

Some comments on the work of Xie Nanxing

by: Peter Pakesch

Xie Nanxing's oeuvre may quite possibly make him one of the most striking personalities to emerge from the contemporary art scene in China today. He belongs to a small group of artists whose approach to painting can only be associated with the current perspectives duly prevalent in new Chinese art with a great amount of difficulty—perspectives that have come to be attributed to, and even represent, new Chinese painting.

Xie Nanxing consistently avoids depicting a visual world that is in any way typical or easily identifiable, unlike artists such as Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang and Fang Lijun. Instead, Xie Nanxing chose a path that led him to scrutinize the painting medium intently, even systematically.

Xie Nanxing's work reflects his perception of both his artistic identity as well as his personal history. It also expresses his approach to painting, taking all of its various facets and dimensions into account. The many conditions artists confront today, from automatically navigating between cultures to contending with different pictorial paradigms and artistic traditions, are also invariably a part of his work. Equally present are the questions that his work raises with regard to the dimensions and meanings present in imaging media, the constellation created by the coexistence of analogue and digital techniques, the images that develop and are contingent upon history, as well as the moment when all-pervading phenomena are captured through various different media in today's digital and electronic worlds.

This is quite a program, and as far as analytical painting is concerned, Xie Nanxing's approach is most certainly in keeping with the conventional paradigm of contemporary art in the West today.

Until the latter half of the 1970s, Western painting history, insofar as its self-depiction is concerned, was held as the universal painting history. The universality that this Western modernity laid claim to greatly influenced the prevailing outlook of the period. The modernist movement thus spent the entire 19th Century trying to develop paradigms of universal art, meaning that it also attempted to integrate elements from diverse cultural heritages into its images and artistic styles. Impressionism and Viennese Art Nouveau, for example, were influenced by the Far East, in particular Japan, and Cubism was influenced by African sculpture and other art forms from so-called "primitive" cultures. Later, the abstraction movement also sought to create a universal paradigm, often in close connection with modern architecture. It is important to note, however, that in this context, although this undertaking began in the 1950s, only half of the world was able to participate in it, on account of the fact that the other half was in the grips of the Cold War. This other half then (the Socialist part of the world) existed to a great extent in an entirely different cosmos, one that was marked by social realism—a movement that was especially pronounced in revolutionary China, where it was also able to develop its own very autonomous character, a character that had very little to do with what we, with our Western perspective, quite inadequately and nebulously linked to the great tradition within Chinese painting.

We must always keep this historical context in mind when we view and examine contemporary art. Equally significant is the fact that all current thought and criticism about painting cannot in any way be separated from the thought and criticism regarding all other kinds of media that today are capable of multiplying images in unprecedented and previously unimaginable ways. Both these elements are integral to the background of, and hence evident, in Xie Nanxing's paintings.

When we cite strong Western influences in Chinese painting beginning in the 1990s, in many instances we are likely recognizing influences from American Pop Art, the new Figuration Movement of the 1980s, as well as the singular position held by the German artist Gerhard Richter. Richter's influence on new Chinese art appears to be both great and of an extraordinarily potent quality. If American Pop Art provided Chinese artists with the tools to deal with ideologically determined iconography, and the "New Savages" paintings served as a source of inspiration for developing new subjectivisms, then both the significance and influence of Richter's work are most likely of a more profound nature and may very well be linked to layers and questions that take root in an earlier point in Chinese painting history. The Western eye, of course, untrained in this great tradition, is barred access on several accounts. It will therefore be extremely interesting to one day read from a Chinese theoretical perspective about how China has experienced the encounter between Chinese and Western painting that is presently underway.

But now a few more words on the influence of Richter's work in China. It is interesting to consider whether Richter's influence on Chinese painting is due to his great influence on artists in general, or if it might indeed suggest a certain mindset that reaches further back into Chinese art history. Various commentaries on Richter's paintings have voiced both a fascination with the realistic and photographic aspects of his work as well as his use of blurriness. One good example of such commentary is Yan Lei's painting titled *The Curators* (2000).

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Xie Nanxing first garnered international attention in 1999 at the 48th Venice Biennale, where he exhibited extremely drastic paintings, drastic for their depiction of people who, in their state of undress, were both vulnerable and violated. They were displays of unsettling realism. Clearly based on actual photographs, the paintings seemed to evoke, above all, images from cinematic reportage. Particularly when viewed in sequence, they suggest the occurrence of dramatic events and the unfolding of some unknown plot. Unable to reconstruct the plot, viewers are forever left in the dark.

In direct opposition to depictions that came out of the Viennese Actionism movement, or the American Performance Art movement of the 1970s, these paintings lack any inherent ceremonial or ritualistic elements. They also lack any suggestion of intent, either of an aesthetic or artistic nature. When viewing this series of paintings, however, one is left with the impression that the artist considered himself very much present at the heart of the paintings. If one looks beyond the shocking depictions and underlying (auto-)aggression of the human figures, it is quite possible to discover that it is the style itself of the paintings that makes them especially drastic. Xie Nanxing succeeds not only in evoking the impression of hastily pieced together reportage, but also in subliminally heightening the dramatic effect by employing specific artistic devices, such as lighting and color.

It is this aspect that makes the paintings so shocking, this quality that was the object of Xie Nanxing's obsession, and that continues to haunt viewers of the series.

Xie Nanxing meticulously investigates the surface of the canvas, the light generated by the paint, and the material itself that disappears (only to reappear) beneath the thin layers that serve to compose his depiction. We are witness to a perpetual disappearing and reappearing act by virtue of the pictorial process he employs.

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In 2000, Xie Nanxing created a series of large-scale paintings of great intensity. They depict, for example, gas stove flames, an oil stain on a floor, a nondescript room, and the pale glow of a fluorescent tube light. These paintings display great depth on account that the artist applied many thin layers of paint to even the most minute details, causing their surfaces to blur and imbuing them with an inherent density. Viewed from a distance, these paintings have a tremendous effect and viewed close up, they possess the greatest possible amount of diffusion. The immediate surface of a given canvas conceals several surfaces beneath. The photo-realism of the paintings is not apparent until they are viewed from afar. Despite their mundane motifs, an iconic power present in the paintings lodges itself indelibly in the viewer's mind. One is also inclined to say that the paintings' sense of density is due solely to the artist's pictorial process; the blurriness remains with the viewer, and it seems to also be the paintings' very quintessence. Richter's use of blurriness may very well have influenced so many young Chinese artists to take an interest in him. A continuation of this tradition, though in his own vein, is present in Xie Nanxing's work.

"I examine the surface, as well as the layers that are close to our mental state, as if I were a doctor", Xie Nanxing (taken from the Galerie Urs Meile website).

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Hence the "dim", the "drab", and the "indistinct" linked together by a single intuition, are the "world" of painting (Li Rihua, L.B., 132). But if the "soul" has not "opened up" enough when loosening its grip, or is not "vast" enough when extending its reach, to penetrate to that stage of the foundational, "it will not be easy for [the soul] effectively to reach this world". All the efforts made to "fill" and "apply oneself" will remain disassociated from such an aspiration. Yet we must still distinguish between the haziness of evanescence, which dilutes presence-absence and brings to light the indifferentiation of the foundational, from a haziness that is only the effect of disorder, interference, or inconsistency. Let us not forget that the foundational is plenitude. While the invisibility of the without-form may not offer forms to be contemplated, it nevertheless provides a coherence to be examined. As Li Rihua says elsewhere (L.B., 756), even if the ink pours out like a mist when it encounters silk or paper, even if it spreads out into a halo, the depth that it reveals thereby, a depth that may "seem unfathomable", can still be "analyzed in great detail". When that haziness of the ink exploits its power for diffuse saturation and is not the result of a lack of skill, it succeeds in "making emergence-submersion appear" and thus achieves completely, by itself, the great process of existence. This occurs without "sculpting" leaf by leaf, or figuring things one after the other, as artisan painters ordinarily do in seeking meticulously—narrowly—to render particular existents.

(François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, translated by Jane Marie Todd, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005)

The extent to which we should rely on texts—such as the one written by François Jullien from which the above excerpt was taken—in order to bridge different great traditions in art history when discussing contemporary painting will remain unanswered here. All pursuits concerning the connections that Jullien, for example, makes on this vast subject should perhaps be left to experts in the field of comparative art history, who never fail to take into account the history of ideas and material culture.

An important issue that should be considered with regard to China is the significance of its very different system as well as its practices. In the case of China, the act of viewing and examining art involves an archeological approach. Since there has not been a single uninterrupted way of dealing with art, or one solitary stringent brand of development throughout the last century, it is important to never lose sight of the fact that various and idiosyncratic layers exist, both in Far Eastern imagery in general, and in Chinese imagery in particular.

I have already briefly touched on the existing relationship between European modernity and Asian modernity. Visual arts and architecture in the West has been greatly influenced by both Japanese and Chinese art and architecture. By the same token, examples of early Western modernity adopted with great enthusiasm at the beginning of the 20th Century (especially in China) abound. As I have already implied however, this trend was broken in China by the simplistic woodcut-like art of social realism, which may very well have had great similarities to the second Modernism movement in the Soviet Union, with the exception of the style being interpreted regionally.

We marvel today at the dynamism and yearning for paintings in modern China. Interest in China (and elsewhere too) has intensified through its powerful, all pervasive, and rampant media landscape, and the images it produces. In this instance, however, China may very well be an exception to the norm. It is a well-known fact that in recent years, China has undergone a rapid and profound transformation as no other country has. Furthermore, the Chinese population has been presented with its own transformation via electronic media, and the fabrication and acquisition of this media has come to constitute a great part of China's new wealth. Electronically generated images have come to represent the New World while simultaneously allowing for the incorporation of much of the old. These images are an integral component of the country's reinvention of its visual context, and on account of the speediness of the process, and the way it has taken effect, the images have become more powerful and more influential than elsewhere in the world. The fact that many artists have reacted directly and in an unmediated way to the transformation also comes as no surprise.

Xie Nanxing is fascinated with surfaces, which deftly transform into spaces of microscopic differentiation in his paintings.

In a series from 2001 and 2002, for example, the surface of a screen is the central theme. Here, too, his fascination is for both the light and the material itself, which he applied in extremely thin layers onto the canvas. It is also apparent that these works are more or less based on photographs, though they are never rendered one-to-one. The viewer can ascertain the texture of a screen, the main element in

this “surface space”. Beneath this surface, there is film and photographic material that may be trivial, dramatic, or autobiographical. Viewers are never certain of what lurks beneath, for the artist consciously keeps them in a nebulous state. The single concrete thing viewers can grasp is a certain flickering: the painting’s indecisiveness, the fleeting electronic images that have been burned onto the canvas. Xie Nanxing develops this theme further on larger canvases and in an even more striking manner in later works. However, the motifs changed. That which in earlier paintings represented the instance of something burning into the viewer’s mind in later paintings transformed into something akin to an open flame. In his later work, too, depictions remain fleeting and vague, but the subtle presence of the paint itself on canvas serves to heighten what viewers see. An unreal space emerges—the flickering of a reality that viewers do not quite know how to place.

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Xie Nanxing has also created an antithesis to all of this. In 2006, for example, he made a solid, monochromatic red painting that was done nearly entirely using the impasto technique; in short: a monolith. First and foremost, this painting can be considered a valid contribution to monochrome paintings, a genre that has been treated repeatedly and in different ways throughout modern art history. Xie Nanxing has taken things a step further in this work. The painting does not come across as a heroic act, which is something that underlies many monochromatic works, but instead seems to convey a story that yet again is partly concealed from viewers. The painting tells a story of taciturnity and randomness. It nurtures a secret. It does not depict the various dimensions of any abstract space—its opening or measurements. Rather, it evokes the idea of a landscape that also seems linked to calligraphy. The painting is about a surface that is depicting a surface. The marks viewers can just barely discern are traces of dirt, and the painting’s monochromatic aspect viewers experience are ambiguous and random—a most extremely Chinese painting indeed.

Translated from German by Gunilla Zedigh