

2 Profile

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Xie Lei

By OLIVIA SAND

Following the numerous artists from China who have gained international recognition in the 1980s and 1990s, a younger generation is now about to follow in their footsteps. Among them is the painter Xie Lei (b. in 1983 in Huainan), who has been based in Paris for the last eight years.

Depicting a universe on the fringe of reality and the fantastic, his paintings are intriguing mainly because of their elaborate narrative aspect. With a clear vision of what he would like to accomplish in painting, Xie Lei seems to have endless imagination in regard to the topics he wants to address on canvas. With a unique approach to colour, an audience easily enters his world, picking up the subject matter where the artist left it, in order to write the next chapter in their own terms. He met with the Asian Art Newspaper to discuss his trajectory and the various aspects of his work.



The artist Xie Lei. All images Courtesy Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

You are presently working on your PhD.

XIE LEI: I actually started in the autumn of 2012. It needs to be completed within three years, which is a rather short period of time.

AAN: Most painters do not go beyond a masters degree. When you began your studies, was it your intention to go all the way to a PhD?

XL: Yes, but it is very difficult. You probably, quite rightly, wonder what is the use of a PhD for a young artist? What interests me in the process is not the writing per se, but the reading and the research in relation with my practice. In that sense, my PhD is very much practice-oriented, which is fabulous. Actually, it is a new curriculum made available to art students in France. This works perfectly for me, because I am not an art historian, I am an artist.

Although I am pursuing my PhD, I have never thought about teaching. Never. First of all, I do not think I would be able to teach: I am a foreigner, French is not my native language – even though my language skills have improved over the years. I think one needs a lot of energy for teaching and, for the moment, I would selfishly rather concentrate on my own work. I know that within the next five years my approach will

Continued on page 4

4 Profile

remain the same. I realise that exchanging with other students would also be very constructive, but I would currently rather focus on my own practice.

AAN: Your PhD topic is based on and is an investigation of your own practice and your topic, 'Between wolves and dogs...'. Is it a logical choice considering your practice? XL: Absolutely. Linguistically, I find the topic very intriguing and one cannot properly translate it. It is very visual but at the same time, very mythical, very profound and I believe it encapsulates a lot. It is a topic that requires research and thinking.

AAN: Would you say that the research involved in your PhD is helpful in your practice as a painter? XL: Definitely. It provides another reflection and a different approach towards my work. Of course, I can be in my studio by myself relying on various resources and thoughts, but that is very different. Being among the PhD candidates and the professors and the guest speakers, gives me the chance to have many stimulating discussions. Clearly, I could also attend various lectures by myself, but ultimately it is not the same.

AAN: Philippe Cogné (b. 1957), a marvellous French painter, is also guiding you in your PhD. It seems like an excellent match!

XL: I had been thinking about having Philippe Cogné as a tutor for my PhD. For the past four years, James Reilly (b. 1956) has been my teacher and since he is Welsh, it also allowed me to learn about another culture. Philippe Cogné has been coming to my studio on a regular basis and he has been very attentive and helpful. It is a great opportunity. I love his work, and he is also an excellent professor.

AAN: You have decided to settle in Paris. As you speak perfect English, why not settle in New York, London, or a city you seem to be very fond of, like Berlin? XL: It is a long story. Since I was a child, Paris has always been my dream, my love even. I guess all Chinese have that stereotypical idea about Paris... When I was in art school in Beijing, I was still determined to come to Paris, one day, to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. I started to learn French whilst still in China. Now that my dream has come true, life is just about to begin! For now, my life is here. As for my work, I find that there is a certain tension in Paris. Presently, I am in a position where I can fully integrate



Harvest (2011, oil on canvas, 320 x 200 cm)

I love colours in the same way that a child does. I am interested in all the mainstream theories of colour.

the world around me, but at the same time remain a spectator and keep a certain distance – when I need to. I can remain in my studio for two weeks with no contact with the outside world and can fully focus on my work.

I did not feel the same way in New York, for example. Although I find the city extremely stimulating, there is simply too much going on which makes it quite difficult for me to concentrate on my painting.

AAN: You were in New York on an exchange programme with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. XL: Yes, I stayed there for five months and attended Hunter College. It was such a great opportunity! I love to travel and discover new places. This gave me a new outlook on things and at the same time makes me realise the necessity to focus on my work. I like to travel to Germany, Italy, and England, which are the three countries in Europe I tend to go to most often. I am also hoping to visit the Nordic countries. I try to go back to China once or twice a year in order to discover different parts of the country I have never been to and to explore my own culture.

AAN: Among the Chinese artists, you are one of the very few painters who does not overtly refer to a Chinese iconography.

XL: That is true. I tend to view my work as being very personal. Also, the painters that refer to a Chinese iconography belong to another generation with a completely different selective memory compared to my generation – the computer and the internet generation. Over the years, I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to get a better understanding of who I am, where I am going and what I want to do. It may sound like I have a strong ego, but trying to answer these questions represents another way in which to define my position in a place and therefore, define my orientation. It is all based on where I am, where I want to go, and what I want to do. Between these points, there can be a line or a curve. In this context, I find that there are no boundaries and no limits anymore. Consequently, nationalities are getting blurred and it is more and more about a personal language and a personal vocabulary.

AAN: With regards to your painting, where would you like to travel next?

XL: I always find some strength and a new dynamic in Germany. As far as painting is concerned, I would say that Germany is a country as rich as France with a pictorial tension combined with a rich tradition starting for example with Böcklin (1827-1901), or Friedrich (1774-1840). For me, Germany's cultural heritage is an undeniable source, but I have no intention of copying it; theirs is a different interpretation. As it is not my culture, I am simply trying to get into their world and understand it.

Going beyond my most recent travels, I went to Mexico and Cuba



Coming back, going (2013, oil on canvas, 160 x 208.5 cm)



Dream (2013, oil on canvas, 140 x 160 cm)

with James Reilly three years ago. Again, I was discovering another culture that was so lively and impressed me with its colours! The colours did not strike me that much as being wild, but more as being violent in the sense that I had never encountered anything like that before. Looking back, it is possibly that trip that changed my vision about colour, which can be direct, bright, yet at the same time very subtle.

AAN: Speaking of colour, your selection is very unusual with an interesting contrast between light and shadow. Also, there is always a glimmer standing out of the painting. How do you go about your composition?

XL: Most of all, I love colours in the same way that a child does. Around me, very few people do not like colour. I believe there is something profound to be developed with the perception of colours. Basically, we

are living in a world surrounded by colour. When I was made aware that dogs only saw the world in black and white, I was fascinated by the way they were able to differentiate things. As for us humans, it is intriguing how we perceive coloured elements and how psychologically we make the distinction between one and more colours and their nuances... and how this can trigger even more things: what is imposed, or what is suggestive, this is what interests me. I am also interested in all the mainstream theories of colour.

You pointed out the distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' colours: I have frequently been told that my paintings have 'Nordic colours', although I have never visited that part of the world. I find this even more fascinating! I would love to see an iceberg in the daylight, or when the night falls. However, I am also a little scared to go there, as I have waited so long and I may end up being disappointed to discover that Nordic light is not what I imagine it to be. I may refer to a theory saying that there is no difference between rational and irrational. I think that for me it is the same thing with colour. Perhaps I am looking for something in the world of Borges with the distinction real/unreal, but with colours instead. Within colour, within the pictorial world, the distinction would be between simple and complex by using the most basic and strongest things possible, but with a subtle power. I think this is what my approach to colour is all about, and I realise this is quite challenging. In this sense, the subject matter has become secondary, and most of all it is the pictorial dimension that interests me. A painting is already limited, per se, whether it is rectangular, or small, or big, regardless of the shape. At the same time, within these limitations, I find that my research is unlimited. To me, the real challenge is to push the boundaries of painting even further.

AAN: What inspires you and pushes you to paint?

XL: Many things: reading, of course, travels, stolen images because we live in a world of images with the internet, magazines, things we saw on the street. There is also music with all its tension, or films that push me towards the canvas.

AAN: When living in China, did



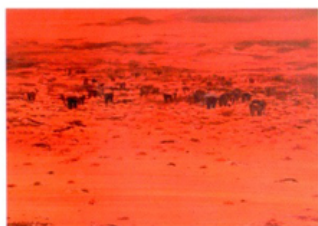
Leader (2013, oil on canvas, 160 x 140 cm)

you work with traditional ink?

XL: Yes, absolutely. It is an important element within my training and basically traditional ink painting is part of my heritage. The medium of traditional ink offers great possibilities within calligraphy and ink painting. Initially, that training process was based on copying masterpieces in order to acquire the techniques. I believe that I have now reached a stage where I can rely on that technique with a certain freedom. However, I am aware that I need to use it cautiously as when people see it, they may find it looking very 'Chinese'. Therefore, I am very careful in using it, as ultimately it can be quite limiting, and I may immediately be categorised as a Chinese artist. I also try to avoid using traditional ink, for the moment, as it is not a technique that speaks to me the most.

AAN: For many years, contemporary calligraphy was considered old fashioned and outdated. It has recently made a comeback and is greatly appreciated by artists as well as collectors. How do you view the evolution of contemporary calligraphy?

XL: I must admit that I do not know contemporary calligraphy very well. However, I am very fond of Mi Fu (1051-1107) and of the tradition of the great masters from history. Every time I go back to China, I look at their work as they are part of my education, and I very much respond to it. In that sense, I would say that I tend to be a little bit traditional. Overall, I am thrilled to see the development of that tradition with regards to calligraphy, ink, the Chinese landscape, but I consider it more as a simple medium. My medium is oil painting. I guess my preference towards oil has



Don't take my sunshine away (2013)
oil on canvas,
70 x 100 cm

to do more with personal taste than with anything else.

AAN: The animal world is present in your work. Has it always been the case?

XL: It started around 2007 or 2008 with a number of works that I entitled *Imaginary Botany*. It was based on a fascination with the animal world, for example, with the world of dogs as I mentioned before, but also with my Chinese heritage of imaginary and fantastic beasts that ultimately stay alive through legends. At the same time, I think it is very much related to Lévi-Strauss with animals being the best mirror of the human beings. I have been working on that topic for two or three years, but I thought it was a little limited in the sense that I do not want to work exclusively on animal subject matter. My goal is to use animals as a tool, as a mirror or as a reflection referring to us humans and to our world.

AAN: The titles of your paintings are intriguing. They are accurate without giving it all away.

XL: For a short while, many of my works were simply 'untitled', as

initially I encountered a language problem. Then, I thought I could not go on like that because titles are important. They should not be descriptive, but they can act like a key for the audience, depending on whether they know the title before or after seeing the work. Also, I have the habit of writing down many things from songs, films or expressions used in daily life that later on can serve as titles. For example, I love the title 'enter at own risk', which I saw in the subway. I think about something that as a viewer allows you to enter the work without creating a myth.

AAN: Could you imagine moving on to explore video or film?

XL: Strangely enough, I am very interested in video, film, and images in general as well as other media like installations. In practical terms, it is a process and it is important to be able to take a different approach. It is another world. As I was in New York, there was a period of six months during which I did not paint a lot. I have learned a great deal about various techniques I was not familiar with, and for the future, I definitely have a number of projects

involving video.

AAN: How do you envision your videos?

XL: It can be something narrative, but the script would not be a fiction. I have a lot of footage, which I am not going to show for the moment. It would be very narrative-oriented as my paintings are. For example, I am thinking about a project about Hong Kong, sharing what I felt and what I saw, but I have not figured out in what context yet. However, it will remain linked to my paintings. I find it difficult to combine painting and video at the same time and although both media are completely different, they somehow remain linked.

I am not excluding anything, but for now I would rather concentrate on the challenges of painting. Of course, I am planning other projects for the future, however, both media – painting and video – treat time in a different manner. For video, it is about time that has gone by whereas for painting it is about time that is 'combined', or juxtaposed. These are two notions of time, imposed and free that are quite different for the viewer. In a time-based medium such as video, the viewer enters, likes or dislikes what he sees, while with painting it is in front of us. It requires time, and unfortunately many people do not have time to look at a piece whether we are dealing with video, painting or sculpture.

What I tend to see around me is that more and more people want to own and to reappropriate what they see: one takes an image, a photo, but one does not properly look at the painting. It is a sad development, but they think they have seen it as they have captured it on their cameras.

AAN: Which contemporary artists

capture your interest?

XL: It is difficult to say and I have not thought about other painters. I think more about installations: Anish Kapoor, for example, although there is no relation to my work. He is a great artist using all the possibilities in the various media be this installation or sculpture. I guess that may be an inspiration, or an influence. Also, I really like Anselm Kiefer, who I consider a true master through the integration in his work of painting and sculpture, the historical aspect and his artistic development over the years. I also like Dana Schutz maybe because what she does has nothing to do with what I do. It is a 'masculine' style of painting, very open and free and she pushes the boundaries. That is an element that appeals to me a great deal.

AAN: You had an exhibition in China last year. How did people read your work?

XL: It was another world. The audience could sometimes recognise some of the references when it came to the butterflies, for example, and their reaction was slightly more direct. Otherwise, they see me as a young Chinese artist that they have not seen so far.

AAN: Are you tempted by the idea to keep a studio in China a few months a year?

XL: Not at the moment. Painting like any other discipline is a quite physical activity and I would like to concentrate on a specific place. This of course does not prevent me from travelling and exploring other parts of the world.