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Inspiration Far From Home

A Chinese Artist Exploring New York



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Tourist Sites as Inspiration: A look at the work of the Chinese artist Sun Xun.

When the Chinese artist Sun Xun was growing up in Fuxin, a small city near the North Korean border, he already knew that China was a country with at least two histories. In school, during the day, he studied the Chinese history presented in official accounts, a version remarkably free of such troubling episodes as the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution.

Then, at night, his father would sit him down for a more personal account of the truth, describing what happened to his family during the 1960s and '70s, when his grandmother was marched into a public square, forced to wear a dunce cap and declaimed as a bourgeois collaborator for her upper-class background.

Today, Mr. Sun is obsessed with Chinese history as it is recounted and manipulated in museum exhibitions and books, and as it is recalled by its participants. He examines it through ink art, an inherited tradition, making installations and video animations from thousands of meticulously drawn frames. They often feature a political leader in the guise of a magician, "the only legal liar," according to Mr. Sun.

He takes inspiration from political cartoons, biology books, instruction manuals and newsreels, yet like many Chinese artists of his generation — he was born in 1980 — he avoids didactic conclusions about China's government, preferring to couch his criticisms in surreal metaphors. Often animals and insects stand in for human emotions, and conflicts and weapons punctuate scenes fraught with paranoia.

Sun Xun (pronounced soon shoon), who lives in Beijing, where he runs his studio, Pi Animation, is spending the fall in New York to research the American scene in preparation for a solo show next fall. His stay is sponsored by Sean Kelly Gallery, which found him an apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and will exhibit his work next year.

But first his work will be in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," its first show of Chinese contemporary art, opening on Dec. 11.

Though video art is a comparatively new medium — and certainly new for the Met's Chinese painting galleries, with their focus on classical scroll paintings — artists like Mr. Sun fit in because they "exploit traditional modes of representation in how they narrate their stories," said Maxwell Hearn, the show's curator, who is also in charge of the museum's Asian art department.

"Ink Art," a survey of Chinese artists from 1980 to the present who are experimenting and innovating with the classical medium of ink-and-brush painting, will place Mr. Sun in a continuum that begins with pioneers like the dissident Ai Weiwei and the MacArthur grant recipient Xu Bing. The museum will show Mr. Sun's 2011 animation "Some Actions Which Haven't Been Defined Yet in the Revolution," a day in the life of a typical Chinese worker that begins with an alarm clock ringing and ends with a bomb exploding. It took more than a year to produce, based on over 5,000 woodcuts, a technique dating to at least the Diamond Sutra, from 868 A.D., one of the earliest surviving examples of a printed book. But Mr. Sun's adaptation borrows heavily from state-sponsored promotional woodcuts used during Mao's time as an inexpensive means of propaganda.

"Sun Xun is one of the youngest and most prolific video artists active in China today," Mr. Hearn writes in a catalog essay. "Though his images share the same angular, rough-hewed quality of the New Woodcut Movement, their message is darker and less inspiring, a dystopian vision of rootlessness and confusion."

Mr. Sun learned calligraphy and ink-and-brush painting while training at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, from which he graduated in 2005. He had left home at 15 to attend the academy's high school, experiencing severe culture shock as he navigated the differences between a newly modernized city and his provincial hometown. "Everyone where I grew up, including my parents, worked in a factory and thought that people in business were evil capitalists," he said. "But in Hangzhou, everyone was doing business."

He struggled to reconcile his conflicting experiences: official history versus family stories, state-controlled factories versus the new market economy, and past versus present. He found new insights in Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault, philosophers he encountered in college.

While in New York, Mr. Sun's itinerary has included the American Museum of Natural History, the New York Public Library and the United States Military Academy at West Point. "Most people look at history like a performance on a stage," he said. "They don't look behind the curtains to see what is really happening. Museums and libraries are windows onto the truth."

Enthralled with taxonomies, Mr. Sun ran around the natural history museum, photographing the Hall of Biodiversity and the dioramas of birds, excited to incorporate various species into his coming installations.

At West Point, he visited its museum, devoted to military history from ancient times to the war on terrorism, and toured the campus. He was disappointed that he could not go inside classrooms and learn about the curriculum, but he lit up at the museum display cases, with their models of military conflicts. Demonstrating a formidable knowledge of Western political history, he offered up details about the Thirty Years' War and the American Revolution. "Don't think of it as murder, think of it as design," he said, as he constantly snapped pictures of pistols, muskets, rifles and machine guns with his iPhone.

"I always thought if there is a war, I want Sun Xun to be my general because he is the most focused, fearless strategist," said James Elaine, director of Telescope, a nonprofit project space in Beijing, who brought Mr. Sun's installation "New China" to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2008. Mr. Sun, who spoke little English then, lived in the museum for a month creating a total environment of paintings, as well as showing a new animation.

During this current stay in New York, his apartment is already filled with ink paintings of birds and dinosaurs, explosive images with thick black lines and aggressive colors. He said he does not consider his work as purely political. "As an artist, to narrow your focus only on the political is dangerous," he said.

He recalled watching news of the Tiananmen Square uprising on television with his father when he was 9. When asked if he supported democracy in China, he at first didn't understand "democracy" and looked up its meaning on Google Translate. "Ah yes, democracy, yes, of course, but which democracy?" he asked, ready to debate the differences among the French, British and American systems of government.

Mr. Sun already knows what he would like to do at Sean Kelly Gallery next year: an installation incorporating his father's stories about the Cultural Revolution, a subject that would be tricky to pull off in China. Next year he will stay in the gallery for a month, painting on the walls and building props for four new films, a process that will be open to the public. "New York is a museum with all kinds of people here, everybody with their own stories," he said. "I am part of this museum, too, so I should share my father's story. You may or may not believe what I tell you. But it doesn't matter, because this is my art."



Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Barbara Pollack writes: "He takes inspiration from political cartoons, biology books, instruction manuals and newsreels, yet like many Chinese artists of his generation — he was born in 1980 — he avoids didactic conclusions about China's government, preferring to couch his criticisms in surreal metaphors."



Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

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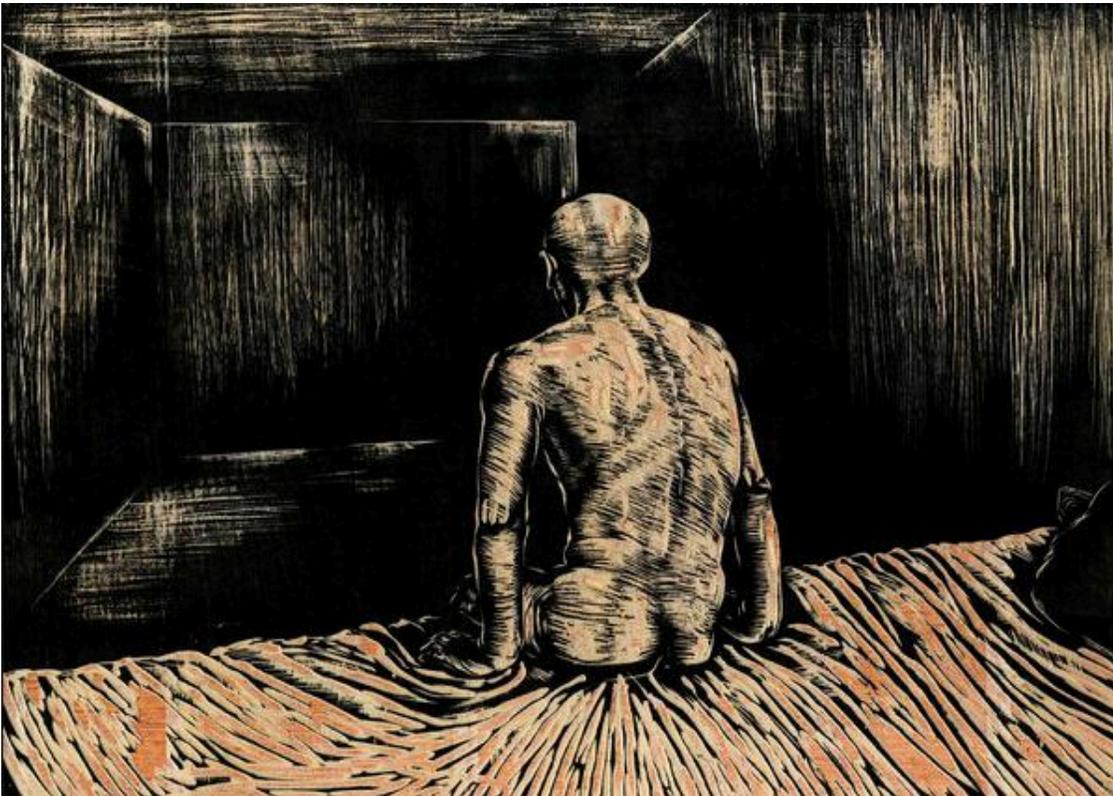
Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

A work from Mr. Sun's tentatively titled “Time Vivarium-ism” series, made this year.



Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

The works in the series will be included in his show at Sean Kelly, where Mr. Sun will spend a month painting on the walls and building props for four new films, a process the public can watch.



Credit: Courtesy the artist

A still from his 2011 animation, "Some Actions Which Haven't Been Defined Yet in the Revolution," which is part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art show "Ink Art." Opening on Dec. 11, it is the museum's first show of Chinese contemporary art.



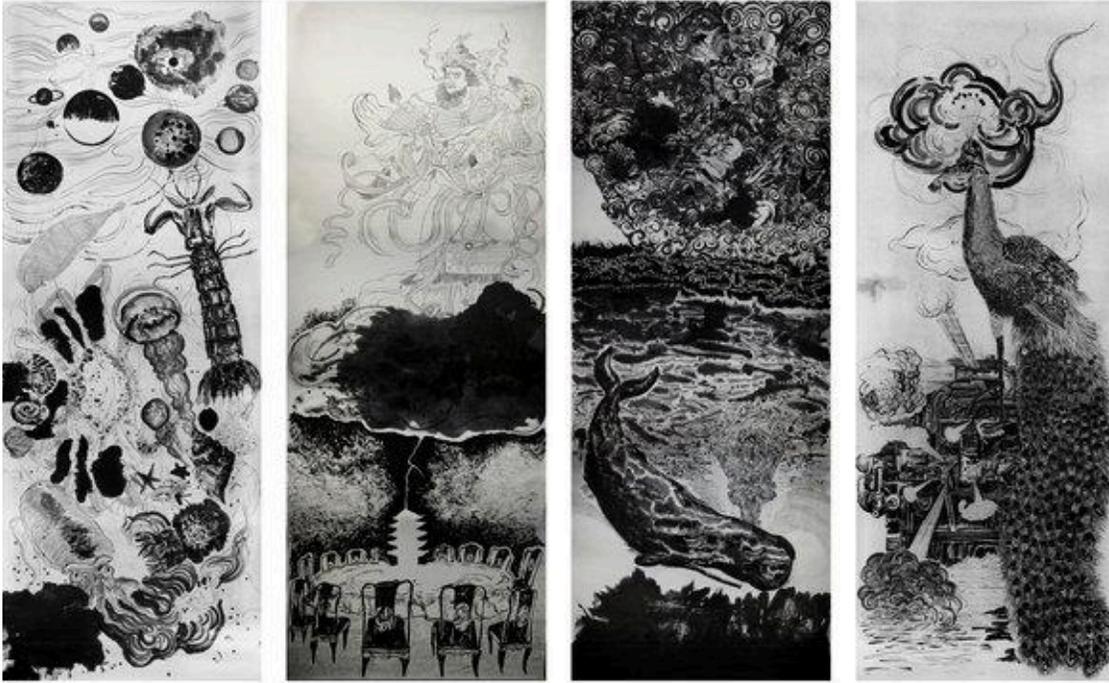
Credit: Courtesy the artist

The work depicts a day in the life of a typical Chinese worker that begins with an alarm clock ringing and ends with a bomb exploding.



Credit: Courtesy the artist

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Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.
Images from Mr. Sun's "Beyond-ism."



Credit: Sun Xun, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.
Stills from Mr. Sun's animated film "21G."