

SPOTS, DUST, RENDERINGS, PICABIA, CASE NOTES, FLAVOR, LIGHT, SOUND, AND MORE
—XIE NANXING'S CREATIONS

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To the audience that follows his creations, Xie Nanxing's works have undergone significant changes since 2011. The most visual change has been the problem that these new paintings pose to people. Namely, how should they be viewed? The more direct problem can perhaps be expressed like this: How should the spots that appear on his canvases be understood? How can an artist's decision such as this be accepted when they lay bare a resultant effect but refuse to provide its source or origin? As for the artist himself, he began to explore and design a number of methods of 'camouflage paintings' or 'escape-from-painting paintings' as early as 2005. The master painter took all of the skills and techniques that would belie his mastery and hid them away, leaving only trace vestiges for the world to see. This, however, was not out of a lazy arrogance in thinking that mere remnants of his painting were enough to constitute a work. Instead, it came from an earnest belief that these marks truly constituted the work he was interested in making. Without visiting his studio, we can only occasionally see the paintings that left behind these traces and markings through photographs, and even in this context, the images tend to be smaller in scale, much like how when an illustration is published with an article, it is never positioned such that it occupies the center of our attention. In fact, every time I visit Xie Nanxing's studio, I always notice that the first layer of canvas that he applied paint to in order to bleed through to the second has already been removed. Even works-in-progress are no exception. Regardless of whether or not it is intentional, there is a strong sense that the artist is rejecting our desire to experience the full narrative of the canvas. On one hand, these explorations are based on deep faith and a dependence on the medium of painting, but on the other hand, they regard the propagation of painting methods and the spreading of general painting awareness with suspicion.

In January of 2014, within *From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: Echoes of Socialist Realism*, we displayed three pieces from a group of paintings that Xie Nanxing was working on called *Triangle Relations Gradually Changing* (2013). This group of works comprised five pieces in total. The creation process involved taking one canvas and covering another with it. He painted onto the outer canvas and allowed paint to seep through onto the inner canvas, creating a different image altogether. Much as he does with other paintings made in a similar manner, Xie Nanxing only displays the inner canvases that were under the canvases that he actually painted upon as his works when he exhibits. We see only traces and vestiges of the painting processes that the artist used on the outer canvas, a kind of common 'by-product'. To emphasize, the artist adds not a single brush stroke to the printed image that bleeds through the first canvas. Because there are no exceptions to this pattern, it can be seen as a general principle. Towards this kind of stubborn cleanliness, the artist takes no uncertain position: "I don't want to draw a single stroke on the inner canvas, because if I were to make just one stroke or a dot, it would be unable to escape its relationship with the context of art history. I also don't want anyone who studied art theory or any kind of curator to say anything. No one can escape the web of art history. This is a really scary thing. Theorists and curators can put these connections together at any time. Therefore, I don't draw a single stroke on the canvas."¹

Xie Nanxing has been using this method of creation for some time now. The earliest you can see an inkling of this method of work is in his 2009 piece *untitled (No. 2)*, a three-piece series of paintings that served as blueprints for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. They are not so much blueprints, however, as they are an apocryphal cover for the artist's personal free expression. Two of the pictures, *untitled (No. 1)* (2009) and *untitled (No. 3)* (2009), take the fairy tale of Snow White and sketch an outline for a murder scene's original case notes. He uses nicknames, casual banter, humor, and profanity along with solid and dotted lines to connect a web of reasonable connections that reinvent the classic children's fairy tale. *untitled (No. 2)* (2009) is the first time he used the method of painting onto the canvas over another canvas. In the center of the first canvas, he placed another canvas roughly half its size. He painted *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and then removed the smaller canvas. Only that which went outside the edges of the smaller canvas or penetrated through it identifies the remaining traces of the original image. This, along with the words

¹ Xie Nanxing, *After the Second Round with a Whip*, January 17th, 2014 speech transcript from Shenzhen's OCAT Library. Unpublished.

written around the center: “Her” (with an arrow pointing to Snow White), “Adopted Daughter and Second Miracle”, “Note: the differences between different kinds of musical instruments” etc., form the body of the picture. These symbols seem related but stop before they tell too much, as the vague text is not intended to explain the story of what is happening. It is instead intended to prevent too detailed of an investigation into the narrative, thus channeling our imagination towards the actual painting itself.

Once, in an artist lecture, Xie Nanjing described his motive: “Since 2005, I’ve been thinking a lot about how to pay more attention to painting’s language problem. Instead of static representational objects like before, I’ve more discussed the scene and object’s feeling of space. Actually, strictly speaking, that kind of picture still belongs to figurative painting. It is a question that is difficult to avoid in the field of painting. It is the starting point of painting, and it is a thread that has run unbroken.”² For the past ten years, the artist’s work has, in a certain sense, been the same. By repeatedly making his own practice more and more extreme, he is shouting himself hoarse about the actual value itself of painting. It is a kind of value that does not rely solely on the experience of art history or the existence formed by the inertia of viewers’ and critics’ common reality. Artists that have faith in this kind of value hope that by blocking all of these channels that have already been experienced, a deep gaze into both the value of painting and painting itself can be achieved. Of course, the artist will quickly become aware that they are in the midst of a never-ending battle and could be overwhelmed at any time. The barriers he faces perhaps come from the rejection of his artistic peers or from within the art itself. After all, the shared experience is often a kind of common language or currency, and is perhaps both the starting point and destination of an artist’s work. Of course, the audience has even less of an ability to understand his sources. As he moves forward with his campaign, the artist must be constantly wary about falling into the other trap of this experience: being included in the camp of “abstract painters”.

To a large extent, much of what Xie Nanxing has rejected and eliminated is actually the object of his work’s dialog: the dualism and dogma of Chinese art history’s discourse and theoretical practice. It is difficult to escape the inertia of attaching names to things, but even stronger is this kind of reality: the basis of naming things is built on a very limited and narrow theoretical experience and consciousness. This is something that an artist whose individual experience is always wrapped in the cultural context often cannot be fully aware of or play on. If Xie Nanxing has read Geng Jianyi’s 1988 article published in the 22nd issue of *The China Fine Arts Journal* entitled *On Works and Audience*, he would know that this campaign of artist/creator versus “theoretical framework” and “audience” has been long underway and that he is far from alone in the struggle. The artist must decide whether to become a revolutionary and bring a revolution in language to popular attention or take the narcissistic route of language, and alienate the sympathizers who become less and less interested in the artist’s increasingly personalized subtle means and begin to only love the artist’s style. What the artist faces is the fact that hoping that their creations are seen and the matter of how their creations are seen are dilemmas that they have no way to control. In his article, Geng Jianyi repeatedly affirms this kind of weariness: “The personalization of language and the field of news language are no longer plants or lush forests. The trees of form have been felled for the most part, but so far people are still reluctant to part with the land.”

After the mid 1980’s, the diffusion of thought and discourse ‘language purification’ in the Chinese Art World had wide and far-reaching effects. In the mid 1980’s, New Wave Art overly relied on philosophical theory for starting points and creative trend meaning. In the late 80’s, theory was simply seen as directly opposed to creation and language. That which was not bound by theory was blindly used as the starting point and basis for reason, and perception and instinct were often overly emphasized for creative uniqueness. These kinds of ‘contrary psychologies’ continued to shape and bind creative orientations. In 1988, under the pen name Hu Cun, Li Xianting wrote, in issue 37 of *China Fine Arts Journal*, that “the artists...have realized what the most unbearable aspect of New Wave Art is: conceptualization and rough language, for which they blame excessive emphasis on formalism, the political, and the philosophical as the source.” Driven by this understanding, artists are keen to purify their language exploration. “When all of the relatively separate parts come together, what shows before us is the great contrarian mindset of New

² Xie Nanxing, *After the Second Round with a Whip*, January 17th, 2014 speech transcript from Shenzhen’s OCAT Library. Unpublished.

Wave Art: Compared to the quick movements, they emphasize calming down; Compared to all kinds of relatively new theories with new concepts coming and going, they emphasize the value of the work itself. Instead of intense passion and aesthetic connotation, they emphasize the purification of language.” When this kind of negative mentality forms a tendency in exhibitions, seminars, and media outlets, “it deviates from the purpose of emphasizing artistic discipline and becomes a kind of social trend.” Moreover, as a social trend, choice is actually very small. Geng Jianyi experienced that, as an artist, “visual language’s narcissistic path and language’s news path are frustrating to the hearts of all artists. The restaurant of style is already full. Everyone arriving at this point is outside waiting in line.

Self-awareness as an artist has caused Xie Nanxing to be unwilling to subject himself to this kind of dilemma. He was unwilling to continue to benefit from an already widely accepted image of his works, that they had style and class, even though those definitions and interpretations had already brought him dazzling success. Xie Nanxing, who graduated in 1996 from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts Print-making department, made a name for himself shortly after graduation with a series of painted portraits of young people’s bodies and positions. This series of paintings used bloody symbols and young men’s bodies to depict objects and used visual drama to let people feel a sense of psychological oppression and victimization. Before 1998, young people’s bodies and scenes of their daily lives were often grouped under the ‘Youth Cruelty Painting’ moniker. Although the artist agrees that the purpose of the works is related to drama and tragedy, he never agreed that his intention was to link youth and cruelty. “Actually ‘Youth Cruelty Painting’ is just something put forward by the critics. To be so quickly lumped together like this is actually pretty unfair to the artists. When I first started to paint this kind of thing, I wanted to communicate and participate with the viewer. I wanted to see if I could paint something that made the viewer feel uncomfortable, upset psychologically, and shaken.”³ He has made similar assertions on various occasions.

From 1998 to the end of 1999, Xie Nanxing ceased creating this series and started thinking about how the picture could avoid using figurative images—like a naked body, blood flowing from wounds, symbols like blood stained sheets, and instead express a kind of psychological experience or feeling by depicting everyday objects. From 2000 to 2001, the artist focused on liquids, the flame on a stove, a bit of light cast onto the wall, the end of a corridor, chandeliers etc. as depicted objects to try to find some kind of basic objects that connect with dramatic psychological experience. From this stage onwards, Xie Nanxing had actually already begun to plot his course to ‘escape from painting’ or more perhaps more accurately: ‘escape from the image’.

Body, “Harm”, Strike, and “Make the audience shake” were trends that permeated the art world in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. This included performance art exhibitions with ‘human and animal’ as the theme that appeared in nationwide tours, ‘Post- Sensibility’ performance art, and bits of performance art that featured in the exhibition “Fuck Off”. These movements and reactions, on one hand, came from the art practitioner’s uncertainties regarding the increasing industrialization, marketization, and domestication of art. On the other, they echoed some of the creative trends coming from Europe like London’s “Sensation” (1997). The artist’s sharpness caused Xie Nanxing to realize that, although his own works were in the form of a kind of artistic trend, he was unwilling to be stopped by the sensation or narrative dimension of the images and the results they achieve. What he hoped for was a step-by-step approach to a more profound intent in painting and creation. In the artist’s own awareness, his paintings had something special from the beginning: “Although I am expressing through visuals, what I actually hope is for my visual language to extend into other areas, like with sound or things happening in other dimensions. (This does not mean I want to make video art)”⁴

However, at this stage, his works are known of and have been consumed, mainly as what has been described by art historian Lv Peng as a part of the “video painting” wave that has emerged in the new century. “In the new century, artists have received a cue from those like Gerhard Richter: Even if it’s a

³ Xie Nanxing: *it’s not interesting if I am the only one playing*, AMNUA Sketch III exhibition series interview at Xie Nanxing’s studio in Caochangdi, Beijing. Interviewer: Wang Yamin. (March, 2015) <http://www.nuamuseum.org/Detail.aspx?id=388>

⁴ Xie Nanxing, *After the Second Round with a Whip*, January 17th, 2014 speech transcript from Shenzhen’s OCAT Library. Unpublished.

photographic image, it can still stimulate the motifs, materials, or meanings of a painting. So-called ‘Photographic Paintings’ are conceptual paintings from the first decade of the 21st century. Many artists enjoy working in this style, and it has already led to a long list of works from artists like Li Songsong, Li Dafang, Xie Nanxing, and Yin Chaoyang. Indeed, painting that pulls its conceptual motivation from photography is a sea change as it is a shift from symbolic painting to narrative painting. It shows that people are attached to all kinds of past experiences and can’t rid themselves of the spiritual influence that today’s life has on us. However, these kinds of artists’ images, even borrowing from historical photographs, have also been modified or adapted so that they are difficult to identify, and are actually a kind of reconstruction of the borrowed image. They are a kind of fictional narrative.”⁵

Starting in 2001, Xie Nanxing created two groups of triptychs entitled “Picture of Voice (I, and II)” (2001, 2002), that let the audience, through picture and visual language, feel other content like the surface of a lake, a whooshing sound, the effect of cars passing at speed, a far-away car. The first of these series’ three paintings are differentiated by their portrayal of rain falling upon glass at three different speeds. The same year he also painted three portraits. They are from the same video and of the same specific woman, but are three different parts of her head. The artist created very limited boundaries for his creation; especially on the selection of content. It was very constrained. It could even be said that he was almost mean and hard on himself by strictly forcing himself to dig at all of painting’s possibilities. At this stage, the question of what to paint is nowhere near as important as that of how to paint. It could be said that the painting action itself conveys additional perceptions. Of course, ‘how to paint’ and ‘what do I hope to achieve through painting’ also determine how to choose a subject matter. Attempts in this manner were also made in 2003 as six compositions of almost the same work were exhibited. However, the different characters and subtle changes of space within become the differences between these works. “The content of each piece is different, but they all present the same picture. You would think that the film was taken at random, but actually they are the same picture. This way offers more space, time, and psychological aspects than a single image, and it extends further in a way. This is unrelated to the series having six different paintings but instead is more indebted to their continuity.”⁶

This method of continuously repeating the description of an object appeared again in 2006’s 4 piece series of creations. What the work expressed was the feeling of the same billiard table as viewed from different angles. For the artist, the billiard table is a familiar object, with its main role served as a source of youthful night entertainment. However, that is not the subject of these four pictures. The real protagonist is light, or that is to say, the experience that emerges related to the light. “Light, in my works, is like a medium. In the 2005 works, I used light’s penetrative properties. For example, when you paint a portrait looking towards the light, you almost can’t make out the person’s figure, because where the picture is thin, light extends, and in the thick places it will make everything black.” I think that this is really interesting. It generates for me different expectations towards painting. It’s like a miracle. You can’t possible imagine all of these shapes that light creates.”⁷

In 2008’s blue-colored three-piece series “*The First Round with a Whip No. 1*”, the artist, fascinated by the shape of the light-or attempting hide the original image, calculated that putting various Beijing billboards backwards, backlighting them, capturing the scene with a video camera before playing the video back on a television and taking a photograph of the television to serve as the final reference for his painting would deny us, the audience, the ability to trace all the way back to the original image. This kind of decision puts the viewer in the same limited space as the creator. The focus is the act of painting itself rather than the significance of the content.

After enacting some extreme practices by removing pictures’ content and using symbolism to explore painting’s possibilities, the artist seemed to briefly return to the picture narrative track. This return also caused him to begin to prioritize art history as a constant inquiry. He was suspicious, yes, but he took lessons from history’s remains as a starting point. The 2009 series “*We*” is made up of three pictures on the

⁵ Lv Peng, *Painting Theory: Hands and Concepts*.

⁶ Xie Nanxing, *After the Second Round with a Whip*, January 17th, 2014 speech transcript from Shenzhen’s OCAT Library. Unpublished.

⁷ Xie Nanxing, *After the Second Round with a Whip*, January 17th, 2014 speech transcript from Shenzhen’s OCAT Library. Unpublished.

subject of copying paintings. Xie Nanxing went online and downloaded a few works from one period by the French Dada artist Francis Picabia. Picabia's mastery was using machine graphics to express the dramatic colors of painting. During his lifetime, the style of his creations evolved constantly, but he never focused on drawing well. He was not a traditional painter. He just wanted to express himself fearlessly through constantly changing content and styles. When Xie Nanxing read through Picabia's history and works, he realized that, at one point, Picabia had drawn a number of covers for erotic magazines. The drawings were not good, and people thought his abilities were in decline. Xie Nanxing copied three of his erotic magazine covers as a way to get to know Picabia better. To a certain extent, this series of works was Xie Nanxing initiating a form of self-examination. The deeper story here is the anxiety and uncertainty in the creator's heart: Should an artist continually change styles? Is the change a fearless expression, or is it the cause of failure? From researching and contemplating Picabia's life and processes, Xie Nanxing seems to have come to this conclusion: Whether or not an artist paints well is related to his character and is not entirely tied up in creation itself.

The careful study of people and events in art history at this stage of creation is remarkable. After "We", Xie Nanxing chose content from an interior decorating reference book entitled *Dazzling Colorful Home Furnishings* and imitated some of the renovation design drawings found therein. Using these design drawings' original names, composition, and furniture spoke to the artist of an obscure but necessary link with art history. The artist gave the works in this series the somewhat sensational names of *Improvisation 500 (Oblivion)* (2011), *White Asses* (2011), and *Velasquez's Innocent X* (2010). On the topic of why he chose to depict renovation design drawings, the artist once said, "the foundation is rooted in the fact that I realized interior design drawings and designers are related to painters of the past. They know the history of the art of painting and its performance techniques. They pretty much know all of it. They probably studied fine arts and went through all of the training. Painters are faced with a white canvas while interior designers are confronted with a space. If you look at a magazine of renovation renderings, you can see European style. It will discuss size, color, and light. It's a purely technical visual language, but painting uses that same language. For example, you are supposed to express luxury without being superficial. The lighting fixtures, the bedroom, the entrance etc., all supposed to achieve this kind of effect. In painting, how to use color, composition, and proportions are all the same as the way interior design discusses them. The generated relationship is the same. Both are discussing how to approach a blank canvas and an empty space. Both use symbolism, color, light, and psychology, so I thought, they really are not very far apart. Painting is a standard form of high art, while interior design is kind of cheap one-time-use aesthetics. The methods behind interior design drawings express that they have definitely been influenced by art history's technical progress. It's like a piece of dust on the table. How could it not be seen as coming from a piece of the Mogao Grottoes? Through this kind of obscure connection, I realized that design renderings are the same as this piece of dust, and pieces and parts of their methods still resemble painting. It's a microcosmic reflection of the larger world."

To Xie Nanxing, all of our experiences with painting are just a mote of art history's dust. Influences and relationships remain, but they are far from the entire picture. To the creator and the reader, confronting this dust is unavoidable, but you can also choose to refuse it. In 2011, Xie Nanxing created a series using one canvas to cover the other, and then on top, he completed a painting with a total narrative structure. In Xie Nanxing's own words, this kind of painting technique "is a little bit like traditional rice paper painting. After you are finished with the drawing on top, the pattern that remains below is unrecognizable. However, the painter cannot paint the top layer without caring about the underlying layer. It doesn't matter if it's the top layer or bottom layer, both are you." The paintings' content contains both classic novels and myths as well as the painters discussed in art history. They are the story of the relationship between painting, space, object, and the painter himself. However, the artist only exhibits the underlying printed image. The splotches and ink traces still allow the viewer to speculate on the composition of the top layer. These weak images can occasionally show traces but quickly dissipate within the movement of the visuals. These traces give the painting a stereo effect. To Xie Nanxing, these spots are called 'Ashes'. It is not abstraction, and is clearly not figurative form. The artist's true hope is that by using

this kind of a painting method, he can break away from the trajectory of art history, enter into a vacuum, and in the end, finally receive a new possible way for art history to identify him.

Amongst these 'leaked', or as the artist calls them, 'dust' or 'shadow' paintings, 2013's series entitled *Triangle Relations Gradually Changing* contains a painting whose source material is a work completed in 2005 by Lucian Freud entitled 'The Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer'. In the original painting, a female model sits next to the painter holding his leg, and the painter is some distance away from a half-painted canvas unable to return to the easel. This painting was chosen because Xie Nanxing believed that the question of authenticity that the painting discusses is a metaphor for the problems regarding painting that he had been contemplating. Freud was a faithful sketch painter. His achievements lie in sketching, but in his later years he began to discuss the issue of people's authenticity. To Xie Nanxing, the model is clinging to the artist, preventing him from moving forward and continuing to paint that painting. The issue of authenticity is actually whether the model was in fact holding Freud tightly, or if the painting is just an illusion. Freud influenced many Chinese painters. His skill was extraordinary, but his performance was also special, and this added to his specialness. In Xie Nanxing's painting, he substituted Freud's image with his own. By his brush, he is that artist held fast by his pursuit of the truth, unable to move forward and approach the canvas to finish painting. Because, as Xie Nanxing's paintings are all a rejection of figurative painting, the result is also disastrous. Because he himself trained and experienced the same kind of technique, brush stroke, and shape training as well as the experience of art history. Of course the artist will not present this painting to us. The body has already fled, leaving behind only a shell and camouflage for us to ponder. This desire to escape the tradition of figurative painting has been the core of his artistic practice for years, and the future is still uncertain. This painting has significance as a self-portrait as the artist likely feels like his legs have been held fast by his own intentions and that he has been drawn into a ponderous stalemate.