

Lisa Claypool

China Urban: An Interview with Xie Xiaoze

As cities in China expand at a rate and to a size practically beyond belief, the language that we use to describe and define them is shifting. Words such as “metropolis,” “cosmopolis,” and even “urban” seem inadequate, not grand enough or encompassing enough to represent the enormity of this new intersection of rice fields and skyscrapers. They are being supplanted by the new language of polylocality, the “glocal,” and terms such as “translocalmotion,” the theme of the 2008 Shanghai Biennial, a word that evokes the powerful machinery of train locomotion, movement across space, and locality. It is rendered *kuaicheng kuaike* in Chinese, literally, “speedy city, speedy guest.” In some cases, words that seem new in fact are being resuscitated from long disuse. They draw us back into the nineteenth century, another era of vast construction, migrations of people, and rapid circulation of commodities and capital. The nineteenth century gave birth to the megalopolis, a city without a centre, a space of endless urban sprawl, an inchoate architectural form. If London was the embodiment of the nineteenth-century megalopolis, the Pearl River Delta is its new embodiment in the twenty-first century.

The city in China, in short, is so big and is moving so fast that it seems almost able to escape language. And so we find ourselves grasping for words to speak of it.

Visual art begins to fill the gap. As an artist whose visual work limns the line between architectural and pictorial space and whose process as a painter and photographer is heavily informed by training in architecture and craft design, Xie Xiaoze is especially well situated to address the problem of the Chinese city. Photographs of his recent installation, *Last Days*, composed with collaborator Chen Zhong in Kaixian, Sichuan, were on view from April 7 to June 7, 2009, at the China Urban show in the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Portland, Oregon. The following interview of Xie by Lisa Claypool, founder of the China Urban Collective and co-curator of China Urban, took place in April 2009.

Xie Xiaoze and Chen Zhong,
installation view of *Last Days*,
2007–2009. Photo: Dan Kvita.
Courtesy of Reed College,
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial
Art Gallery, Portland, Oregon.



Lisa Claypool: Why did you decide to pursue a B.F.A. degree in architecture?

Xie Xiaoze: I was actually on the science and technology side [in high school]. At that time I wasn't really sure what to do. I was interested in physics and I had been interested in painting and drawing since I was a child. But I never considered pursuing a career in the arts. To study architecture seemed a good compromise between science and art.

Lisa Claypool: But there were not that many Chinese architects working at the time?

Xie Xiaoze: In the early 1980s, rapid urbanization had not started yet. But people already had an idea about what professional fields would be popular. And architecture was definitely one of them. And, of course, the architecture department at Qinghua is one of the best in the country. At that time I was seventeen years old, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

But I didn't find myself very happy there, particularly the first couple of years. The training was very rigorous. We were supposed to draw in a way that doesn't reveal the trace of the human hand at all. And, in general, I found myself aspiring for something freer, less practical, less compromising . . . because, you know, in architectural design you have to take different elements into consideration and come up with a solution, and you're limited by circumstances.

On weekends and holidays I would go to the Yuanmingyuan gardens to enjoy and paint landscapes. The paintings were expressionistic, even though I didn't know what expressionism was at the time. They weren't very realistic.

Lisa Claypool: Did you see the Robert Rauschenberg show in Beijing [at the National Art Museum in 1985]?

Xie Xiaoze: I do remember it—it was a big deal. I was quite startled by the show. It was very exciting, striking, fluid, powerful. I didn't quite understand it yet, but that excitement and freedom left a deep impression on me.

Lisa Claypool: You graduated in 1988. What did you decide to do next?

Xie Xiaoze: I wanted to get as close to pure art or fine art as much as possible. I went to see the well-known muralist Yuan Yuanfu. I showed him my work and he was very encouraging. After two entrance exams, I got into the graduate program at the Central Academy of Arts and Design, which at the time was kind of a big deal, because no one from an architecture background could get into a major graduate program that emphasized painting.

Lisa Claypool: Were you working in oils at the time?

Xie Xiaoze: At architecture school we studied drawing, which was mostly academic drawing: full-value drawing using cross-hatching, very time consuming and intensive. We also drew landscapes and buildings outdoors. We studied watercolour painting. But at that time I was interested in gouache—as a medium it seemed to me to have a little more weight. I studied it on my own. I tried my first oil painting in a friend's dorm room with his

materials. When I went to the academy, oil painting wasn't encouraged so much by the professor; he encouraged us to work on design, on public art, on art that relates to architecture and space. But I always wanted to do oil painting. It seemed like the thing to do as a real artist.

Lisa Claypool: Were you expected to do sustained object studies?

Xie Xiaoze: My advising professor, Yuan Yuanfu, was more of a modernist than the average art professor. He emphasized formal qualities of design, composition, simplification, rhythm, and he paid a lot of attention to space, all of these formalist issues. We did not do a lot of those long-term studies based on observation (which is what we were supposed to have done as undergraduates, anyway). There was a lot to enjoy in the program. We had the opportunity to design tapestries, which were then fabricated in a factory in southern China. We went to rural areas in Shanxi province to make lacquerware, mostly lacquer screens. And we worked on mural commissions. So from that experience I became very comfortable handling things on large scale. Some of my installations are mural sized.

Lisa Claypool: I am very interested in your early study of the object. Now you paint books and newspapers, and your work is still engaged very much with issues of objectivity. I want to talk about this aspect of your work. But first, can we continue the discussion of your education? What made you decide to continue on to pursue a second M.F.A. in the United States?

Xie Xiaoze: In the 1980s there was an influx of ideas and art from the West. At that time college students were reading authors who previously had been banned—people like Sartre, Nietzsche, and Freud. Among intellectuals there was constant discussion and criticism of traditional Chinese culture. So there was this idea of wanting to know more about the West and going abroad. The opportunity came when my wife got a scholarship to study physics at the University of North Texas. I went to the art school at the same university for the experience of a completely different system. The graduate program was more of a shelter for artists who had not yet found a place in the art world or artistic direction.

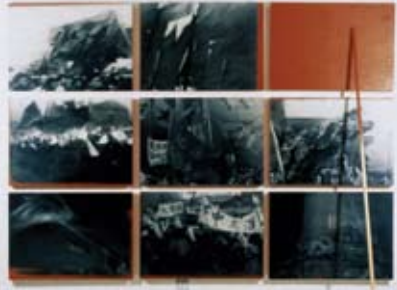
I was rethinking my ideas about art. After studying postmodernism I felt that those early ideas I had about the autonomy of art seemed dated. So I was looking at the potential of figurative art and how to combine realistic skills with ideas, with issues that related to contemporary art. Perhaps not to tell stories, but to use stories to deal with critical issues.

In 1995, I had my first solo show. Then things picked up quickly. And I moved to Bucknell University in 1999, and soon after started to show in New York.

Lisa Claypool: What kinds of things were you painting?

Xie Xiaoze: At the very beginning, in 1992–93, my work responded to the sudden change of living environment. I painted things that were very American. I painted the junkyard. I climbed into abandoned cars and took photographs of the sky through the cracked windshields and did a series of black-and-white photorealistic paintings of these images. And I did very colourful, very expressive paintings of grocery stores—in the States they're

so big, a scene of abundance. But then, soon, I focused on a new series of works called *The Library Series*. I painted rows of books, sleeping books, on the shelves of the library (based on photographs I took in the library). I usually painted them up close, so that you are confronted with this wall of spines of books with numbers and labels, usually without titles—either the title and author is cropped out of the picture or they're obscured. So more like an abstract kind of containment.



I was also very interested in the interpretation of history. In 1994 I started to make works based on historical or news photos. I started to make installations that dealt with the interpretation of historical events. My first installation was about the history of student movements

Xie Xiaoze, Flags and Banners: A Century of Student Movements in China, 1994, oil and acrylic on wood, 297.2 x 358.1 x 88 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

in China in the twentieth century, called *Flags and Banners*. And I also did a piece about the burning of books by the Nazis, and another work about the destruction of books by the Red Guards. The theme of the library—my interest in time, and history, and memory—these have always been present in my work.

Lisa Claypool: How are your paintings different from traditional still lifes?

Xie Xiaoze: First of all, instead of setting up the objects the way you want, instead of composing, I prefer to find something that is existing, and to rely on however librarians leave things or organize things. To use only the viewfinder of the camera to decide upon my composition. Second, I am very deliberate about my palette. Some of the early paintings are purely black and white, very neutral, and cold, and the Chinese library paintings are always dominated by either a warm brownish-yellowish tone, or, later on, a greenish tone with an almost toxic feel. And I think the third thing has to do with the scale. We think of traditional still life paintings being small, perhaps somehow closer in size to the actual objects they depict—you think of paintings of apples, and glasses, things like that. My book paintings are dramatically bigger than life size, so that they have a kind of architectural presence.

Lisa Claypool: I completely agree. I'm wondering about the notion of finding the books in a particular order—or finding them out of order. It seems to me that what you paint often is the disorder or the trace of a hand that has been touching the book and casually leaves it in one place. Is there something about order and disorder in the library that you find appealing?

Xie Xiaoze: Yes, I think that the question of order or disorder is an important one. Many of these library paintings—how the books are organized or how the newspapers are stacked—do reflect an order. For the stack of newspapers, maybe it's a chronology of time, from one particular month or weeks. And librarians usually stack them from earlier to later or later to earlier, although they appear to be casually stacked. And I would keep them the way librarians stack them, because it reflects an order.

Lisa Claypool: Yet your paintings suggest that there is a potential for disorder, that things which we think can be contained within structures of



Xie Xiaoze, *The MoMA Library (O-P)*, 2005, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 152.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

order may actually escape them somehow. Even the newspaper stacks are a bit precarious.

Xie Xiaoze: Well yes, they're never perfectly horizontal and static. When you stack newspapers casually, inevitably you're getting some tilting lines. And that gives it a sense of movement. Everything is sliding away. The composition is dynamic.

In the *MoMA Library Series* the books are placed on horizontal metal shelves in order to emphasize the architectural space and a cold kind of analytical look. I wanted the lines to be straight, to be perfectly uniform. The proportion between the space the books occupied and the empty space they left has to be exactly the way I wanted. Order suggests the trace of the human hand and human mind. If we can categorize, we can organize things around certain themes or subjects; we get to have control over things. We categorize them, classify them, and label them in order to have control over them. Originally, this was more of a Western way of thinking.

Lisa Claypool: It's a late-nineteenth-century science, something I have been thinking about in my own research on colonial and domestic libraries and museums in the Shanghai area.

Xie Xiaoze, *Order (or the Red Guards)*, 1999, acrylic on paper, steel plates, 317.5 x 541 x 74.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Xie Xiaoze: Those terms (order/disorder) are definitely relevant now. Nothing is perfectly, comfortably contained or classified. In the paintings, there's a label falling off, the order of the books is switched, and sometimes you're reading the letters on the spine upside down. It's a decision to be

true to real life. In my 1999 installation called *Order (or the Red Guards)*, there was a deliberate superimposition of order and chaos to suggest the destructive nature of radical revolution.

Lisa Claypool: Can you say more about your own process?

Xie Xiaoze: I start with a theme or an idea. I work intensively on it for a while, and then maybe I get distracted. And then I start something else, work on it for a while, and I may revisit older themes or ideas or do something related, or deal with the same idea in a different way. What I am hoping is that I am not recognized by a particular subject or a particular style, but, rather, that over the years all these bodies of work grow into a related system, kind of like a tree, in their common conceptual stress.

Lisa Claypool: I see a conceptual link between your paintings and the Kaixian installations entitled *Last Days*. Can we discuss this recent work? First, how did you decide to work in Kaixian with Chen Zhong?

Xie Xiaoze: We always shared the same attitude of not serving the right profession. I moved from architecture to painting; he moved from engineering to cinematography. When I moved to Pennsylvania, Chen Zhong was studying cinematography at Temple University in Philadelphia. He taught me how to use the camcorder, basic editing. We stayed in contact.

Chen Zhong is from Sichuan, so he is very familiar with the Three Gorges Dam project, though he lives in Beijing. In January 2007, he traveled to Kaixian just when the new city was being built and the old city being taken down (200,000 people were relocated to the new city just twenty minutes up the hill). People were going about their everyday life, and because it was before the spring festival, it was really busy, lots of colours, the markets were so full of people. Chen Zhong showed me some of those photographs, and I really liked them; he also showed me photographs he did in the summer of 2007. He wasn't very happy about the documentary approach to photography and wanted to do a project, something that would intervene in the environment. And so we decided to visit Kaixian together in winter 2007.

The first few days each of us took pictures, and in the evening we talked and talked about a variety of ideas. For example, I was thinking of doing an installation of thousands of boats made of folded newspaper and to have them piled and scattered in the ruins. Chen was talking about the use of some bright colours in this grey environment, and having this colour, maybe a bright red, reflected in the water in some way. We talked about covering the lower walls of a conference hall in the city with newspaper, a miniature version of the Great Hall of the People, but it's a sensitive place, even though it's in an area in which the surrounding buildings have been taken down. We talked about covering open fields with newspapers and taking photographs of this dense field of newspaper on the ground surrounded by buildings that are half demolished. So after a lot of brainstorming, drinking, sketching, we said, okay, we will mount paper flat on existing walls and make it some kind of temporary monument. We were interested in newspaper as a metaphor for the transition of media and life, particularly in this dynamic moment; we were aware of the role of propaganda and of the media in the realization of the project in local newspapers; and we also knew newspaper has been used as a cheap decoration in a lot of people's homes. To mount the outside walls with newspaper was to turn something inside out.

Xie Xiaoze and Chen Zhong,
detail of *Last Days*, 2007–2009.
Photo: Dan Kvita. Courtesy
of Reed College Douglas F.
Cooley Memorial Art Gallery,
Portland, Oregon.



Lisa Claypool: How did you choose your structures?

Xie Xiaoze: We looked for sites with extraordinary contrast between “monument” and ruins. We hired a driver, looked around, and we would work quickly. I remember the first installation we did. It was getting dark in the late afternoon and we barely had time to finish it. The next morning we worried that the pictures were not good enough, that they didn’t have enough light, and we went back right away and were very happy to find that most everything was intact.

It was such an extraordinary experience to work there. You can imagine: the dust in the air, the toxic smell, noise. . . . How can people live in such an environment? For two years while the demolition was going on slowly and painstakingly, we would spend the day there, and in the afternoon we would start to get headaches because of the air, and our clothes would become filthy, the white sneakers becoming grey and brown. At the end of the day, when it was too dark to work, and we were exhausted, hungry, and all with headaches, then we would go to the new city, which was decorated with lights and advertising. And it was like heaven.

Lisa Claypool: Who did you hire to help you?

Xie Xiaoze: This young guy who had a bun bus (*mianbao che*). We asked him to take us to a hotel the first day and then to help us. We found him to be a nice guy to work with. He’d know all these places in town. We’d ask: Where is the recycling place that sells newspapers? And he would say: Oh there are a couple of them, and take us around. He’s a local guy, so he could help us hire more people.

Lisa Claypool: What did he think of your conceptualization of this project?

Xie Xiaoze: He intuitively could sense something unusual and exciting was going on. He had fun; he wasn’t so skeptical about it. His contribution was most significant. The others were just making some money. Chen Zhong was the real hero of the project, but this guy helped a lot.

Lisa Claypool: There’s one photograph of a wall plastered over with newspaper in front of a kindergarten. A round hole in it echoes the shapes of the windows in the school. Was that hole there when you found the site? Or did you punch the hole into the wall?

Xie Xiaoze: We pretty much utilized only the existing structures; newspapers were the only elements we added to the structures. If there was a hole or a crack we left it alone. We pasted only on flat surfaces to give the impression that this was a complete wall, and the surface decoration fragmented as the wall collapsed. As a filmmaker, Chen was very aware of the *mise-en-scène*. He used certain tricks to make the contrast of dark and

light more effective . . . He would spray water on the gaps and shadows to make them appear darker and give the composition stronger contrast.

Xie Xiaoze, *March–April 2003, P.P.G.*, 2004, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Lisa Claypool: And speaking of propaganda, is there a connection between the installations and the newspaper display windows common in Chinese cities?

Xie Xiaoze, *2001–2002, Guangzhou*, 2003, oil on canvas, 209.6 x 162.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xie Xiaoze: I did a project on those! I made a time-based, constantly changing installation for my 2003 show at the CAAW (China Art Archives and Warehouse); it displayed current local newspapers in transparent compartments—not unlike those display windows.

Lisa Claypool: In regard to architectural space, you discuss your earlier paintings conceptually as architectural, and at Kaixian you actually began to construct real spaces in the same bricolage manner. Would you elaborate on the ways in which that architectural impulse connects the newspaper paintings, in particular, to the installations?

Xie Xiaoze: *Fragmentary Views* is a series of paintings depicting a close-up of stacked newspapers, with fragmented little bits and pieces of information collaged together, more of a condensed version of history. This idea of fragmentation—you're never getting the full picture—relates to the configuration of the wall in the Kaixian project. The fragments of newspapers in the Kaixian installations cover fragments of the walls. Wherever the wall stops, the newspaper is chopped off. We never tried to include a full page; everything followed the natural shapes of the walls.

After doing the paintings of stacks of newspapers, I also did a group of paintings called *Both Sides Now* in which it appears that the text and images on the back side of a newspaper page have bled over to the front, so what you are seeing is the overlapping of the back and the front images. They're all based on a given newspaper with a specific date. I wanted to focus on something that was found, to give a sense of layers of information, complexity, confusion, and conflict of information. In those paintings the newspapers are opened up, and not only opened up, but seen through. So I think that with the Kaixian installations, the method of presenting the newspapers, to flatten them, to have them overlap, is very much related to those paintings.

What is essential to the paintings I just mentioned and to the installations is the idea of fragmentation, of conflicts, of the bombardment of dense of layers of information, and how it affects the way we see the world.

Lisa Claypool: One of the interesting things about the Kaixian installations is that you cannot read the characters. Sometimes you can just make out some of the newspaper headlines, but they're just too far in the distance to read. In your paintings it is exactly the opposite. You're so close that you almost feel the texture of the newspaper pages, but because you're so close, that sense of fragmentation and incompleteness is enhanced. The text is beyond legibility in both cases.

Xie Xiaoze: It's this idea of this dense information, sometimes not so much content specific.

Lisa Claypool: Could you talk a little about how history plays out in these almost lushly beautiful scenes of compete demolition and destruction? How does the aesthetic of the sublime speak to history in *Last Days*?



Xie Xiaoze: This particular project is the most dramatic. It is about the temporality and transitory nature of life, because it is such an extraordinary scene when the city is being flattened. That kind of urgency, that kind of scale—it was quite exciting for us.

I hope the images are beautiful. Beauty is always important—even, sometimes, when it comes almost as a by-product of an idea. To me, it could be a persuasive thing. You want someone to think about the work, to live with it in the sense of letting it linger in your mind. I think it has to have some visual quality, and that is beauty. But I think a lot has been done to create picturesque scenes of ruins. There's that whole tradition of paintings of ruins in nineteenth-century Europe, perhaps earlier, but I think what we're doing is quite different. This beauty has to do with artificiality, so much to do with the constructedness of the media. It's not just being nostalgic about old things (of course there is a sense of the work as a memorial to something that is quickly vanishing), but we also wanted to communicate something urgent.

Lisa Claypool: About the real human costs of living in a hyperreal world?

Xie Xiaoze: Human tragedies, political struggles, power: these are things that are major concerns in my work, that compel me to make work.



Xie Xiaoze, *August 8, 2006*.
N.Y.T., 2007, oil and acrylic
on canvas, 167.6 x 121.9 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.