



Xie Nanxing, pictured in front of two of his artworks | Photo courtesy Fan Xi

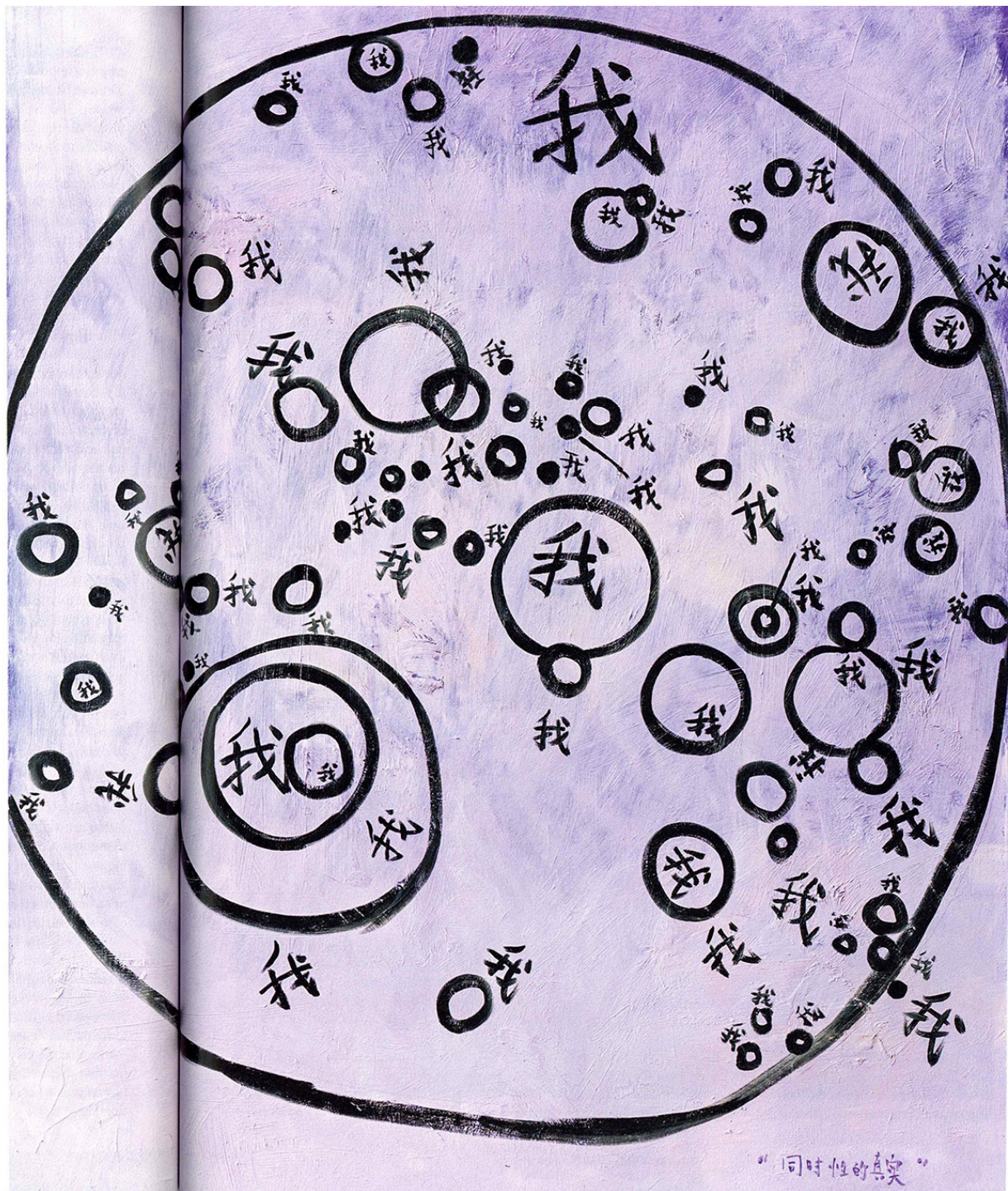
## Portraits of Paradox

CHINESE ARTIST XIE NANXING PAINTS  
AN ESCAPE FROM PAINTING.

BY SARAH FLEMING

**X**IE NANXING HOLDS A DEEP MISTRUST OF PAINTING. Though he has spent the better part of the past three decades honing his craft as a painter, the Beijing-based artist still regards the medium with suspicion, perpetually experimenting with techniques to “escape” from painting. In the process, he has continually reinvented the form, mining both Eastern and Western artistic traditions to uncover ways to push figurative painting to its limits.

*The Reality of Simultaneusness, oil on canvas, 2010 | Courtesy Xie Nanxing and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing*





**Like fragments of a dream  
half-remembered, the paintings  
resist easy interpretation.**



*Exploited Dream No. 2, oil on canvas, 2022 | Courtesy Xie Nanxing and Petzel, New York*

Thriving in spaces of paradox and contradiction, Nanxing's work refuses to be pinned down, hovering between figurative and abstract, analogue and digital, East and West.

Born in 1970 in Chongqing, Nanxing studied printmaking at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. In 1999, he made his painting debut at the 48th Venice Biennale, where he garnered international attention

for his startling photorealistic self-portraits and depictions of naked men in distress. With these tense snapshots of aggression and vulnerability, Nanxing has stated that he was aiming to provoke a psychological reaction in the viewer as they confronted the shadows of violence lurking beneath the scenes. Soon, however, he abandoned these more explicit portraits of turmoil, setting

out instead to evoke similar psychological states through large-scale oil paintings of semiabstracted forms of everyday objects like a fluorescent light bulb, an oil stain on the floor, or a gas stove flame. He described this shift as part of his attempt to "escape from the image," and it marked the beginning of his exploration of the balance between abstraction and figuration.

In subsequent series, Nanxing took this "escape" even further, stretching and subverting the medium of figurative painting to create what he calls "camouflage paintings" or "escape-from-painting paintings." In his 2001 series of untitled triptychs, for example, he probes the possibilities of digitality, starting with quasiphotographic portraits and then obscuring them to the point of illegibility with layers of paint that replicate the texture of a screen. Some paintings are pixelated;

others are blurred or distorted like a grainy flip phone photo—or footage from a surveillance camera. Nanxing links his fascination with surfaces to his interest in investigative psychology: "I examine the surface, as well as the layers that are close to our mental state, as if I were a doctor," he writes. With these layers of obfuscation, Nanxing produces works that simultaneously reveal and conceal, at once experimenting with and upending the form of figurative painting.

Iterating on these exercises in obfuscation, Nanxing went on to develop his signature "canvas print" technique, a methodology derived from traditional Chinese ink painting. After affixing an unstretched canvas atop a stretched one, he paints solely on the outer canvas, allowing the pigment to seep through to the surface below. He then removes the outer canvas so that only the traces remain. "The spots that are left behind are fundamentally linked—as evidence—



*Triangle Relations Gradually Changing No. 3, oil on canvas, 2013 | Courtesy Xie Nanxing and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing*





Exploited Dream No. 5, oil on canvas, 2023 | Courtesy Xie Nanxing and Petzel, New York

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to the completed work," he explains. "These surplus materials carry some of that work's meaning. They are like its shadow." The resulting canvases are often ghostlike, with outlines of hazy silhouettes and hints and gestures at what has been removed.

His latest series, *Eight Dreams*, uses the canvas print technique as a starting place to build out vibrant, elaborate tableaux inspired by his own dreams. Like fragments of a dream half-remembered, the paintings resist easy interpretation. In one scene, hallucinatory figures float amongst power outlets and splotches of paint; in another, pastel buddhas and bodhisattvas sit behind bars. Several paintings in the series include fragments of text, many of which are crossed out, painted over, or otherwise obscured. In *Exploited Dream No. 2* (p. 70), for instance, only one character is visible, yet even this character contains ambiguity: As the exhibition's press release

explains, 哧 (*chi*) can signify the sound of giggling, heavy breathing, or something being torn. Nanxing welcomes such spaces of mystery and uncertainty—as he writes, "We shouldn't be afraid when confronted with unfamiliar forms that we don't understand because, with time, the forms will speak for themselves."

Nanxing's work is, in effect, an attempt to allow the forms to speak—and to tell whatever truths or half-truths they may. "There is no end goal for me in terms of painting," he told *ArtAsiaPacific*. "It's not the truth, but it's also not just a game. It's more like a game that is close to the truth, or rather a truth-mimicking game. It entices you to continuously discover different possibilities of the truth, although no one knows what this actually is. It is similar to trying to find the meaning of life." 🍵

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