

SEAN KELLY

Dawson, Jessica. "An Artist Finds His Place in the Sun: Chinese Artist Sun Xun at Sean Kelly Gallery," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2014.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

An Artist Finds His Place in the Sun

Chinese Artist Sun Xun at Sean Kelly Gallery



Sun Xun's 'Sometimes Memory Does Lie' (2014)
© SUN XUN/SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

Blame Marina Abramović and her 2010 Museum of Modern Art show "The Artist Is Present" for the growing appeal of real-time interactions with real-life artists.

Just weeks after hosting Ms. Abramović's latest show—it involved blindfolds, noise-canceling headphones and, occasionally, the performance artist herself—her New York dealer, Sean Kelly, is now exhibiting another in-house creative. This time, the Chinese artist Sun Xun has conceived an exhibition within an exhibition called "The Time Vivarium," in which Part One involves watching the artist create the artwork for Part Two.

Since mid-December, Mr. Sun has occupied the gallery's lower level, sketching new works while assistants shoot and edit a film made from those drawings. It will make its debut on Jan. 6, when the upstairs space, which now features the artist's drawings, will be turned into a screening room.

A boyish 34-year-old in Diesel sneakers, Mr. Sun has at times maintained a decidedly casual approach to visitor interaction. On his first day in residence, his head propped up on makeshift pillows, he stretched out on the floor several feet from his work table and gazed into his smartphone.

"This is not part of my work," he said to a pair of young men in the gallery. "This is a not a performance piece."



'Artists are dangerous people in this world,' said Sun Xun
ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Best known for his animated films critiquing the Chinese government, one of which screened in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's group exhibition "Ink Art" that closed in April, Mr. Sun was taking a break from working on a painted scroll. It mixed traditional Chinese approaches with animal images and nods to Western art history, a style that can be seen in his drawings on view upstairs, several of which he completed in the past few weeks. They have the fast, gestural look of graphic novels.

Their protagonists, which will star in his film, include tigers in gas masks and foxes with megaphones for faces. They were inspired by his visits to the American Museum of Natural History and tell the stories of the Cultural Revolution that Mr. Sun's father relayed to him.

"My father cannot understand my art," Mr. Sun said. "My father and his generation cannot understand the contemporary because the history is empty, and the experience is empty, too."

His work, he added, is an attempt at bridging that divide.

"The film is contemporary art. This is traditional art," Mr. Sun said, gesturing toward the scroll. "I put them together."

"When you look at his work, you see that he knows watercolor, he knows brushwork, he knows ink work, he knows woodcuts," said Dana Prescott, executive director of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, which sponsors an artist-residency program in Italy that Mr. Sun attended in 2013. "There's this modern take on the history of China with the old techniques and new politics and message."

As visitors entered the gallery, Mr. Sun happily discussed his work and the coming second phase of the exhibition. He showed one group a scene from the forthcoming film, starring a quick-witted rooster who seemed eager to break the fourth wall. He whipped out a ukulele and harmonica, which he plans to use for the soundtrack.

Regarding Mr. Sun's presence in the gallery, Mr. Kelly emphasized the importance of interaction. "It provides access to the public in a completely unfettered way," Mr. Kelly said. "It's the greatest educational tool of all to see an artist working."

But what does Mr. Sun make of his role?

"Artists are dangerous people in this world," he said. "These kind of people are really wonderful in spirit because they always try to get close to the truth."

“So what is truth?” Mr. Sun continued, gesturing around the gallery. “Truth is like pi. We get it, but we never get it, because it always continues, continues, continues.”

—Sun Xun’s “The Time Vivarium” is on view through Jan. 24 at Sean Kelly Gallery, 475 10th Ave.; 212-239-1181; skny.com. The film first screens on Jan. 6 at 6:30 p.m.