

# Xie Nanxing

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Xie Nanxing, *Spice No. 3*, 2016, oil on canvas, 118 1/8 × 86 5/8".

Oil painting is as foreign to the Chinese visual tradition as kung pao chicken is to Western cuisine. “A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken,” the title of Xie Nanxing’s solo premiere in London, underscored the artist’s sense of how his work is acculturated in a global context. But perhaps instead of the exhibition being a gift, it’s more like a gift exchange.

At Thomas Dane Gallery’s No. 3 Duke Street space, in a room painted scallion green to add a new flavor to the conventional white cube, a number of paintings from Xie’s “Spices” series, 2016–17, previously exhibited at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, could be seen in a broader interpretive context. Viewers in London who are presumably more erudite in Western art history might have identified *Spice No. 3*, 2016, with a number of variations of the classic modernist motif of the nude descending the staircase, deployed by artists ranging from Marcel Duchamp and Gerhard Richter to Jana Euler. Applying paint in broad strokes that barely coat the canvas, Xie has effaced any definitive details, with the exception of only a parrot, depicted in fine lines, as an incongruent add-on next to the hand of the front figure. The bird’s exotic nature undermines the “authenticity” of the motif; in the eyes of “the other,” the Western canon is merely another visual source. Xie’s choice of the parrot, symbolic of mimicry, not only evokes the many artists who have employed this motif, but also projects his own identity as that of someone whom Westerners might perceive as an exotic imitator, like the bird. In this sense, Xie’s intention for *Spice No. 1*, 2016, is not necessarily that it be in accord with Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*, ca. 1570–76. Similarly, he is not aligning *Spice No. 7*, 2017, which features added diagrammatic arrows, with Caravaggio’s *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601. Rather, he wishes to underscore his open acknowledgment of and unburdened attitude toward the European canon, and thus to reinvent the tradition.

In the same vein, the 2018 series of portraits at No. 11 Duke Street did not depict the heads, upper bodies, or full figures of individuals. Instead, abstract brush marks were the protagonists of each composition. Xie’s technique, inspired by his observations of ink seeping through rice paper and leaving marks underneath, highlights the relationships between his subjects: He paints figures on an unprimed canvas, then lays this still-wet ground over another painted tableau, making a print of sorts. The results are surprisingly various. For example, in *Portrait of Couple A*, 2018, the splotches could be clearly read as two individuals on a sofa, next to a shelf with a row of statues of the Buddha’s head painted faintly on the background, whereas one could hardly conjure any kind of figuration in *Portrait of Big X*, 2018. Even *Portrait of D*, 2018, probably the closest to a standard portrait head, was ambiguous enough to require viewers to come up with their own idea of who this person might be. For Xie, perceiving a painting is a process of deliberation spurred by the clues provided on canvas, which allows the viewer to arrive at his or her own conclusions. Similarly, our everyday perceptions of individuals, the social context in which we encounter them, our impression of their appearance, and the conversations we have with them all affect our judgments of them, as does hearsay. In reinventing canonical imagery, Xie not only explores the depth of his medium, continuing to mediate the struggle between abstraction and figuration, but proposes a broader consideration of how we make our way through the world.