

Press Release

January 11
March 15, 2025Opening
Saturday, January 11, 2025
from 11am to 8pm

Mort heureuse

Xie Lei

The exhibition titles *Chant d'Amour*¹ in 2022 and *Mort Heureuse*² in 2025 chosen by Xie Lei, evidently bring to mind Jean Genet and Albert Camus, yet these discreet tributes emancipate themselves those tutelary figures, acting in a more general manner simply as a starting point for two series of paintings.³ The omission of the articles “un” and “la” is certainly of importance: Is it not the means Xie Lei wishes to use in order to lead us down the pathway of song(s) and death(s) that remain radically undefined?

This lack of definition or ambiguity, immediately noticeable from the titles at the threshold of the exhibition, is a significant feature of Xie Lei's painting. It is something I already mentioned in a previous text concerning his practice:⁴ the features of his figures preclude them from any form of categorization, be it gender, race or class. In an era that is justifiably concerned with positionality⁵ and involvement, Xie Lei depicts bodies subjected to a kind of identity fugitivity. Indeed, his pictorial language includes, amongst other techniques, flat tints in oil, which are successively scratched and scraped—using brushes, paper and even the artists hand, the fingerprints of which can occasionally be discerned⁶—until the contours of the bodies are blurred into mysterious colored halos. It seems to me, that in his painting, Xie Lei is striving for what José Esteban Muñoz termed as the psycho-sociological concept of disidentification,⁷ i.e. an aesthetic and political strategy aimed at avoiding any form of assignment.

The theoretical references cited by Xie Lei are however quite different and more familiar: Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva,⁸ and thus linked to the field of psychoanalysis. Moreover, Xie Lei has long used the term oneirique or dreamlike to define his practice. I want to highlight this particularity since art shares with psychoanalysis a focus on exploring the question of our representations.⁹ In contrast with repression which bespeaks the refusal to represent a desire seen as problematic, I'm more interested in the dynamic mechanisms of the unconscious, such as dreams and drives (including the death drive, whether happy or not, which brings us back to the title of this exhibition) and which both have something to do with desire. Xie Lei's characters are all, sometimes indistinctly, “fighting, making love, dying or being saved.”¹⁰ My argument here is that the impossibility of precisely characterizing the scenes the artist shows us, reflects the representation of the impossibility of linguistic intermediation (which is in fact, the very definition of the unconscious). To put it another way, what Xie Lei depicts on canvas we can only imagine and is beyond words, things that might uninhibitedly erupt into our consciousness. The scenes he has been painting ceaselessly since at least 2020, are part of an ongoing cycle, whose very subject is illegibility. The above-mentioned disidentification would be met with indescribable acts, in the linguistic rather than the moral sense.

Within this long series I've just mentioned, we should note that the bodies—and whatever they are doing—have been increasingly dissolving into the colored backgrounds, like the barely discernable face behind two dark hands into the blues of *Intimation* (2024).¹¹ The treatment that this ghostly presence has undergone—is it even possible to speak of a body here?—is the same as that of the background: powerful, vertical brushwork, very different from the circular touches used for the hands. Although the hands might appear black, Xie Lei never uses either black or white to compose the infinite complexity of his hues.

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Finally, to emphasize the tension and duality that emerge from his paintings, Xie Lei likes to identify his works with the stylistic device of the oxymoron—“*Mort Heureuse / Happy Death*” is just one example. “How can one represent ambiguity in painting?”¹² asks the artist, who himself discerns oxymorons both in his work and in his own life. “As a painter, you’re confronted with white¹³ and death every day. How is it possible to make something invisible appear?”

Victorine Grataloup

1. From Jean Genet's sole film, *Un Chant d'Amour*, 1950, 26'.
2. From Albert Camus, *La Mort heureuse* [1936-1938], Gallimard, Paris, 1971. This first text by Albert Camus remained unpublished until the author's death.
3. As Loïc Le Gall emphasizes in his text authored for the exhibition *Chant d'Amour* at Semiose Gallery in 2022.
4. Artwork interpretative label, *Ce à Quoi Nous Tenons. Viva Villa! La Biennale des Résidences d'Artistes*, Dilecta, Paris, 2022.
5. Defines a theoretical and reflexive approach to subjectivity in the field of human and social sciences.
6. In an interview with the artist in his studio on October 17, 2024, Xie Lei described the process of applying his fingers to the canvas as “something quite unconscious, almost visceral, very personal.”
7. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis / London, 1999.
8. See Xie Lei's interview with Claudia Buizza and Ludovic Delalande in *Open Space #13*, Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris, 2023.
9. Here, I'm summarizing in very broad terms.
10. Interview with the artist *op. cit.*
11. During the interview, Xie Lei stated that the small format paintings in his exhibitions often act as keys or as “reminders of the pathway taken.”
12. Interview with the artist *op. cit.*
13. White is associated with death and mourning in Asia.

Director of the nationally renowned Triangle Astérides contemporary arts center and artist's residency in Marseille since 2022, Victorine Grataloup is an exhibition curator, co-founder of the tri-lingual Qalqalah platform for artistic exchange, research and publishing (together with Line Ajan, Virginie Bobin, Montasser Drissi, Vir Andres Hera and Salma Mochtari) and of the curatorial collective Le Syndicat Magnifique (alongside Thomas Conchou, Anna Frera and Carin Klonowski). She grew up in Drancy, in the suburbs of Paris and studied art history and theory at the EHESS (Paris), the Humboldt University (Berlin) and the Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne where she also taught art economics for six years. She previously worked at the Palais de Tokyo, KADIST, Bétonsalon and the Cneai before taking up freelance work. Her work is collaborative, at the intersection of artistic and social issues and the meeting point of languages. She is particularly interested in the political and affective implications of artistic practices, the collective imagination and minority representations, as well as appealing and welcoming institutions.