

## FEATURE

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# Sun Xun: The Absurd Theater of the Present

*Calligraphy meets Kentridge: With his expressive drawings, murals, and animated films, Sun Xun has become a darling of international curators. Kito Nedo on one of the most exciting young Chinese artists, several of whose works are included in the Deutsche Bank Collection.*



*Sun Xun working on his wall mural for the exhibition "Bat Cave: Treasures of the Day and Creatures of the Night" at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center. Courtesy Asia Society Hong Kong Center*



*Sun Xun's wall mural for the exhibition "Bat Cave: Treasures of the Day and Creatures of the Night" at the Asia*

*Society Hong Kong Center . Courtesy  
Asia Society Hong Kong Center*



In today's China, there are two different views of history: the official version, penned and controlled by state and party; and the unofficial culture of memory circulating among the populace. Encoded or only hinted at, one encounters the latter on the Internet or in the media of the Chinese diaspora. For decades, the language of the party and the media it controls has prevented Chinese people from calling a spade a spade. This rift is so powerful that the Chinese writer [Yan Lianke](#) even speaks of "two conflicting language systems" resulting in social amnesia. "Forgetting," says Yan, "is not a disease of the people or a defect; it is part of this state's leadership strategy and is a prerequisite for guiding society arbitrarily. Forgetting works most effectively when memory is infiltrated with ideological taboos. Due to the control of the powers that be, everything is rerouted into the channel of forgetting, and history books and textbooks, literature and all types of art, are pruned accordingly." Ironically, though, these conflicts around memory, the official language riddled with taboos, and the clever ciphers that collective Net intelligence continually uses to protect itself from government censors, culminates in new discourse, which of course is also manifested in the visual arts.

Such political and cultural contradictions in present-day China are one of the subtexts of the work of [Sun Xun](#), one of the most successful representatives of a young generation of Chinese artists born in the 1980s. Since his school days, he has had an obsessive relationship with Chinese history. At that time, says Sun, he learned both versions of Chinese history at the same time. At school, his teachers taught him the official view of things during the day; at home, his father related the other version to him in the evening, mainly telling him about the decade of the counter-revolution in the late sixties and early seventies. Sun's family fell victim to the cruelty of Mao's dreaded Red Guards. Due to her bourgeois origins, his grandmother was publicly pilloried wearing a dunce hat. Although the terror of the Cultural Revolution is no longer concealed today (unlike the suppression of the student protests on Tiananmen Square in 1989), a broad social debate – for example, about the role of the Communist Party – is still not desired by the government.

So it is surely not by chance that the Red Guard wanders like zombies through some of Sun's pictures. Young Communists look like formulas of pathos, drawn in the Socialist Realist style, whom the artist repeatedly flanks with animals, for example numerous beetles crawling over a Mao uniform, a human-size cat, and a snake. Sometimes the Red Guard members appear as non-individuals, as uniform wearers whose faces are fused with megaphones. In general, however, Sun refrains from alluding to the agitprop motives of the Mao era. Such references, which under the label "Mao Pop" have long dominated our image of contemporary Chinese art, seem to have been exhausted.

The absurd theater of the present that Sun stages in his paintings, animated films, large murals, and room-filling installations is much broader, drawing on different sources whose interpretation always depends on the viewer's background. Figures from recent world cultural history appear, such as the eccentric Croatian-American physicist [Nikola Tesla](#), who celebrated his inventions in turn-of-the-century New York like a magician of electricity, and [Duncan MacDougall](#), an American doctor who once tried to specify the weight of the soul by putting dying patients on the scale. The series *21 Ke* (21 Grams) from the [Deutsche Bank Collection](#) is devoted to MacDougall. In the work, Sun has an image of the soul that seems to float in the air like a soap bubble.

Sun draws and paints classic media machines such as the [Arriflex](#) film camera, as well as traditional motifs like the "scholar's rock" from garden philosophy and motifs from animal fables and fairytales: the cricket, a popular pet in China, or a continually recurring magician figure, which plays the role of the super scoundrel in Sun's theater. The artist calls him "the only legal liar." Of course, it remains open whether he is Sun's alter ego or a kind of adversary, for example the people who skew language and history in government institutions.

Another common motif is the Chinese dragon, which is at the center of the drawings from the series *Beyond-ism C* from the Deutsche Bank Collection. Sun alludes to its historical and mythological content, yet at the same time uses it as a metaphor for current political conflicts. Such building blocks give rise to a discreetly linked art narrative that Sun has

driven ever further for years and that has brought him repeated exhibition requests from the USA and Europe. Precisely because Sun avoids taking the beaten path of his predecessors, he has for some time now become a darling of curators and is hardly ever missing in important exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art. Due to his extended travels and work stays in, for example, India, Ukraine, Japan, and the USA, Sun's work is seen by international audiences, surely another reason for this current success.

The artist was born in Fuxin, a coal-mining city with a population of two million in northeast China. The great thirst for energy in the wake of China's rapid economic growth made the mining industry into a profitable, albeit dangerous business. In 2012, China consumed around 4 billion tons of coal – a much as the rest of the world combined. But the country is paying a high price. Smog is omnipresent in big cities and coal miners continually die in severe mine accidents due to non-adherence to elementary safety regulations. For example, 200 miners were killed in a gas explosion in Fuxin ten years ago, and last winter two dozen miners died in a fire at a mine. With the eight-minute animated film *Coal Spell* from 2008, Sun not only worked through his childhood and youth in Fuxin, but also depicted the city as dystopian place.

In his exclusively hand-drawn empire, Sun artfully combines a **film-noir** aesthetics reminiscent of **William Kentridge** and **Raymond Pettibon** with an age-old tradition. For many centuries, ink has been the most important medium in Chinese art. And the calligraphy created with it is three thousand years old, one of the oldest developments of Chinese culture. Even today, there are separate departments at art schools (which are considered bastions of conservatism by many) in which students deal exclusively with calligraphy. But when Sun Xun alludes to traditional artistic media and incorporates it in contemporary media presentations, he liberates it from the golden cage of academic rigidity and breathes new life into it.

He is not interested in perfection, though, but in art and thought. "It is essential to find the right psychological state to adjust and adapt while painting. For example, how to understand mistakes: No mistake is allowed when you paint on the wall. But it's impossible to not make any mistakes. This requires a shift in thinking: to understand a mistake as something else which can be turned into an advantage." For him, there is nothing ingenious or mysterious about art production. Rather, it is based on a chain of events and decisions. "Conceiving and realizing comes together in my creation flow. The end product will never be exact to the initial idea. It can either be better or worse than expected." On the other hand, it is precisely this casualness and flow that Sun needs to link tradition, history, and criticism to the political conditions in his home country, both aesthetically and politically. Instead of cracking or toughening up on account of China's political contradictions, the artist makes them dance in his paintings and animated films in an unparalleled way.

Sun Xun is currently represented at the following exhibitions:

#### **2015 Asian Art Biennial**

National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung  
Until 12/6/2015

#### **Bat Cave: Treasures of the Day and Creatures of the Night**

Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Hong Kong  
Until 1/3/2016