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"Sun Xun: Solo Exhibition At The Museum Of Contemporary Art Australia"

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Sun Xun: Solo Exhibition At The Museum Of Contemporary Art Australia

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July 11, 2018 by [Wendy Fang](#)



"Magician Party and Dead Crow" (still) (2013) by Sun Xun. Image courtesy of artist.

A strange, yet familiar world is created in Sun Xun's major solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Occupying the first floor of the gallery, the exhibition showcases the last ten years of Sun's oeuvre with drawings, paintings, woodcuts, installations, and animated videos being sprawled across the gallery walls. Curated by Anna Davis, Sun's curious mind is revealed through the bold and surrealist images that conjure up questions about the role of history and memory in contemporary society. An obsessive observer of the present world and meticulous gatherer of its imagery and historical information, Sun creates a parallel universe consisting of familiar monuments, botanical specimens, maps, and industrial machines to comment on 'bugs' or 'cracks' in our everyday systems. Speculating our current world from the imaginative space that Sun has created, the artist creates an expanded view of reality that encompasses both Eastern and Western mythology. Inviting the audience to peruse this world with him, Sun's symbolic visual language is loaded with meaning through every brushstroke.



"Time Spy" (still) (2015) by Sun Xun. Commissioned by Audemars Piguet Art Commission.

Growing up in Fuxin (a north-eastern Chinese province of Liaoning) during the 1980s, moving to the modern southern city of Hangzhou during his adolescent years was a fundamental turning point in Sun's perception of the world. Studying at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Sun witnessed the profound industrial and commercial evolution of China's modernisation. Following Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy in 1978, the southern regions of China dove into the capitalist dream whilst the northern regions lingered behind and remained in the fading socialist past. Recognising the drastic contrast between the two regions of the same country during the same time period, Sun's artistic practice often re-visits these conflicting feelings of great change in socio-economic landscapes. It could thus be said that Sun, since his adolescence, has been operating in two worlds at the same time and therefore explains why he has preoccupations with creating an alternate universe in his artistic practice.



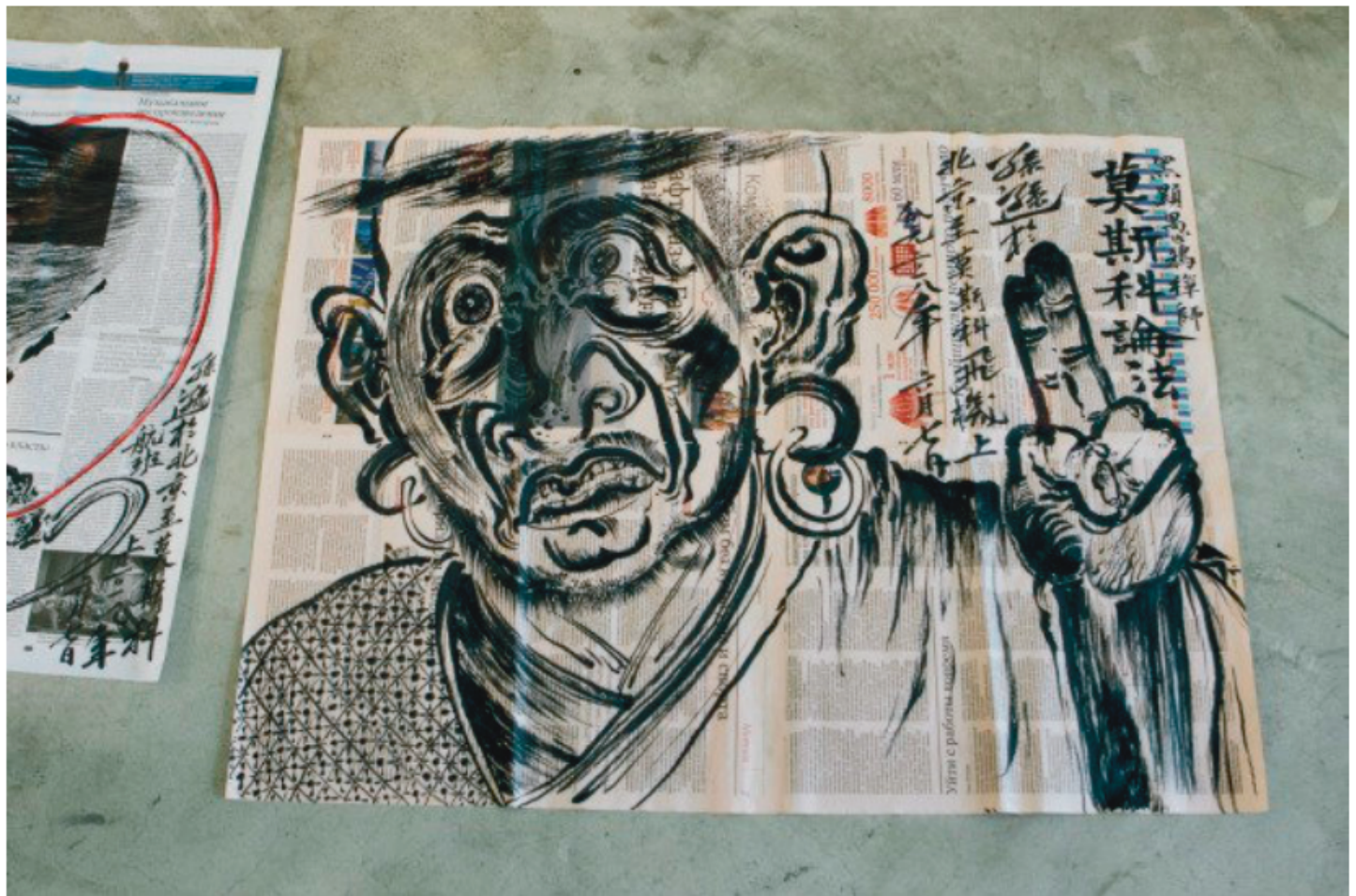
Encouraging the audience to elevate their gaze, fantastical sculptural creatures are suspended from the museum foyer ceiling and surround an industrial airship. Utilising striking ink brushstrokes to capture the attention of his viewer, Sun imitates the harsh metal texture of the aircraft and almost foreshadows the otherworldly experiences that follow upon entering the neighbouring gallery spaces.

Commissioned by the MCA and the Edouard Malingue Gallery, *Maniac Universe* (2018) transforms the Level 1 North Gallery into a cosmic spectacle. Utilising UV-A light to 'paint' the walls a shade of midnight blue, Sun installs a large scroll-like work across the walls. Depicting various familiar animals in a linear procession along the bark paper, the work is reminiscent of the Chinese zodiac. However, upon closer inspection, the audience realises this is not the world they know, but instead a darker alternative universe that emerges with creatures including bat or sea creatures replace the traditional Chinese zodiac animals. Almost as though Sun is alluding to the genesis of the universe, the curatorial decision to place this work here also appears to hint at the beginning of a journey into a fantastical place of new discovery and insight.



"Maniac Universe" (2018) by Sun Xun.

Moving towards the South Gallery, the audience is first confronted by the series, *Newspaper Paintings* (2015-18), overlaying the immediate walls to the right. Discovered in the artist's drawers during a studio visit, Davis was immediately drawn to these rough ink sketches of various specimens, religious monks and mythological creatures. Making subtle references to contemporary society through the clever use of word play, Sun employs found newspapers as his 'canvas'. The reason for this peculiar choice of medium is due to the frequent amount of travelling the artist does for exhibition projects. As a result, the artist collects free newspapers on the plane and constructs quick travel paintings that often reference his new experiences. Interested in capturing and observing the present through these rapid paintings, Sun enjoys creating work that is beyond the confines of museum budgets and commissions. There is a sense of urgency and boldness in Sun's newspaper paintings, which contrasts greatly to the level of control needed for his animated works. Furthermore, the artist wants to be seen as a global citizen rather than simply a 'Chinese artist' (from [interview](#) with Barbara Pollack at Art Basel Miami) and therefore believes in the importance of travelling as a way to broaden the horizons of an artist's worldview.



A work in progress at Sun Xun's studio. Image courtesy of The Financial Review.

A further demonstration of Sun's fascination with new cities and experiences is seen in *Invisible Magic* (2018) - a commissioned work by MCA. This exquisitely detailed piece contrasts greatly to the temperamental newspaper paintings and is reminiscent of traditional Chinese paintings from the Qing dynasty. Highlighting Sun's mastery over fine brushwork, the artist depicts gnarly tree branches with interesting choices of accompanying animals - a pheasant, a tiger, and crabs. The latter is a common species found on Sydney's seashore, and is therefore symbolic of the influence travelling has over the artist's creative expression. According to Sun, his art is "a lifelong spiritual pursuit rather than a series of individual projects" (*Sun Xun's Parallel Worlds* by Anna Davis). Therefore, his works are a continuation of previous thinkings and philosophies. This is evident in the contrast between the use of a silk folding screen and a more contemporary subject matter - crabs, which is an uncommon animal to be depicted in traditional Chinese ink painting. Therefore, there is a sense of merging the old with the new, the past with the present, which are all dependent on the artist's experiences of the world through travelling to different cities and creating relationships with different people.



"Invisible Magic" (2018) by Sun Xun. Commissioned by the Museum of contemporary Art Australia and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

Making animated films is also a key component of Sun's art practice. *21 Grams* (2010) is one of many video works included in this solo exhibition. This piece predominantly explores the notion of questioning accepted knowledge systems in contemporary society. Created from a series of black and white pastel drawings, Sun was inspired by a group of poets discussing the history of revolutions during a festival he attended whilst on residency in the Netherlands. Taking the title from the writings of Duncan MacDougall, an American doctor, who argued that the human soul weighs 21 grams, Sun considers the fluctuating dynamics between fact and myth, where at certain periods of history a scientific theory may be considered 'mad', whereas decades later the same theory could stand true. The film opens with geographical outlines of an 18th-century world map, the animation then morphs into unfamiliar shapes where a text reading "Another world is like this" appears across the screen. Referring to how belief systems change overtime, Sun comments on the effect frameworks of interpretation can have over the adoption of certain types of dialogue and ideas. Thus, by creating a parallel universe, Sun is able to vigorously observe his past and present world and go beyond history in his own work to imagine new and alternative systems of knowledge. Based on a utopian/ dystopian model, Sun expands his creativity onto various mediums that allow his landscapes, fantastical creatures, and otherworldly visions to come alive through his ink brush.



"21 Grams" (still) (2010) by Sun Xun. Image courtesy of Artsy.

"Sun Xun" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia until October 14, 2018.