

Aspects of Anxiety  
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Submitting to inflexible models of activity and their inherent tendencies invariably produces an indescribable unease in pure painters. Sometimes, a painter's inner demons seem to be governing the painting act's pleasure principle, manifesting in "repetition compulsions."<sup>1</sup> For example, in Xie Nanxing's portrait paintings, the Seven Dwarves from the story of Snow White meet with figures from his everyday life, then he forcibly layers them together and establishes a sort of mutual destruction pact. The viewer, as a precursor, is often misunderstood as having the right to rehearse the relationship between the two, when in fact, this relationship never really existed. However, this non-existent relationship and this obstacle are the starting point for our discussion of Xie's paintings.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom noted that successor poems always live in their precursors' shadows, and as a result of this lingering influence, later creators make masterpieces in a cloud of anxiety. In order to help later creators escape this awkward situation, Bloom designed six "revisionary ratios" for new creators. One of them, "kenosis" means "repetition and discontinuity,"<sup>2</sup> or breaking the continuity with one's predecessors. For art criticism, which tends to prefer continuity, this causes a certain amount of trouble. However, if painters choose to coexist with the continuity of the painting tradition, then they should choose to stop painting, because only by stopping can they maintain that continuity.

Obviously, Xie Nanxing has continued to feel the influence of the painting tradition, and the best evidence for this is his ongoing disruption of the portrait paintings that have an important place in the history of the medium. From three early works on paper (2007) to *Someone's Portrait* (2014) to *Seven Portraits* (2017), he has always questioned the portrait painting tradition's cognitive models, power structures, symbolic meanings, emotional expression, aesthetic pursuits, and representational rationality. He chooses to develop the intertextuality of painting; the texts, illustrations, patterns, and layered paints appear like mystical meetings between the painter and his subject. This relationship did not originally exist, and it needs the viewer's participation to be rehearsed. We cannot see the painter—he is hiding—but this obvious self-concealment is used to confuse people. By clearing out traditional influences and continuing with synchronicity, these puzzling images become a series of unbelievable independent texts, or emotional secretions from the painter. With his time-tested osmosis technique, these images break the critical discourse that has long surrounded painting.

The concept of "kenosis" comes from St. Paul, "where it means the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status... [Kenosis] is a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions."<sup>3</sup> Because the influences of the portrait painting tradition cannot be eliminated, Xie Nanxing gains an experience that actively challenges critical continuity, including the critical standards that inform traditional painting. In addition, the unalterable subject, with an eminent, sublime position, and human glory, overflows the Modernist critical tradition in which objects are fragmented into a diversified flatness. In the intertextual realm, the painting is more like an image, and no longer has the unique character of its artistic medium; what Jacques Rancière called "the surface of design" is produced by the color, style, and other elements, or between painting and non-painting, which results in "ut pictura poesis" ("as is painting so is poetry"), or to use our painter's term: "an aspect."

Outside of the traditional influences of precursors' impediments and inherent critiques of the medium, painters all face a more practical problem: the invalidity of painting (art), or the crisis of discourse. After shaking off the critical tradition's binary between seriousness and entertainment, art has become infused with entertainment, which caused an irrepressible anxiety for artists who continued with serious work. In the three pieces from his *What to Exhibit* series (2017), Xie downgrades the typical contemporary exhibition space to a schematic. It has a non-painting, almost design-like undertone, and the seriousness of the gallery

is shown using the eye-in-the-sky perspective of a surveillance camera. At the same time, the forms that ooze from his osmosis technique are attached to the image. Here, Xie moves toward a very personalized “Counter-Sublime.”<sup>4</sup> He not only engages in institutional criticism and dismantles the legitimacy of the art museum; his paintings take in, represent, and flatten the wandering ghosts in the gallery. In the company of all of the artists and artworks that were once exhibited there, he returns to commonplace methods in order to kill the uniqueness and superiority of all precursors.

A similar tendency manifests in the triptych *A Theater of Waiting* (2017)—demonstrated in its diminished imagination and desire for creative expression. These scenes of waiting outside the airport, at security, and on the plane lack active intellectual participation and fluidity; the groups of people in the images have neither the fleeting substance of Polaroid pictures nor any significance on a stylistic (compositional) level. However, in these strenuously painted works that still lack spirit, Xie forsakes some imaginative gifts, and in doing so, he establishes a distance from reality; with this reverse movement, he reduces reality’s dilution of the discourse of painting.

With the dual influences of tradition and reality, Xie finds it very difficult to see painting as an aesthetic space of refuge, or to insist on Modernism’s specificity of the medium. Perhaps he realized the burden that painting today bears on the levels of technique, subject matter, and morality. So, why paint? Like those sensitive successors, under the anxiety of influence and through aspects of painting—the parts that should not have been added and the things outside the painting—he surpasses its complexity and cognitive dimension, finding creative estrangement and self-defense. Alternatively, we could call Xie Nanxing’s paintings “images-in-anxiety.”

1 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.

2 Bloom, 77.

3 Bloom, 14.

4 Bloom, 15.