

## **Ashes of Time: The New Work of Xie Nanxing**

*The critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.*

--Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities"

The most interesting painters working today—in China and elsewhere—are those who still feel compelled to advance the medium's potential through experimentation and innovation. In this regard, Xie Nanxing (\*1970, Chongqing, China; lives and works in Beijing and Chengdu, China) is a maverick. "THE SECOND ROUND WITH A WHIP," the artist's solo exhibition at the Beijing branch of Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne, presents two new series of large-scale oil paintings by this evocative artist. One body of work, informally called the Canvas Prints series, is characterized by the works' stippled surfaces. To create this effect, the artist places a panel of rough, woven canvas between his brush and the painting; the daubs of color that comprise the nebulous figures in the finished work are the result of paint passing through the cloth and onto the work's surface. Seen over time, these whorls and dots of pigment give way to vivid scenes that are mutually constructed by the artist and the viewer. Another series on view is loosely based on illustrations found in an interior design catalogue, which Xie Nanxing transforms into suggestive spaces redolent with references both personal and historical.

Thematically, both new series explore what the artist calls the "ashes" or "dust" found in every representation—echoes from the vast repository of collective visual memory that make images comprehensible. No picture exists independently, but is part of a continuum informed by sources ranging from art history to advertising; a given image's place within this encyclopedia of visual associations is shaped as much by the artist's hand as by the viewer's state of mind. It is in this sense that these two series are surprisingly complimentary. As it turns out, the Canvas Prints offer viewers only the ashes—traces of pictures now barely perceptible, ghostly scenes that invite us to imagine how they looked when whole; the slick, modern interiors, though feigning neutrality, are unable to escape the ashes—or embers--of a Vesuvian past.

"The first time you crack the whip, you get people's attention," Xie Nanxing has said about the

exhibition's title.<sup>1</sup> With the second crack of the whip, they know you're serious. Of course, no one has ever doubted the artist's commitment to his craft. If the show's name is familiar, it is because this turn of phrase was first introduced by Xie Nanxing as the title for his series *The First Round With a Whip, Nos. 1-3* (also called *The Wave*), a group of paintings that debuted in 2008 at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing. In these earlier works, the artist began with roughly made preliminary paintings, transforming them through a series of alchemical mediations that utilized lighting, video and photography in the generation of new images. These were then painstakingly rendered in oil on large canvases. The result is a series of shimmering blue paintings shot through with an otherworldly light. If scrutinized for a time, these works begin to immerse the viewer within frightening scenarios involving a group of children, an authority figure and a whip. It is finally the deliberate obfuscation of the image—through excessive mediation—that leads into the work's dark center.

In 2009, Xie Nanxing began to refine the questions raised by *The First Round With a Whip* series of the previous year. To do so, he followed a line of inquiry that continues to inform his most recent artistic investigations: *Precisely how much visual information is needed to retell a familiar story? Can painting sidestep its art historical conventions and borrow from the most abbreviated forms of visual communication?* The artist found part of his answer in diagrams, schematic drawings, annotated sketches and the like—those pared-down, deliberately anti-aesthetic forms used to convey complex narratives. As the artist explained at the time, "I defend figurative painting by bringing it into connection with schematic drawings or representations, but in doing so I contradict the expectations that the viewer has of the painting."<sup>2</sup>

Xie Nanxing took *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* as a point of departure for the 2009 series, drawn as much by the story's psychological complexities as by its almost universal familiarity. In *untitled (No. 1)*, 2009, the artist recast his own version of the fairy tale in the style of a police detective's diagram. No cartoon characters appear in the work. Instead, with great care, the artist painted an unruly confluence of hastily written notes, dashed lines and rough-hewn figures, finessing them until they seemed to occupy a murky field of depth. *untitled (No. 2)*, 2009, another work in this series, is a direct predecessor to the most recently completed works on view in "THE

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation between the artist and the author, artist's Beijing studio, October 10, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Xie Nanxing quoted in "Painting and the Beholder: Heinz-Norbert Jocks in Conversation with Xie Nanxing," in *Stepfather Has an Idea!* (Galerie Urs Meile: 2010), p. 9 (exhibition brochure).

SECOND ROUND WITH A WHIP.” This time, the artist attached a rectangular piece of fabric to the surface of a larger canvas. An image of Snow White and the dwarves (it is not clear how many) was painted onto the cloth, exceeding its borders. The fabric was then removed, revealing only a series of marks where the oil paint had seeped through and colored the canvas, framed by what remained of the Disney-styled renderings of the maiden beauty. A series of cryptic notes are scrawled around the painting’s perimeter (“testicle” is repeated several times, next to nearly erased, clue-like phrases such as “pay attention to the gesture of the hands”), accompanied by arrows pointing toward the nearly absent subject. Though still recognizable, the image had nearly vacated the painting. What remains are traces, dust, ashes.

In the most recent works on view in “THE SECOND ROUND WITH A WHIP,” there are no words to guide us, no clear references to a familiar story. Instead, we are forced to look hard—with care and for at least a few minutes—at what unfolds before us. In the exploded pointillism of these new paintings, the fractured mosaic of the canvas pulses like a dull ache until, in time, forms begin to emerge. In some cases, these, too, have a fairy tale quality—the figure of the milkmaid can be made out, and Disney’s seven dwarves reappear to create some mischief. As before, the scenarios are freighted with allusions to desire and violence, though in their reduced state they cannot spell out their conditions. Instead, they exist as fragments of a faded dream which, when remembered, takes on an entirely different meaning. Like finely detailed maps of territories long ago renamed, they point to an elsewhere we can only imagine, but can also be admired for their own aesthetic qualities.

As the German cultural critic and architect Siegfried Kracauer (1889 – 1966) observed, “Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of these images are deciphered, one finds the basis of social reality.”<sup>3</sup> For Xie Nanxing, these hieroglyphs are etched in the fine layer of dust that covers the fashionable rooms appearing in the pages of *Dazzling Colorful Home Furnishings* (炫色家居), a look book for would-be interior decorators whose images the artist has appropriated and customized for four of the paintings included in his latest exhibition. These paintings are not “about” the tastes of China’s nouveau riche. Nor are they a critique of the aesthetic sensibilities of the aspirational class. Instead, Xie Nanxing is interested in how even the most innocuous images are crawling with symbols and associations, both personal and art

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<sup>3</sup> “Über Arbeitsnachweise,” *Frankfurter Zeitung* 17 June 1930, cited in Karsten Witte, “Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer’s ‘The Mass Ornament,’” *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975), p. 63.

historical. These referenced pictures—indeed, all pictures—do not issue from or exist within a vacuum, and every picture can serve as a screen for our projections. The particular “dust” that Xie Nanxing kicks up is sometimes linked to the cherished fantasies of the artistic avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence the irony implicit in the title of *Improvisation 500 (Oblivion)*, 2011, an allusion to the Russian artistic pioneer Wassily Kandinsky’s *Improvisations*, a large, numbered series began in 1910 and created with a spontaneity meant to reflect “events inspired by a spiritual type”<sup>4</sup>—that is, unrelated to the materialism of everyday commodity culture, generated from a “pure” place whose very existence Xie Nanxing’s newest works call into question. In another of these works, *Cubist Night* (2011), the hieroglyphs are personal. Shrouded in an eerie blue haze that is akin to the shade that dominates the 2008 *Whip* series, the faces of the artist’s immediate family surface on the model living room’s walls and furniture, haunting the room like disembodied spectres.

Those who have seen the artist’s earlier works, whether in reproduction or in major international exhibitions such as the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1999) and Documenta 12 (2007), can easily recall the strange, dark beauty of his exactly executed canvases, which seldom tell us anything directly but leave us with a great deal to consider. If his recent paintings don’t look like the previous ones, this is because Xie Nanxing refuses to lapse into a comfortable, signature style. He does not cultivate the brand equity that has befallen many of his peers. Nor does he seek to entertain us, though he does hope that we will be engaged. And despite his technical expertise, Xie Nanxing shrugs off the exhibitionism of needless virtuosity. After all, painting must be more than technique. Instead, Xie Nanxing prefaces the creation of each new series with a period of intense reflection. He considers the history of painting, the desired psychological impact of the new work, and the knowledge gained through the development of his previous artistic output. Self-questioning, research and preliminary studies are followed by the day-by-day process of conjuring his powerful works into being. The new paintings on view in “THE SECOND ROUND WITH A WHIP” presents us finally with a skeleton key, one that helps viewers to access all of Xie Nanxing’s artistic production from 2008 onward. His most recent works may offer us the ashes of visual culture, but this exhibition invites us to stare directly into the flames.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ronan Barris, “The Spaces of Spirituality and Absolute Abstraction: Kandinsky,” <http://www.radford.edu/~rbarris/art428/kandinskys%20abstraction.html>, last accessed on October 16, 2012.