

【评论】朱朱：弗朗霍费·谢南星

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(Please scroll down for English)

I

巴尔扎克在小说《不为人知的杰作》里，塑造了那么一位怪人，他几乎能洞悉一幅好画的所有技巧和秘密，却又对绘画本身充满了怀疑，他越是深入思考色彩、线条的绝对真实，就越是感到绝望，并且，充满了自我怀疑，“严格说来，绘画并不存在！”这位弗朗霍费先生嚷嚷道。

最近一次，也就是今年八月，就在谢南星位于草场地的那间画室里，他将这样的话又重复了一遍，他大老远地从巴黎赶来，是因为疫情之前在瑞士偶然看到了谢南星的画，他觉得其中隐含了一点对他胃口的东西，话说现在从欧洲飞过来一趟，可真不容易，但是，对他来说，除了绘画本身，这世界上就没有难办的事情。

我们见面时，谢南星就向他介绍了我：一位评论家，要为自己新的个展写评论。

“评论家？评论家能懂什么？不就是艺术界的装潢工人吗？”他对我可是一点也不友善。

我当然可以回敬一句什么，但既然已经从巴尔扎克那儿了解到他的脾气，索性也就权当没听见。

“那么，你要展出的是什么样的玩意儿呢？”老人站在画室中央，问谢南星，白色的胡子尖陡然地往上翘，“反正，在我们法国，绘画已经死亡了”。

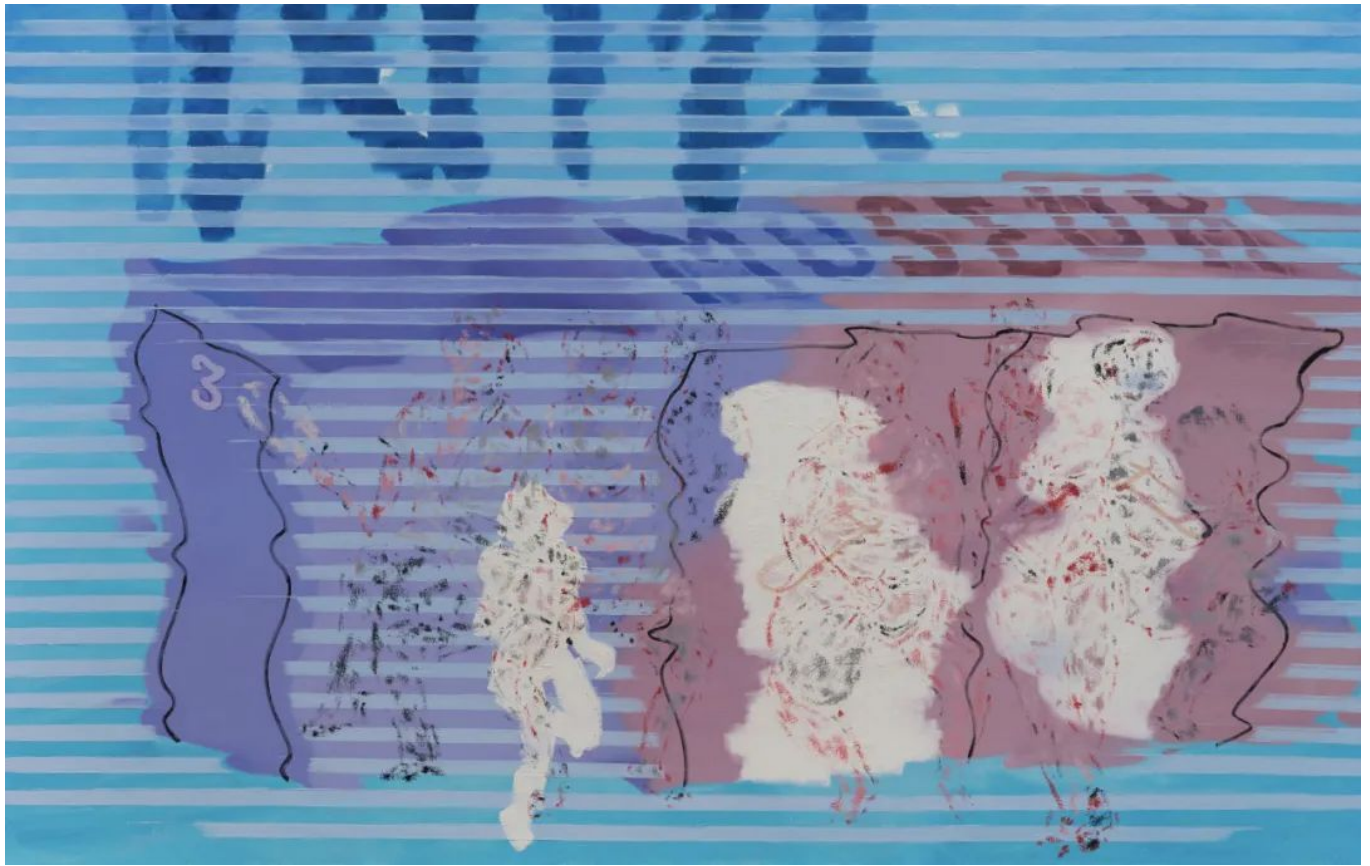
于是，我临时充当起了搬运工，和谢南星一起，从小仓库里开始将要展出的作品一件一件地往外搬。最先搬出来的是三幅颇大的油画，小心地避开沙发的外沿之后，其中两幅被靠在一面墙上，另一幅倚住了门，仿佛是故意重复了弗朗霍费的问题，这三幅构成的那个系列，标题就叫做：“展什么？”

老先生眯起了眼睛，视线逡巡在画面与画面之间，“这么说，你还真没有想好在这些空间里画什么？”

“不，”谢南星答道：“这就是已完成的画。”

被老人当做空间规划草图的三幅画之中，第一幅和第三幅的构图更相近，同样是空荡荡的展馆内部场景，空间被表现得既像美术馆又像商场：扶梯、间隔栏、展台，其中，“展什么”的字样变成了横幅和条幅上的标语，悬挂在场景中，在第三幅里，画面还嵌入了两个拼贴式的悬浮窗，内容是监控镜头里的楼道，屏幕上有一层横纹，似乎是数码图像的分辨率出了问题，也像透过一层百叶窗帘监视和窥望着什么，这个镜头

效果似乎被单独放大成了第二幅画的主体，透过那层格栅，你可以隐约看见一个被标注为“美术馆”和“3（号）”的内空间，里面影影绰绰地活动着一群暗物质般的幻影，也像幽灵，这些幻影同样也出现在另外两幅之中——这些画面虽然处理的是空的空间，但一点也不空旷，倒是带有一种入夜之后热闹的恐怖感。



谢南星，《展什么 No. 2》，2017，布面油画，190 × 300 cm

Xie Nanxing, *What to Exhibit No. 2*, 2017, oil on canvas, 190 × 300 cm

我听谢南星解释过，这些幻影大致相当于形形色色的艺术家们的魂魄和奇思怪想，它们有待于被展览赋形和定义。至于画面中的美术馆空间，也被他故意地与商场的空间特征复合和混淆在一起了，这里面当然包含了机构批判的意思，令人联想到美术馆的话语权与其背后的资本、利益之间的媾合，但相比起某些观念艺术家那种严肃得过了头的讨论，他处理这个主题的方式更谐谑，也更轻松。

事情多少有点出乎预料，弗朗霍费先生在那里沉吟着，似乎在酝酿着一场风暴般的措辞。

“这些画的手法可以被视为说明性的，而不是描绘性的，绘画性本身并非重点”，我说。

“这算是哪门子评价？”似乎我的话提供了一条导火索，老人突然就爆发了，他挥动起手杖指戳着：“你看这儿，这儿，还有这儿，”手杖凭空地绕了几圈，好像有某些局部正被勾勒出来，“这里就有丢勒冷漠的严峻！还有，这儿——威尼斯画派的华丽！”

他手杖的节奏实在太摇滚了，让人难以跟上具体的方位。受到了这样的褒奖，谢南星反倒腼腆了起来，说到：“我没有想那么多，我只是开了一个玩笑……”

“画画的时候就应该忘掉所有，把每一幅画当做第一幅画、也是最后一幅画来画”，老人的脸上浮现出殉道者般的激昂和沉痛，他望着谢南星，继续说到：“别以为我刚才是在夸奖你，你差得远呢小伙子，我不喜欢你在这种故意的漫不经心，你确实有点才华，但你似乎越来越游离到绘画之外，你喜欢讽刺，你靠讽刺活着？”

“一幅画放在不一样的空间里，很可能意味着不一样的遭遇和命运，这难道不值得关心吗？质疑任何权力的存在，也是在质疑绘画的机会主义，在我看来，有太多的垃圾被赋予了合法性，甚至笼罩上了莫名其妙的光环……”谢南星答道。

“那又怎么样？绘画的世界从来就是由百分之九十九的垃圾和百分之一的好画构成的，就是那个百分之一，往往也缺少那么一丁点儿，而这一丁点儿就是一切，终我们一生，坚持不懈地、平心静气地寻找，也未必能找到，你又何必把精力和心思耗散在和百分之九十九的垃圾去较劲？和什么……机构较劲？”

“总要有人说点什么，而不是沉浸在自我意淫之中，每个人都认为自己可以成为那个百分之一，为这个世界再增添一种不朽的图像，真是幻觉！我确实怀疑绘画是否还有存在的必要？”谢南星答道。

“这一点我们是共通的，否则我也不会大老远地来看你，可是，你还是应该留在绘画之内，这是命！你无法占有世界上所有的女人，你选择了一个女人，就要通过她穷尽所有的女人……”

“像弗洛伊德那样，把所有的女人画成了同一个女会计？[1]”谢南星带着那么一种倔强和不屑反驳道。

“别跟我说弗洛伊德，他蠢透了！”老人提高了嗓门，“欧洲，也已经完蛋了！都怪杜尚那个坏小子，他存心和大家过不去，他就应该好好地地下棋，为法国拿一个世界冠军之类的，你瞧，美国人通过他嘲笑了我们……”

II

气氛变得僵滞起来，闪电的光亮从窗外透进来，但雨还没有下。弗朗霍费先生从小厨房找到小半瓶二锅头，皱着眉头喝上一口，然后，表情似乎舒展了开来：“那么，我们继续看点什么？”

被搬出来的是“七个肖像”系列，尺寸相对较小。它们被排放停当之后，老人刚展开的眉头又皱紧了，仿佛是喃喃自语似的，说到：“天哪，你究竟是想干什么呀？”

“我画了一些身边的人，譬如，一个害羞的女孩，一个打喷嚏打出了灵魂的人，一个草场地的保安之类……我先画一张相对写实的肖像，让颜料渗漏到下面的一层画布上，它们就变成了上面那幅画的痕迹或者说证据，然后，在下面的一层画布上再继续画，我补充的东西来自于对这些人性格的观察与猜想，这一幅就是

刚才说到的保安，我在画布上叠加了一只蜗牛，和上一层留下的痕迹结合在一起，在我的印象里，他每天在村口晒着太阳的懒散状态，和蜗牛相差不多，这一幅.....”



谢南星，《七个肖像 No. 1》，2018，布面油画，100 × 100 cm

Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 1*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm



谢南星，《七个肖像 No. 4》，2018，布面油画，100 × 100 cm

Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 4*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

听着谢南星这么说着，老人在沙发上坐了下来，手托着腮，似乎酒精和时差同时在起作用，让我怀疑他在打盹，不过，就在谢南星停下来时，他又恢复了气力似的，盯住了那些画面，认真地看上一会儿，多少有点无可奈何地，说到：“……就这个？我能说些什么呢，证据？倒是一个有意思的词，对于绘画，我们确实都犯了罪，而且一直在犯罪。”



谢南星，《七个肖像 No. 3》，2018，布面油画，100 × 100 cm

Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 3*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

他又缓缓地站了起来，凑近那些画面，继续说到：“话说回来，虽然我不喜欢这些……垃圾，但它们倒是让我想起了童年，我喜欢过一阵子童话、漫画之类，那倒真是一段好时光，春风里有种叫人沉醉的东西，塞纳河边的旧书摊被吹得哗哗作响，时间在阅读中搁浅了，我就像小蜗牛什么的，整天地蜷缩在那里，其实不像蜗牛，更像一只海绵，拼命地吸收着，吸收着各种形象、养分、杂质，我就是从那时候开始爱上绘画的……你们应该都去过那儿，嗯？”

他转头看了看我们，继续说：“也许我根本就不该选择绘画这条路，太难了，不过，伤感可不是好东西，应该从人生也从画面彻底清除出去，在任何一个年代，人都不应该伤感”。

暴雨开始下了起来，他们俩走到了一起，对着画布，谈论起一些具体的细节，但交谈的声音被雨声淹没了。

不得不承认，关于绘画，他说的每句话几乎都是对的，问题在于，他固执地聚焦于那种绝对性，太过不容置疑，以致于交流变得不可能，但是，望着他蹲下来审视画面时颤巍巍的膝盖，望着他陷入回忆或沉默时的背影，你会觉得他是一种令人欣慰的存在，毕竟，很少有人对于绘画抱有如此的激情，他的激情真的活在很高的海拔上——我在想，也许可以尝试着将这位弗朗霍费先生和谢南星叠加一下，就像眼前的这个肖像系列所做的那样。

那会是怎样一种叠加呢？首先，现成的、毋需再作叠加的部分在于，他们的性格都是那么的愤世嫉俗，活得很不耐烦，而从绘画的角度来看，他们都曾经迷醉于绘画的伟大传统与魅力，受惠于某种具体的影响，并且画出过一些令人信服的作品，然而，绝望和怀疑始终与之相伴，这桩事业注定会折磨他们一生，至于他们的不同之处，弗朗霍费先生注定是为了画出一幅完美的画而生，也注定为此而死——“里面缺少什么呢？缺少一丁点儿，可这一丁点儿就是一切”，这是弗朗霍费先生的名言，老人终生要去找“这一丁点儿”，而谢南星则已经将这种追求视为绘画史的一种镜像式的无效衍生，为此他将自己锐化成了打碎这个梦的那只手，关于这一点，我在他上一次展览的评论中写到过：

理解他也许比理解很多人更需要钥匙。大约在2001年之后，他就抛弃了心理现实主义的表达系统，转而视图像为绘画本身的生理缺陷。导致他转向的原因，首先出于一种警醒：上一代或同代的艺术家们，似乎都希望躺在自己建立的符号上“一劳永逸地享受它带来的雨露”。另一方面则可以归之为后里希特时代的绘画焦虑，即使谢南星已经以“虚焦”方式画出了纯粹度极高的作品，但语言特征仍然处在第二性，对这位孤傲的中国人来说，他无疑感到不满足。当然，焦虑还不止于此，在其他媒介的映衬之下，绘画的没落感为他所强烈地感知。

利用摄影、录像方式记录素材，并且传输到电视荧屏上获取定格成像，再进行“写生”，这是他近年的工作方式；与此并行，他叠放两层画布，在上一层画布上进行具象描绘，而渗漏到下一层画布上的色斑被确认为作品。前一种方式似乎指涉了我们在媒介化的景观世界里再也无法获取真实的图像，后一种方式更多地反讽了绘画史，以及画家作为图像供给者的传统身份。[2]

也许弗朗霍费先生过于屏蔽了外部世界，而谢南星又过于敏感于此，在我以想象绘制的那幅“弗朗霍费·谢南星”的肖像里，那个复合人仍然应该专注于画出更好的画作，但又不过于执着和疯狂，他需要确认绘画的相对性，同时以有限来对应无限，他也需要深切地思考绘画在新的年代环境里所面临的危机，将它作为有效的异质加以转化，如同当年绘画在面对摄影的出现时所做的……但是，好吧，就此打住吧，说总是容易的。

III

最后被搬出来的是一组三联画《等待的剧场》，画面聚焦于机场的三个典型场景：等待安检，等待登机，和机舱内等待起飞——就像某一只钟摆终于缓慢地摆了回来，无论是从内容、构图还是笔触而言，这些画面总算回到了相对正常的绘画范围。



谢南星，《等待的剧场》，2019，布面油画，80 × 100 cm (左); 90 × 120 cm (中); 80 × 120 cm (右)

Xie Nanxing, *A Theater of Waiting*, 2019, oil on canvas, 80 × 100 cm (left); 90 × 120 cm (middle); 80 × 120 cm (right)

大概是受到了前两个系列的愚弄，弗朗霍费先生面对这般具象、直接的画面时，反而不肯轻易说话了，他似乎想要先研究一下，这些画之中是否也有什么会突然冒出来的坏水，同时，他看了一眼自己的手表。

这组画的主题似乎令人联想到高更的名作。画面更多地采用冷色调，虽然塑造了那些人物的形象和空间场景，但保持了一种与写实的间距，这是因为，除了笔触的控制之外，画面里的光源没有自然之感，更像在舞台上经由人工布设而成，一种白惨惨的、类似曝光过度的光线，充斥着神经质的不安，漫溢在整个画面。即使是机舱内的那幅，这光线也像一场静悄悄的霾，从前端及侧翼合围，以致于落座的人群仿佛置身于一场麻木而有序的逃亡氛围里。

这一次，谢南星似乎没有什么要解释的，望着自己的画，他忽然轻轻地、习惯性地哎了一声，好像为自己这样画感到愧疚和无奈，这情状挺像巴尔扎克写到的，“这种羞耻心，一般有希望获得荣誉的人在经营他们的艺术中都会丧失殆尽，正如漂亮妇女在风月场中会丧失羞耻心一样。对胜利习以为常会使怀疑越来越小，而羞耻心也许就是一种怀疑”。

“它们倒像是提醒我该走了”，老人说道：“这几幅画不俗气，你的优点在于你能够控制那个度，我算是看明白了，你就是存心不想好好画，你更愿意扮演绘画这座帝国大厦里的监控镜头……虽然我更喜欢你在瑞士的那批画，但还是要赞赏你不妥协的劲头，怎么说呢？也许你的画再现了我的某些思考过程，围绕着绘画之事的那些点点滴滴，你倒是挺有剖析的耐心，确实，有时候，当我灵感附体，看见了绘画全新的曙光，再走进罗浮宫或者蓬皮杜，真觉得墙上挂着的一切俗不可耐，恨不得一把火把它们烧光，更不用说那些画廊里新推出的各种伪抽象，简直就是满大街的皇帝的新装！有时候，当我状态全无的时候，我也会梦见自己分解成了各种颜料，徒劳地滴淌下来，渗透到无底的深渊里……绘画总归是有限的，马拉美说得不错，骰子一掷改变不了偶然……”

他盯着谢南星的眼睛，继续说道：“也许我老了，而你，我不相信你压根儿就不想再画出一幅好画来，你其实充满了野心和渴望，你的内心并不会放弃画一幅伟大作品的意图，你就继续捣蛋吧，你还年轻，还有可以浪费的时间，但是，一个人自从生下来就应该知道，时间不多了。”

谢南星答道：“我只是不想太把绘画当成那回事，如果没有你在巴尔扎克的小说里经历的那场失败，大概也不会有后来的那些变革，那些新的流派、主义……至少我是这么认为的，如果我们不首先毁了自己，又怎么知道那个更大、更完整的存在呢？”

两个人相互看着，老人忽然张开手臂，说：我得走了。

他们拥抱之后，他又主动地和我握了握手，脸上突然浮现出孩子般天真而狡黠的笑容，说：“你这次可是接了一件不容易的活儿”。

门被推开，小院淹没在暴雨中，昏黄的路灯越过灰色的砖墙，映照着密集的雨丝、暗淡的花台和抖动的藤蔓。

“你要不要等到雨小一点再动身？”谢南星问道。

“雨怎么能够隔离得了我？何况，我喜欢隔离的感觉”，弗朗霍费先生答道：“人类最大的问题就是沟通得太多、太便利了，而不是单独地和上天沟通。”

望着他消失在雨里的身影，谢南星忽然喃喃自语起来：“他这么一来一去，我怎么觉得自己的展览已经做过了似的？……”

[1] 女会计指的是弗洛伊德画过的胖模特、救济金管理人苏·蒂莉。

[2] 引自《谢南星：无题三种》，原载于2015年11月21日ARTFORUM中文网。

Frenhofer/Xie Nanxing

Text by Zhu Zhu

I

In "The Unknown Masterpiece," Honoré de Balzac presents Master Frenhofer, a strange character who seems to understand all of the techniques and secrets behind a good painting, but he is full of doubts about painting itself. The more deeply he contemplates the absolute truth of color and line, the more he despairs and wallows in self-doubt. In the short story, Master Frenhofer declares, "Strictly speaking, there's no such thing as drawing!" [1]

Frenhofer's most recent visit, in August this year, was to Xie Nanxing's studio in Caochangdi. He repeated several times that he had come a long way from Paris. He had chanced upon Xie Nanxing's paintings in Switzerland before the pandemic started, and he found something he had liked about them. It really was not easy to fly from Europe back then, but for him, nothing in the world was difficult except for painting.

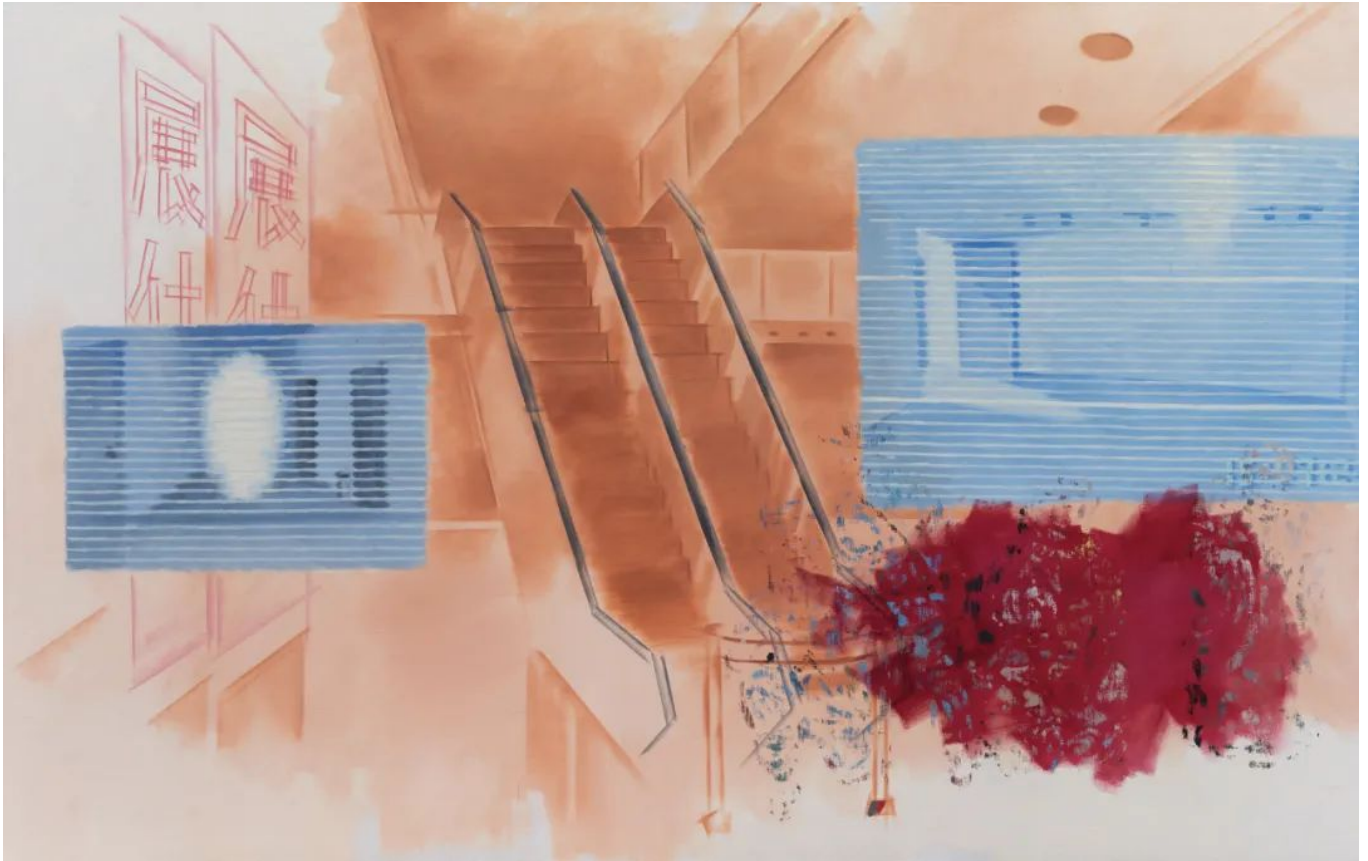
When we met, Xie Nanxing introduced me to him, telling him that I was a critic who was writing the essay for his new solo exhibition.

"A critic? What can a critic understand? Aren't they just the decorators of the art world?" He was not at all friendly to me.

Of course, I could have retorted, but I had already read about his temperament in Balzac's story, so I just had to pretend I hadn't heard him.

"Now, what kinds of things are you planning to exhibit?" the old man asked Xie Nanxing as he stood in the center of the studio and the point of his white beard suddenly flipped upward. "In France, painting is already dead."

At that point, I briefly became a porter. Xie and I carried the works that were going to be exhibited from the store room one by one. The first things we moved were three rather large oil paintings. After carefully avoiding the edge of the sofa, we leaned two of them against a wall, and the third against the door. They intentionally seemed to repeat Frenhofer's question, because these three paintings belonged to a series entitled *What to Exhibit*.



谢南星，《展什么 No. 3》，2017，布面油画，190 × 300 cm

Xie Nanxing, *What to Exhibit No. 3*, 2017, oil on canvas, 190 × 300 cm

The old man squinted at them, his eyes moving from one work to the next. He asked, "So you haven't really thought about what to paint in these spaces?"

"No," Xie Nanxing replied, "These are the finished paintings."

Of the three paintings, which the old man thought were sketches that Xie was using to plan out the structure, the compositions of the first and third works were most similar, both representing interior scenes of empty exhibition galleries. The space has aspects of both a museum and a mall, namely, staircases, bannisters, and pedestals. The Chinese characters for "What to Exhibit" have been turned into a slogan on horizontal and vertical banners hung in the scenes. The image in the third painting is collaged with two floating windows depicting security camera images of corridors. A layer of horizontal lines mars the images; it looks like there is an issue with the resolution in the camera or that we are watching or spying through a Venetian blind. This effect was enlarged to become the subject of the second painting. Through that pattern, you can faintly see an interior space labeled with the word "museum" and the number 3. Within this space, a group of phantoms or ghosts move in the shadows. These phantoms also appear in the other two paintings. Although these paintings are treated as empty spaces, they are not open; they radiate the humming fear that emerges after night falls.

I've heard Xie Nanxing explain that these phantoms are roughly equivalent to the ghosts or other strange images that various artists have produced—they wait to be given form and definition by the exhibition. He intentionally hybridized the museum space, mixing it with the characteristics of a mall. Of course, this is an institutional critique related to the discursive power of museums and the intermingling of capital and profit that underpin them. However, compared to the overly serious discussions of certain conceptual artists, Xie has treated this subject in an amusing, relaxed way.

Things went a bit differently than expected. Frenhofer stood deep in thought, and a storm of words seemed to be brewing.

"The technique in this painting could be seen as illustrative, not descriptive. Painting itself is not the focus," I said.

"What kind of critique is that?" It was as if my words lit a fuse, because the old man suddenly erupted. He brandished and pointed his walking stick, saying, "Look here, here, and here." The walking stick made several circles over empty space, as if he were outlining specific parts. "This part has Durer's cool severity! Also, this part has the magnificence of the Venetian School!"

His walking stick was swaying so much it was difficult to follow. Upon receiving this praise, Xie shyly said, "I wasn't thinking about it so much. I was just making a joke..."

"When you paint, you should forget everything. You should paint every painting as if it were your first and last painting." A martyr's indignance and grief appeared on the old man's face. He looked at Xie and continued, "Don't think that I was praising you just now, not by a long shot, young man. I don't like the intentional carelessness of this work. You certainly have some talent, but you seem to be drifting farther outside of painting. You like jokes. Can you make a living on jokes?"

"When a painting is placed in a different space, it may very well engage with a different set of encounters and fates. Isn't this something we should care about? Challenging the existence of any power also challenges the opportunism of painting. In my view, too much garbage has been given legitimacy or even an inexplicable halo..." Xie replied.

"So what? The world of painting has always been 99% garbage and 1% good painting. That 1% often lacks a bit of something, and this little bit is everything. We unrelentingly yet calmly spend

our entire lives seeking it out, but we won't necessarily find it. Why must you waste your energy and ideas on matching wits with the 99%? Or with some... institution?"

"We will always need people to say something, and not just immerse themselves in their fantasies. Everyone believes that they can become part of that 1%, adding an immortal image to the world. It's a delusion! I really question whether painting is even necessary," Xie Nanxing replied.

"This is something we have in common, otherwise I would not have come from so far away to see you, but you should still stay within painting. This is life! You cannot have all the women in the world. You choose one woman, and through her, you exhaust all women..."

"Take Lucian Freud, did he paint all women like that one accountant?"[2] Xie Nanxing stubbornly and disdainfully retorted.

"Don't talk to me about Freud, he's a moron!" the old man said raising his voice. "Europe's already done for! I blame it all on that bad boy Duchamp. He was intentionally hard on people. He should have just played chess to his heart's content and won a world championship for France. You look, the Americans mock us through him..."

II

The air became stagnant as the light from a flash of lightning came in through the window. The rain had not yet started to fall. Frenhofer found half a bottle of Erguotou liquor in the kitchenette. Brow furrowed, he took a sip, then his expression relaxed, "Now, shall we continue?"

Xie's *Seven Portraits* series was brought out, which were smaller in size. After they were placed in order, the old man's brows, which had just relaxed, knitted back together again. He said, almost mumbling to himself, "My God, what were you trying to do here?"

"I painted people around me: a shy girl, a person sneezing out their soul, or a Caochangdi security guard... I first paint a rather realist portrait, then allow the paint to seep down into the layer of canvas below, which becomes a trace, or evidence, of the painting above. Next, I continue painting on the bottom layer of canvas, and I add things from my observations and suppositions about the personalities of these people. This painting is the security guard I was talking about. I painted a snail on the canvas that fuses with the traces leftover from the painting

above. My impression is of him lazing around in the sun at the entrance to the village every day, a lot like a snail. In this painting..."



谢南星，《七个肖像 No. 4》，2018，布面油画，100 × 100 cm

Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 4*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

On hearing Xie's response, the old man sat down on the sofa, holding his chin in his hands. It looked as if both the alcohol and the jetlag were having an effect, and I wondered if he was dozing off. However, when Xie stopped, he seemed to recover his energy. He looked at the paintings intently for a while. With a bit of helplessness in his voice, he said, "...That's it? Can I say something? Evidence? This is actually an interesting word. We have all committed a crime against painting, and we are continuing to do so."

谢南星，《七个肖像 No. 7》，2018，布面油画，100 × 100 cm

Xie Nanxing, *Seven Portraits No. 7*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

He stood up slowly, moved closer to the paintings, and said, "I must say that, although I don't like this... garbage, it makes me think of my childhood. I liked fairy tales and cartoons, and that was a really good time in my life. Spring breezes have something intoxicating about them, blowing along the old bookstalls by the Seine. Time stops when you're reading. I was like that little snail, curled up there all day. I wasn't really like a snail; I was more like a sea sponge, absorbing everything as if my life depended on it. I absorbed various images, nutrients, and impurities, and it was around that time that I fell in love with painting... You've probably been there, right?"

He turned his head to look at us, and continued, "Perhaps I really shouldn't have chosen painting as a path... it's too hard. However, sentiment is not a good thing; it should be completely removed from one's life and images. In any age, people should not be sentimental."

The thunderstorm had started. Frenhofer and Xie moved closer, facing the canvas as they discussed a few more details, but the conversation was drowned out by the rain.

I had to admit that almost everything he said about painting was correct; the problem was that he persistently focused on absolutes and refused to question his assumptions, to the point that communication became impossible. However, when you saw his trembling knees as he squatted to inspect a painting or his silhouette when he was immersed in silence or recollection, he felt like a gratifying presence. After all, very few people have this kind of passion for painting, and his passion really lived at a high altitude. Perhaps we could try layering Frenhofer and XieNanxing, like in Xie's portrait series.

What would this layering look like? First, the ready-made parts, which do not need to be re-layered, are their personalities—cynical and impatient. In terms of painting, they are both fascinated by the grand tradition and charm of painting. They have benefitted from certain influences and they have painted some convincing works, but despair and doubt are their constant companions. They are destined to be tormented by this undertaking for the rest of their lives. As for their differences, Frenhofer is doomed to live and die trying to paint a perfect painting. Frenhofer is known for asking, "What is it lacking? It lacks a bit of something, and this little bit is everything." The old man's entire life is seeking out "this little bit," while Xie Nanxing sees this pursuit as an ineffective mirror-image derivative of the history of painting, so he has transformed himself into the hand that will smash that dream. On this point, I wrote the following in the essay for Xie's last exhibition:

More than you do with many other people, you need a key to understanding Xie Nanxing. In about 2001, he abandoned the expressive system of psychological realism and shifted toward seeing pictures as a psychological defect in painting itself. There were several reasons for this shift, but the first was an alertness to the fact that artists of the same generation or a previous one seemed to want to luxuriate in the symbols they had created and enjoy the favor they bring. Another aspect to this is the anxiety of painting in the post-Richter era. Even though Xie Nanxing painted extremely pure works that seemed out of focus, stylistic characteristics were still secondary. This proud, aloof Chinese man undoubtedly felt dissatisfied. Of course, the anxiety does not stop there. Highlighted by other mediums, he is keenly aware of the sense of decline surrounding painting.

His recent working methods involve recording source material in photographs and videos, sending them to a TV screen, capturing stills, and sketching from those stills. In addition to this process, he layers two pieces of canvas and makes a detailed painting on the upper layer, while the blotches of color that seep through onto the lower layer serve as the work of art. The former method seems to refer to our inability to obtain truthful images in a world of media spectacle, while the latter satirizes the history of painting and the painter as the traditional supplier of images. [3]

Perhaps Frenhofer is overly sheltered from the outside world, and Xie Nanxing is overly sensitive to this. In my imagined portrait of Frenhofer/Xie Nanxing, that hybrid person would still be focused on painting a better painting, but he would not be too rigid or crazed. He would need to confirm the relativity of painting. By matching the finite with the infinite, he would also need to deeply consider the crisis that painting is confronting in a new decade, transforming it into something else valid, just as painting was transformed after the emergence of photography... But, OK, we'll stop here. Talking is always easy.

III

Later, we moved the triptych *A Theater of Waiting* out of storage. The paintings present three typical scenes from an airport: waiting for security, waiting to board, and waiting to take off after boarding the plane. Like a pendulum that eventually, if slowly, swings back, Xie's works always return to a relatively normal scope of painting in terms of content, composition, and brushwork.

As if he felt deceived by the previous two series, when Frenhofer faced these representational, direct paintings, he was not ready to speak rashly. He seemed to want to study them first, to determine whether there was some evil that would suddenly emerge from the paintings. He also looked at his watch.

The series seemed reminiscent of famous paintings by Paul Gauguin. The works generally employed a cool color palette, and although Xie depicted the forms of these people and the space of the scene, the paintings maintain some distance from realism. This is because, in addition to controlling the brushstrokes, the light sources in the painting do not feel natural. It's more like things are artificially arranged on a stage under a whitish, almost overexposed light, full of a nervous unease that permeates the entire painting. Even the light in the image inside the cabin seems quietly hazy. Enveloped from the front and side, the seated passengers seem situated within a numb and orderly atmosphere of escape.

This time, there was nothing that Xie Nanxing wanted to explain. Looking at his work, he made a gentle sound out of habit, as if he felt guilty and helpless about this kind of painting. Balzac wrote about "that indefinable humility which a man destined for glory is likely to lose in the exercise of his art, as a pretty woman loses hers in the stratagems of coquetry. The habit of triumph diminishes doubt, and humility maybe a kind of doubt." [4]

"They're actually reminding me that I should go," the old man said. "These paintings are not banal; one of your strong suits is that you can control the degree. I believe that I understand them. You did not intend to paint them perfectly; you wanted to be like a surveillance camera in the Empire State Building of painting... Although I like the work you showed in Switzerland better, I still appreciate your uncompromising energy. How do I put this? Perhaps your paintings represent some of my thought processes, revolving around those little details of painting. You really have the patience to dissect it. Sometimes, when I am possessed by inspiration, I see painting in an entirely new light. I go back to the Louvre or the Centre Pompidou, and I really feel that everything on the walls is unbearably vulgar, and I want to take a torch to it. Let's not even talk about the faux abstractions that those galleries are promoting. It's simply a street filled with emperors in their new clothes! Sometimes, when I zone out, I imagine myself breaking down into various colors, futilely dripping into the bottomless abyss... Painting is always limited. Mallarmé put it well: 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.'"

He looked Xie Nanxing in the eye and continued, "Perhaps I'm old, and you... I don't believe that you will never again paint a good painting. You're full of ambition and longing. You will not abandon the intention of painting a great painting. Continue to make trouble—you're still young, and you can still waste time. However, from the time you are born, you have to know that there isn't a lot of time."

Xie said, "I just don't want to see painting that way. Without the failure you experienced in Balzac's short story, there certainly wouldn't be that transformation, or those new schools and "isms"... At least I think so. If we don't first destroy ourselves, how can we come to know a larger and more complete mode of existence?"

The two looked at each other, and the old man suddenly opened his arms and said, "I have to go."

After they embraced, he also shook my hand. A sly yet child-like smile appeared on his face as he said, "This is a difficult job you've taken on."

When the door opened, the little courtyard had flooded in the rain, and the pale-yellow street lights passed through the grey brick wall, illuminating the densely falling rain, gloomy flower

beds, and trembling vines.

"You don't want to wait for the rain to lighten up before you go?" Xie asked.

"How could the rain isolate me? Moreover, I like the feeling of isolation," Frenhofer said.

"Humanity's biggest problem is that we communicate too frequently and too conveniently with one another. We're not communing alone with Heaven."

Looking at his silhouette disappearing through the rain, Xie Nanxing suddenly mumbled to himself, "With him coming and going this way, why do I feel as if I've already had my exhibition?"

References

Balzac, Honoré de. "The Unknown Masterpiece." In *The Unknown Masterpiece*. Translated by Richard Howard, 3-44. New York: New York Review of Books, 2001.

Zhu, Zhu. "Xie Nanxing: Wuti Sanzhong" (Xie Nanxing: Three Types of Untitled). ArtForum China, November 21, 2015. <http://www.artforum.com.cn/picks/8720>.

[1] Honoré de Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 23.

[2] The "accountant" to which he refers is Sue Tilley, a former benefits supervisor who Lucian Freud used as a model in his paintings.

[3] Translated from the original Chinese text. Zhu Zhu, "Xie Nanxing: Wuti Sanzhong" (Xie Nanxing: Three Types of Untitled), *Art Forum China*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.artforum.com.cn/picks/8720>.

[4] Balzac, 8.

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The exhibition would continue through Jan. 31, 2021. We are looking forward to your visit.

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