

## The Seven-Year Itch

by Ai Weiwei

For the last seven years, Xia Xing has created one work per year. Each work consists of about 60 oil paintings, and each individual painting is a reproduction of one of the news photos he has chosen to paint.

Painting is said to proceed from a process of depersonalization, and Xia Xing uses the least possible treatment in terms of technique. He has adjusted his images to produce a uniform size and has brought some minute alterations to his painting technique. For example, in 2009 and 2010 he adopted a monochrome treatment with multiple coatings, painting a yellow layer, and then superimposing a red layer, followed by a blue one, in a manner reminiscent of the color separation of early color TV images. This is a method of "programming" the colors and monitoring their application. What Xia Xing paints is not determined by him, but rather is dictated by the media and current events, and the content of the next image is thus always up in the air.

His methods encompass many levels of meaning, including painting's subjects, style and the diction of discourse. Subjects such as the legacy of traditional painting's values are no longer of interest to him, since they fall well beyond the perimeter of his daily painting activities and work. Xia Xing seems condemned to a lifetime vigil as a night watchman, spending his life making his nocturnal rounds.

What, then, is the logic supporting this continuously drawn-out activity? Why doesn't some other form of behavior come along to supplant it? Acting in this way (to recap) is to draw from a flat medium such as newsprint - itself a repetitive medium - that then undergoes the processes of editing, selection and being repainted. And when this repetitive behavior culminates in one year's mass of images being transformed into a work, just what kind of expression is this supposed to be? This is not the sort of question that preoccupies other artists. Yet art does pose an important question. Its form, however judged - even if there has been no way to judge it at the time in question - still possesses certain features. In Xia Xing's case, his paintings have neither beginning nor end. They suggest a long-distance bus in motion, when the people on board have ceased to care where the bus will stop. Whether you get on or off, the bus is always moving. So you just get on the bus, and then you continue onward.

Acts of painting are very often an escape, but this is merely one very small aspect. The notion of escape finds no place within the rationale for public life. What is an absolute, however, is something that you can grasp hold of and then paint. Escape is itself a force generated by and present in most people's capacity, and one already embedded in their subconscious. We cannot truly perceive depravity, corruption and cowardice, or see a real escape route after we have spent some time in this world. There is no grandeur in the existence of depravity; everyone becomes very ordinary. Ordinarity is a relatively egregious but common problem in our art, which is deemed superfluous even when trying to explain what it is, and therefore lacks any real need to continue existing.

Since 2004, Xia Xing has created seven works of this kind of agglomerative painting, the size of whose individual units does not change within any one year. This was initially 70 x 100 cm, but this changed to 140 x 200 in 2007 and 2008, becoming 35 x 50 cm after 2009. Painted content is all reproduced from photo images appearing in the same newspaper in the same period, so that whatever appears in the news is what Xia Xing paints. He paints almost every day, and has amassed more than 400 paintings in five years. To state it more incisively, Xia Xing, using the same method for one full year to produce one work, is always awaiting the appearance of the next news photo, so his painting is a regimen of constant waiting, with even he himself unaware of when a work may be finished.

There is no room for personal choice in composing these serial works, and so very few of these photos are trimmed or cropped. Most are in color and taken from the front page or the first few pages of the newspaper. Each year has a somewhat different focus. In 2007, Xia Xing was more interested in materials relating to children. In 2009, he changed his focus to, in his words, "the civil way of life", while in 2010 his paintings all dealt with the protection of rights.

In relation to paintings that adopt a political stance (and address associated issues related to painting), people often stand in a perpetual state of evasion or denial. In the majority of cases, the most accomplished art in our patch of land serves merely to kick up a fuss, posture or throw fits of hypochondriac languor, or it produces vainglory that panders to sycophancy and sensual desire. People have for too long not dared to see reality. They lack the gumption to observe what is happening all around them every day. In our land of fallen culture, literature and art always necessarily present the best examples of corruption and cowardice.

To speak truth is a need. The possibility of speech will always persist. This is probably a major reason why painting still survives. After we have traversed the rubble of Chinese contemporary art's period of hypocritical prosperity, today's art will continue to guide us in viewing this era in its true light and seeing its intrinsic possibilities. This era must ineluctably fade into the past, but the humiliation and decline of our age will inevitably and faithfully live on, enshrined in the brush strokes of these paintings.

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