

Xie Nanxing

Fugitive Figuration. Paintings 1994 – 2026

Curated by Clémentine Deliss

Galerie Urs Meile, Zurich Ankerstrasse

June 12 – August 29, 2026

Opening: Friday, June 12, 2026, 6 – 9 pm

The artist will be present

“Figuration is not an imitation of the real, a copy of what exists, a reproduction of the visible. Rather, it is an evocation of that which should be, a means of rendering perceptible qualities, situations, and beings that matter to us.” (Philippe Descola)¹

Fugitive Figuration traces the practice of Xie Nanxing from his early iconic works of the 1990s through to his most recent paintings. The exhibition acts both as an introduction and an appraisal of the exceptional position he holds in contemporary Chinese and international art. Xie paints in series of two, three, or more works that emerge out of a common line of inquiry and then spar off one another. For this exhibition, nine paintings from six different series produced between 1994-2026 are brought together for the first time. Placed in dialogue with one another, they highlight the different morphologies of figuration that have emerged in his work over the last thirty years. While his paintings are grounded in the harsh realities of the global situation, and the choices he makes as an artist who lives and works in Beijing, each one is infused with a sense of timelessness and mystery. They lure the viewer into a game of light that both divulges and obscures the subject. Colours adhere to the surface, then are tarnished and layered until, for a fleeting instance, something entirely different appears in the mind’s eye. Like visually charged thought maps, these paintings arouse the imagination, inviting one into a world that is libidinal, conceptual, and occasionally ominous.

Born in 1970 in Chongqing, a futuristic industrial city in Southern China, Xie Nanxing first garnered wide international recognition at the 48th Venice Biennale with a series depicting scenes of intimidated violence. Even today, these works from 1999 remain contentious, speaking unapologetically about the darker side of the human condition. With *Untitled No.2*, 1999, the viewer is taken to an unknown location where something clearly sinister has taken place. We see a couple – most likely modelled on the artist’s parents – standing upright, while a third figure, their son, is seated on a toilet, naked, his pants around his ankles. There is blood and bruising and the young man tilts his head awkwardly while the couple behind him stare directly out of the painting with aberrant righteousness. In the dark luminosity of the brushstrokes, specks of red pigment leave traces at the corners of the protagonists’ mouths. Red reappears as pressure points on the victim’s body, like marks of a violation. An oppressive floral wallpaper accentuates allusions to possible domestic abuse, while the bluish light amplifies the traumatic corporeality of the situation. We see light and colour because they appear like an “echo in our bodies,” writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, yet where does the feeling of terror and abject performance emanate from?² How does Xie, a painter of ambiguity, release the proclivity of our imagination to construct mental and sensual images that trigger both unease and seduction. As Peter Pakesch writes, “it is the style itself of the paintings that makes them especially drastic.”³ Xie’s figuration is hidden in plain sight, drawing the viewer into unexpected scenarios, at times tinted with suppressed cruelty, but also romanticism and humour.

¹ Philippe Descola, “Les formes du visible. Une anthropologie de la Figuration”, 2021, Éditions du Seuil, p. 15, translated by the author.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 1961

³ Peter Pakesch, *Some comments on the work of Xie Nanxing*, 2008, Galerie Urs Meile.

In 1994, five years prior to the notorious Venice series, Xie paints a sequence titled *Old Aged Generation*. In painting *No. 3*, a group of men sit semi-naked inside a fridge, knees bent up rather like mature embryos waiting to be pulled out and consumed. Sketched in white lines, with chrome yellow, blue, and crimson, one can make out the shape of meat parcels, a jar with organs, and a Coke can. Outside, on the freezer door, the white contours of male genitalia form a cross-shaped insignia. Meanwhile, slipped into the side compartment of the fridge is a miniature sofa, which, like the three crouching figures, is painted as if it were cut out and collaged onto the composition. Made when Xie was twenty-four years old, one might read this painting with its ageing men as the artist's dread of cryonic stasis, or the pitfalls of a practice that is old before it is young. If the paintings from the 1990s succeed in transmitting a sense of doom, humiliation, and apathy, today, Xie analyses the contradictory roles embodied by the artist with renewed vigilance.

In *Portrait of an Equal Sign No.4, 2026*, a blood-red exclamation mark punctuates the painting as if to suggest that self-scrutiny is now an urgent call to action. Nearby, the skeletal outlines of the foreboding figures, first seen in the 1990s, return. Perched on rose buds, they appear to fly over an urban thoroughfare with houses that skirt a curve in the road. Naked and irreverent, they squat and defecate onto the street below. These spirits of incertitude jibe the status quo, insinuating that as an artist, one necessarily identifies with models of “counter-conduct” described by Michel Foucault as “the art of not being governed quite so much.”⁴ Posture, cynicism, and sang-froid are attributes of disguised policing, ready to impose bureaucratic and legal restrictions onto others. They can also be read as the traits that define a successful artist. Painted with black diagrammatic lines, these menacing figures complement the chalky phalluses seen thirty years earlier on the fridge door. In both paintings, Xie paints archetypes of human agency that float on the uppermost surface of the canvas. Side by side, the paintings from 1994 and 2026 not only exchange visual details but orbit around a fundamental question both then and now: “As an artist, a painter – how do I set out from the perspective of my inner eye? How do I seek out my subject?”⁵

This conceptual question is elegantly deconstructed in the second work from his new series, *Portrait of an Equal Sign, No.3, 2026*. Hanging in the window of the Galerie Urs Meile with its 1960s architecture, the painting could be a scene out of *Jules et Jim* (1962), François Truffaut's acclaimed film of the Nouvelle Vague. A figure in semi-undress – the artist – dialogues blindly with his second self, also headless, while a female mannikin stands nearby in a tailored suit, immobile and similarly acephalous. Xie melts the environment with the person. Roles are played out in a staged emporium of nineteenth century French paintings à la Gustave Courbet, Japanese tiger imagery, Victorian bedposts, silky dresses and decorative objects. It is a wry parody of the market and the art historical clichés that repeatedly flood the artist's world. For a brief moment, the gallery's showroom is turned into a vintage clothes and antiques store for the dandies of the art world. Xie gracefully spins the scene with urban drag so as to trigger sensations of desire in the viewer. If at times his figures are humiliated and debased, they can be equally camp and sexy, diffident and rough-edged. His expressive capacity is rooted in a refusal to accept a narrow ontological perspective on the world. Changes in style run parallel with the conceptual mutations that transform perception, and by extension art. When he references masters of European painting – say Rubens and Giorgione in the *Spice* series (2016) – he does so with metaphysical rather than surgical skill. The operation he performs on these great works from the past is not an art historical graft but a transubstantiation of the spirit of the painting, enabling the original to be mediated anew and differently.

Xie's scepticism toward the canon, be it Chinese or Western, is resolved with analytic flair in the series from 2010 in which he dismantles Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650). By reducing human presence to its metonymic parts, he suspends the visual regime of naturalism and authenticity in European portraiture. He lays down clues but then effaces, smudges, and kills off their trace so they

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique?*, 1978

⁵ Xie Nanxing in conversation with the author, Beijing, April 2026

remain at best fragmentary. With *Portrait of an Ugly Man – Study of Velasquez’s Innocent X, No. 1*, 2010, the red and black of the original 17th century portrait is broken down to a composite of heraldic icons, like those found on playing cards. In the 15th century, French cards flooded Europe with their four suits of heart, diamond, club and spade. Each one was believed to represent a different figure in society such as a merchant, nobleperson, peasant or priest. At the centre of Xie’s semiotic painting, the permutational dance between antinomic black spade and red heart suddenly implodes. A smeared black club smothers the red heart generating a psychosomatic, libidinal déjà-vu. Similar to 18th century Libertine literature, this painting, with its constellation of positions, performed according to an erotic charter, disguises manoeuvres that otherwise would be read as political. It is the performative enactment of invention.

Xie studied printmaking, a technique that is mirrored in the different ways he manipulates paint. At times, he makes it seep through the canvas to produce a nearly molecular osmosis between pigment and textile, as if he were silk-screening. With the series from 2011, that includes *Mug Mat* on view in this exhibition, he begins by placing loosely woven cloth onto a canvas. He paints figures or scenes onto it and then peels it away, rather like a woven stencil. The remaining pigment leaves a textured strata of marks and colours that give body to the canvas and blur the original source. One may recognise the outlines of the Seven Dwarves modelled on a drawing by his father, but the contents have been purged of visual nostalgia. The painting takes on a nearly forensic quality.

In a later series from 2024–2025, Xie deploys a different method. He begins by projecting strong light through an oil sketch that he has attached to the back of the canvas. With this intense backlighting, a diagrammatic imprint of the source image appears on the front. Xie photographs the result, transfers it digitally, and then uses this new sketch to create a painting. This process renders his works inherently puzzling and captivating. German philosopher Christophe Menke suggests that art produces leaps in theoretical knowledge. “It is the exposition of something and therefore very close to philosophy. Impulses, desire, pathos, affect, these are brought into a form-finding medial dimension.”⁶ With *Portrait of N*, 2019, Xie embarks on an act of blind painting. Holding a set of photographs to his eye, he draws a sketch without looking down onto the paper. He then transfers the result onto canvas. In the background of the painting, a sculptural volume alludes to Rodin’s monument to Balzac while the animated outlines in the foreground take on a nearly calligraphic quality. Together, sculpture and painting combine to create the signature of a female figure. Xie seals the work with a miniature photorealist painting of N, who stands, tautologically, to the side of her portrait. Maria Lassnig’s words from 2008 resonate here, “*Figuration comes about almost automatically, because in my art I start first and foremost with myself*”⁷

Xie’s portraiture is sensory and panoramic. In the iconic series from 2003, *Untitled Nos. 1–6*, he paints his mother, father and himself lying prostrate on the floor of his studio. Again, the paintings speak of the aftermath of dramas performed in an atmosphere of stale familial air. Xie plunges the viewer into the depth of this environment on eye level, as if one were literally inside the space. Meanwhile three of these six paintings are void of human figures. Luminous and overwhelming in their sheer liminality, these large horizontal canvases lead to the ultimate dissolution of the figure, its final escape. All clues to whatever happened are condensed within the canvas, such that no additional amplification is required to provoke a medial reception. These paintings are essentially filmic even if Xie deploys no time-based media. With speed of thought and painterly precision, they merge into a propositional montage with significant depth of field. Their layered multi-focality draws the viewer deeper into the imagery until the mind senses vertigo at the edge of cognitive translation. Xie’s aim is to destabilise figuration, to fracture existing systems of aesthetic recall, and explore the limits of illusionistic portrayal. Why not paint several portraits over one another, he suggests, letting them vie for space on the canvas and battle to become the defining character.

⁶ Christoph Menke, “The Power of Art/Die Kraft der Kunst”, Suhrkamp Insel, 2013.

⁷ Courtesy Maria Lassnig Foundation, Vienna

In his writings on figuration, Philippe Descola explores the value of working with a juxtapositional approach, a method reflected in the paintings of Xie Nanxing and the constellation of works proposed in this exhibition. Descola states, that by “arranging images into series indexed according to a kind of ontology – that is to say, regardless of their period or provenance – and by examining the visual choices that made certain series homogeneous, one discerns the recurring mechanisms of figuration that reveal the ‘invisible lining’ specific to each mode of identification.”⁸ Xie’s invisible lining exists in the agency he accords to the shimmering afterlife (*Nachleben*, Aby Warburg) embodied within the act of painting. Scholarly yet irreverent, he leans on the unregulated dyslexia created by the accumulation of visual imagery and its displacement over time. In syncopation, the viewer stops, trips, and returns to look at the painting once again, ready to engage, nearly addictively, with its enigmatic detail.

In this sense, his paintings trap us through their wilful “insubordination,”⁹ like the trope of insincerity or punning once fabled by Marcel Broodthaers as the ingredient for a successful artistic career. Viewed from this ironic and self-deprecating perspective, the paintings nurture both falsehood and truth, introspection and diffidence. They can be read in relation to an artist who, unable to navigate the surface of life, plunged into its mythic underworld. In *50 Drawings to Murder Magic*, Antonin Artaud wrote, “the body is a multitude driven wild, a kind of travelling trunk with many compartments which can never have finished revealing what it conceals.”¹⁰ During the Second World War, while interned at the psychiatric hospital of Rodez in France, Artaud famously made drawings to trap the doctors into believing he was mad. By introducing the reference to both Broodthaers and Artaud, one recognises the theatre of cruelty within Xie’s works, and more specifically, the scenic as a composite literary trope that surpasses the past and reconfigures the present. Content is a game of contradictory agency, an oscillation that if viewed from a conceptual lens, addresses the existential dilemmas facing the artist. “I examine the surface as well as the layers that are close to our mental state,” he explains, “as if I were a doctor.”¹¹

In conversation, Xie has spoken of literature like “a spirit that cuts through our lives.”¹² At times, poetic phrases precede a work. He returns to these text-sketches as he paints, considering how to convert their words into the ambiguity of a visual charade without consequence or resolution. It is a process of ideational transferal that never takes the same route twice but plays with what could be called *visual parataxis*. Parataxis is a literary technique that favours the non-hierarchical construction of meaning. The usual scaffolding of verb, noun, pronoun and adjective is broken down into smaller units that follow neither clausal subordination nor conjunction. Like textual stuttering, they stand in for themselves, side by side, however dissimilar. With Xie, one finds a form of visual parataxis in the dynamic, episodic relationships he creates between, but also within, paintings. Adopting a structure not dissimilar to Milorad Pavić post-modern parable, *The Dictionary of the Khazars*, each visual phrase ignites the imagination without conceding to a linear narrative.¹³ Here one recognises the importance of the series as a constitutive feature in Xie’s practice. Not only are individual paintings brought into unexpected conversations between one another, but they dialogue without difficulty beyond their initial grouping. This is apparent with *Untitled, No. 5, 2025*, his painting of a snooker game. Xie’s formal interventions are baffling for their lightness of touch that accentuate details from the red surface of the table, to the white arc created by overhead lighting, and the reflection of people who sit and watch the game. To see this painting unfold before one’s eyes is to witness the fluidity of Xie’s brush stroke and his ability to create complex images out of brief moments of joy.

⁸ Philippe Descola, 2021, translated by the author.

⁹ Ruth Noack, *Attitude and discipline – notes on Xie Nanxing’s painterly ethics*, 2015, Galerie Urs Meile

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, *Histoire vécue d’Artaud-Momo*, translated by Stephen Barber, published by Fata Morgana, 2009.

¹¹ Quoted in Peter Pakesch, 2008, Galerie Urs Meile

¹² Xie Nanxing in conversation with the author, Beijing, December 2025

¹³ Milorad Pavić, “No chronology will be observed here, nor is one necessary. Hence each reader will put together the book for himself, as in a game of dominoes or cards, and, as with a mirror, he will get out of this dictionary as much as he puts into it, for you (...) cannot get more out of the truth than what you put into it.” From *Dictionary of the Khazars*, New York: Knopf, 1988.

There is fast and dirty in his paintings too, like the scene with the motorcycle riders who jam through the camouflage of green undergrowth somewhere in a suburb of Beijing (*Untitled, No. 8, 2025*). Yet this instance, in which a couple holds tight against the velocity of life, embodies no sense of aggression. Its energy comes from the gentle duplicity of its subject matter, both innocent and fuelled with potential. Here the fugitive in figuration suggests a conscious method of veiling and unveiling through painting, of being on the run from the dictates of today's technology of surveillance. With rogue mastery, Xie covers over the routes traced in the past, training his mimetic abilities to fight against these same skills, like a trained athlete or judo pro who has to invent new tactics to outdo that which is known, embodied and recognised.

Further insight into his remarkable artistic practice can be found in three small unstretched paintings from 2025 that, like sketches, precede the larger works. One, in particular, transfixes the mind. A woman is seated, an open book on her lap, while two people appear in a thought cloud above her head. They are holding mobile phones, the light from the screens shining onto their faces. Painted in soft shades of lilac, brown, yellow and pink, the oneiric quality of this small yet condensed work is redrafted onto a larger painting, also on show in the exhibition. *Untitled, No. 1, 2024*, is divided optically by a wooden stretcher, as if the painting had been reversed from back to front. Eyeballs fly where the thought cloud once featured in the sketch, and a shroud-like cloth painted in blueish greys and browns appears superimposed onto the original scene as if to signify a moment of passing. Again, Xie invites one to enter a metaphysical state, which, however nuanced and individual, as mourning can be, is sensitive and inclusive.

The paintings of Xie Nanxing strike a powerful chord in today's volatile world. Their visual iconography is engaging and agile but never superficial. They do not seal off the imagination with virtuoso technique or clear-cut topicality, even if both qualities can be found in his work. On the contrary, with each series, we enter another cinematographic world with a visually honed episodic narrative, persuasive structure, and enigmatic set of characters. Each painting represents the inner and outer dimensions of a phenomenon that may be controversial but is never void of human empathy or the option for dialogue. Mesmerising, these subliminal paintings are made for contemplation, for looking while seated over longer periods of time. They incite dreams and analysis in equal measure. Like a contrast-medium that flows through the veins, the configurations of subject and space in Xie's paintings illuminate the other side of daily life and its archetypes, immersing us in new and vertiginous conversations about things that matter to us today.

GALERIE URSMEILE 麦勒画廊

Xie Nanxing (b. 1970, Chongqing, China) is a key figure in contemporary painting from China, internationally recognized for a practice that moves between abstraction and figuration while challenging painterly conventions. He first gained international recognition at the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), where he presented quasi-photorealist self-portraits and male nudes in wounded, vulnerable states. In the early 2000s, he began working from blurred photographs and mediated imagery, shifting toward abstraction - three such works were shown at Documenta 12 (2007). Since then, he has continued to experiment with diverse approaches, including a “canvas print” technique in which only the traces of paint seeping through a secondary canvas remain. Xie approaches painting as a temporal process shaped by fragmentation, rhythmic brushwork, and subtle shifts in form. His works resist fixed interpretation, allowing images to hover between recognition and dissolution. Xie Nanxing lives and works in Beijing and Chengdu.

Institutional solo exhibitions include Pingshan Art Museum, Shenzhen, China (2021); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2018); Kunstverein Hamburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, Germany (2005); and Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (2003). His works are held in major private and public collections internationally, including the De Ying Foundation (China); Goetz Collection (Germany); K11 Collection (China); New Century Art Foundation (China); Novartis Collection (Switzerland); Rachofsky Collection (USA); M+ Sigg Collection (Hong Kong/Switzerland).

Dr. Clémentine Deliss works across the borders of contemporary art, curatorial practice, and publishing. She studied art practice in Vienna and semantic anthropology in the UK and Paris, completing a PhD on conceptual eroticism in the journal *Documents* and the fieldwork practice of French anthropologists including Michel Leiris. She is currently Curator at Large at KANAL-Centre Pompidou in Brussels, where she is preparing *Département des Pièges* for the museum's opening in November 2026. She is also KANAL-Guest Professor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels and Global Humanities Professor of History of Art at the University of Cambridge. Between 2020–2023, she was Associate Curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin. From 2010 to 2015, she directed the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt/Main, where she developed a transdisciplinary lab focused on rethinking collections through a post-ethnological approach. Her publications include *The Metabolic Museum* (Hatje Cantz, 2020) and *Skin in the Game. Conversations on Risk and Contention* (Hatje Cantz/KW, 2023). Since 1996, she has produced the independent artists' and writers' organ *Metronome*.