

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, 2021)

Fugitive Figuration traces the practice of Xie Nanxing from his iconic works of the 1990s to his most recent paintings from 2026. The exhibition acts both as an introduction and an appraisal of the exceptional position he holds in contemporary Chinese and international art. For the first time, nine paintings from six different series are brought into conversation with one another. Together, they incite dreams and analysis in equal measure, revealing the different morphologies of figuration that have emerged in his practice over the last thirty years.

Xie’s paintings are essentially filmic even if he deploys no time-based media. With their scenic quality, they incite the viewer to submerge themselves in a multilayered, visual narrative. This effect is particularly pronounced in *untitled (No. 5)*, from 2003, the last work in a seminal series in which he painted each member of his family, including himself, lying prostrate on the floor of his studio. Only, in three of these works, there is no one to be found. Sensory and panoramic in scale, Xie has painted the dissolution of figuration, its final escape. As with his paintings from 1994, and those of 1999 exhibited at the 48th Venice Biennale, we become witnesses to situations and dramas performed in the home in an atmosphere loaded with sinister potential. 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.

Take *Portrait of an Equal Sign, No. 3, 2026* – it 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. Xie gracefully spins the scene with urban drag so as to trigger sensations of desire in the viewer. He is a painter of ambiguity. If at times his figures are humiliated and debased, they can be equally camp and sexy, diffident and rough-edged. 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*). Here, the fugitive in figuration offers a method for veiling and unveiling lived realities through painting.

Placed 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?”¹ In *Portrait of an Equal Sign No. 4*, 2026, a blood-red exclamation mark punctuates the canvas as if to suggest that renewed self-scrutiny is now an urgent call to action. Skeletal outlines of foreboding figures, first seen in the 1990s, return in 2026. Naked and irreverent, they squat and defecate onto the street scene below. Like spirits of incertitude, they 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.”² Painted with black diagrammatic lines, these menacing figures complement the crouching figures and chalky phalluses seen thirty years earlier in *Old Aged Generation, No. 3*, 1994.

Born in 1970 in Chongqing, a futuristic industrial city in Southern China, Xie studied printmaking, a technique mirrored in the different ways he manipulates pigment. With *Mug Mat*, 2011, he takes loosely woven cloth and fixing it onto a large canvas, paints figures or scenes onto it, only to peel it away at the end. The painting takes on a ghostly, forensic quality, with the remaining pigment creating a textured stratification of line and colour. With *Untitled, No. 1*, 2024, 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 rear lighting, 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. Both the final work, in this case, *Untitled, No. 1*, 2024, and its prototype, can be seen in this exhibition.

While his paintings are grounded in the harsh realities of the global situation, 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. Xie Nanxing’s paintings are made for contemplation, for looking at while seated over longer periods of time. 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.

¹ Xie Nanxing in conversation with the author, Beijing, April 2026

² Michel Foucault, *Qu’est-ce que la critique?*, 1978

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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.

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*.