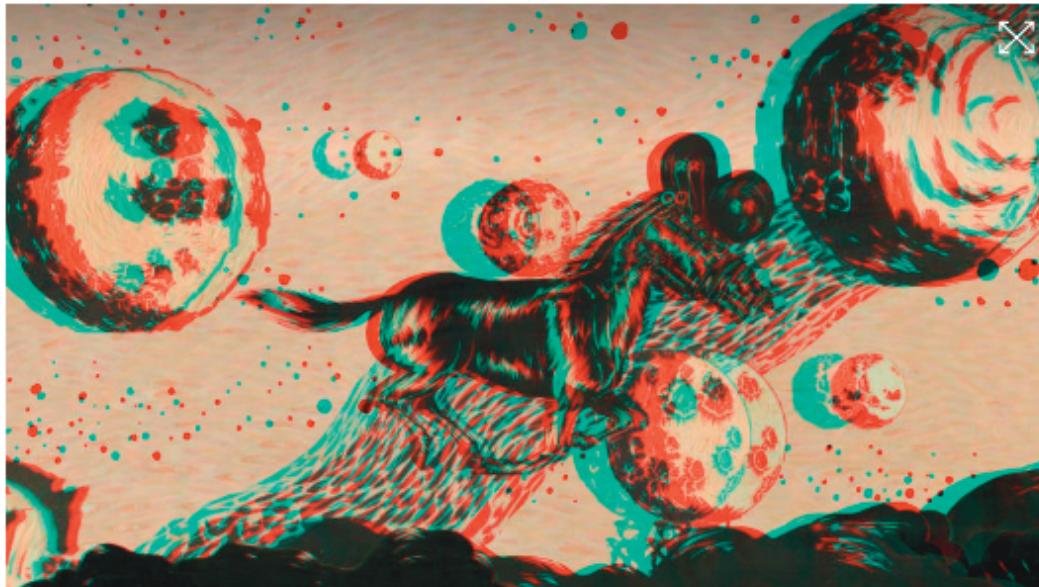


Sun Xun: "I've made beautiful works and ugly works. I have ferocious pieces, but also very gentle ones."

Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

Fuxin has stayed lodged in Sun Xun's mind. He remembers the culture shock of coming from the north and having to adapt to the southern city. He also became conscious of the way history tends to ravage and discard places such as his home town. "Fuxin used to be a coal producing town," he remembers, "but when the coal was gone it became an empty shell and was abandoned as rubbish."

The town has resurfaced in many of his works, most dramatically in *Time Spy* (2016), a 10-minute animated film made from tens of thousands of individual woodblocks.



Sun Xun's Time Spy (still), 2016.

Photo: Supplied

In his student days at the Academy, Sun Xun specialised in printmaking but had no desire to produce editioned prints. Many of the blocks he carved were never even inked. It was during these early years that he developed his interest in animation – a labour-intensive process that required a camera he found difficult to obtain. The method he arrived at bears a resemblance to the "stone age animation" techniques of South African artist, William Kentridge, which retain all the traces of the artist's hand. The difference with Sun Xun's work is that it draws upon the traditions of Chinese brush-and-ink painting, as well as many other sources.

In a typical work – if there is such a thing – one catches glimpses of modern Chinese woodcuts of the early 20th century, German expressionism, Dada collage, and imagery taken from the news and popular culture. Time and history are thrown into the blender, emerging in the form of silent, mysterious allegories that the artist has no desire to explain. He has also drawn upon the works of writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who have provided inspiration for his fantasy worlds.



Sun Xun's Heterodoxy III (2017), detail.

Photo: Supplied

Although he is fascinated with utopias and dystopias, when asked if his art has a hidden political dimension Sun Xun's answer is unequivocal: "I don't consider my works to be criticisms of anything, and I don't consider them to be open for interpretation. The only things powerful enough to change the world we live in today are economics and politics. An artist should not be concerned with changing the era in which he or she is living but with bringing about change retrospectively, when their work is looked back upon in the future. It's not about single pictures, it's about a whole system of works – a system that needs to carry meaning and value in an archaeological way."

He tries to clarify his metaphysics by referring to Leonardo da Vinci, who is now much better known and more influential than any of the wealthy patrons or nobility that employed his services.

"I've made beautiful works and ugly works. I have ferocious pieces, but also very gentle ones. I talk about politics but I also talk about time. I talk about Chinese politics and Western politics. Everybody thinks that in China you have to be a dissident, critical of the government, but I've been to Western countries and seen many things that are laughable. Those have become equal sources of inspiration."

Sun Xun's focus on the future puts him at odds with so many of today's most celebrated artists, whom he sees – quite simply – as "vulgar". This is a label he applies to the photo in which Ai Weiwei mimics a dead child on the beach. He also sees it in Jeff Koons' public sculpture of a hand holding a bunch of tulips, intended as a memorial to the victims of terrorism in Paris. He feels these artists are consuming their own market hype like a fire burning its way through a forest.

In Sun Xun's formulation vulgarity is the antithesis of independent thinking. "It's vulgar when you do things purely to conform with another's point of view. It's especially vulgar when you try to conform and do it badly."

This makes him sceptical of the politically correct attitudes espoused by many contemporary artists. "When people insist on only one point of view it becomes the very opposite of correct," he insists. Those who act in a 'correct' way believe themselves innocent of all crimes."

"An artist must not be too eager to be understood," he says. "An artist should live in a state of confusion and awkwardness."

Sun Xun is undertaking his residency at the MCA in such a spirit. "I absolutely cannot understand how Australian people think," he admits. "I know some of the history, but it's really another world. I'm interested in your cultural and geographical relationship to the east and the west, but I can't work out whether Australia is a very big small country or a very small big country. The emptiness at the centre is especially interesting. I've never been there but I suspect that nobody really knows what lies at the heart of Australia."

***Sun Xun* will be at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, from July 9 to October 14. John McDonald travelled to China courtesy of the MCA.**