

Sun Xun's work plies the uncontested surface of politicized truth. By tying together the tenets of academic drawing with political cartoons and projecting them into the realms of installation and film, he manifests his multifaceted imagistic world as improvisational theater. His broken narratives, peopled with pedagogues as magicians and infectious insects that plague the world, work on the viewer's emotional response to fear – fear of the unknown, of the undiscovered country that Shakespeare, Nixon, and each of us cower before. But it is the ambiguous era in which he sets his stories that further mystifies the viewer. Sun's world lies suspended in anonymous twentieth-century eternity, a past riddled with legacies of modernity at its most extreme, a film noir testimony to absolutism. His flickering images crystallize into a gritty, dystopic urban overture to revolution; it is the industrial revolution as much as it is the Cultural Revolution. But Sun's work, muddled in this overlapping and obsolete modernity, idles at the brink of revolution without spilling over. His aim is to scratch the surface of political history, a history continuously conflated into myth, in order to expose the past as being in a state of constant becoming. His vision is the pregnant pause of mythology in the making...

Perhaps Sun's suspicion of mediated truth comes with the territory. The China that he grew up in was in a constant state of reinvention and denial... When Sun was still in grade school, the "East Is Red" changed its tune to "Balls Under the Red Flag" [a hugely popular song and album by Cui Jian, China's "father of rock and roll"] as the end of the 1980s saw the shock of yet another China. Taking the seventy-year anniversary of the May Fourth Movement (instigators of the twentieth-century's original "New China") as their cue, students occupied Tiananmen Square in an effort to reform what they saw as a government out of step with the current needs of society. The outcome of this standoff was yet another New China, which violently crushed individual liberties while simultaneously promoting individual wealth and unbridled consumerism. Today China is intoxicated with its newfound prosperity but has yet to confront its recent past, revise its politics, or fulfill the spiritual needs of its people. In the wake of this erratic social transformation, a sense of collective historical amnesia has begun to set in. Sun's work is an expression of this amnesia.

– Mathieu Borysevicz, Shanghai correspondent for Artforum

**Curated by Bérénice Reynaud and Steve Anker**

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#### **UPCOMING FILM/VIDEO PROGRAMS**

**October 26:** Christine Panushka and Alberto Araiza: *Mosca and the Meaning of Life*

**October 27:** Brigitte Maria Mayer: *Anatomie Titus: Fall of Rome*

**October 29:** Rebecca Brown, Myriam Gurba, Abdellah Taïa and Masha Tupitsyn: *Life As We Show It: Writing on Film*

**October 30–31:** *The Golem* (d. Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen, 1920) with live score by Brian LeBarton

**November 3:** *Lichtspiel: Contemporary Abstract Animation and Visual Music*, with Joost Rekveld, a Program from Center for Visual Music

**November 5:** *Satellite, as long as it is aiming at the sky*, a video project by Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi

**November 9:** J. Hoberman: *The Making and Unmaking of Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures*

**December 14:** *Native Visions: Two Documentaries on Indigenous Mexican Culture*

*2501 Migrants: A Journey* by Yolanda Cruz and *Day Two* by Dante Cerano

## **SUN XUN:** THE DARK MAGICIAN OF NEW CHINESE ANIMATION

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October 19, 2009

8:30 pm

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

CALARTS

REDCAT

# SUN XUN: THE DARK MAGICIAN OF NEW CHINESE ANIMATION

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**Monday, October 19 | 8:30 pm**

Jack H. Skirball Series

West Coast Premieres

Giving a rare US presentation of his animation oeuvre, artist and filmmaker Sun Xun screens a program of shorts ranging from a witty experiment in body art (*Lie of Magician*, 2005) to the creation of an expansive imagistic world that evokes China's checkered voyage toward technological and political modernity. After studying printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, Sun founded the animation studio Pi in 2006. To make his meticulous animations, Sun uses traditional calligraphy techniques to produce drawings on canvas, silk and printed matter; these are then hand-copied frame by frame to create flickering effects and complex, multilayered textures. Sun's films have been shown in festivals in China, France, Germany and at New York's Anthology Film Archives. His original drawings, meanwhile, have been exhibited in galleries and museums in China, Europe and the US. A major show of his work will open on November 7 at Max Protetch Gallery in New York.

In some of Sun's earlier animated works such as *Mythos* (2006) and *Requiem* (2007), the recurring figure of a magician in a top hat wanders through a strange historical palimpsest of fervent dreams, apocalyptic fires and remnants of revolutionary texts. Nostalgia bleeds inexorably into brutality in more recent films like *Coal Spell*, about the artist's grim industrial hometown of Fuxin in northeastern China.

REDCAT is proud to present Sun Xun's work at a turning point in his career, i.e. in the wake of his first show in an American museum: for over a week in July 2008, the artist inhabited the UCLA Hammer Museum's Vault Gallery to develop a new, animated, site-related video and drawing installation on the "New China." While his paintings are exhibited and represented by China's foremost contemporary art gallery, ShanghART, Sun relocated his animation studio, Pi (which employs 16 assistants), from Hangzhou to Beijing in the spring of 2009. In developing and promoting his animated films as well as his fine arts work, Sun has gained a growing reputation as a leading member of China's new generation of interdisciplinary artists.

**In person: Sun Xun**

## PROGRAM

"When we sleep deeply, everything becomes history." – *Sun Xun*

All film notes below are adapted from the artist's own descriptions.

***Utopia in the Day*** (2004, 4:41 min.)

Five oneiric moments of what was once considered the truth in Chinese history.

***Chinese Words: War*** (2005, 2:12 min.)

A war about Chinese words.

***Lie of Magician*** (2005, 4:14 min.)

The lie of a magician or the lie of god?

***Shock of Time*** (2006, 5:29 min.)

Memory empties when man is in a state of shock. The shock of time can also be called the shock of history. The film is composed from old newspapers from the 1950s and '60s in which important events pertaining to China were recorded. This is history I can never get close to, so I have turned it into a doubtful legend. Our

conception of history is fragmentary; it is like a placebo, molded by passivity and submission. There are lies, secrets and maybe farce behind it all.... History reflects the way we think but not the way things are.

***Lie*** (2006, 7:20 min.)

China's first atomic blast, jubilation, jubilation... the beautiful mushroom cloud destroys history, plaza, the crowd, rulers, magician, this is mythology, every huge disaster is romantic.

***Mythos*** (2006, 5:15 min.)

Strange mythos, his, theirs, yours, ours, and the storyteller's manifesto and clamor. In the empire that has no border and the city that has no port, history is cut into countless fragments, the distant signal fire and the elder's memory... Everyone is a king, everyone is a magician. In each moment of enslavement, history is an infinite number of chairs, waiting motionless. The dictionary of mythos is the law.

***Requiem*** (2007, 7:21 min.)

I'm infatuated with imagined history... I want to know what is invented, and what is true in the past that I imagine.... What drives my infatuation? The ongoing experience of going between truth and fiction, similar to a requiem that keeps repeating itself and playing for all who share those memories.

***Heroes No Longer*** (2008, 9:04 min.)

The "hero" is a kind of historical complex.... "History" appears to us as a mental image, or a virtual reality.

***Coal Spell*** (2008, 7:56 min.)

*Coal Spell* is inspired by an old five-Yuan *renminbi* note, on which was recounted the rise and fall of Fuxin, an old industrial coal city located in northeastern China....

In a mysterious dark city, yellow sandstorms wreak havoc. In the city center several huge smokestacks pierce the sky, emitting black fumes that block the sun. Political slogans blast away daily, drowning out any form of curiosity about the outside world. The city is a tremendous prison where history is boxed up like a brutal, fierce monster. One day, a screeching Soviet excavator is forced to gouge the land, gradually closing the heart of the city...

The people's money; the pattern is just an illustration.

***The New China*** (2008, 5:19 min.)

[The inspiration for this work comes] from a small book titled *New China*, given to me by a friend. The book, probably published before World War II, was written by a missionary who had lived many years in China and knew the culture well. The general thrust of this book was to teach people how to love their country, how to construct their country, and how to be a useful person, in addition to addressing China's revolution at that time.

Everyone knows that China was called New China after 1949, but it is interesting to me that this appellation existed even before the war. After I read this book and examined China's recent history, I found that the country actually runs in a circle, that history is round and infinitely recurrent. We are used to creating a boundary between the present and the past. But actually, history has no such boundary.

– adapted from the Artforum translation by Dawn Chan

## ON SUN XUN

Eight years of Cultural Revolution after Nixon's historic visit [to China in 1972], Sun Xun was born in Liaoning Province, along the northeast coast of China. While most of the country was once again in the throes of reinventing itself – this time along the tenets of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and opening-up policies, which declared, "to get rich is glorious" – the new country that Sun grew up in was essentially the same old country. The effects of China's momentous shift from socialism to capitalism were slow in coming to this peripheral mining county, and so Sun was raised in the folds of a historical lapse. Propaganda still blared from loudspeakers every morning, bringing the factory complex where he grew up to attention, just as it had done for the past few decades. Uniformed workers shuffling against chimney stacks and fluttering flags colored the environment of Sun's childhood, as did reams of newspapers that disseminated the same good word of an altogether "New China" still in its infancy.