

“We” — New paintings by Xie Nanxing

by Nataline Colonnello

“Some people enjoy making a whole performance of their own life, some others prefer to hide behind the window and silently weave their plots.”ⁱ

It was 1999 when Xie Nanxing (*1970, Chongqing, China) made his international debut at the Venice Biennale. At the time, he exhibited photorealistic oil paintings similar to flash snapshots abruptly stolen at close range, which depict half-naked, bleeding men caught in ambiguous activities carried out in the dark. Since those early canvasses, Xie Nanxing has been creating visually intriguing, dreamlike scenes that stimulate the viewer's psychological associative process, inner recollections and voyeuristic desire to find out the story that he/she “sees” behind the image, as well as to unveil the narrative logic that connects the different works belonging to the same series, e.g. untitled (No. 1-6), 2003, or “The First Round with a Whip” (No. 1-3), 2008. If there really is a story, a plot or not, this is something that Xie Nanxing refuses to reveal, instead leaving the narrative to the viewer's imagination.

Since departing from the photorealism characterizing the paintings executed in 1998-2000, Xie Nanxing has been developing an increasingly complex visual grammar and a multi-layered, masterly technique for which the subjects, suspended in an unique balance between figuration and abstraction, are not immediately and fully identifiable, and come into sight only gradually, after a long observation.

In 2009, Xie Nanxing created a new series of three paintings that differ--both conceptually and stylistically--from any work he has ever realized before. In a surprising return to figurative representation, Xie Nanxing directs his artistic research to the study and interpretation of the works, artistic career, multi-faceted character and public/private personae of one of the most outstanding, irreverent and discussed artists of the twentieth century: Francis Picabia (Paris, 1879-1953). Out of Picabia's richly diversified artistic production, which included, among other styles, Dadaist mechanomorphism, abstraction and realism, Xie Nanxing specifically selected three paintings executed by the French/Spanish master during the first half of the Forties, when he was no longer actively engaged in the avant-garde mainstream. “Femmes au Bull-Dog” (1940-1942), “Deux Femmes au Pavots” (1942) and “Nu” (1942) are among those richly coloured, explicitly sensual, realist nudes that earned Picabia bitter critiques from many art experts at the time. Largely labeled as purely commercial, bad quality paintings, they were cast on the fringe of art history until only recently.

In his latest series of works, Xie Nanxing paints his personal reflections on these works after studying reproductions of Picabia's nudes that the artist found in catalogues or on the Internet. To Xie, the straightest and easiest way to conduct his analysis without losing information is imitation. In accordance to the (not only) Chinese traditional practice of copying the ancient works of well-known painters and calligraphers generation after generation, Xie Nanxing's goal is not to try to become the celebrated master, but to be able to deeply perceive and understand the reference artwork and the artist who created it. For his series of nudes, Picabia resorted as well to the copy of pre-existing pictures; yet, they were not acknowledged art models, but fashionable, contrived images derived from sub-cultural products such as pin-ups postcards, pulpy photo-novels and erotica. This set of paintings by Picabia were aimed to ironically and provocatively oppose a contemporary, mass-produced kitsch aesthetic to the classical concept of beauty found in the works of famous nude painters like Ingres. On a more psychological level they embodied the artist's highly individual, countercurrent reaction to the gloomy atmosphere of those difficult years spent in the framework of the Second World War.

Xie Nanxing's personal copies of Picabia's nudes are larger than the originals. This choice is due to the desire to stress an immediately recognizable subject and amplify the apparent uselessness of reusing images that, newly introduced into the international contemporary art context, have nothing of the outrageous and non-conforming impact they produced over sixty years ago. What Xie significantly reduces in his works is the chromatic spectrum: by depriving his black and white version of the seducing, glowing colours of the inspirational paintings, the artist suggests the idea of old pictures belonging to a distant past. Through the contrast of black and white, moreover, he raises the question of the value judgment in connection with the categorical assertions--either positive or negative--with which Picabia's nudes were received by the public.

Xie Nanxing clinches his study on Picabia by jocularly signing his 2009 series of 3 paintings with Chinese characters corresponding to the transliteration of Picabia's surname, and by entitling the works "We" (No. 1, 2, 3). The term "we" serves as a "radiant point" that, from Picabia and then through Xie Nanxing, refers as well to the viewer and involves him/her into the discussion. What makes Xie Nanxing feel so close to an artist that he describes as "somebody who could definitely be a character from a good movie", or "an actor in a play", and "a person who suffered from 'acting disease', who was trapped in his societal role, hoping to burn himself out as soon as possible"? What links the two artists is not only the common interest for erotic, voyeuristic elements repeatedly occurring in the works of both, but also, and more importantly, the hidden, private dimension of Picabia's personality once behind the scenes of Dadaist theatre.ⁱⁱ

From a different historical moment, socio-cultural background and personal experience, Xie Nanxing comments:

"Nowadays the possibilities to play the *enfant terrible* or the 'heroic artist' are too small; as well there is no longer the chance to play the prodigal son [...] The current time is certainly not exciting, it is the time of over-simplification. If you have poor cognitive ability, or if you are not strong enough, the corrupted, decaying side of this simplified era will eat you up very quickly."ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Excerpt from an interview to Xie Nanxing, Beijing, March 8, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.