

UNCATEGORIZED

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Close Reading: Xie Xiaoze paints blown-up books

by Edward M. Epstein

Xie Xiaoze: *Endurance* at Chambers Fine Art

April 6 to June 17, 2017

522 W 19th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues

New York City, chambersfineart.com



Xie Xiaoze, *The Morgan Library and Museum (f318)*, 2017. Oil on linen, 48 x 82 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Chambers Fine Art.

Though it promises to bring us closer to a subject, the zoom button on a phone camera merely enlarges what the device cannot grasp. Xie Xiaoze's blown-up book paintings—really paintings of photographs of books—also purport to bring us into close proximity with their subject. The more we look at these images, however, the more they show us how much is missing.

Taken from libraries around the world, the books depicted in these images are, at most, the length of a forearm, but the artist enlarges them to fill body-length canvases. The paintings faithfully reproduce the focal range and cropping of the source photographs, leaving some books blurred and others cut off at the edge.

Although Xie renders details such as lettering on spines without a trace of the brushstroke, his paint application is not neutral. Rather, the overall softness of his brushwork creates a dreamy, distant quality. In *Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University* (2016), the artist blends the background color with a raking motion that aligns with the horizontally-laid pages of the books. Left-hand cropping further accentuates this cross-wise blur, giving us the sense of panning across the subject rather than fixing our gaze directly upon it. Though they are heavy as stones, Xie paints his books as if they were fluttering in the wind.



Xie Xiaoze, *Tribhuvan University Library Rare Book Room (Study No. 2)*, 2016. Oil on linen, 36 x 62 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Chambers Fine Art.

As their covers are closed and spines crumbling, we must rely on the gallery handout to reveal the contents of these books. A piece entitled *Tribhuvan University Library Rare Book Room (Study No. 2)* (2016), from a Nepalese collection of works on eastern thought and religion, shows a book covered by a fantastically wrinkled cloth. A triad of paintings, *Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University)* (2017), depicts half-burned Chinese books, rescued from Japanese attacks during World War II.

What we cannot see in the text Xie reveals through color. As if to evoke flames from Japanese firebombs, the artist has heightened the rich reds in the leather of the *Through Fire* books, which stand out sharply against their blackened pages. In *The Morgan Library and Museum (f318)* (2017), books jacketed in vivid greens and oranges rest on cool steel-gray shelving units. In the *Tribhuvan University* painting, rivers of orange cloth drape over the decaying book, a warm foil to a cool gray-green background. Transmitted through the slurry of Xie's brushwork, these high-key colors leave us feeling slightly nauseated.

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The blurring in Xie's paintings invites comparison to that of Gerhard Richter's photo-based works—which exaggerate the defects of their source material, news photographs, and snapshots. According to Richter, the haze was intended to remove any attachment to the image's content: "I blur to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant." While similarly detached from rational apprehension, Xie's subjects connect nevertheless through the senses. Amidst the rot and the crumble of decaying books, the artist draws us close to our own fleshy weakness.



Installation shot, exhibition under review. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art.