

HYPERALLERGIC

Challenging Censorship, One Meticulous Artwork at a Time

Xie's **latest** exhibition at Asia Society Museum grapples with the long history of book banning in his home country of China

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Xiaoze Xie, "Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University No. 2)"

(2017), oil on canvas, 48 x 74 inches (all images courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted)

In *Transience*, artist Xiaoze Xie's film from 2011, books sail across the video screen, their pages fluttering as they catch the air. Viewers may try to catch glimpses of their titles: there goes Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, then Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Sometimes the book covers sport titles and authors written solely in Chinese characters. A traditional Chinese folk melody, the meditative "Wild Geese Descend on a Sandbank," scores the film. The subtle tones of a *guqin* (a seven-stringed Chinese instrument) belie the violence that the film actually depicts: the graceful flight of books are all titles that have been banned in China at some point in history. The film depicts not a celebration of literature, but rather its attempted eradication.

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The twelve-minute work plays on a continuous loop in a darkened gallery within *Xiaoze Xie: Objects of Evidence*, currently on view at Asia Society through January 5, 2020. Book banning has a long history in China, dating at least as far back as the Ming Dynasty. Within the last year, the disappearance and shuttering of a number of booksellers and their shops in the once British-, now Chinese-governed Hong Kong (a partial cause of the ongoing resistance there) have become only the latest iteration of this distinct form of repression.



Xiaoze Xie: Objects of Evidence at Asia Society Museum, 2019. Photograph © Bruce M. White, 2019.

Xie has long made books central to his artistic practice. Born in China's rural Guangdong province, the now Palo Alto-based artist was deeply affected at an early age by memories of his father, a school principal, being forced to collect books banned by Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution for their eventual destruction. Now a professor of art at Stanford University, Xie's move to the United States in 1993 marked the beginning of his fascination with books. He began making international excursions back to China, in order to investigate the repositories of Chinese libraries and make paintings of what he found.

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Xiaoze Xie, "Chinese Library No. 66" (2018), oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches

Several sumptuous examples of these works are on view at Asia Society. For a bibliophile, a painting like "Chinese Library No. 62" (2017) dazzles the senses. The work depicts a stack of Chinese texts, their pages curling and crumbling and marked by Chinese characters. Through delicate brushstrokes, Xie captures the sense of reverence one experiences while gingerly leafing through ancient, fragile papers. As he visited more and more libraries, Xie became increasingly interested in the ways China has historically extinguished literature it perceives as incendiary. From there, he began his own meticulous collection and documentation of books banned from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), through the era of Mao's Republic of China (1911-1949), and on through to the present day.

In an alcove viewing area just outside the main galleries of the exhibition, visitors are invited to watch *Tracing Forbidden Memories* (2017), a documentary that follows Xie as he searches for the books that would become part of his collection. Throughout the film, he interviews a number of booksellers, publishers, professors, librarians, and writers who have been in some way affected by China's punitive literary policies. The tension is palpable. Many of Xie's subjects are afraid to speak on camera, or clam up at his probing questions, underscoring just how dangerous and fraught bringing information to readers in China has the potential to be. For US audiences, these anxieties offer a sobering reminder that knowledge is a right that must be continually fought for, over and over, and once again.

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Xiaoze Xie, *Scrutiny (Premodern Books)*, 2014, Archival inkjet prints, Dimensions variable; Each framed sheet: H. 21 1/2 x W. 30 1/2 in (55 x 77 cm) Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Photograph courtesy of the artist

Xiaoze Xie: Objects of Evidence continues at *Asia Society Museum (725 Park Avenue, Upper East Side)* through January 5, 2020. The exhibition was curated by *Michelle Yun*.