

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken  
Xie Nanxing



Installation view of "A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken," at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, 2019. Photo by Ben Westoby. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery.

It's easy to forget, when considering western painting, that no act of mimesis on a two-dimensional surface will equate reality. Linear perspective represents one of many ways to draw the world and all painting is reducible to pigments on a surface. Photography is no different. When the first cameras were developed, there was a conscious effort to represent reality with the technology. It doesn't have to be that way, according to Xie Nanxing. The artist's solo exhibition "A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken" at London's Thomas Dane gallery featured 12 canvases, comprising two recent series. References to the works of old masters were abundant, as were subtle and not-so-subtle tweaks to the parameters of perspective and image-making in painting, via the incorporation of photographic effects.

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In one of the two series, “Spices” (2016–17), Xie borrows motifs and compositional elements from a number of classical paintings. In *Spice No.3* (2016), a procession of female nudes descend a staircase, all in a palette of pink and purple, with shadows in grey. The composition is strongly evocative of Edward Burne-Jones’s *The Golden Stairs* (1876–80), Marcel Duchamp’s cubistic-futuristic *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), but the most striking thing about this image is that, for the most part, it appears to be in soft focus, emulating a variable effect of photography. The one part of the image that appears in focus is a parrot, perched on the hand of the foremost descending figure, perhaps symbolising the artist’s imitation, or “parroting” of well-known works from an extra-diegetic point in the picture frame that, indicated by its focus, stands outside of time and provides a bird’s eye critique.



Left: *Spice No. 3*, 2016, oil on canvas, 300 × 220 cm.



Right: *Portrait of L*, 2018, oil on canvas, 220 × 150 cm.

Another painting in the series, *Spice No. 1* (2016), depicts what appears to be a conflict, with one figure looming over a person lying on the ground, against a dark turquoise background. The motif could easily be taken from any number of violent scenes in paintings like Peter Paul Rubens’ *Massacre of the Innocents* (c. 1610) or Daniele Crespi’s *Cane Killing Abel* (c. 1597–1630), and, again, it is subject to a technique that recalls the variables of photography. In this case, the defining element is movement, with limbs blurred and doubled along an implied trajectory, like in a photograph taken with the slow release of the shutter. In *Spice No. 2* (2016), Xie replicates the effect of too-fast a shutter speed combined with too-small an aperture, by rendering a nearly indistinguishable crowd in purple-grey. The references to photography serve to illustrate that at the forefront of these images is an awareness of what painting can do, and what parameters can be adjusted at a macro scale in order to re-envision an existing image, be it art-historical, or worldly.

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Left: *Spice No. 1*, 2016, oil on canvas, 220 × 300 cm.



Right: *Spice No. 2*, 2016, oil on canvas, 220 × 300 cm.

The fourth in the series presented in the show, *Spice No. 7* (2017), represents a different kind of perspective. In a largely blue painting that very clearly recalls Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (c. 1495–98), the artist has drawn black arrows pointing to various points in the image. The arrows refer to the extremely rigorous methods of education in Chinese art schools, where the approach to composition is high analytic. Rather than sharing the perspective of the original painting, then, here we are seeing a process.



*Spice No. 7*, 2016, oil on canvas, 210 × 300 cm.



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The second series comprised a collection of portraits, all made in 2018 and involving some degree of obfuscation. For these, Xie employed a “canvas print” technique in which a rough canvas is placed over the work’s surface. Paint is allowed to seep through this canvas filter onto—and to an extent integrated into—a range of backgrounds spanning the figurative to the abstract. *Portrait of L*, for instance, has only sparse dots of colour on an otherwise minimal background split by three horizontal black lines, whereas *Portrait of Couple* and *Portrait of 3G* each have similarly spare portraits—largely from photographs of the artist’s friends—applied onto scenes depicting living rooms and other everyday spaces that employ more traditional western perspective. The overall effect is uncanny, with ghostly images appearing in places that don’t fully seem to accept them. Like all the works in the show, the series encapsulated the artist’s process, through which he continually tests the limits of painting.



Left: *Portrait of Couple A*, 2018, oil on canvas, 210 × 250 cm.



Right: *Portrait of 3G*, 2018, oil on canvas, 210 × 250 cm.

All artwork images: Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.

Xie Nanxing’s “A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken” is on view at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, until July 27, 2019.

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