

Out of a whirlwind

Dost thou generate from Heaven or from Hell?

Charles Baudelaire, « Hymn to Beauty »

For Xie Lei, finding inspiration to create an image is never difficult because, when he paints, he does not try to impart images with any immediate meaning. This is why his painting practice differs so fundamentally from that of his contemporaries, which are often charged with concepts. He is more concerned with the infinite possibilities that a pictorial practice has to offer, and with the onlookers' emotional response to a painting. The most important thing to be noted is that such a thinking process and such a vision are more the result of an aesthetical immersion than a strategy.

Xie Lei's inspiration often comes from his own life and from the imaginary references he has built through his readings. This is why, when facing Xie Lei's paintings, the onlooker's imagination is set free. « Starving » for example, opens up a pictorial dimension into the world of dreams – the tones are cold and the brush strokes play a leading role in the image's strength. The very large format adds to the onlooker's mystification. The inspiration for this painting came from a real life event – one day on a street in Paris, the artist came across a homeless man, bent over, feeding bread to pigeons. As is the case in many of the scenes from which Xie Lei could draw his inspiration from, this scene was not translated into an ideological condemnation, and the onlooker does not need to see this piece of work through a social or political prism. What the artist is mostly concerned about is how to create a pictorial tension within the format defined by the canvas. In order to reach this goal, Xie Lei decided against a detailed description of each bird, and instead played with him or her as a balancing tool for colors and chiaroscuro

Ponderings and musings about art history pepper Xie Lei's work. At ease with the aesthetics of German romanticism, his paintings are often inspired by a quest for the sublime. For « Between You And Yourself » the artist chose, again, the dreamy ultramarine as the main color for the painting in which naked tree trunks stand close together erect under the sky. The unreal and seemingly infinite forest invites the puzzled onlooker to carry his gaze to the very end of the pictorial space. Furthermore, a strange sky and a ground, which despite the fact that it has no obvious light source is extremely luminous, reinforce a feeling of unease, of anxiety, and create the illusion that a violent storm is approaching. Of course, such a landscape does not exist in reality – it springs from the artist's imagination. Xie Lei does not appear to be overly concerned with the title of this piece – and many of his paintings are given titles only after they have been completed. For him, painting is not writing, and must create its own visual vocabulary. While he paints, Xie Lei ceaselessly enters into a dialogue – sometimes even perhaps into a conflict - with the painting, with the images that he sees as human beings and not as passive objects. Or to be more precise, “unexpected encounters” with images happen.

Xie Lei has an original way of thinking about painting - free and open. An avid reader, he often gets his inspiration from literature, from parables, from philosophy or from art history, and will grab opportunities to transform them in his own way. « Around the Moon » offers a clean break from the usual way we look at images. Children's silhouettes have replaced the owls or birds that are standing on a tree branch to gaze at the moon, and this infuses the painting with a strong metaphoric meaning reminiscent of children's tales. Instead of a classical image, what is offered is a possibility of a different that may be seen as the diversion of an accepted formula. Similarly, for « Harvest », he thought of three workers holding a rainbow with long sticks – giving perhaps a different point of

view on the Western aphorism *the other side of the rainbow*. By using this mode of expression Xie Lei not only opens up a humoristic dimension but also creates for the onlooker a great visual stimulation by using contrasted chromatic tones.

« Congregation » reminds one of the Chinese proverbs that talks of monkeys trying to catch the moon and this conversion of a text into a painting reminds one of the Flemish tradition, as in « The Haywain » or « The Ship of Fools » by Hieronymus Bosch. Although the artist addresses a few major themes, each painting has none the less its own inspiration and meaning. In « Time Out » however the message is more vague and allows for a greater freedom of interpretation; a headless man stands in waters that the last rays of the setting sun have turned red, and is examining his head that he carries in his hands. A dense clump of aquatic plants imparts the scene with an aura of melancholy and mystery. This painting may allude to religious musings, to a literary piece, to a reference in art history. We do not know what the artist wanted to achieve but one thing is certain: painting, the medium itself, means a lot more to Xie Lei.

Liang Shuhan