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"Sun Xun"

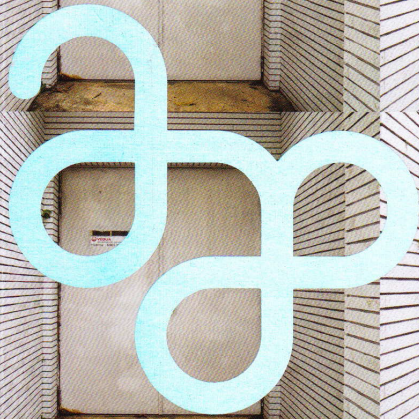


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# SUN XUN

There is a tall, sinister character who lords over many of Sun Xun's gloomy, animated landscapes. He wears a top hat, and is the magician who rules the world. According to the artist, the truth is malleable in this figure's hands—a magician's job is to sell tricks after all. He is but a part of Sun's allegories for how the powerful manipulate history and keep society under their control.

Born in Fuxin in 1980, Sun became preoccupied with narratives of the past and the excavation of truth upon realizing the contrast between his father's accounts of the Cultural Revolution and that of the Chinese Communist Party. He has since built an international career interrogating these concerns through traditional Chinese art-making techniques and new media, including handmade animations, woodcuts, ink drawings and immersive installations.

Sun's solo exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) was a long-overdue, tightly curated showcase of the artist's practice from 2008 to 2018. Twenty-one works, including five of his animations and their sketches, presented an overview of Sun's critiques against authorities and their unilateral portrayals of time.

The exhibition's key pieces were Sun's exquisitely crafted stop-motion animations. The nonlinear narrative of *Mythological Time* (2016), screened across two buttressed televisions in the gallery, is based on the rapacious coal mining in Fuxin—developed in the 1950s with Soviet aid—that made the city a jewel to China's modern industry before it was laid to waste. In the work, the land is seen as a dismembered body across which Soviet tanks rumble and downtrodden workers toil. Anachronistic elements such as mythological creatures that morph into Soviet monuments and the Statue of Liberty complicate the notion of linear progress touted by modernity. Further unraveling time as a cultural construct was the three-dimensional, ten-minute *Time Spy* (2016). The animation was made by scanning and digitally sequencing 10,000 individually carved and printed woodcuts. Winged violins, mechanized beasts and spinning planets appear and disappear in dizzying succession, spurred on by the top-hatted magician in an allegory on the elusiveness of the past, present and future.

Multiple timeframes are collapsed in Sun's most recent work as well. The never-before-exhibited, free-standing Japanese screen *Invisible Magic* (2018) bears a disjointed, barren landscape juxtaposed with animals and insects representative of Chinese idioms about success, rendered delicately in ink. *Newspaper Paintings* (2015–18) comprises 30-plus vigorous line drawings on pages torn from newspapers, depicting mythical creatures and several deities, similarly overlaying

narratives of contemporaneity with those of the past. The drawings, completed on planes or at airports as Sun jetted across the world, also form an idiosyncratic travel diary.

Additionally, there were two new, colossal commissions: *Maniac Universe*, a 40-meter-wide painting on mulberry-bark paper that snaked around the walls of the main hall, and *Who First Saw the Stars?* (both 2018), a 25-part woodcut print, each piece illuminated by ultraviolet lights within what became an ethereal gallery space awash with Sun's phantasmagorical images. *Maniac Universe* features a series of what appear to be primordial critters interspersed with animals such as horses, owls and roosters that appeared later on in the evolutionary timeline, all of whom are floating amid gleaming orbs. According to the artist, the monumental work was inspired by the Aurora Australis, and its scale was a reminder of the relatively miniscule scope in time that we, as humans, are able to glimpse during our lives. The prints, on the other hand, were pieced together to show knotted tree branches that appeared anthropomorphic and threatening.

A menagerie of birds, insects and crabs could be seen in the mixed-media-on-paper *Untitled* (MCA Residency Painting) (2018), which was completed by the artist in front of an audience at the MCA. The ten-meter-wide work of vibrant colors and virtuosic intensity was a refreshing escape from the sinister palettes that pervaded many of the other exhibits.

For Sun, the past is contradictory and unfathomable. Finding a way through this miasma while avoiding the dystopian nightmare that he believes ultimately threatens us all remains paramount for the artist. As is argued by his works, past, present and future remain to be written.

**MICHAEL YOUNG**

\*Visit our Digital Library at [library.artsiapacific.com](http://library.artsiapacific.com) for more articles on Sun Xun.

