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Arts

The grotesque, fantastical world of Chinese artist Sun Xun

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Sun Xun dips his brush into ink that's so blue it's black. He's spent the better part of a half hour painstakingly drawing balloons, lying prone on top of a huge wooden canvas on the floor of his studio in the northeastern outskirts of Beijing.

In the other room, nearly a dozen assistants are hard at work -- on Photoshop and drawing tables -- doing their best to please their boss, one of the most prolific artists working in China.



Sun Xun at work in his studio in Beijing. Credit: Harry Forbes/CNN

Born in 1980 and raised in Fuxin -- an impoverished coal mining town in the northeastern province of Liaoning, formerly known as Manchuria -- Sun is one of the more unlikely figures to emerge in the global contemporary art scene.

Much of his practice draws inspiration from his upbringing, and as such, he favors an industrial, vintage aesthetic.

"From my hometown, everything (revolves) around coal. Coal is actually a magic stone, because it can be fire... The burning stone changed people's life," he says. "A lot of history happened in that area. So, I think for (an) artist, it's really like a magic box. I open it, I can find a lot of interesting things."



"Mythological Time 17" (2016) by Sun Xun, a work shown at this week's Art Basel in Hong Kong.

Sun has described the differences between his hometown and the thriving metropolis of Hangzhou, where he studied art for nearly a decade, as essential to his conception of a duplicitous, multi-layered world. He has [previously described](#) the differences between these two places as being nearly as stark as those between North Korea and Manhattan.



His film "Time Spy" was shown at midnight every night in New York's Times Square in July, 2017. Credit: Sun Xun

To say the last few years have been busy for Sun Xun would be an understatement. In 2016, his installation at Art Basel Miami Beach was a hit, and his work was added to the permanent collection of the [Guggenheim](#). In July 2017, one of his films was shown at midnight every night in New York's Times Square. This year, he's already opened shows with new work in Singapore and Chongqing.



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This week Sun is exhibiting work at Art Basel in Hong Kong as part of a group show organized by ShanghART, one of the oldest contemporary art galleries in China. He also painted an intricate menu for a dinner hosted by the gallery.

"Sun's difficult to define," says Lorenz Helbling, the founder and director of ShanghART in a phone interview. "He's very driven, very curious. He has enormous energy. I'm always surprised by him. He's not living in a corner, he's really observing the whole world."

In April, Sun will travel to Cuba for the Havana Biennial, where he will be the sole Chinese artist represented. Also on his itinerary this spring: New York, Florida, and Rio. "Every year, only three or four months, I stay in China, (and) the others, I go outside."

Sun says he feels compelled to be "always working, even on the airplane." He's finished close to 200 works on his inflight tray table in the last four years, using the newspapers he snags from airports as canvases. "It's funny, because, every day (on paper looks) special, but actually, no day (is) special."



Sun creates grotesque and fantastical characters in his works. Credit: Sun Xun

Sun prefers the world of the surreal and fantastic to the quotidian, and often uses his airplane drawing sessions to workshop the ever-growing cast of grotesque, fantastical characters which inhabit his practice.

Sun's gruff, unnerving animation style is often compared to South African master William Kentridge, and his early style of woodcarving was heavily influenced by the exactitude of German Renaissance printmaker Albrecht Dürer.



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His couched critiques of contemporary Chinese society echo the practices of fellow Beijing artist Cao Fei, as well as Ai Weiwei, who recently announced his move from Berlin to New York. Critics have also noticed parallels to the practices of countrymen from his generation, including the absurdist, intricate prints of Wu Junyong and the dystopian ink work of Qiu Anxiong.

Sun, however, rejects comparisons to fellow Chinese artists, identifying himself more as a citizen of the world. He insists on a desire -- and responsibility -- to "connect with different kinds of people, with different and special backgrounds."

"I mean the Earth's people, it's not only Chinese," he says. "I think every country (is) developing a little bit (the) same."

Sun vehemently rejects what he calls the "China artist game" of playing the victim. He says some Chinese artists use claims of persecution by the government to gain international attention and exposure in top galleries. "Government hurt me, so, ah, museum, help me!" he says, mimicking such artists. "I don't want say that, I don't want to do that," he sighs. "You want to make your price higher. But I just want (to) talk the truth."

Despite avoiding didactic works concerning the Chinese Communist Party, Sun Xun is no sycophant. In fact, he is fiercely critical of repression -- whether enacted by his own government or others -- and frequently encourages individuals to think for themselves.

"Where's your private system? You have to find a balance. If you just decide (things for) yourself, it's okay. But don't control (other) people."

Sun's sense of humor concerning statecraft is refreshing. In 2014, he held a show in Singapore which consisted of the playful establishment of a temporary country, dubbed the Republic of Jingbang.



He designed everything a budding state might need -- including passports, currency, flags, and even a national anthem. "I just make fun of the whole earth. Then, six weeks, bye, bye," he smiles.

Sun created an ephemeral country in his 2014 project "Jing Bang: A Country Based on Whale." Credit: Sun Xun

The only requirement for citizenship in this country -- other than a \$10,000 price tag to purchase a briefcase full of "official" documents -- was to spend the whole day lying. Untruth, no matter the dialect, was his nation's official language.

"The artist is always trying to touch something dangerous," he says. "If, every day, you can just make some beautiful drawing, and sell them, that's a fake artist. That's technique. Your thinking is not artist thinking. The important thing is that I try to make people ask question."

This article has been updated to better reflect the dinner Sun Xun painted a menu for.