



Installation view of "Endurance: New Works by Xie Xiaoze" at Chambers Fine Art, New York, 2017. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

## ENDURANCE: NEW WORKS BY XIE XIAOZE

### XIE XIAOZE

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Over the years, Xie Xiaoze has cemented his role as an artistic figurehead and purveyor of cultural histories. The artist continues to explore printed media in his most recent exhibition, "Endurance," with a focus on perseverance in the face of inevitable decay.

Xie has long held an appreciation for print. His earlier bodies of work spotlighted stacks of newspapers and magazines, with the goal of highlighting social and political issues. His new paintings show a shift in focus from newspapers to libraries, thereby evoking themes of time, permanence and memory.

Xie's background in architecture can be seen in *Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University* (2016). The canvas shows stacked volumes aligned in a sloping gradient. A dramatic contrast exists between the blurred, grey background and the detailed books in the foreground. A slight curl in the cover and a bookmark create interest in the center of the piece, and draw attention to the shape and arrangement of the books. With strong, clean lines and a bold use of color, the simple elegance of the stacked books reflects the didactic purpose of the library. This selective focus conjures ideas of structure, stability, resilience.



XIE XIAOZE, *Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University*, 2016, oil on linen, 92 × 152 cm. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York.

All of the exhibited pieces show thematic elements of history and preservation. Rather than focus on libraries in a specific geographic location, as seen in his ongoing “Chinese Library Series” (1994– ), Xie catalogs experiences and memories from libraries across the world. His attempt to speak to new audiences allows for a renewed presentation of cultural artifacts. The similar themes in “Endurance” and the “Chinese Library Series” speak to the artist’s belief in human tenacity, even hope. Each canvas is beautifully detailed, but beyond Xie’s technical prowess is an underlying warmth. The books want to be held and touched. There is a quiet eagerness in each brush stroke.

In *The Queen’s College Library at the University of Oxford (K24, New Testament)* (2016), a soft light illuminates an ancient tome. Just visible, gilded letters spell out “New Testament.” The composition is tightly cropped, pulling focus to the sharper edges of the text’s deteriorating neighbor. The book’s leather binding is peeled back or damaged, revealing a red spine. It might be another Bible, but that remains unclear. The sense of mystery created is compounded by marks of wear and tear—where has this story been?



*Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto No. 4 (Calvin)* (2015) depicts a volume with “CALVIN” written along the spine, and two unknown books to both its right and left. The books are worn, while the “CALVIN” edition is only slightly crumpled. According to Xie, the atmosphere created in this painting, as well as the one from Oxford piece and two works done at Kathmandu’s Tribhuvan University all use light to suggest enlightenment brought about by the religious content of the books.

Three pieces, *Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University) No. 1, 2, and 3* (all 2017), are particularly stirring. During the second Sino-Japanese war (1937–45), Tsinghua University was forced to relocate to southern China and merge with two other educational institutions. During the evacuation, many books were heavily damaged, and 175,000 were lost. These three paintings resemble the diffusion of flame, transitioning from blueish hues to subtle but angry red strokes, followed by a cool ashy aftermath. The disfigurement of the books seems cruel. With their usage disrupted by forces beyond normal control, they act as a physical reminder of steadfastness.

The exhibit raises questions of persistence and atrophy. Political and social situations are in a constant state of flux, elevating the documentation and accurate preservation of these events to prime importance. Physical preservation may seem less relevant in a digital age where intangibility is in demand, but Xie’s collection shows us that the tangible can also hold incredible importance. By modeling his message around books, Xie implies that though objects may bear unsightly marks of history, their story is only that much richer.

*“Endurance: New Works by Xie Xiaoze”* is on view at Chambers Fine Art gallery, New York, until June 17, 2017.

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**XIE XIAOZE**, *Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University No. 1)*, 2017, oil on linen, 122 x 188 cm. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York.



**XIE XIAOZE**, *Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University No. 3)*, 2017, oil on linen, 122 x 163 cm. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York.