

STEPFATHER HAS AN IDEA! — Xie Nanxing

by Nataline Colonnello

Many of the classic fairytales from our childhood have taught us about the character of the step-parent: that viciously tricky figure who, incredibly talented in sedulously tyrannizing the good-hearted protagonist, is capable of any kind of wickedness in an effort to derail all the hero's constructive plans.

It is with knowingly accuracy and pleasure in subtle conspiracy that Xie Nanxing (*1970, Chongqing, China) amuses himself in his self-styled stepfather role and draws the viewer into his psychological games, starting with the choice of the name for his one-man show at Galerie Urs Meile Beijing-Lucerne, "STEPFATHER HAS AN IDEA!" Reminiscent of a crucial passage abruptly excerpted from the middle of an unknown story, the title verbalizes the same associative process that Xie Nanxing induces in the observer through the pictorial medium. In the earlier oil paintings executed until 2008, by means of the artist's unique, ever-evolving and masterly technique and his intriguing interweaving of light and shadow, Xie Nanxing seduces the observer with alluring dreamlike images that, serving as an intentionally staged visual *déjà vu*, stimulate the observer's curiosity, inner recollections, emotions, and darkest sides of the subconscious mind.

The exhibition "STEPFATHER HAS AN IDEA!" features two new series of works, each comprised of three paintings, which constitutes the whole production by Xie Nanxing between 2009 and the beginning of 2010. Although Xie Nanxing's conceptual leitmotifs--such as sexuality and psychology--are still conspicuously detectable in all the six recent paintings, the two series "We" (2009) and untitled (2009-2010) not only dramatically differ from each other with respect both to content and style, but also embody a further--and now even more noticeable--experimental shift in Xie Nanxing's artistic research. Since the 2008's blue series of 3 works, entitled "The First Round of a Whip (also known as "The Wave")", in which the artist enacted a pictorial transposition of the Freudian theory of the "Slip of the Tongue", Xie Nanxing has been even more openly dealing with the relation between two different forms of language: painting on the one hand, and writing on the other.

In "The First Round With a Whip" (No. 1, 2, 3), 2008, what at first seems to be monochromatic, semi-abstract and almost cartoon-like silhouettes gradually appear to the viewer, eventually turning into figurative subjects immersed in a hallucinatory, fluid-like three-dimensional atmosphere. In those paintings it is only after a long observation that the viewer is able to slowly identify a deeper narrative connection among the three images, each looking like disconnected stills from the same unfathomable story. After this stylistic climax in balancing abstraction and representation was reached in 2008, the next series Xie Nanxing created in the following year technically subverts the previous one, and this in order to put the observer in the condition of focusing on a totally dissimilar subject matter. Openly referring to the recent history of art, in this figurative series Xie Nanxing reinterprets three lesser known works by Francis Picabia (Paris, 1879-1953), analyzing the social, artistic, political and private aspects in the life and career of this irreverent and much discussed artist. The title "We" reveals the closeness Xie Nanxing perceives to the French/Spanish master in terms of unceasing artistic experimentation and the sensual dimension of the works. The three works Xie Nanxing reproduces in a larger scale and in black and white are "Femmes au Bull-Dog" (1940-1942), "Deux Femmes au Pavots" (1942) and "Nu" (1942), originally colourful realist nudes, drawn from source materials that included pin-ups, postcards, pulpy photo novels and erotica, realized during the period when Picabia was no longer actively engaged in the avant-garde mainstream. Xie Nanxing's decision to newly paint the works in black and white is due to the will to stress the division in judgment of the critics during Picabia's time. When Picabia's paintings first appeared, a small number of critics positively commented that these works were aimed to ironically and provocatively oppose a contemporary, mass-produced kitsch aesthetic to the classical concept of beauty found in the works of famous nude painters like Ingres. The majority of the experts, however, labelled them as purely commercial and deprived of any genuine artistic value. Like a wink to Picabia, the only written statement with which Xie Nanxing directly glosses each of the three paintings belonging to the series "We" is the signature, jocularly made up of the transliteration of Picabia's surname into Chinese characters.

The use of the written language plays a central role in the most recent series, untitled (No. 1, 2, 3), 2009-2010. In these paintings, Xie Nanxing carries out an extreme formal simplification, where the figures are turned into basic shapes and both the identification of the characters and the description of the scene, including tactile, visual and olfactory sensations, is made possible by deciphering a few hints, namely, the Chinese characters left on the canvas as they were clues in a mystery. The artist's personal reinterpretation of the fairytale Snow White, with its strong sexual/ironical allusions and a crescendo of violence culminating in untitled (No. 3), suggests either an orgy or the perpetration of a group rape in the framework of a seemingly incestuous family relationship. In untitled (No. 1) 220 x 385, and untitled (No. 3) 220 x 385 cm, the composition indeed recalls a crime scene sketch-map reminiscent of those employed by the police in the reconstruction of a murder, where the "victim" —Snow White—lays in the centre, surrounded by the seven other characters. Besides the structure, untitled (No. 1) and untitled (No. 3) share Xie Nanxing's distinctive pictorial technique where the Chinese characters are not written but treated as any other part of the painted composition, and thus appear blurred to the eye. Unlike the other two works, untitled (No. 2), 220 x 325 cm, smaller in size, is arranged and painted in a significantly different way. This is because the artist wants the observer to use other means to discover the image, and also due to the fact that the function of text differs from the other works in the series. When looking at the painting, the viewer initially sees Xie Nanxing's personal notes quickly scribbled in charcoal at the margins of the work, abstract blots of colour in the centre of the composition, and only a few fragments of bodies, represented in a comic-like style, appearing outside the borders of a second, smaller missing painting that has eventually been removed from the canvas. In order to imagine the picture Xie Nanxing originally painted, the onlooker is therefore forced to analyze the few visible figurative traces through which the well-known fable comes back into mind —the bow in the hair of Snow White, the cap of a dwarf— and to slowly follow the image toward the centre of the picture. What tells us that this painting is not a mere reproduction of a famous image from our infancy are the instructions the artist seems to have recorded only for himself, such as, "pay attention to the gesture of the hands", "testicle", "passivity" or again, knowing Xie Nanxing's code, "stepdaughter's second adventure".