Chen Sixin

Pale World

Galerie Urs Meile, Zurich Rämistrasse
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Opening: Saturday, September 6, 2025, 6 - 9 pm
The artist will be present

Chen Sixin: The Tail of the Story
Text by Ren Yue

Some stories start from the beginning, some move backwards from the end. Some flit about between the mind of the speaker and the listener, weaving a version that can never be repeated. In Chen Sixin's painting, the story often stops at a subtle "timeless place," revealing varying levels of detail and layers of emotion: pillars of smoke taking root and burning endlessly (*Burning Forest*, 2023); milk overflowing from buckets onto the ground as four cows stand in a row, sneering (*Milk*, 2023); a snake's tail tightly wrapped around a high-cheeked frog, with no way of guessing how things started or will end (*Snake Lock*, 2023); a crocodile with its claws curled in front of its eyes as a telescope, a glimmer of a smile in its gaze (*Tactical Telescope*, 2023)...

To say that the viewer sees a particular bizarre story in Chen Sixin's paintings is not entirely accurate. We can only say that we have seen rich story possibilities, while the painter as storyteller seems to have no intention of bestowing on them any formal aggregation, leaving us only a little tail end of the story.

The most compelling quality of Chen Sixin's painting is precisely this little tail end. One could venture that this is an "iceberg strategy": the plot comes to an abrupt halt before our eyes, while the threads in need of mending stretch far beyond the visible surface. In other words, this "tail" is an invitation to viewing. It pushes viewers to the edge of the story, leaving them to decide for themselves whether this tail leads to the quarry or leads into the depth of the forest, whether it is an echo of a battle, or a tranquil breath. As a creator, Chen Sixin hands over the gently swaying end, watching to see how we as viewers grasp onto the beginning, tracing out our own version between strangeness and curiosity.

Animal Ferocity

Whether real or imaginary, animals are an enduring theme in Chen Sixin's painting. But there is no need to question his non-anthropocentrist views, because in Chen Sixin's narrative field, people are never the protagonists. From the beginning, the artist has not reserved even supplementary coordinates for humanity. Aside from standard humans, no limitations are placed on the concept of "animals" in Chen Sixin's painting. It can even include an alien clad in mech armor (*Sil ver.2 – War Machine*, 2024), an anxious-looking rock (*The Fate of Shi Tou*, 2025), or a "McDonald's worm" that only exists in the imagination (*McDonald worm*, 2024). In Chen Sixin's works, animals are not gingerly slipped into fixed semiotic metaphors or markers of stereotypical impressions but are true primary inhabitants of the stories—with their respective habits and dimensions, they each come to form the basic order of the world under the artist's brush.

Inheriting the essence of hardcore manga, these pictures with animals as the protagonists are brimming with hints of conflict, but only as an emotional tone. Beyond the dark, turbulent undercurrents, the pictures are also covered in a layer of satire or pity: dogs in clothing slaughtering naked kneeling humans in a forest (*Siege*, 2023); a primate covered in white fur, with powerful sinews in his hands and feet, striding across a mountainous plain and river, looking down over the land he is crossing as he rushes off to the distance (*White Terror*, 2023); a fearsome bird soaring through a pale blue sky with its talons

open, though close observation reveals it to have the body of a dove with disproportionately large wings (*War dove*, 2024); a being resembling a primate, covered in flames, walking across a land scorched by the fires of war (*Walking Fire*, 2024). No matter how whimsical the imagery, how extreme or horrible the scene, these "animals" always touch on our crisis awareness, our inference of absurdity, and our yearning for the magical in our cultural memory. In this way, they are unfamiliar others, but also potential kin within the chaotic world.

These seemingly wild flights of fancy, however, are not entirely removed from the logic of reality. Chen Sixin's primal impulse to convey these animals can be traced back to accounts of the state of farm animals in industrialized agriculture as described in *Farmageddon: The True Cost of Cheap Meat* (2019), a book he received as a gift from a friend. We can find clear traces of this influence in his creations, particularly in a series of paintings depicting cows, where the artist's reflections on the moral tensions between man, animal, and nature that arise from intensive agriculture leap vividly across the frame. Furthermore, Chen Sixin has mentioned that he is drawn to the species that frequently appear in geography, climate, and food culture, an interest with a clear regional element that is not dependent on realistic representation. In fact, this selection of subject matter in painting feels like Chen Sixin has grabbed onto a "tail" from within the cracks in reality and imagination. It often comes from a simple, clean notion that suddenly pops up in the artist's head, such as "a frog swallowing a bug," or a natural association between "smut-infected corn" and death. For this reason, whether it is the distorted forms of dairy cows and sheep at a farm as a storm approach, or a frog and a snake's tail in the same frame as strange astronomical phenomena, Chen Sixin has placed all of these images in scenarios removed from conventional time and space, marked by mythological echoes, or tinted with cartoonish exaggeration and absurdity. They depart from the functional categorization applied to them by humanity, and do not submit to the linear narrative of natural history. The fluctuation of these beasts between lightness and menace is like a self-sustaining ecosystem that has no need for human intervention to maintain its operations.

Labyrinths and Laughter

One clear impression from reading Chen Sixin's recent works is that the dimensions of his painted narratives are like scalable labyrinths. Sometimes, we face sweeping panoramas with complex scenarios and numerous focal points, as in *The Land* (2024), with its concentrated images of animals, scattered structure, and complex spatial allusions, drawing viewers' thoughts into interconnected yet mutually concealing plot elements. At other times, the picture only leaves us with simple yet powerful cross sections, such as *Time* (2023), which juxtaposes a wheel and a snake, both metaphors for cycles, among roiling waves (or are they clouds?), or *Chà-Nà* (2024), wherein the entire picture is occupied by a red snake's tail dotted with black scales, while the meticulous texture, rendered to give a sense of the moment of the snake's contortions, is enough to intuit something massive hiding just outside the frame. At yet other times, the picture presents a scene with rare clarity of expression and complete elements, like a frame in a manga…

To a certain extent, Chen Sixin's creation naturally offers us two different ways of reading: "missing the forest for the trees," becoming immersed in the details laid out by the artist, and taking in the ways in which the details of the story have been focused and magnified; or "seeing the forest and the trees," flitting about between the complex spatial structures and fantastical environmental parameters, and selecting a thread that interests us in the moment to engage the imagination. This manner of freely alternating between scales of expression is a delightful facility for visual adjustment, as well as a reflection of Chen Sixin's strategy regarding "narrative"—there is no need to lay out every thread of stories, because sometimes a fragment is enough to intuit the whole.

The control over plot elements and pathways of seeing is intimately linked to Chen Sixin's creative habits. Chen Sixin is an intuitive artist. He is easily able to decide on such "technical questions" as the best size for a given work's content. I suspect that before entering into his working state, Chen Sixin has likely spent some time together with the protagonists of his paintings, allowing him to quickly determine the core dynamic of the narrative, before deciding whether the "lens" should be pulled wide or tight, whether to construct a sweeping panorama, a manga frame, or a fixed gaze on a particular detail.

As his most persistent creative medium in recent years, the colored pencil has played a unique role in the formation of the overall texture of Chen Sixin's works. Tracing back, Chen Sixin's creative trajectory has not been entirely conventional. He trained in oil painting as an undergraduate, while his master's studies in fine art in the United States brought him into contact with a wider range of mediums and concepts, and led him to experiment in sculpture and video creations. The emergence of the color pencil appears to have been entirely by chance: in 2022, when Chen Sixin was about to depart from Guangzhou to a residency at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, considering the ever-present risk of quarantine during the pandemic, he chose colored pencils for their portability. This spur-of-the-moment choice of medium rapidly altered his creative trajectory—Chen Sixin still prefers to work in colored pencil to this day.

Colored pencil has an intimate texture, being a drawing tool that virtually everyone seems to have used in their childhood. In terms of its characteristics as a tool, the colored pencil can be switched between outlining and coloring simply by sharpening the core in a different way. Furthermore, the colors have low saturation, leaving ample room for color stacking and mixing. Meanwhile, compared to acrylic and ink, colored pencil is a rather "slow" medium. It forces the artist to progress the picture at a much slower pace, bringing much fresher possibilities for the accumulation of details and shifts in intention.

We also cannot help but notice the tantalizing contrast between the explosive, absurd, apocalyptic feel of Chen Sixin's works and the warm, soft feel of the colored pencil. When the affability of the colored pencil encounters the dense contours of animal skins, cold mechanical structures, and threatening biological forms in Chen Sixin's works, the viewer becomes enveloped in a subtle air of unease: we see entanglements between mechanical installations and biological morphologies, arrays of gears stretched out like bones, their surface layers taking on a skin-like sheen (*Silver.2 – War Machine*, 2024). These hybridities make it impossible to determine whether we are seeing machines or biological beings, drawing us into shifting perceptions and triggering the desire to investigate. As for works presenting fiercer or more dismal scenes, such as *LONG* (2024) and *Beheaded* (2024), the fine layering and low-saturation color gradients of the colored pencil give the picture a gentle surface tension. As Chen Sixin has said, "Once it is drawn, it isn't so scary anymore." The colored pencil leaves room for the artist's narrative, allowing the viewer to shift their sights between tension and relaxation, like coming across an open space or corridor in a labyrinth.

Once, in an interview, Chen Sixin laughingly said that he has limited patience for "seriousness." His creations are time-consuming, but for an artist who feels that "Four-footed Animals Are Great," work is play, and pictures need not be so methodical. This is perhaps why those bizarre scenes always seem to conceal implications of satire, surreptitious joy taken in the intervals of these long stints of labor. Looking at Chen Sixin's painting at this moment, we find that whether it is fierce battles between animals, brutal contests in the natural world, or small episodes within apocalyptic scenes, everything is permeated by a spirit of play. Rather than cynicism, Chen Sixin's sense of humor is a way of retaining resilience for life in the conceptual realm.

Along these lines, we can say that in the process of forming a stable creative style, Chen Sixin has not established a comfort zone for himself between the narrative and medium. I would venture that his persistence in colored pencil is not just out of a preference for its texture but is also connected to the state of focus in the creative process—this method of accumulating stroke by stroke is like laying bricks in the "labyrinth" of each story, while also placing hidden doorways for the humor that wanders within.

Soft Steps of the Ghost

In a series of new works from 2025, Chen Sixin has continued to use the slow, intricate medium of colored pencil drawings, but has shifted to a "ghost" motif. Unlike the richly textured, muscular and sinewy animal images of his earlier works, the ghosts in his new series seem to float in the air with blurred edges, lightly sweeping across the picture. This lightness has softened the sense of direct, overbearing force in much of Chen Sixin's earlier imagery, leaving more room for the imagination, for breathing, and for fluidity. Furthermore, if the animal images in Chen Sixin's works have a clear ecological thread, the ghost works have shifted more into the realm of memory and imagination.

In the cultural context, ghosts approximate that "liminal state" that so frequently appears in our lived experience. They are both alive and dead, at once frightening and captivating. There are many

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sources for the ghost in Western culture. In Gothic literature, ghosts were the manifestations of unsettle grievances. With the rapid development of photography in and the popularity of "parapsychology" in the Victorian era, ghosts were assigned a role that was part scientific, part mystical. In contemporary popular culture, from the cute, friendly ghosts of cartoons, to the fearsome ghouls of horror movies, ghosts are undergoing a process of simultaneous disenchantment and reinforcement of its role a tool for cheap thrills. This ability to repeatedly switch between affability and intimidation has turned ghosts into a favorite object of expression in visual art. The image of ghosts in the Chinese context is equally complex, marked by native religious notions of dead spirits, and deeply rooted in folk traditions revolving around the Ghost Festival (Zhongyuan Festival), the Tomb-Sweeping Festival, and other holidays. In these settings, ghosts are often incarnated in the form of paper puppets, lanterns, and masks, and are often connected to collective patterns, kinship, and spatial order.

The ghosts in Chen Sixin's works do not have any so-called cultural properties, nor do they serve to admonish or intimidate—though the artist admits that the ghost in his mind has always been "a white sheet with two holes in it," a symbol that is "very Western in the eyes of people from the East." The tide of globalization that pushed the classic image of the ghost into the artist's subconscious has already begun to ebb, while in a continuation of the intuitive and satirical elements of the artist's creative thread, these ghosts linger on the margins of the picture and in the interstices of the plot, maintaining an ample sense of sentimentality and play.

This time, Chen Sixin has been constructing the existence of his ghosts through the three spatial dimensions of the sky, the land, and the sea. Perhaps reading these artworks in groups will yield a more interesting narrative. The three new works *Ghost Dog*, *Bullet Holes*, and *Ghostly Machismo* (all 2025) all employ gray tones with touches of light yellow, and seemingly unconsciously place the faceless ghosts into one of Tadao Ando's signature concrete buildings, with a bit of divinity hiding within. The ghost who floats over a pale cyan ground in *Longing* (2025) is made from a dense accumulation of wavy white lines, with a thin scarlet thread denoting that it is a kite, though we cannot know whose hand is holding the thread. The blue-green of the sea in *Shipwreck* (2025) is thicker, while the kite, also made of wavy white lines, appears to lie broken on the ground, its thread vanished. Which artwork is closer to "freedom" is perhaps not what Chen Sixin is asking, but the viewer whose gaze flits back and forth between the two paintings may feel that freedom is nothing more than having the face of a ghost.

In correspondence with two works that depict wide views of landscapes in the distance (*Rot* and *Search Search Cold Cold Sad Sad*, both 2025), Chen Sixin brings the camera in close for *No Way* (2025), to focus on a little ghost in a corner formed by crumbling walls. This is perhaps the moment with the strongest sense of a story in these new works, coalescing sentiments of helplessness, social awkwardness and cuteness on this not entirely complete body and bearing of a ghost in a particularly captivating form.

In his 2014 book *Ghosts of My Life*, British cultural theorist Mark Fisher proposes that unlike the phantoms of the past, ghosts today haunt us with the "futures that failed to happen." They are always reminding us of certain historic possibilities that were suspended or vanished, leaving constant echoes of their "absence." The "ghost sense" is particularly powerful in a postwar era marked by constant technological process, and a culture enveloped in nostalgia. In this light, when compared to his earlier works centered on animals, this "spectral turn" is not just on a graphic level; it is also a veiled reflection of a certain zeitgeist. Chen Sixin has noted that his interest in drawing ghosts is rooted in a plethora of internet videos. "Internet grazing" is perhaps the greatest shared trait of today's youth. As liberalism wanes and the post-pandemic status quo is normalized, our screens are filled with videos of war, disaster, pet videos, and comedy shorts. The mixture of distant scenes of death with everyday entertainment has brought the floating, translucent, fleeting ghost closer to our perception of the world, that of sustained uncertainty and suspense. This creative turn could also be an echo of the artist's own identity shift in a period of recession and low social morale. Art may no longer be the clear carrier for market fervor and aesthetic progress it once was. Now it must face the reality (at least for now) of its "demotion of mission," and provide a kind of container for fluid sentiments.

Chen Sixin mentioned that he was drawn in by the ghost's "fixed, empty and mystical gaze." He feels that it encapsulates some form of moral judgment, a form of self-reflection as an individual creator. Looking back on the ghosts Chen Sixin created, they combine the lightness of the holiday paper puppets, the cartoonish feel of internet culture, and the coldness that lurks behind news footage. They appear to float harmlessly against their soft-colored backgrounds, but that surveillance-monitor gaze gives off a

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subtle, yet unignorable threat. Furthermore, stripped of specific sensitivities, this image with no clear provenance in any particular tradition maintains even more possibilities in cross-cultural transmission. Thus, we find that Chen Sixin's impulse to "tell ghost stories" is driven by complex emotional motives: he has produced a secret entryway for the unsuspecting viewer, allowing them to step into a new story dimension—though as always, this is all merely implied in the picture, not spoken.

Epilogue

Since the mid-20th century, the rise of conceptual painting has pushed discussion of pictorial narrative to the margins. Since Duchamp, modern art has increasingly relied on structural presentations of thinking, turning painting into a medium for carrying concepts, rather than a necessary narrative outlet. The conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s used collages of texts, signs, photography, and images to diminish the plot of painting and emphasize the conditions of seeing and the emotion-generating mechanisms of abstraction. By the 1990s, this de-narrativization trend was further consolidated against the backdrop of globalization. Images were coldly dismantled into units of visual information, gradually drifting further and further from the "story" in the traditional sense. In this art-historical environment, narrative painting is often seen as a conservative retreat, either turning back to the craft of representation, or becoming illustration, subservient to literature.

Chen Sixin's painting has found an unconventional pivot between concept and narrative. His painting simultaneously maintains the gravity of narrative and self-awareness on the conceptual level. The strategy he employs is to cut the story into slices on the canvas, intentionally breaking the threads and leaving only a series of "tails." The tail is the remnant of the story, and the entry point for conception. In the process of attempting to piece the plot together, the viewer is drawn into a rethinking of image, sign, and seeing.

In this sense, Chen Sixin's work is not a return to narrative outside of conceptual painting but is instead the use of the strategies of conceptual painting to rearrange narrative: like a conceptual artist, he manipulates the flow of signs, while also keeping the story fresh in the picture. This lends a thought-provoking hybridity to his works. He is adept at having the story "reveal its tail end," neither fully complete, nor fully abandoned. That tail wags ever so slightly before the viewer, hinting at a large body and an unseen world.

Ren Yue is an art writer and editor based in Beijing. She has written for LEAP and ArtReview. Alongside her academic and editorial work, she runs the poetry project Ghost Cascade.

Chen Sixin (*1995, Guangzhou, China) lives and works in Chongqing, China. He graduated from Guangdong University of Technology in 2017 and received his master's degree from Maryland Institute College of Art in 2021. His work draws on posthumanist thought and visual culture, blending surrealist elements from old comics and cult films. Rejecting linear narratives, his practice embraces fragmented ideas and subconscious responses, creating poetic, ambiguous worlds between reality and fantasy.