



Confrontation and Disruption in a New Exhibition by Chinese-American Artist Xiaoze Xie

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In his work, artist Xiaoze Xie deals with the vulnerability of historical memory and superficiality of perception in the media age. (PHOTO: Stanford University, used with permission).

In his latest exhibition, “Confrontation and Disruption,” Chinese American artist Xiaoze Xie invites his audience to explore a fresh reading of time and memory mixed with a powerful reflection on global concerns.

Xie tackles street confrontations with the police, refugees, violence and war, and issues of resistance and empathy. His fascination with books and newspapers, a dominant current in his work over more than two decades, is a commanding force in this latest exhibition, highlighting his creative process as an observer of the human condition. He has remained loyal to these themes in spite of their being a challenging sell in the global art market, where collectors and even galleries sometimes define or direct artists’ growth and success.

During a recent interview with me in Brooklyn, Xie told me that “to consistently explore a theme, you will be able to go deeper, and you will also be able to expand the scope of the theme.”

Xie’s focus on newspapers and books has nothing to do with the “decline of print media,” but he acknowledges that the “rise of digital media and the internet” has brought “a kind of urgency” and “a different kind of relevancy” to his work.

Regarding the large size and scale of his paintings, Xie explains that by painting books and newspapers much bigger than they actually are “they gain a kind of presence and unfamiliarity than when you are used to deal with books or newspapers, something very small in real life, you look at the monumental representation of those trivial daily objects.”

Born in China in 1966, Xie is the Paul L. and Phyllis Wattis Professor of Art at Stanford University. In the interview excerpted below, I asked him about his creative process, teaching art at Stanford, the subjects of his works, his technique, political art in China and his relationship with his audience.

Omid Memarian: The title of your recent exhibition at the Stanford in Washington Art Gallery is “Confrontation and Disruption.” Why did you call it that?

Xiaoze Xie: It includes three groups of works. One group is paintings from a recent series of newspapers called “Both Sides Now.” Each painting is based on a section of a found sheet of newspaper, an existing issue. The painting looks like the texts and images on the backside of the newspapers have bled over to the front. If you turn over the pages of a newspaper against the light, sometimes you see the backside of it. Or, if you hold it against the window, you see the text and images of the backside of the paper overlap with the ones on the front. Creating a kind of overlapping, almost confusing effect. Or at least the images and texts from the backside disrupt the ones on the front.



From February 3, 2007, L.G.D.S. No. 1” (La Gazzetta dello Sport). 2007, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches, Artist Studio at Stanford. Here Xie presents the confrontation of soccer fans with riot police at night during a game in Italy in 2007. (Used with permission).

It creates a dense layer of information that sometimes relates to, sometimes contradicts with and sometimes interrupts each other. That’s where the title comes from.

I also present six large paintings from the series, including images of illegal immigrants from North Africa during rescue efforts, and also, images of confrontations with the police in two different newspapers. One of the images depicts the confrontation of soccer fans with riot police at night during a game in Italy in 2007. Soccer fans throw rocks at the riot police and their armed vehicles. The scene is somehow fleeting and ambiguous. You get this idea of confrontation and violence but you don’t really specifically know what was the cause. Was it political? For me, it’s more of a symbolic image of confronting the authority, the

clash between the ordinary people and the police, not unlike the famous Time Magazine's photo of a Chinese student in front of the tanks.

OM: What does the confrontation in your work refer to?



"August 26, 2013, I.H.T (International Herald Tribune)" 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 64 inches. (Talley Dunn Gallery, Dallas. Used with permission).

Xie: By using the word "confrontation," I'm trying to indicate a general kind of attitude, non-acceptance, resistance and struggle. The other painting, "August 26, 2013, International Herald Tribune," was based on a news photo of riot police confronted by demonstrators in Bangkok, Thailand, when the police confronted them. There is a close-up of the riot police with their shields and helmets, and it is a very impersonalized image that feels very cold and machine-like. On the shields, they are writings that demonstrators drew with markers on the transparent part of the shields. And they say, 'Civil War is coming,' 'There was injustice,' 'parliament is not justice'—from this work you get a sense of what is going on. Even though each painting is based on specific events, my work as a whole deals with recurring themes and concerns and reflects an attitude.

OM: Are concepts such as resistance, disruption, and social movements things that keep you alarmed during the day? A reflection or reaction to all the things that are happening in the world?

Xie: Well, being an artist or not, I think one is an observer of social life either directly or indirectly. Nowadays, we perceive more what is going on around us from the media than as a witness. But we are witnesses in a sense anyway. From all kinds of content that we get from the media, I'm always more drawn to the ones that are more tragic and disturbing, not the regular daily life or entertainment or sports.

I'm not interested in those. Subjects with conflicts, struggles, and some intensity always compel me to paint, because I think they are important.

OM: And how do you see it through the eyes of somebody who buys your art—that disturbance and tragic moment to place on the wall of somebody who buys your art? What is the role of the kind of art that reflects tragedy in people's lives?

Xie: When I'm doing the work, I'm not really thinking about the work being collected and lived with. I mostly think about the audience in a more general way. Before the work is collected, it's usually exhibited in public and sometimes it gets into the media, so many more people than the collectors would see the work. To live with art is a different kind of story, and I must admit that these large paintings with intense content and political subjects are harder to live with and they are harder to sell. But that doesn't stop me from making them. The appreciation for art should be broader; it can't be just something that pleases your eyes and something that you get visual pleasure out of. Art should be thought-provoking at the same time. It makes you think; it allows you to look at things from a different angle. And at best, it could inspire action, I hope.



"November-December 2008, L.T. "(The London Times) 2010, oil on canvas, 52 x 75 inches. (Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco. Used with permission).

OM: Your fascination with books and newspapers has been reflected in many of your works. Where does that come from?

Xie: I've always been interested in time and memory and how memory and history or human thought are contained in material form. So books and newspapers are the material forms of things that are invisible and abstract. It came across very early, in the early 90s, when I first came to the United States. When I spent a lot of time in libraries, wandering between aisles and bookshelves, I would see these rows of books in front of me—you know, these silent and sleeping books. So what do they contain? From the spines, sometimes you don't know, they are almost like tombstones. Then later I looked at stacks of newspapers. I'd look at the edges of these folded newspapers, and I'd see a dense pattern of symbols, dots, characters, and words. Eventually, I'd look even closer and zoom in on the side of the stack to reveal fragments of news photos, mixed with words and phrases. All these bits of information sometimes seem irrelevant, but they come together to create the juxtaposition of different events, a glimpse of what

is going on in a certain period of time. If I am only interested in the formal aspect of a subject, like the abstract composition of vertical and horizontal lines, I could very well be painting other objects in life. But it is the meaning of the subject that fascinates me.

OM: Could it be the fact that books and newspapers are getting erased from people's lives? We might not have any newspapers in 15-20 years. Do you feel you are making them last longer by painting them?

Xie: Yes, that has changed the interpretation of my work in the past years. But I must say it was not my initial intention. The decline of print media is something that happened later. I started this subject very early on before this was happening. As I continue to work on the subject, paper media is getting obsolete and constantly challenged by digital media and the Internet. Therefore, sometimes my work is interpreted as being a eulogy, being nostalgic for what is an age that is perhaps almost over. I think that the current situation with the rise of digital media and the internet gives a kind of urgency to my work; it brings a different kind of relevancy, I hope.



"January-February 2011, G. (The Guardian)." 2011, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 92 1/2 inches. (Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago. Used with permission).

OM: There is continuity in the subject matters you pick for your paintings. Consistency in raising awareness, emboldening what exists around their role in life that might be ignored or downplayed. What's underneath your commitment to this approach?

Xie: If you randomly make a few works with a certain approach, that is something different. I think to consistently explore a theme, you will be able to go deeper, and you will also be able to expand the scope of the theme. For example, when I started painting books, I didn't know that it would continue for so many years. I first started painting Western books, and then after I went back to China in 1994, I started painting Chinese thread-bound books with different forms and atmosphere. Later, I expanded the subject further to include museum libraries, horizontal large folios sitting on metal shelves. The feel and the look were totally different. It was the same with newspapers.

OM: Have you seen any change or shift in the views of the Chinese government in regard to accepting political art in recent years?

In general, control over the media and ideology in recent years has been much tighter than in the past.

OM: Is it more difficult for artists in China to exhibit their work if it has a political theme?

Xie: Works engaging social-political themes are always harder to exhibit or publish. Recently, I have been working on a project about banned books in China. I interviewed an editor who said that in the past, they could publish 15-20 books per year and now only a handful. Many more of their proposals are turned down compared to the past. You need to get permission in order to get published.

OM: How does the Chinese government view your work? Do they tolerate your work? And do you need to get permission to exhibit your work?

Xie: In official museums, they are going to be very careful about what they show. There are certain things that you don't even think about it, you just know that they are not going to show them. Things are a bit easier in commercial galleries and small spaces—unless you come up with something that is overtly political, confrontational that touches on taboo subjects—otherwise it is usually ok. If it is ambiguous enough, you can get away with it. So I must say that there is a little bit more room in the field of visual arts than in mass media. For example, if you post something on the Internet that they consider as subversive, the post could disappear right away. But visual arts tend to be more ambiguous; they tend to be not so straightforward and it is harder to get a message, therefore, you have a little bit more room to play.



"September 9, 2013, S.Z. (Suddeutsche Zeitung)" 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas 64 x 95 inches.(Private collection, Dallas. Used with permission).

OM: You have brilliant technique; you can do so many different things with your brush. Can we say that some of your work touches on hyperrealism? Also, why painting instead of photography?

Xie: This is a question that has been asked about my work many times. Actually, I do both in my work, I've done paintings that are based on photography and I've done photography and videos. When I have

direct contact with reality and photograph certain scenes in China, sometimes I feel like the photographs are strong enough as direct documentation of social life, the photographs are the final work.

It is a different case when I paint a stack of newspapers or a single sheet of newspaper, or books. I feel there is a need to translate this subject, these fleeting or transient images, into something more permanent-traditionally oil paintings. When you look at a painting in a museum, you get a sense that it is going to last longer. When you look at newspapers, you recycle them after flipping through the pages. So I feel an urge to capture something temporary and make it into something more permanent. as if to say: look at this, remember this, we cannot forget this.



November-December 2008, L.T. "(The London Times) 2010, oil on canvas, 52 x 75 inches. (Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco. Used with permission).

In the "Weibo" series, I made paintings based on images downloaded from the popular social platform called "Weibo." Many images that I downloaded were censored shortly after they were posted. They are no longer there. So particularly when they are more time sensitive, the urge for me to make it into art is stronger. I hope to give it presence in life, in time, and to let it last longer.

There is also the question of translation, for example, to simply enlarge a photograph of a stack of newspaper just doesn't work for me. In the process of painting, there is fine-tuning and layering of colors, gesture and touch of hands, simplification, accentuation, etc. The image is transformed in that process.

I think the painting is much richer than the source photo that I work from, and the adjustments that I make in the painting process are important and enhance the image. Sometimes my feeling and understanding of the subject will unconsciously be present through the process of painting. Even though the paintings look more or less photographic from a glance, when you get up close and look at it, it is unmistakably a painting. It has something to do with the history of the painting. So this dialogue between the past and the long history is very important in my work.

OM: You teach art. What's the significance of art schools in preparing a new generation of artists, if that's at all possible?

Xie: When I was in China, art education was more focused on the technical and formal aspects. In the West, at least, in the contemporary art education in the U.S., the focus is placed on the conceptual basis of art-making. Why are you making this? What do you want to say? What message do you want to get across? How is the work related to a larger context? These are the more fundamental questions to ask. I'm lucky enough to combine these two trends of higher education and come up with my own approach. Of course, I cannot summarize what art education is like in China now since it has been so long ago when I was there. Right now it seems that it has been heavily influenced by art education in the West.

OM: A while ago, when you were explaining your trip to China and working on a new idea, you said that you don't know what the outcome of that research and inspiration would be. Whether it's a painting or installation, or even a video project. As an artist, you are free to use different media to express your feelings, concerns and communicate your thought process. How do you choose your medium? Particularly when you pick painting, which in your technique is very dominant.

Xie: Well, actually, most people have some conceptions or misconceptions about the creative process and tend to view it as something mysterious. One moment the inspiration descends on you and gets you very excited and you use that to make the work. There are artists who are more intuitive and spontaneous, and there also artists that are very rational, very thoughtful, and they go through a lot of preparations and planning to carry out the idea and execute the work. I think I belong to the latter group, and yes, there are these moments that you get ideas and you are struck by something, you are motivated and compelled to do something.

But to go from there and to expand the idea, to realize it in the most powerful ways, you have to go through a process of preparation and planning. These are more strategic. The choice of medium is an important part of the process. I may choose to translate source images into paintings, or present photographs or videos or objects, or combine different forms into one installation. Everything follows the concept. With painting, which is my favorite medium, I have to go through the long process of labor; I have to spend all this time working in the studio and for me, it is very important to have direct physical contact with the work, even if it sounds old-fashioned. It is as if to insist that the viewer spend time looking at it or convincing someone to memorize it.

For me, labor is an important part of art. The nature of art is artifact. Artifact that embodies thoughts, feelings and labor.



Written by Omid Memarian