

SEANKELLY

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Tracing a World Awash in Lies

Sun Xun's Art Show Evokes His Upbringing in China



The artist Sun Xun working in his studio at the Sean Kelly Gallery, which has opened the second half of an exhibition featuring what he is best known for: animation. On display through Jan. 24, his art reflects on his upbringing in China. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

Sun Xun was in residence at Sean Kelly in December, working in an ad hoc studio on the lower level of the gallery with his assistants and adding paintings and drawings to the exhibition upstairs as he went along. The news release for the show says, "Questions and dialogue with the artist will be encouraged," so I obliged.

I asked Mr. Sun about some of the images in his work, like an Arriflex movie camera at the center of one composition and the military figures in several Socialist Realist-style paintings. He replied, "Movies lie." (In fact, he elaborated upon this: Movie cameras are "lie machines," and film is a "lie system.") I asked him about a character from Chinese opera painted into a long, accordion-style foldout book in the front gallery. He said, "Opera lies."

Welcome to Sun Xun's world. Born in 1980, he was raised in Fuxin, one of the rapidly developing cities in Liaoning Province in northeast China, near North Korea. But he also grew up with a warped view of history. In school, he learned an official version of China's past. But at home, his father, who worked in a factory and whose family had been adversely affected by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and the 1949 uprising that resulted in the People's Republic of China, told him everything he'd learned in school was a lie — and offered another version of Chinese history.



An animation series by Sun Xun, whose work is far different from slick Japanese anime. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

Paintings in this show reflect this simultaneous fascination with and distrust of history. They're also filled with references spanning thousands of years. There are recreations of Han dynasty calligraphy and Socialist Realist-style paintings. Some of the landscapes recall Mr. Sun's favorite Song dynasty painters: Fan Kuan (990-1020) and Li Cheng (919-967). Only, in Mr. Sun's versions, a penguin or an animal with a megaphone for a muzzle — references to the loudspeakers that emitted propaganda in public spaces during the Cultural Revolution — wanders through the composition.

Mr. Sun's ink drawings, with their shaggy contours, are also reminiscent of American artists like Raymond Pettibon or R. Crumb. (Mr. Sun is currently included in the exhibition "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China" at the Metropolitan Museum). But there are other precedents: Mr. Sun studied printmaking in school, and he told me his favorite artist is Albrecht Dürer, the German Renaissance master whose woodcuts and engravings are filled with animals that evoke human traits and foibles.

The second half of the exhibition at Sean Kelly, which opened on Tuesday, features what Mr. Sun is best known for: animation. (He started an animation studio right out of art school, Pi Animation, which he runs in Beijing.) Taking the drawings and paintings made during the December residency, he has created a 10-minute, four-channel film installation titled "The Time Vivarium" (2014), which is also inspired by New York's American Museum of Natural History.

Set to a scratchy, warbling Mahler soundtrack (Mr. Sun and one of his collaborators, Chen Xingye, did the sound), a variety of tableaux flash across the wall. There is no narrative; instead the work is like a giant, throbbing mural painting. There is a recurring lineup of suited figures whose heads are rocks, or perhaps fossils: a panel of talking heads. Birds and insects come to life in an Expressionist landscape; a lion sculpture painted with Fauve-like brush strokes moves jerkily, like an animated GIF, in Tiananmen Square. Tigers wearing gas masks and angry bulls stalk across the screen.

One of the simplest segments captures a hand holding a series of cards with an animal drawn in different positions on them, held up against a Midtown Manhattan backdrop. The animal moves with each shot, like a flip book: an animation within an animation. The device is reminiscent of D.A. Pennebaker's film "Don't Look Back" (1967), in which Bob Dylan holds up cue cards with lyrics from his satirical

“Subterranean Homesick Blues.” Near the end of the film, the Socialist Realist military heroes appear and are swallowed up in a field of snowy flecks, like digital noise or the cacophony of history.

Mr. Sun’s animation is consciously arty — very different from slick Japanese anime or the retro indie cartoons on cable television. That they overlap with William Kentridge, the South African artist who has used hand-drawn realist animation to retell the violent history of his nation, is significant. Both artists employ a line-drawn approach that harks back to the 19th-century caricaturist Honoré Daumier or to the 18th century and William Hogarth, but with the addition of surrealist effects and, in Mr. Sun’s case, bright acid coloring.

Mr. Sun’s work has the same bombast and grand-narrative-style ambition, as well as a universalizing bent to the work that is frowned upon by many artists and critics working in a globalized industry. After all, one artist and his assistants can’t speak for everyone affected by history. Or can he? In the absence of other purposes, often stripped of its political power and treated like a luxury good, this may be art’s last stand. As Picasso, another bombast- and grand-narrative-friendly artist once said, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.” Mr. Sun, brought up in a rapidly changing, highly politicized China, got an early start on this one.

“Sun Xun: The Time Vivarium” runs through Jan. 24 at Sean Kelly Gallery, 475 10th Avenue, at 36th Street; 212-239-1181; skny.com.