

SEANKELLY

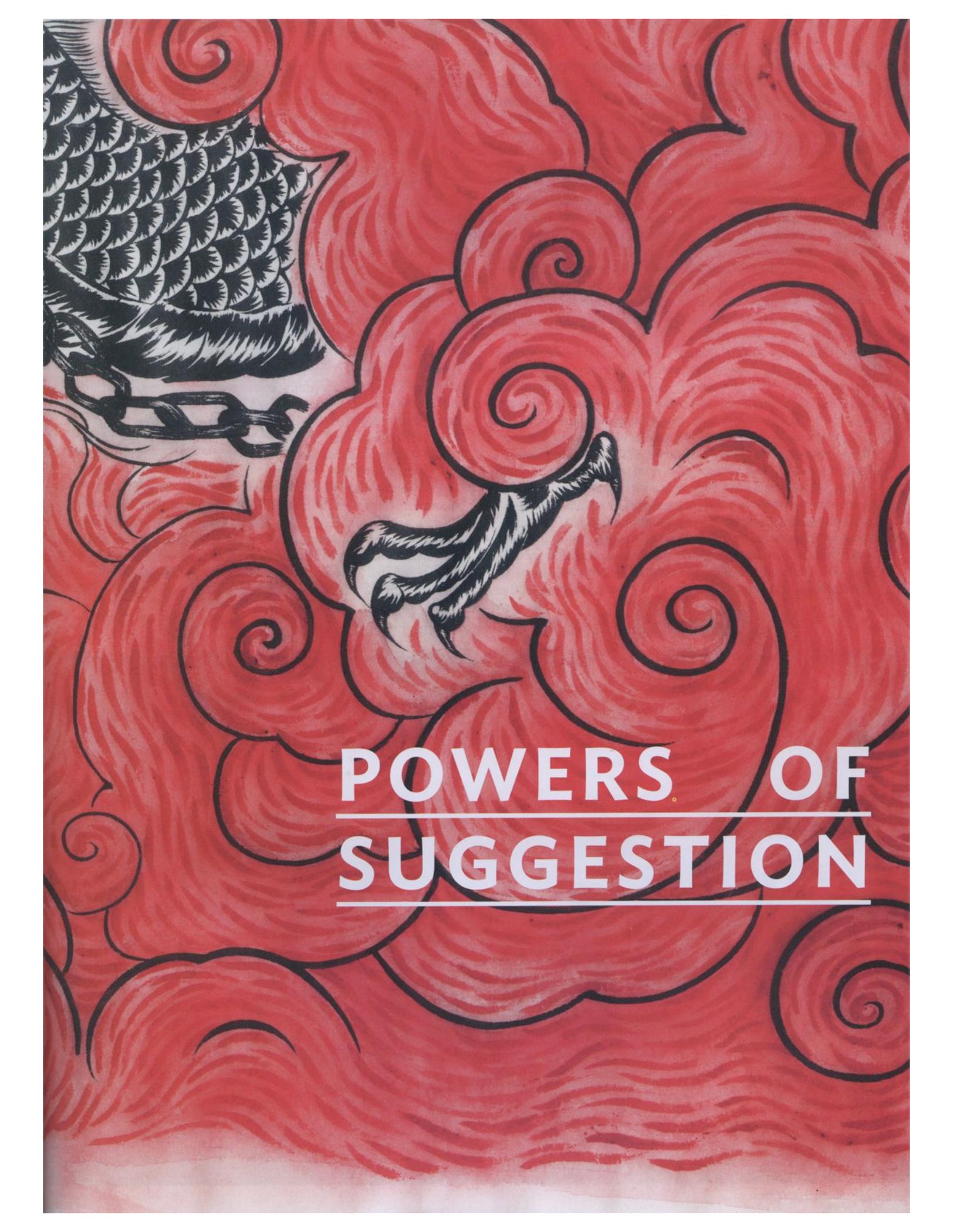
Wai-Ying Beres, Tiffany. "Sun Xun: Powers of Suggestion," *ArtAsiaPacific*, November/December, 2014.





SUN XUN

BY TIFFANY WAI-YING BERES

The background is a vibrant red with intricate black outlines of swirling, cloud-like patterns. In the upper left, a portion of a dragon's head is visible, featuring a detailed black and white scale pattern and a thick, black chain. A single black and white claw with sharp talons is positioned in the center, reaching towards the right. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional East Asian art.

POWERS OF

SUGGESTION

How do you define an artist who seeks to defy definitions?

Sun Xun is an anomaly among young artists in China—his artistic practice blurs the lines between drawing, animation and installation, and he believes that his personal artistic language, replete with allegory and overtones, is indecipherable to most. Still, Sun, a James Dean-like renegade among the post-'80s generation of artists in China, is widely considered to be one of the nation's rising stars. In 2010, he was presented with the Best Young Artist award by the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards, and he has also received the Young Art Award from Taiwan Contemporary Art Link in 2010 and an arts fellowship from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy. In the span of just a decade, he has shown at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Hayward Gallery in London, the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai and the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taipei, and his video work has been widely exhibited at film festivals around the world—from Rotterdam to Venice to Tehran.

For Sun, being an artist is more a state of mind than a vocation. At 34, he directs a commune-like animation studio called π , in the Heiqiao art district on the outskirts of Beijing, where he employs up to 30 assistants at a time. A factory-like setting, with workers who work, eat and sleep on-site, π is an industrial studio space with designated rooms for the different aspects of his production and walls covered in Sun's creations and inspirations. When I visited him in August, he was working on several projects simultaneously: a group of sculptural busts were being covered in entomological specimens to be sent to a summer group show at ShanghArt, his representative gallery, while in a different room assistants were hand-copying, frame by frame, scenes for an upcoming animation work from his pencil sketches and storyboards. Sun's library is filled with philosophical, historical and political texts, as well as countless international art history books; on the wall hang museum-edition

copies of the seminal 11th-century Chinese ink paintings *Magpies and Hare* by Cui Bai and *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan. It is clear that Sun has a broad intellectual curiosity.

A kind of Renaissance man himself, it is no wonder Sun considers Leonardo da Vinci to be his greatest artistic inspiration. With his boxy glasses, crew-cut hair and deep interest in social history, war and philosophy, Sun can come across as something of a revolutionary—minus the dogma. Perspicacious and assertive, he will discuss 19th-century inventor and scientist Nikola Tesla and Song Dynasty paintings (960–1279) in consecutive sentences; he also chain smokes cigarettes and chews betel nut, a mild stimulant, to “enhance” his focus.

Given Sun's academic slant, one might not guess that he was born in an industrial coalmining town called Fuxin, in northeast China, to parents who worked in a local brick-making factory. Sun says he was terrible at mathematics, but showed an early aptitude for art. At age 15 he was sent to a preparatory school affiliated with the prestigious China Academy of Art (CAA). There in the city of Hangzhou, a city well known for its culture and history, Sun developed his artistic techniques: drawing, sketching, oil and ink painting. Later, when he entered the CAA as an undergraduate student, Sun asserts he could have chosen any major but selected printmaking because its curriculum was comparatively lax and there was significant potential for individual creative experimentation. Fittingly, he recalls that he produced fewer than 20 traditional prints during his four years at university.

Instead, the idea of moving images appealed to Sun. In his freshman year at CAA, he created his first experimental video, *BaYa* (“Tooth Extraction”) (2001), inspired by the short story *Gas* (1919) by Alfred Hitchcock—a director who influenced Sun greatly at this time. During the course of his undergraduate career, he went on to produce three additional animated films that, despite their rather primitive presentation, feature Sun's hallmark dreamlike scenes, absurdities



and veiled criticisms on present realities. His experiments gained the attention of his professors, and upon graduation he was singled out to teach in the newly formed animation department at his alma mater. In 2006, Sun left his teaching position and its institutional restraints to assert his artistic independence, founding π Studio in Hangzhou, and later moving it to Beijing in 2009.

Apart from developing his artistic craft and broadening his outlook, Sun's experience in Hangzhou was also the catalyst for his skepticism about the agendas governing modern society, a theme that underlies most of his artwork. When Sun left his provincial hometown in the north for the newly reformed and capitalistic city of Hangzhou, he experienced a certain culture shock. "The disparity between southern and northern China really had me confused and dislocated, because what I learned from the past was no longer applicable; my standards did not apply anymore. The north and the south were so different that you could no longer measure everything with the same ruler." Although he was born after the Cultural Revolution, its lingering aftereffect in his hometown became of particular interest to him. When he returned from school every year to visit his parents, Sun began to realize that the disparities between Fuxin and Hangzhou were not merely economic—people's mindsets were different too. In his backwater village, where the shared fate of the community was placed in the local factories, issues of wealth and social class were irrelevant. Before leaving for school he was even warned about the influence of "evil capitalists." Yet as Fuxin developed and new economic opportunities arose, the artist also witnessed how people's ideologies within his village changed: people's desires and ambitions grew, and not necessarily for the better.

Other experiences that fueled Sun's mistrust toward the government included anecdotes that his father would tell him when he was growing up; they seemed to contrast with the faultless histories he would read

(Previous spread)

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON, 2014, still detail from animation video: 10 min. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

(This page)

Installation view of "Animals" at Max Protetch Gallery, New York, 2009. Courtesy the artist.





in textbooks or see in museums. With these ideas in mind, it should come as no surprise that novels such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) all featured in Sun's teenage reading list. Sun became fascinated with the distortion of reality, the manipulation of ideologies and how histories are recounted: "There isn't a government that doesn't deceive us in some way, and the act of revising history itself is extremely dangerous. As an artist, one should not criticize history, because it is impossible to define it. However, any sort of attention paid to history can provide a new perspective on it."

Combine Sun's broad intellectual curiosity, artistic talent and antipolitical motivations, and it starts to become clear why the artist is a powerhouse of ambitious creativity. "I am an artist, rather than a film director," Sun says. "The emphasis is on the things behind the works, and I don't limit myself to any forms." To date, the artist has created 18 meticulously wrought animations that have employed a range of media that includes Chinese ink on paper, acrylic on canvas, charcoal, woodblock print, shadow puppetry, red-blue 3D technology and more. "In my perspective, anything can become animation," he says. "I don't think that animation can only be made in a workshop; it can be combined with any medium . . . I hope my animations can interrelate with space and time. Actually, animation is itself not very important; the most valuable thing in animation is how it can break through all restrictions."

This tendency to want to break "restrictions" is of particular interest to Chinese art historians who see in Sun's body of work the ability to fluently navigate between Asian and Euro-American cultural discourses. Although Sun's English is limited, he feels "at home" in New York, and can converse with zeal about the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky and Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty. Yet for all his modern ideas, there is still a conservative and historical attitude at the core of all his work, manifesting itself in his broad examination of established customs and cultures. As much as he may draw upon, and dissect, recent Chinese political history, Sun still derives artistic inspiration from China's rich cultural past. In his office, amid black-and-white posters of Napoleon Bonaparte, Nikola Tesla and Leonardo da Vinci, sits a traditional scholar's desk with ink, brushes and albums of steles, which Sun uses to practice calligraphy.

Given Sun's expansive body of work, sweeping use of artistic media and vast knowledge of the world outside China, it is perhaps useful to focus on those works that are rooted in a more "Chinese" medium, as it were—namely, ink. Recently, there has been a revived interest in Chinese ink art, with dedicated exhibitions of its contemporary manifestations at international venues such as the Saatchi Gallery in London, the Museum of Arts in Lucerne, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and, most recently, in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China." Sun, whose woodblock-based animation *Some Actions Which Haven't Been Defined Yet in the Revolution* (2011) was presented in the Met's show, is quick to disavow any particular attachment to the ink medium. In his words, "I use ink painting in my work, but I don't think very much about ink as 'culture.' My interests are elsewhere. I don't want to be labeled with easy tags like 'ink' or 'animation'—these are materials. What's much more important is the thinking behind the work." Still, regardless of intention, by utilizing and meaningfully referencing the age-old "ink aesthetic," Sun is able to explore a range of possibilities for the transformation, extension and reconstruction of this tradition in a modern context.

To date, Sun has created three works that principally involve the use of ink. The earliest, *People's Republic of Zoo* (2009), was developed, in part, during a residency at the University of Essex in Colchester, United Kingdom, and was inspired by George Orwell's satirical political allegory *Animal Farm* (1945). A kind of bestiary,



People's Republic of Zoo is filled with symbolism and ambiguity: from scenes of a tuxedo-wearing pig who oversees a spinning globe, to the gesturing arm of a stone sculpture, parachuting down from the clouds. Apart from the monochromatic, ink-on-paper animation itself, there is almost nothing to evoke traditional Chinese art in Sun's zoo (except perhaps the scene with a crow in the sun, from Chinese mythology). For this seven-minute film, the artist created ink sketches on rice paper that his team of assistants copied by the thousands and collated, which were then presented rapidly in succession, like a flicker-book. Experimental, and at times crude, *People's Republic of Zoo* was pieced together through a kind of trial-and-error process—Sun's team scanned and digitally cut out certain subjects, combining frames and selectively introducing movement. This kind of exploratory process is evident, for example, in the scenes where the artist combines frames of shadow puppetry against his painted ink backgrounds, creating a novel but rather incongruous effect.

This sense of craftsmanship and experimentation is a defining feature in all of Sun's works. By and large, Sun's animations are drawn out by hand, frame by frame. Digital techniques are used as the "glue" to hold the work together, assisting in the editing, transitioning, display, etcetera. This labor-intensive method began as early as his high-school days in Hangzhou, when the artist says he had the time to hand-sketch many frames but lacked the wherewithal to create complex, digitally rendered animations.

Today, the artist continues to experiment with this handwrought style: "When it comes to producing new works, I like creating new challenges for myself because they come with new pressures and a new kind of excitement." *People's Republic of Zoo* is certainly a product of innovation. Despite its obvious lack of connections to traditional Chinese painting, the work nevertheless possesses a sense of timelessness due to Sun's use of ink. Moreover, this emphasis on painting may be interpreted as a kind of resistance in this age of new media—the rewriting of a traditional craft-like practice that might otherwise be lost forever in an environment of high technology.

(Opposite page)

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF ZOO, 2009,
stills from animation video: 7 min 49 sec.
Courtesy the artist.

(This page)

BEYOND-ISM installed at Yokohama
Creative City Center, Yokohama, 2010.
Courtesy the artist.

While one can appreciate, in terms of aesthetics and interpretation, the artist's novel use of ink art, few if any classical Chinese art conventions are evident in Sun's film. Starting in the first scene, which portrays a map of unknown constellations—in the forms of a crab, iguana, butterfly, octopus, praying mantis, human anatomical model and more—the viewer is faced with the grand indecipherability of Sun's vision. According to the artist, the cryptic nature of his artwork is normal: "Is it impossible to understand my art? The truth is there, but it is impossible to define, just like the questions: Is there a god? How can we know?" Sun adds, "People may interpret my artwork and may even misunderstand it; this is reasonable. Why? Because the moment you begin to define something you place limits on it. This is why images are so powerful: they do not attempt to define. My work should be read through its images, not described."

Sun's second film to employ ink, *Beyond-ism* (2010), is an animation that was inspired by the artist-residency project at the Yokohama Creativity Center in Japan. More sophisticated than *People's Republic of Zoo* in terms of its overall narrative, with a well-matched soundtrack and smooth transitions, *Beyond-ism* is a work that reexamines China's myths and origin stories. In particular, Sun reinterprets the legend of the first Chinese emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE), who is said to have sent a court sorcerer, Xu Fu, and 3,000 boys and girls on boats eastward toward a mythical land called Penglai to find the elixir of life; never to return, these passengers are believed to be among the early inhabitants of Japan. Sun's version of this myth is a bit more enigmatic: in *Beyond-ism*, he weaves together a fantastical tale about Japan from a Sino-centric perspective. Scenes from the film portray insects swarming over Mao's poetry, elephants drowning, iconic architecture and a frequently occurring character in Sun's works, the top-hatted magician—dubbed "the only legal liar."

Beyond-ism was envisioned as a tripartite work: the first part consists of ten three-meter-tall ink paintings done freehand in Yokohama; the second part is the animation itself, which was completed at the π animation studio and first screened at Japan's Aichi Triennale in 2010; and the third part was a major installation shown in 2010–11 at Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum (RAM), where the artist's ink paintings, sketches and video were combined with site-specific wall painting. The RAM installation was particularly stunning for its wall of spontaneously rendered dragons floating among clouds in ink and brush, opposite a display of the artist's framed sketch-panels. From these three installments,



(This page)
Sun Xun creating a site-specific wall painting for "By Day, By Night, or Some (Special) Things a Museum Can Do" at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2010. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, top)
WHAT HAPPENED IN THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON, 2014, still from animation video: 10 min. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page, bottom)
Sun Xun creating a site-specific wall painting for "By Day, By Night, or Some (Special) Things a Museum Can Do" at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2010. Courtesy the artist.





it is evident that the artist's oeuvre is made up of more than just his animated videos—it includes his entire body of sketches, drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations, all of which are a record of, and accessory to, Sun's films. As the artist himself says, "No work is independent; each piece is just a brick that forms a larger structure."

The complexity and labor behind *Beyond-ism* are also evidence of Sun's unusual relationship with the art market. Unlike artists who produce works tailored to the gallery system or collectors, Sun believes art should be part of the public domain, and he is happy letting the forces of inspiration drive his artistic output. Eschewing commercial animation production, Sun's film projects are not created for specific audiences, but are consciously submitted to as many film festivals as possible. Though his films are sold in limited editions, many of the artworks exhibited and sold by his galleries are remnants of the film creation process—the sketches, manuscripts and related mementos. Sometimes Sun's works are ephemeral: the artist has displayed his exceptional ink painting skills by working directly on the walls at several of his exhibition venues, a practice which dates back to his youth as a three-year-old painting on the walls of his home. After the exhibition ends, these murals are painted over. According to Sun, this is not a politically motivated stance: "I've been asked whether I mean to protest the market system by doing this. I tell them that I don't have this motive. My only concern is making my exhibitions better."

Sun's most recent solo exhibition, "Brave New World," after Aldous Huxley's dystopian 1932 novel, at Edouard Malingue Gallery during Art Basel Hong Kong, was one such immersive installation featuring his most recent ink-inspired film, *What Happened in the Year of the Dragon* (2014). Sun's catalyst for the animation was his discovery of René Magritte's painting *The Spontaneous Generation* (1937), which, with its depiction of a symbol-engraved head and

background of oddly shaped receptacles apparently was also influenced by Huxley's *Brave New World*. The show featured *The Second Work of Spontaneous Generation* (2014)—Sun's painterly response to Magritte's piece which is a monochrome pastel-on-canvas self-portrait that takes its composition and background from its more colorful predecessor. *The Second Work of Spontaneous Generation* also forms one of the vignettes in *What Happened in the Year of the Dragon*, in which the artist's head is joined by a crow (another recurring character in the artist's works), heightening the surrealist effect of Magritte's painting and lending an air of mystery to Sun's animation.

What Happened in the Year of the Dragon depicts Sun's vision of Chinese politics and power struggles today—and throughout history—as represented by a recurring sequence of shackled dueling dragons, which serve as stand-ins for any number of contesting people or forces in the modern Chinese government. Sun is intrigued by the symbol of the dragon because, as an animal, it doesn't exist. "Why do Westerners see a dragon and think immediately of China?" he asks. "This is the power of the symbol. It is a cultural power, which is endowed with history." Metaphors are rife throughout this work, and yet compared to his earlier film works, there is a more obvious aesthetic link to traditional ink painting in *What Happened in the Year of the Dragon*—a familiar balance in the imagery he is creating and the spaces he defines, from the dragons floating in the flaming red clouds to his stark and barren wastelands. Moreover, Sun's narrative and filmmaking sense continues to develop along with his editing skills. His transition effects—the dissolves, fades and match cuts—feel less jarring, especially when we pan between the artist's ink-on-paper scenes to his episodes rendered in other artistic media within the video.



(Opposite page)

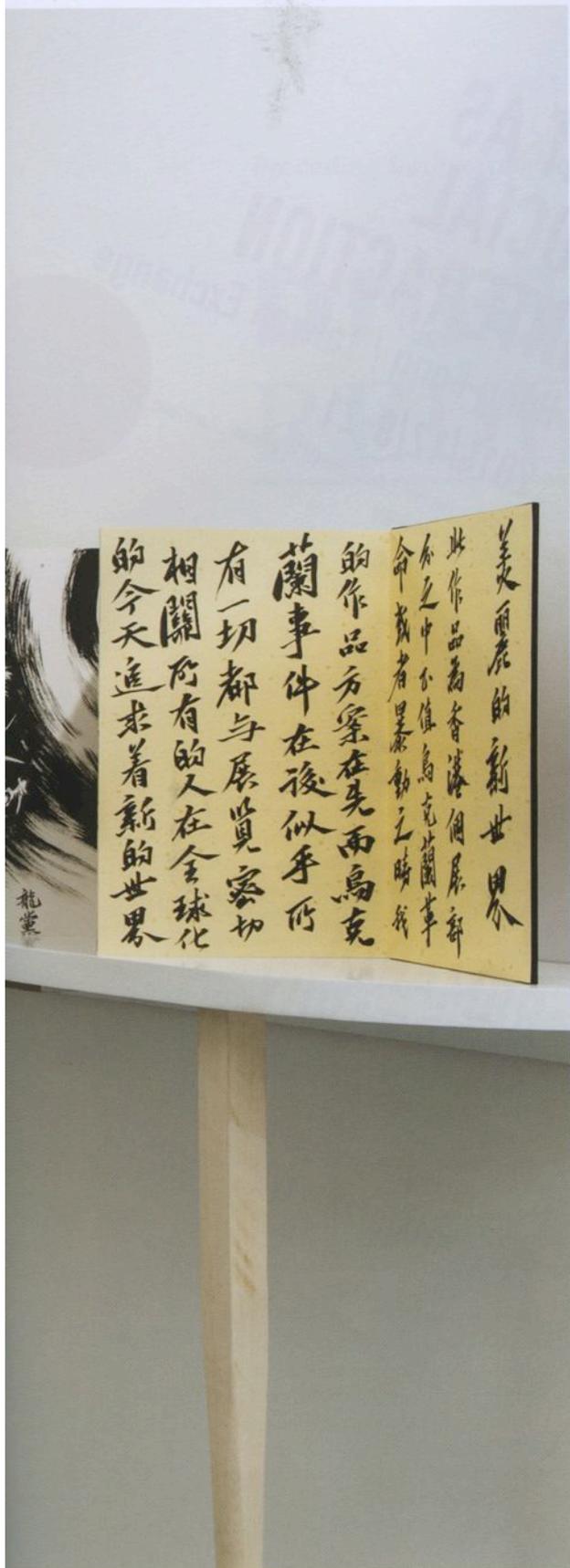
BEYOND-ISM (detail), 2010, ink on paper, 650 x 200 cm each.
Courtesy the artist.

(This page)

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON, 2014, stills from animation video: 10 min.
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.



SCRIPT FOR WHAT HAPPENED IN THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON 2, 2014, painting on paper, 33 x 670 cm. Installation view of "Brave New World" at Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, 2014. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery.



In addition to the film, Sun's Hong Kong exhibition included two painted Chinese folding albums, *Script for What Happened in the Year of the Dragon* (2014) and *The Beautiful New World* (2014), which form an interesting and traditional parallel to his animation. These semi-pictorial, accordion-folded manuscripts, executed in ink on rice paper, showcase the artist's accomplished calligraphy. The works sequentially unveil his vision, in a manner similar to that of his animations, and simulate the traditional method of viewing a painted handscroll, segment by segment. Of course, one of the innovations of Sun's inked animation (compared to traditional painting) is that he is able to control how and when he reveals his subjects, along with features impossible to achieve on paper, such as movement and sound. The ultimate result of Sun's animation then, is not so much a film, as we have come to recognize it, but rather a manuscript—an alluringly immersive visual work of authorship.

Collectively, Sun's three ink-inspired films, all exploring themes of globalization, politics and historical memory, have strong parallels to the work of South African artist William Kentridge (b. 1955), who is perhaps best known for animations derived from his charcoal drawings as they are edited and erased in sequence. Although Sun doesn't necessarily draw direct inspiration from Kentridge's work, he does recognize Kentridge as a pioneer in this kind of handwrought film art: "When I first encountered his work, I thought Kentridge was just a painter and only much later did I learn of his inventive animation work. In terms of the form and personality, while I really like his work, I think his most important contribution is his ability to instill drama and poetry throughout his historical narration." Sun's ink works also bear certain connections to the contemporary Chinese filmmaker Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972), who creates animated narratives by painting ink-like black acrylic on canvas and then links them together in animated form. Qiu, like Sun, also consciously references classic ink painting motifs and draws upon historical sources to create his visual narratives, which are not plot-driven, but composed of episodes that are linked together by graphic elements. All three artists share a certain fixation with handcrafted techniques, preferring to draw/paint their content and use digital aids only later in the editing and display process. Moreover, these filmmakers are linked by their often-ambivalent treatment of history and memory, which they use as raw material rather than focusing on a more personal narrative.

An oblique provocateur, Sun differentiates his art from his self-awareness: "To me, art is not the ultimate goal. When you look at our history—not only Chinese history but world history—you see that there is culture behind art, and civilization behind culture. Thus, the artist has an important role, but never the most important one. In the discussion of such a topic, an artist's self-awareness is a critical precondition. Artists may seem special and important in China, just like how China seems important in the world, but I don't feel that way, because it is just a superficial phenomenon." The next challenge for Sun may be to further explore such issues of self-understanding and create a more personal narrative in his work. In fact, this prospect may soon be a reality, as the artist's next planned project is a novel and animation about his father.

As an artist, Sun Xun is a paradoxical figure: he runs an animation studio while developing a diverse, individualistic practice; he draws from the legacies of both Chinese and world art history and philosophy, while simultaneously critiquing them; he works with ink but rejects the discourse of cultural systems that accompanies it; and he scrutinizes political narratives but takes only vague positions of his own. Yet for all the questions that Sun and his artworks raise, the key is that they are fundamentally uncompromising, probing, innovative and, most importantly, an evidence of the artist's independent thinking, provoking others to do the same. 