

Frenhofer/Xie Nanxing  
by Zhu Zhu

## I

In “The Unknown Masterpiece,” Honoré de Balzac presents Master Frenhofer, a strange character who seems to understand all of the techniques and secrets behind a good painting, but he is full of doubts about painting itself. The more deeply he contemplates the absolute truth of color and line, the more he despairs and wallows in self-doubt. In the short story, Master Frenhofer declares, “Strictly speaking, there’s no such thing as drawing!”<sup>1</sup>

Frenhofer’s most recent visit, in August this year, was to Xie Nanxing’s studio in Caochangdi. He repeated several times that he had come a long way from Paris. He had chanced upon Xie Nanxing’s paintings in Switzerland before the pandemic started, and he found something he had liked about them. It really was not easy to fly from Europe back then, but for him, nothing in the world was difficult except for painting.

When we met, Xie Nanxing introduced me to him, telling him that I was a critic who was writing the essay for his new solo exhibition.

“A critic? What can a critic understand? Aren’t they just the decorators of the art world?” He was not at all friendly to me.

Of course, I could have retorted, but I had already read about his temperament in Balzac’s story, so I just had to pretend I hadn’t heard him.

“Now, what kinds of things are you planning to exhibit?” the old man asked Xie Nanxing as he stood in the center of the studio and the point of his white beard suddenly flipped upward. “In France, painting is already dead.”

At that point, I briefly became a porter. Xie and I carried the works that were going to be exhibited from the storeroom one by one. The first things we moved were three rather large oil paintings. After carefully avoiding the edge of the sofa, we leaned two of them against a wall, and the third against the door. They intentionally seemed to repeat Frenhofer’s question, because these three paintings belonged to a series entitled *What to Exhibit*.

The old man squinted at them, his eyes moving from one work to the next. He asked, “So you haven’t really thought about what to paint in these spaces?”

“No,” Xie Nanxing replied, “These are the finished paintings.”

Of the three paintings, which the old man thought were sketches that Xie was using to plan out the structure, the compositions of the first and third works were most similar, both representing interior scenes of empty exhibition galleries. The space has aspects of both a museum and a mall, namely, staircases, bannisters, and pedestals. The Chinese characters for “What to Exhibit” have been turned into a slogan on horizontal and vertical banners hung in the scenes. The image in the third painting is collaged with two floating windows depicting security camera images of corridors. A layer of horizontal lines mars the images; it looks like there is an issue with the resolution in the camera or that we are watching or spying through a Venetian blind. This effect was enlarged to become the subject of the second painting. Through that pattern, you can faintly see an interior space labeled with the word “museum” and the number 3. Within this space, a group of phantoms or ghosts move in the shadows. These phantoms also appear in the other two paintings. Although these paintings are treated as empty spaces, they are not open; they radiate the humming fear that emerges after night falls.

I’ve heard Xie Nanxing explain that these phantoms are roughly equivalent to the ghosts or other strange images that various artists have produced—they wait to be given form and definition by the exhibition. He intentionally hybridized the museum space, mixing it with the characteristics of a mall. Of course, this is an institutional critique related to the discursive power of museums and the intermingling of capital and profit that underpin them. However, compared to the overly serious discussions of certain conceptual artists, Xie has treated this subject in an amusing, relaxed way.

1 Honoré de Balzac, “The Unknown Masterpiece,” in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. Richard

Things went a bit differently than expected. Frenhofer stood deep in thought, and a storm of words seemed to be brewing.

“The technique in this painting could be seen as illustrative, not descriptive. Painting itself is not the focus,” I said.

“What kind of critique is that?” It was as if my words lit a fuse, because the old man suddenly erupted. He brandished and pointed his walking stick, saying, “Look here, here, and here.” The walking stick made several circles over empty space, as if he were outlining specific parts. “This part has Durer’s cool severity! Also, this part has the magnificence of the Venetian School!”

His walking stick was swaying so much it was difficult to follow. Upon receiving this praise, Xie shyly said, “I wasn’t thinking about it so much. I was just making a joke...”

“When you paint, you should forget everything. You should paint every painting as if it were your first and last painting.” A martyr’s indignance and grief appeared on the old man’s face. He looked at Xie and continued, “Don’t think that I was praising you just now, not by a long shot, young man. I don’t like the intentional carelessness of this work. You certainly have some talent, but you seem to be drifting farther outside of painting. You like jokes. Can you make a living on jokes?”

“When a painting is placed in a different space, it may very well engage with a different set of encounters and fates. Isn’t this something we should care about? Challenging the existence of any power also challenges the opportunism of painting. In my view, too much garbage has been given legitimacy or even an inexplicable halo...” Xie replied.

“So what? The world of painting has always been 99% garbage and 1% good painting. That 1% often lacks a bit of something, and this little bit is everything. We unrelentingly yet calmly spend our entire lives seeking it out, but we won’t necessarily find it. Why must you waste your energy and ideas on matching wits with the 99%? Or with some... institution?”

“We will always need people to say something, and not just immerse themselves in their fantasies. Everyone believes that they can become part of that 1%, adding an immortal image to the world. It’s a delusion! I really question whether painting is even necessary,” Xie Nanxing replied.

“This is something we have in common, otherwise I would not have come from so far away to see you, but you should still stay within painting. This is life! You cannot have all the women in the world. You choose one woman, and through her, you exhaust all women...”

“Take Lucian Freud, did he paint all women like that one accountant?”<sup>2</sup> Xie Nanxing stubbornly and disdainfully retorted.

“Don’t talk to me about Freud, he’s a moron!” the old man said raising his voice. “Europe’s already done for! I blame it all on that bad boy Duchamp. He was intentionally hard on people. He should have just played chess to his heart’s content and won a world championship for France. You look, the Americans mock us through him...”

## II

The air became stagnant as the light from a flash of lightning came in through the window. The rain had not yet started to fall. Frenhofer found half a bottle of Erguotou liquor in the kitchenette. Brow furrowed, he took a sip, then his expression relaxed, “Now, shall we continue?”

Xie’s *Seven Portraits* series was brought out, which were smaller in size. After they were placed in order, the old man’s brows, which had just relaxed, knitted back together again. He said, almost mumbling to himself, “My God, what were you trying to do here?”

“I painted people around me: a shy girl, a person sneezing out their soul, or a Caochangdi security guard... I first paint a rather realist portrait, then allow the paint to seep down into the layer of canvas below, which becomes a trace, or evidence, of the painting above. Next, I continue painting on the bottom layer of canvas, and I add things from my observations and suppositions about the personalities of these people. This painting is the security guard I was talking about. I painted a snail on the canvas that fuses with the traces left over from the painting above. My impression is of him lazing around in the sun at the entrance to the village every day, a lot like a snail. In this painting...”

<sup>2</sup> The “accountant” to which he refers is Sue Tilley, a former benefits supervisor who Lucian Freud used as a model in his paintings.

On hearing Xie's response, the old man sat down on the sofa, holding his chin in his hands. It looked as if both the alcohol and the jetlag were having an effect, and I wondered if he was dozing off. However, when Xie stopped, he seemed to recover his energy. He looked at the paintings intently for a while. With a bit of helplessness in his voice, he said, "...That's it? Can I say something? Evidence? This is actually an interesting word. We have all committed a crime against painting, and we are continuing to do so."

He stood up slowly, moved closer to the paintings, and said, "I must say that, although I don't like this... garbage, it makes me think of my childhood. I liked fairytales and cartoons, and that was a really good time in my life. Spring breezes have something intoxicating about them, blowing along the old book stalls by the Seine. Time stops when you're reading. I was like that little snail, curled up there all day. I wasn't really like a snail; I was more like a sea sponge, absorbing everything as if my life depended on it. I absorbed various images, nutrients, and impurities, and it was around that time that I fell in love with painting... You've probably been there, right?"

He turned his head to look at us, and continued, "Perhaps I really shouldn't have chosen painting as a path... it's too hard. However, sentiment is not a good thing; it should be completely removed from one's life and images. In any age, people should not be sentimental."

The thunderstorm had started. Frenhofer and Xie moved closer, facing the canvas as they discussed a few more details, but the conversation was drowned out by the rain.

I had to admit that almost everything he said about painting was correct; the problem was that he persistently focused on absolutes and refused to question his assumptions, to the point that communication became impossible. However, when you saw his trembling knees as he squatted to inspect a painting or his silhouette when he was immersed in silence or recollection, he felt like a gratifying presence. After all, very few people have this kind of passion for painting, and his passion really lived at a high altitude. Perhaps we could try layering Frenhofer and Xie Nanxing, like in Xie's portrait series.

What would this layering look like? First, the ready-made parts, which do not need to be re-layered, are their personalities—cynical and impatient. In terms of painting, they are both fascinated by the grand tradition and charm of painting. They have benefitted from certain influences and they have painted some convincing works, but despair and doubt are their constant companions. They are destined to be tormented by this undertaking for the rest of their lives. As for their differences, Frenhofer is doomed to live and die trying to paint a perfect painting. Frenhofer is known for asking, "What is it lacking? It lacks a bit of something, and this little bit is everything." The old man's entire life is seeking out "this little bit," while Xie Nanxing sees this pursuit as an ineffective mirror-image derivative of the history of painting, so he has transformed himself into the hand that will smash that dream. On this point, I wrote the following in the essay for Xie's last exhibition:

More than you do with many other people, you need a key to understanding Xie Nanxing. In about 2001, he abandoned the expressive system of psychological realism and shifted toward seeing pictures as a psychological defect in painting itself. There were several reasons for this shift, but the first was an alertness to the fact that artists of the same generation or a previous one seemed to want to luxuriate in the symbols they had created and enjoy the favor they bring. Another aspect to this is the anxiety of painting in the post-Richter era. Even though Xie Nanxing painted extremely pure works that seemed out of focus, stylistic characteristics were still secondary. This proud, aloof Chinese man undoubtedly felt dissatisfied. Of course, the anxiety does not stop there. Highlighted by other mediums, he is keenly aware of the sense of decline surrounding painting.

His recent working methods involve recording source material in photographs and videos, sending them to a TV screen, capturing stills, and sketching from those stills. In addition to this process, he layers two pieces of canvas and makes a detailed painting on the upper layer, while the blotches of color that seep through onto the lower layer serve as the work of art. The former method seems to refer to our inability to obtain truthful images in a world of media spectacle, while the latter satirizes the history of painting and the painter as the traditional supplier of images.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Frenhofer is overly sheltered from the outside world, and Xie Nanxing is overly sensitive to this. In my imagined portrait of Frenhofer/Xie Nanxing, that hybrid person would still be focused on painting a

3 Translated from the original Chinese text. Zhu Zhu, "Xie Nanxing: Wuti Sanzhong" (Xie Nanxing: Three Types of Untitled), *Art Forum China*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.artforum.com.cn/picks/8720>.

better painting, but he would not be too rigid or crazed. He would need to confirm the relativity of painting. By matching the finite with the infinite, he would also need to deeply consider the crisis that painting is confronting in a new decade, transforming it into something else valid, just as painting was transformed after the emergence of photography... But, OK, we'll stop here. Talking is always easy.

### III

Later, we moved the triptych *A Theater of Waiting* out of storage. The paintings present three typical scenes from an airport: waiting for security, waiting to board, and waiting to take off after boarding the plane. Like a pendulum that eventually, if slowly, swings back, Xie's works always return to a relatively normal scope of painting in terms of content, composition, and brushwork.

As if he felt deceived by the previous two series, when Frenhofer faced these representational, direct paintings, he was not ready to speak rashly. He seemed to want to study them first, to determine whether there was some evil that would suddenly emerge from the paintings. He also looked at his watch. The series seemed reminiscent of famous paintings by Paul Gauguin. The works generally employed a cool color palette, and although Xie depicted the forms of these people and the space of the scene, the paintings maintain some distance from realism. This is because, in addition to controlling the brushstrokes, the light sources in the painting do not feel natural. It's more like things are artificially arranged on a stage under a whitish, almost overexposed light, full of a nervous unease that permeates the entire painting. Even the light in the image inside the cabin seems quietly hazy. Enveloped from the front and side, the seated passengers seem situated within a numb and orderly atmosphere of escape.

This time, there was nothing that Xie Nanxing wanted to explain. Looking at his work, he made a gentle sound out of habit, as if he felt guilty and helpless about this kind of painting. Balzac wrote about "that indefinable humility which a man destined for glory is likely to lose in the exercise of his art, as a pretty woman loses hers in the stratagems of coquetry. The habit of triumph diminishes doubt, and humility may be a kind of doubt."<sup>4</sup>

"They're actually reminding me that I should go," the old man said. "These paintings are not banal; one of your strong suits is that you can control the degree. I believe that I understand them. You did not intend to paint them perfectly; you wanted to be like a surveillance camera in the Empire State Building of painting... Although I like the work you showed in Switzerland better, I still appreciate your uncompromising energy. How do I put this? Perhaps your paintings represent some of my thought processes, revolving around those little details of painting. You really have the patience to dissect it. Sometimes, when I am possessed by inspiration, I see painting in an entirely new light. I go back to the Louvre or the Centre Pompidou, and I really feel that everything on the walls is unbearably vulgar, and I want to take a torch to it. Let's not even talk about the faux abstractions that those galleries are promoting. It's simply a street filled with emperors in their new clothes! Sometimes, when I zone out, I imagine myself breaking down into various colors, futilely dripping into the bottomless abyss... Painting is always limited. Mallarmé put it well: 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.'"

He looked Xie Nanxing in the eye and continued, "Perhaps I'm old, and you... I don't believe that you will never again paint a good painting. You're full of ambition and longing. You will not abandon the intention of painting a great painting. Continue to make trouble—you're still young, and you can still waste time. However, from the time you are born, you have to know that there isn't a lot of time."

Xie said, "I just don't want to see painting that way. Without the failure you experienced in Balzac's short story, there certainly wouldn't be that transformation, or those new schools and "-isms"... At least I think so. If we don't first destroy ourselves, how can we come to know a larger and more complete mode of existence?"

The two looked at each other, and the old man suddenly opened his arms and said, "I have to go." After they embraced, he also shook my hand. A sly yet child-like smile appeared on his face as he said, "This is a difficult job you've taken on."

When the door opened, the little courtyard had flooded in the rain, and the pale-yellow street-

<sup>4</sup> Balzac, 8.

lights passed through the grey brick wall, illuminating the densely falling rain, gloomy flower beds, and trembling vines.

“You don’t want to wait for the rain to lighten up before you go?” Xie asked.

“How could the rain isolate me? Moreover, I like the feeling of isolation,” Frenhofer said. “Humanity’s biggest problem is that we communicate too frequently and too conveniently with one another. We’re not communing alone with Heaven.”

Looking at his silhouette disappearing through the rain, Xie Nanxing suddenly mumbled to himself, “With him coming and going this way, why do I feel as if I’ve already had my exhibition?”

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#### References

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