

FROM DREAMS TO FABLES

Henry-Claude Cousseau

They are not quite landscapes, not quite portraits and neither genre nor historical scenes – yet all of this at the same time, mixing sequences, fragments, excerpts that appeared from somewhere, escapees of a fiction as yet undiscovered. Xie Lei's images stay clear of realism, as did his ancestors', and unlike many of his elders' prudently ignore contemporary stereotypes – and they stream out magically. Full of life, expressive, cloaked with a dream-like eloquence that is seductive and often misleading, they enjoy blurred contexts, ambiguity, and deception in order to better co-found. They depict something that just happened or could happen. Not shying away from appropriate artifice, they freeze snapshots into a concise phrasing whose easy poise is always laced with irony. They seem to forever mock their own appearance.

Xie Lei was born in 1983 and really started to paint in 2005 when he was still in China. He therefore belongs to the generation that follows the ones that during two decades – the 80's and the 90's helped emancipate Chinese contemporary painting by re-interpreting Western models, often by resorting to parody or caricature. This is what came to be referred to as « political pop », hyperrealism and its endless variations, the outrageous spinoffs of « body art », and many other trends. It remains an uneasy task to try and identify the truly salient nexus in that crucial transition period of the 70's – such was the ebullience shown by the Chinese art production at that time.

The path that Xie Lei has chosen to follow bears witness to his desire to extend this emancipation in a new direction. Intimist and subjective, it deliberately goes against the platitudes that his forebears promoted in their attempts to make a statement at self-reaffirmation. Just as they did, Xie Lei utilizes both the Western and the Chinese traditions in his practice, but he nonetheless strives to establish a deep connection with the realm of the imaginary, the literary world, in a quest for new refinement. Thus, speaking of his work during a recent interview, the artist suggested notions of intrigues, of strangeness, of « stolen images ». Drawing a parallel between painting and language, and quoting Borges, he stresses his commitment to building fictions by using a « simple and verbal style », as the writer did. It is this simplicity, this spontaneity, this talent for drawing in a straightforward manner, this blunt depiction of intrigues that are so easily noticeable in his paintings. Yet, one can also discern a need to explore the art and the ploys of fiction, to narrate with images, to build dreams, to create the unforeseeable and to bring the unexpected to the forefront. This may be explained by the fact that after going to school in Beijing, Xie Lei studied in Paris where he swiftly showed how adaptable he was, in particular by his remarkable mastery of the French language, and his aptitude at gaining a solid and well rounded culture. Very quickly he built a universe of personal references – and they now feed his work, and perhaps more importantly enthuse it with a true confidence and an undeniable virtuosity. This translates into a production that is as comfortable scrutinizing its own culture as it is exploring a new world. He does so with an obviously eager and amused curiosity, still startled by each echo he finds between this world and that of his childhood – and greedily snatching each similarity to make it his own. It must be this very successful hybridization that gives his work the ease, the spirit, the relaxed inventiveness that are so striking for the onlooker.

Yet Xie Lei's world is inevitably more complex than one may think. His elegant offhandedness hides elaborate constructions where imperious yet firmly controlled oppositions and conflicts meet in a seemingly casual manner. The artist has quickly become a master in the artistry of the contrary, or perhaps has succeeded in merging opposites so that they can no longer be separated – his practice is based upon the use of paradox and ambiguity. The result is an unexpected fusion between metamorphosis and dream, humor and gravitas, metaphor and allegory, which projects a vision underscored by a moralistic undertone. His mother culture is re-interpreted, blithely high jacked, and revisited through the lens of its total immersion in the Western adventure.

Right from the start Xie Lei's paintings reveal recurring characteristics. They include an undeniable iconographic efficiency, an unusual ease at divulging a motive, at cornering an image's theme, at staging it, all the while toying with a sort of cinematographic effect that invites a pause on each image, and in the end captures a great luminous intensity. He also skillfully manipulates scale – in one case to better stress the grandiloquence of historical paintings, or in another to convey the intimacy of a genre scene or of a portrait. This of course, will not prevent him, if need be, to reverse patterns, and use a large format for a scene that would very well fit into a small one, or the other way round. The same can be said of his chromatic palette, either contrasted or single-toned, which moves from strident saturation to colorful polyphony, from the lightest and most delicately transparent monochromatic shades to sequences of harmonies built on the major hues of the primary colors' range – red, blue, green, yellow (and which are clearly stated in « Harvest »), and to their modulations from one tone to the next, with the mauves, the pinks and the blue-greens that the artist so frequently uses. Another defining aspect of Xie Lei's work is a style that mixes quick sketching and a more or less heavy use of textures, the opposition of discordant pictorial modes, or again the alacrity, the gushing of a movement reminiscent of calligraphy and of drawing, contrasted with the slow motion of ample and vaporous brush strokes, such that the incisive precision of the decorative rhythm is set against the erasure of the stroke. And this brings us to what is perhaps the best illustration of the debate started by the painter with these images, which confront with no apparent hierarchy the dizzying series of themes that he so whimsically intertwined. In the end it creates an equality in the narrative that reinforces anachronisms in the order (or lack thereof) in which these images follow each other, and the dream-like strangeness that it generates. The happy remembrance of the early thrills that painting brought to the artist are revealed through a different sort of intoxication. The rush of feeling finally immersed in first the discovery and then the intimacy of something that for the longest time had only been a distant dream. This comes out as a talent for playfully mixing the scholarly Chinese tradition with the theatrics of Western modernity. The long awaited pleasure has finally reached a level of immediacy, free of the early cultural disconnect – the complexities and brilliance of the new culture are now fully understood and savored.

It is probably because of his view on the human species – both complicit and derisive – that the human figure is given a paradoxical place in his paintings. It is there, but as if it were a second choice, on the sly, and subjected to strange manipulations. Human figures appear upside down; headless; with a hood topped with a clinging little monkey that looks like a comic hat ornament; or with the face cut out. The most frequently represented figure is that of ghosts or of specters. In the end its most natural manifestation is dissolution, a mere memory of what it used to be, referencing paintings of Vanitas and memento mori. But, as one would expect another drollness worms its way into this gravitas. Here a pink pig is foraging for food in hazy undergrowth shrouded by fog, and covered with a carpet of skulls that are sprouting out like mushrooms. Elsewhere a magpie hanging by its feet from an elegant and leafless tree branch is playfully doing acrobatics among the human skulls, - hideous fruits that garnish the bough. Or finally, and to stay on the same subject, a sinister bird with yellow eyes, digs his talons into a small hill that is actually the top of a skull. Each phantasmagoria depicts animals. Here a gathering of monkeys; there ill-defined mammals hang from trees like sloths; flying fish; clouds of butterflies; amphibious birds; or birds that are masters of the air. Some of these ominous species have even been done in portraits. In « Sha » for example, the microphones in front of its protruding tongue transform it into a rock star or a two-bit dictator. « Hybrid » shows a vacuous compromise between a starlet, a cat and a mouse.

This bestiary is not meaningless. It is the extension of the antique tradition of the fable that both China and the West share, a reflection of ancestral wisdom in which animals were readily substituted for men. The anthropomorphic stylistic device is nothing but a variation on the theme of metamorphoses proposed by Ovid, and that perfectly fits the painter's approach – it is both oblique and suggestive. Things can be named, as long as an

ironic, moralistic and always humorous distance is maintained. It is also a way for the painter to have fun with art history and its myths, and in so doing to dispatch, with humor, a few contemporary clichés. This is precisely what he does in his variation on the rape of Ganymede by Zeus, in which the former has been changed into a hunter, offering a vision that is both accurate and droll on this very contemporary theme. Or when he represents Narcissus whose face has disappeared into a dark depth but where a dim reflection of deer antlers shows him that, as for Acteon, he is tricked only by himself. Yet his inspiration is far from being uniformly light and playful. It can also veer towards the fantastic and the sinister – ghostly apparitions of corpses; malevolent gatherings of monkeys around a fellow-ape that seems to have been hung to a branch; a little monkey lying dead on a bough, undressed of his children clothes, and who lays, martyr fallen for an undisclosed cause (« Cruelty »); or this scene of a recumbent statue being brought back to life; this bush of predator-like microphones ready to pounce on their prey; the cascading hair of an Ophelia hanging from her feet ; a magnificent herd of deer unfurling the entangled nobility of their antlers but showing us their... backsides ; this overzealous undefined gregarious group kneeling in front of a gigantic sow eagerly drinking its milk!

Xie Lei also reinterprets with a very typically Chinese parodic mode the elders whose works he saw only as reproductions in his youth, and that so impressed him. Goya's black paintings; Friedrich's ghostly landscapes (« Fading », « Bird », « Around the Moon »); the anthropomorphism found in Courbet's landscapes (« Origin »); or when he ventures into a sort of fantastic realism (« Big wave », « Fall », « Central city »). As soon as he started painting, Xie Lei started to circumnavigate with a natural and disarming aplomb all that makes up his territory - memories, experiences, thirst for knowledge. This is why despite his lightness and playfulness, he can still take us somewhere between dreams and nightmares, reveries and illusions, the natural and the hybrid. This is evidenced by his predilection for a bestiary that is both amusing and threatening, droll and repugnant: knots of rats; pigs in trees; copulations of monstrous deer and rat hybrids; spiders; owls; ostriches; jellyfish; two-headed frogs. Or yet in the case of themes prompted by current events: this impassioned imam with red and bulging eyes, dilated pupils and sporting a face somewhere between that of a frog and a monkey, or the pope weighed down by his red cloak, and walking away, keeping us wondering if he is carrying or forfeiting his burden. This predilection is also attested by the optical definition that he imposes on images – either precise and insidious as an ornamental thought, or after taking the appropriate technical detour, indefinite, and pretending to be elusive in a daring defiance of visual perception. A mix of improvisation and premeditation, of quick esquisses and completion, revealing an acidic viewpoint and contained mockery, Xie Lei's painting cannot but demonstrate, albeit in a somewhat nonchalant manner, that it has been nurtured by a sharp eye, concerned with world events, and constantly attuned to the lessons given by the past and by life. Yet, it is equally obvious that some of the initial bedazzlement that the painter felt looking at the marvelous colorful shimmer of Velasquez or van Dyck or by the theatricality shown by Poussin is still there.

However, he eventually had to come out in the open and conquer his own world. Contrarily to some of his elders, such as Huang Yongping or Yan Peiming, who directly graft onto their work a vision born from their encounter with Western culture, Xie Lei starts by skillfully neutralizing the two traditions that have been antagonistic for centuries. He then introduces a new perspective into the ancestral dialogue that has been carried on between the two cultures and the fascination that they have always felt for each other. In a way, he is taking the higher road, and hurrying to broaden his horizon. He does not let go of his own fantasies but revisits their *raison d'être*, and it is only after taking an arduous detour that he may spontaneously, like the others, find his way again and head back towards his starting point.

How is it possible to reach the effortless level of the work of these masters that have been so carefully scrutinized,

with whom one has wanted to be measured to for so long, and that have imparted such durable memories ? How is it possible to define what the principle of simulation precisely means in the field of representation? How can one bring it to life ? As usual, it is only through skillful trickery that success is achieved. As a matter of fact, the Western tradition has a word that conveys this sense of aloof freedom that feeds the creative process- a word that precisely describes a certain lightness where imagination and reality balance each other, morph into each other: *sprezzatura* or the art of spontaneity and detachment, of imaginative vivacity and nonchalance, and whose best example was perhaps, as Robert Calasso so wonderfully pointed out. It is in the process between understanding the moment to comprehending its causes; in the superposition of reality with its imaginary double; in the long tradition of dissimulation that exist in all representation that one can find the transparency that color, shape, matter, and particularly light need in order to come to life again for us. But to work, this progression necessitates an ardor that is as much elegance as aloofness, as much passion as detachment. And one has to deal in the same manner with painting – with the same tact and daring, the same prudence and zeal that one would use when first venturing into reality after a long sojourn in a world of fantasies, of dreams, of wonders. Precisely the one in which, not so very long ago, Xie Lei was still living.

OUT OF A WHIRLWIND

Liang Shuhan

Dost thou generate from Heaven or from Hell ?
Charles Baudelaire, « Hymn to Beauty »

For Xie Lei, finding inspiration to create an image is never difficult because, when he paints, he does not try to impart images with any immediate meaning. This is why his painting practice differs so fundamentally from that of his contemporaries, which are often charged with concepts. He is more concerned with the infinite possibilities that a pictorial practice has to offer, and with the onlooker's emotional response to a painting. The most important thing to be noted is that such a thinking process and such a vision are more the result of an aesthetical immersion than a strategy.

Xie Lei's inspiration often comes from his own life and from the imaginary references he has built through his readings. This is why, when facing Xie Lei's paintings, the onlooker's imagination is set free. « Starving » for example, opens up a pictorial dimension into the world of dreams – the tones are cold and the brush strokes play a leading role in the image's strength. The very large format adds to the onlooker's mystification. The inspiration for this painting came from a real life event – one day on a street in Paris, the artist came across a homeless man, bent over, feeding bread to pigeons. As is the case in many of the scenes from which Xie Lei could draw his inspiration from, this scene was not translated into an ideological condemnation, and the onlooker does not need to see this piece of work through a social or political prism. What the artist is mostly concerned about is how to create a pictorial tension within the format defined by the canvas. In order to reach this goal, Xie Lei decided against a detailed description of each bird, and instead played with him or her as a balancing tool for colors and chiaroscuro

Ponderings and musings about art history pepper Xie Lei's work. At ease with the aesthetics of German romanticism, his paintings are often inspired by a quest for the sublime. For « Between You And Yourself » the artist chose, again, the dreamy ultramarine as the main color for the painting in which naked tree trunks stand close together erect under the sky. The unreal and seemingly infinite forest invites the puzzled onlooker to carry his gaze to the very end of the pictorial space. Furthermore, a strange sky and a ground, which despite the fact that it has no obvious light source is extremely luminous, reinforce a feeling of unease, of anxiety, and create the illusion that a violent storm is approaching. Of course, such a landscape does not exist in reality – it springs from the artist's imagination. Xie Lei does not appear to be overly concerned with the title of this piece – and many of his paintings are given titles only after they have been completed. For him, painting is not writing, and must create its own visual vocabulary. While he paints, Xie Lei ceaselessly enters into a dialogue – sometimes even perhaps into a conflict - with the painting, with the images that he sees as human beings and not as passive objects. Or to be more precise, "unexpected encounters" with images happen.

Xie Lei has an original way of thinking about painting - free and open. An avid reader, he often gets his inspiration from literature, from parables, from philosophy or from art history, and will grab opportunities to transform them in his own way. « Around the Moon » offers a clean break from the usual way we look at images. Children's silhouettes have replaced the owls or birds that are standing on a tree branch to gaze at the moon, and this infuses the painting with a strong metaphoric meaning reminiscent of children's tales. Instead of a classical image, what is offered is a possibility of a different that may be seen as the diversion of an accepted formula. Similarly, for « Harvest », he thought of three workers holding a rainbow with long sticks – giving perhaps a different point of view on the Western aphorism *The other side of the rainbow*. By using this mode of expression Xie Lei not only opens up a humorous dimension but also creates for the onlooker a great visual stimulation by using contrasted chromatic tones.

« Congregation » reminds one of the Chinese proverbs that talks of monkeys trying to catch the moon and this conversion of a text into a painting reminds a tradition of Low Countries, as in « The Haywain » or « The Ship of Fools » by Hieronymus Bosch. Although the artist addresses a few major themes, each painting has none the less its own inspiration and meaning. In « Time Out » however the message is more vague and allows for a greater freedom of interpretation; a headless man stands in waters that the last rays of the setting sun have turned red, and is examining his head that he carries in his hands. A dense clump of aquatic plants imparts the scene with an aura of melancholy and mystery. This painting may allude to religious musings, to a literary piece, to a reference in art history. We do not know what the artist wanted to achieve but one thing is certain: painting, the medium itself, means a lot more to Xie Lei.



AROUND THE MOON

2011
115,5 x 157,5 cm