

The Remains of the Day

The Picture Chronicle of Xia Xing

by Ulrike Münter

Beginning your day by looking at the papers implies leaving the cozy retreat of private life. Only ever so rarely has the news printed on recycled paper anything positive to offer to the readers. For not only art and literature as a rule tend to focus on the dark side of life—journalists as well are routinely drawn to scenes of accident or scandal, of grief or manifestations of power. Every day brings new papers, new news, as it were. Like some tidal phenomenon, the deluge of texts and images is flooding the reader's previously stored information.

In 2004, the Chinese artist Xia Xing (born in 1974 in Shihezi, Xinjiang province, now living in Beijing) started his picture chronicle. From the issues of "Xin Jingbao" (New Beijing News, published since November 2003), he chose front-page photos reporting about remarkable events to transfer the scenes in these photographs—more or less faithfully to details—in oil and often with broad brushstrokes, on canvasses of identical size: 70 cm in height and 100 cm in width. If the original photo was a portrait format, this self-imposed restriction to the landscape layout forces Xia Xing to more intrusive interventions.

Each annual sequence is composed of 60 pictures, each titled with the publication date of the newspaper. The related title page that carried the original photo and the article that went with it are technically part of the work though not necessarily displayed as well.

Pictures without headlines

How does the image memory of newspaper readers work? To what extent do press photos still convey information when you take away their caption text? And: is there such a thing as a global image memory? Standing before Xia Xing's paintings, the viewer realizes the potential as well as the limits of the medium at first hand. Chinese viewers will no doubt be familiar with much more of the contents shown in the photos than people from outside China, in particular since in several cases the scenes contain hanzi characters on banners or billboards. As for works **05.05.21** and **05.10.17**, the script is actually at the center of the painting. While the kneeling, apathetically staring man with the sign around his neck immediately makes us think of some form of public humiliation, we learn from the inscription that this is in fact a missing persons report—and what's more, the writer who deplores the loss of his wife is threatening retribution in the same breath, for the text says "I am looking for my wife, Ma Yanchun. If she does not return within the next three days, I will kill somebody."

With increasing temporal distance from the event to which the press photo refers, even the most informed person loses touch with the image's content. Another thing is that the artist decided against using the associated headline as the title. Xia Xing's "pictures based on pictures" thus set off a mental search program in the viewer, an exploration of the scope of one's own knowledge, a virtual walk through the individual image/information archive. A further source of this fresh approach to images is the news story that went with it. Particularly in conjunction with photos from the 2004 (but also the 2005) sequence, one becomes aware how quickly even incidents that at the time were most

emotionally charged can no longer be remembered. How did the person in **05.02.17** get mauled in this way? Is it a victim of one of the countless mine accidents that the woman in **05.05.20** bemoans? Sometimes only vague attributions can be made. For instance, it is quite likely that the male group in **05.11.27** is an official delegation and a number of journalists examining the aftermath of some environmental disaster. The reason why one does not immediately associate a concrete event to the picture is the sheer frequency of this type of news.

Xia Xing's works create an imaginary reversal of time, they turn the standard dogmas of press photos into their opposite. For the principle of such images is to reach the reader with the most possible up-to-dateness, i.e. with little or no temporal distance from the events shown in the photos. Xia Xing, however, gets the "water under the bridge" to flow back and invests it with a new function. Detached from the concrete headlines, his picture sequence make us realize the transitory character of emotions such as curiosity, outrage or dismay. Recurring motives like the meeting of politicians, mass gatherings, police interventions, mine accidents or environmental disasters show a continuity of the briefly topical, which in retrospect takes all the punch out of the punchline caption.

A quantum leap in the medium: from photograph to painting

Comparing the photos with Xia Xing's paintings, we notice—despite an obvious preference for the image content, as opposed to an ambition of formal originality—certain variations in the technique. While the artist displays scenes of political power presentation, such as in **05.04.30** and **05.05.13**, with strikingly flat and almost monochrome coat application, he composes all faces—but often also the backdrops of scenes portraying human distress or even happiness—with a well-managed flickering illumination. In **05.01.06** it is the front-page headline and public praise of the newly-born 1.3 billionth Chinese; in **05.01.19** it is the abduction of Chinese migrant workers in Iraq. Whether it is a baby with a rosy complexion surrounded by surgery nurses and clean white sheets, or the victims of Iraqi despotism in unwelcoming gray, blue and dusty beige tonalities: it is the almost violently expressive brushwork and the intense coloring of the paintings which artistically reflect a state of agitation. The worm's, or bird's, eye view in many photos that is transferred to the painting adds an additional element of disconcertment.

The unmistakable artistic statement of Xia Xing's annual sequence is the alignment of formats. Regardless of the original's subject, all scenes are brought into a landscape layout. Hanging all paintings closely together at the same height adds to convey to them the status of a collective entity. "I want to do away with the customary interpretation of events as being important or unimportant", says the artist. High-ranking politician or coal miner, the heights and the depths of human life, corruption scandal or stock market trends: Xia Xing fits them into the stream of images, lets them become part of a successively proceeding history that we are witnessing day by day—or the facets of which we take account of, by reading the papers, for example. The artist snatches some showcase occurrences from oblivion, revives them in the process of painting, invests them with a personal touch by choosing a particular technique, and then surrenders his image collection to the viewer. By going for a form of painting that is in undeceivable proximity to its objects, this painter assumes the mission of archivist and records manager. And it is not only information as such that is archived here but also the empathetic connection between the occurrence (as well as the persons involved in it) and the viewer.

The artist as chronicler

Every history of art, whether Western or Eastern art, is characterized by periodic redefinitions of the artist's function and position within society. The art scene of China, which had been thriving and alive with international exchange in the early 20th century, was brought to a grinding halt decreed by the early People's Republic and even more so by the Cultural Revolution. Suddenly cut off from the rest of the world, the independent development of Chinese modern art was stalled for quite some time. Under Mao, art was nothing but an extension of the party line. All imagery got reduced to that of Socialist realism. After the opening of the country at the end of the 1970s, Chinese artists searched, in the most diverse genres, for new forms of expression that reflected their own temperaments and intentions. Aside from a revival of landscape painting and calligraphy, the garish Mao pop art, and the provocative attitude of Cynical Realism, there was the group of artists that Xia Xing can be associated with. They are not interested in art for art's sake. Creating art to them is a state of mind, it serves to define their point of reference in the rapidly changing reality of life. What really counts is not the limelight of the art industry, the vain dramatization of one's own originality. The framework of everyday life becomes the very subject of one's work.

So there is a profound logic in Xia Xing's decision, as an artist living in Beijing, to focus on a daily newspaper that—with more than 450,000 sold copies every day (number given by the paper itself)—has no little influence on the capital's public opinion, but also represents that opinion. In particular since this very newspaper, although administratively under the control of the Communist party, has the self-proclaimed aim to become more of a mouthpiece for the newly forming middle class. Next to semi-official articles on politics and the economy, one may read about the questionable handling of SARS patients or a bad storm disaster that the authorities didn't bother to warn the population about. An editorial note says, "We accept all responsibility for the news we print. There are some things we will not be able to report on. But we will not write any news that is false." Even though there can be no question of freedom of the press in the Western sense, "Xin Jingbao" marks a real upheaval in the media landscape, reflecting at the same time the changing daily realities that the inhabitants of China's metropolises are living with. Xia Xing's picture chronicle documents these developments. By the choice of photos and by the painting technique, his personal perspective imprints itself permanently onto the pictures we see.

Powerless and furious

Ulrike Münter and Su Xiaoqin in conversation with Xia Xing

Ulrike Münter: How did the decision come about to make front-page photos of the "New Beijing News" (Xin Jingbao) the subject of your artistic work?

Xia Xing: Actually, I studied printing and typography and my first art was abstract painting. Then I started photography: shooting empty streets, architecture, etc. Then at some point, I felt this was no longer in tune with my attitude to life. I live here in Beijing, I'm part of this society, and this should somehow be reflected in my work. And it was just at that time that "Xin Jingbao" was founded. There are a number of really committed and critical journalists who work for this paper. I've been reading every single issue, like many other Beijingers.

Ulrike Münter: By bringing all your paintings of the "2004", "2005" and "2006" sequences into the same format, you deprive all those widely different issues that are being reported on of their individual dimension. Why?

Xia Xing: They are all real in the same way. And even though political events seem to be of greater relevance than, say, individual destinies, I want to achieve a different perspective on things with my work. Sometimes a news item makes me enormously angry but of course I know I have no influence whatsoever. It is this sense of powerlessness, but I am also furious. Painting for me is an attempt to escape this feeling, at least while I'm painting.

Ulrike Münter: Are those press photos all transferred one-to-one to your pictures or do you sometimes select certain elements? I mean do you decide on a dramatic center, leaving out parts of the picture? For instance, what about **05.06.14** (scratch marks on a fissured surface)? This work immediately caught my eye. It is impossible to imagine the photo it was based on.

Xia Xing: On the one hand, I choose pictures of events that have had a lot of resonance with the public, and these items I by and large adopt as they are. On the other hand—and that applies to this photo to a particularly great extent—there are images that move me deeply in some way. The picture with the scratch marks refers to a disaster in Liaoning province. A river overflowed and flooded a school. Many children lost their lives in this incident. The local government could have prevented this; there had been weather forecasts that almost predicted the flood. The teachers and students could have been warned.

Su Xiaoqin: And who made those marks ?

Xia Xing: Whether the scratches in the picture were produced by people trying to save themselves or by people who tried to save others, is no longer known but it doesn't really matter. What it shows, in a way, is all this powerlessness. This type of avoidable accidents makes me more angry than anything. And you know, the news story immediately reminded me of a disaster in my home province. In late 1994, there was an official ceremony in honor of the best students from all over Xinjiang when suddenly a fire broke out on a nearby oilfield. They chose to first evacuate the party bigwigs with buses, and that's why two hundred children died in the blaze. The date has been a day of mourning in the area ever since.

Su Xiaoqin: As it is, the painting does not even suggest any original photo. It is esthetically quite different. Actually it looks as if you scratched your own rage into the picture.

Xia Xing: You could see it that way. The hand imprints on the photo were a lot smaller; here I chose a section of it and enlarged the hands.

Su Xiaoqin: So in this painting, you changed more than in most others?

Xia Xing: Yes. In general, I decide on my painting technique for each individual case. It depends on the subject of the picture. Take for example the last one from the 2005 sequence, **05.12.16**. This is about the accident of a racing cyclist. Or the ones showing political representatives of some kind, like **05.04.30** or **05.05.13**. This sort of subject I treat from a much greater distance.

Ulrike Münter, 2006

Translated from the German by Werner Richter