

Romance of Desire  
by Xu Xinyi

### Bodily Desires

What do we understand the ‘physical body’ to be in our everyday lives? And how do we explain the notion of ‘desire’? Perhaps for the time being, the ‘body of desire’ can be limited to the body as it relates to sexual love. Emotional perturbations bring about fluctuations in desire. Xie Qi’s depictions of the body feel like they are in line with the view articulated in the theoretical context of ‘sociology of the body’ by Margaret Lock & Judith Farquhar, namely that of the ‘lived body,’ which is animate and transcends all binary oppositions. By and large, in matters concerning desire, practice and actions precede theoretical research by a long shot. Likewise, the creation of language art also have a relative leg up over theoretical research. This being the case, are desires even well-suited to being researched by visual means? How then are they to be researched? How can a subjective language be used to represent [desires]? And how can others take heed of and observe them? This in itself is an issue that requires further probing into. Xie Qi’s oeuvre provides a natural trajectory for doing just that. In her works—blurry when viewed up-close and sharp from a distance— notions such as the body, desires and sex cease to be elusive, nor are they taken for granted any longer. Material bodies belonging to the realm of life are afforded a libidinal space in which to exist and proliferate. Rather than be submissive or consumed (in masochistic fashion), these bodies are now energetic, erotic and powerful.

Having come face to face with Xie Qi’s paintings, it seems as though they’ve been naively stripped of any existential or material influence, instead leading me towards everyday bodily and sexual practices. As for how these paintings came to fruition, which strategies and logic were utilized in their making, or how they came to be embedded into the power of words and deeds, all of this is revealed to the spectator as he or she sets out to explore the realm evoked by the artist.

Looking back at how the body is depicted and explored in Xie Qi’s earlier works, compared with the artist’s more recent output, we notice they are more unequivocal and straightforward in terms of content, more determined in their figuration. And yet, these early in-focus paintings already inflicted a certain degree of constriction on the spectator (given the thinner veil separating the spectator from the work). Fast-forward to the present, and we notice the motifs in her works have remained the same. The life she has been taking stock of exists perpetually, but the intensity of the works has increased: they feel more complex and entangled, shadowy and unstable, be it that the expressive techniques used have softened and become more nebulous.

Xie Qi lives by her own set of rules, and attempts to defy traditional images and symbols by conveying undefined and unruly affective perception, namely individualized sentiment. Spectators are given ample free space in which to perceive their own specific lived experiences.

The frantic color schemes in her paintings serve to accentuate a rippleless tranquility, whereas their sober narrative reveals an undercurrent of tension. This contradiction is ultimately resolved by the minute way in which Xie Qi deals with moods on the canvas: in light of the rules Xie Qi herself lives by, the above contradiction morphs into a distinct personal style. Nevertheless, it seems this outpouring of sentiment is never the stylistic lynchpin in Xie Qi works. With her consistent ‘toughness,’ she is more concerned with the boundary between delicate emotional mystique and blurry life textures that lie hidden underneath the layers of paint. Desires trickle inexhaustibly from out of her works. They flow out slowly, imperceptibly seep into the mood of the spectator, and in so doing they bring about a collective resonance.

### Imaginary Devils

Through ‘imaginary perception’ and the ‘devil in the mirror,’ two concepts taken from the study of poetics, the poet Herta Müller uses a childlike naivety to understand the patterns in the world, a process analogous to using literature to understand reality. This is no different in Xie Qi’s paintings: the two are different in

character yet similar in makeup, since both depart from the real world (matter as is found in life, or life with its material properties), and in turn transcend the boundaries of reality, thereupon entering the subjective domain of affective perception. Through imaginary perception and mirrored observation, Xie Qi infinitely approaches the reality hidden beneath the appearance of objects.

The reality Herta Müller refers to is not objective experience, but more resembles subjective cognition. In a similar vein, narrative or the status of that which is being observed are of no concern to Xie Qi. In her works, everyday life is akin to an imaginary stageplay, emerging from a seamless irreality to the point of shrouding the reality of the objects we'd just been touching with our hands moments ago. The painter lets this concrete reality emerge using another form.

In the words of Xie Qi: 'Lighting helps to situate characters on a stage; it implies a certain predicament or plight.' Deliberate interference in a painting serve to pile on the mood. Some paintings may look unfinished, despite the copious brushwork that went into making them. Others may appear to have resulted from being covered in random color smudges. Real life is infested with such disorder, and the feeling of wholeness has been left by the wayside. There's an ever-present feeling of unsettledness and dread, engendered by the ambiguous and boundless imaginary spaces, resulting in a universal and inevitable 'imaginary sentiment' in Xie Qi's works, to the point of it giving shape to their content, and revealing the reality that lies underneath the surface. This is in response to [Herta Müller] the poet's verdict, which goes as follows: 'Perhaps dread is that unalterable, apperceived fiction which always accompanies us. We're unable to define its causes, nor are we able to coin a definitive term for it.' This outcome—a fragile and capricious beauty—is what the artist is in pursuit of, and wherein lies the paradox of the bodies, skeletons and figures she depicts. Their beauty stems from their fragility, which, as is the case with our emotional capability, results from constantly having to balance tensile forces.

Unlike in Lacan's famous metaphor of the 'mirror stage,' here the act of looking in the mirror does not signify that the person looking in the mirror (i.e. the signifier) has recognized in his own reflection (i.e. signified) an integral whole, or that the schism between the subject and the world has yet to occur. Here in Xie Qi's works, the opposite is true: what the 'I' looking in the mirror sees in his reflection, is an unfamiliar state—the 'devil in the mirror.' As is the case with 'imaginary perception,' the crux in Xie Qi's paintings lies in the transformation of personal experience through the act of seeing. This coincides with the idea of reconstituting life experience which Xie Qi wishes to express. Especially from 2015 onwards, following the massive rollout of her 'Renminbi banknote series,' the artist not only gradually rid herself of ideological structures and the constraints of the art system, but also shifted towards a more universal cognitive praxis. This exemplifies the great resilience with which Xie Qi can adapt and take control of her artistic creations. On the spectrum of importance, teetering between what's false and what's true, her works seem to deliberately drive the spectator to two extremes, yet she possesses sufficient energy and imagination to freely shuttle back and forth between the two. This cadence, which implies an enormous tension, has helped to free up countless cognitive realms which go beyond our everyday experience, all the while arousing those senses which have been long-dormant in our mediocre lives.

### Dizzily Nebulous

Running through Xie Qi's artistic creations is the thread of 'nebulosity.' Looking at her paintings, we see faintly discernible shapes, overlapping layers upon layers, traces left by lingering emotions at different times. Those same traces then form the underpainting for a new canvas, a repetitive process which creates a dizzying 'nebulosity.' Just like author Nathaniel Hawthorne sang his own praises with the term 'psychological romance,' Xie Qi's explorations present a middle ground which connects life and emotions, real desires with imagined constraints. Her referencing and mixing of ideas concerning the body as an apparatus of desire, causes her paintings to demonstrate the same reconstruction and alienation found in narrative texts, while also attesting to romantic qualities hidden within her works.

What state was the artist in when she created these works? I was reminded of Giorgio Vasari's use of the term 'grace' (*grazia*) in his work *Le Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*. This criterion for appraising paintings coined by the art historian seems to be consistent with Xie Qi. Despite bearing some relation to the concepts of daintiness or ethereal haziness, the most relevant connotations of Vasari's notion of 'grace' are the idea 'using no way as a way' and that of an unfettered state for artistic expression. This means the artist's creation is no longer constrained by rules, and is entirely

practiced according to personal taste and will, in a composed manner, using easy solutions for weighty problems yet with no trace of painstaking effort. Simply put, a painting should look like it's easily begotten, while in fact tons of thought and energy went into it, yet leaving the spectator hard-pressed to discern even the slightest trace of these efforts, as if the work were part of nature itself.

Amid the intense color contrasts in her paintings, conflicting desires turn into vapor between one's fingers, swirling around endlessly, while constraints and tensions are traded in for liveness. The subjects of the artist's thought remain the same, yet her methods of expression have changed, as has the experience of the spectator. Ultimately, everything in existence returns to life.