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Franz, Sav. "Abstract 3D animated film featured in new Ringling exhibit,"
Herald-Tribune, August 15, 2019.



An image from Chinese artist Sun Xun's 2-16 animated film "Time Spy," which will be seen at The Ringling through Feb. 16 [PROVIDED BY THE RINGLING / COURTESY SEAN KELLY]

'Time Spy' depicts a meticulously crafted tale about environmental destruction and how humans depict history through a blend of woodblock images, ink paintings and 3D animation.

An avant-garde animated 3D film by a rising star in the art world combining traditional techniques with contemporary digital rendering is on display in The Ringling's newest exhibit.

The film "Time Spy" is a non-linear narrative by the artist Sun Xun that is weaved together through small vignettes touching on themes of how humans interpret history, environmental destruction and power. The topics are explored through abstract images such as chimera creatures with cameras for heads, vast industrial wastelands, spinning planets and a magician figure.

Dr. Rhiannon Paget, the curator of Asian art for The Ringling said while the film has "no simple narrative and defies any attempt to explain what is going on," the intention is to spark conversation around the contemporary issues it touches on.

The film runs about nine minutes, and was created through a hybrid technique combining physical art such as woodblock cutting and printmaking with 3D

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animation. The exhibit gives a glimpse into the artistic process by displaying various painted woodblock pieces from the film, and lightboxes illuminating ink paintings. One series of blocks shows the individual images of a winged leaping tiger seen within the film. The blocks come in various sizes, with small postcard sized pieces and expansive works that were each hand-carved.

Xun recently shot to fame after a major exhibition of his work “Mythological Time” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Xun trained as a printmaker at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. He founded Pi Animation in 2006, creating his esoteric animated films that oftentimes depict his self-proclaimed fascination with perpetual change.

“The large scale pieces are highly texturized, you can really see the hand in each piece through the paint strokes or the motion of the carving,” said Paget.

The creation process for the film was labor-intensive, with each panel carved or painted by Xun or the hundreds of Chinese art students that assisted him.

Woodblocks are usually carved and used by artists to make impressions with ink on paper, but Xun streamlined the process by digitally scanning the blocks directly and using it as the image to keep the texture of the wood in the movie.

The film is watched with 3D glasses provided by the museum, blending traditional techniques with old-school anaglyph 3D that uses red and cyan to create the multi-dimensional effect. Various images in the film will leap out, with one scene featuring a flurry of intricate snowflakes falling out of the screen.

The piece is accompanied by an original score by Zhang Fei, performed by Beijing Young Philharmonic Orchestra. The foreboding and dynamic music increases the immersive quality of the work and sets the tone for the film when visitors enter the exhibit.

Xun’s multimedia approach to the film shows how the expansion of digital art will continue to pioneer new methods of creating movies, said Paget. “The film really represents a hybrid approach to filmmaking.”