



Xiaoze Xie: Objects of Evidence at Asia Society New York

A survey exhibition of Chinese artist Xiaoze Xie at Asia Society examines the incredible power of books through installations, video and paintings.

TEXT: Barbara Pollack IMAGES: Courtesy Asia Society, New York



Xiaoze Xie, Chinese Library No. 66, 2018, oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

Born in 1966 in Guangdong Province, Xiaoze Xie's childhood coincided with the Cultural Revolution which has had a lasting impression on his research and art works. His earliest memories include his grandmother reading classic novels to him while his father, a school principal, was ordered to collect forbidden material for destruction. The collection of censored books in his family home were both frightening and tantalizing to him as a young boy.



So, it is maybe not too surprising that this Chinese artist, now a professor at Stanford University, has devoted the last five years of his practice to the story of censored books in China, a fascinating and disturbing cultural history. In this latest exhibition at Asia Society, Xie gathers paintings, photographs, video installation and a documentary film on the most recent impact of censorship on publishing to lay out all that he has discovered in his research. Moreover, there's a comprehensive database of close to 1,000 books—from the Ming Dynasty to the Cultural Revolution—that viewers can interact with and discover titles, dates, authors and causes for such material being banned.



Xiaoze Xie, *Chinese Library No. 62*, 2017, oil on canvas, 152 x 152 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

In his photo-realist paintings of books, Xiaoze Xie conveys a mournful combination of awe and sadness as the texts seem to be deteriorating before our eyes. In *Chinese Library No. 62* (2017), a pile of books with Chinese texts on their spines features volumes of an encyclopaedic reference book by Qing Dynasty scholar Hua Ximin. *Chinese Library No. 66* (2018), depicts a suitcase with the text *Han Song Qi Shu*, meaning *Books of Wonders of Han and Song Dynasties*, the title of a collection of Ming



Dynasty novels that had been banned multiple times, such as *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. It would have been helpful if the wall texts addressed a Western audiences' need for translation and explanation. But even with a quick glance, it is easy to see that these works pay homage to a history of literature and the greatness of the stories contained within these covers.



Xiaoze Xie, *Scrutiny (Premodern Books)*, 2014, archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable, each framed sheet: 55 x 77 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

On one long wall of the exhibition, the artist presents *Scrutiny (Premodern Books)*, reflecting his research from 2014 and a series of photographs he took of banned books from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, now revered and housed in prestigious library collections. Presented at scale, this wall of books is impressive, but again Western viewers unfamiliar with Chinese need a guide to point out that among the collection one can find first editions of the *Peony Pavilion* written by Tang Xianzu in 1598 and *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng)* by Cao Xueqin, printed in 1791, once banned, now revered examples of classical Chinese literature. Also included in the show are three vitrines holding actual first editions of books from the modern period through to the Cultural Revolution, including Chinese editions of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens as well as the poetry of Lord Byron and Pushkin. Xiaoze Xie has collected more than 700 of these books and it was fascinating to see them on display.



Xiaoze Xie, Chinese Library No. 55, 2012, oil on linen, 250 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

As long as these books have survived, there is hope that censorship will not win the day. In a video installation, titled *Transcience* (2011), the artist captures the fragility of books as we see in slow motion pages floating in the air, seemingly propelled by the heat of a fire. In the 2017 documentary film, *Tracing Forbidden Memories*, the artist's process and research are fully illuminated along with commentary from leading writers and publishers about the challenges of censorship in today's China.

The Asia Society and curator Michelle Yun should be complimented for presenting such a challenging exhibition with plenty of examples of once forbidden material. The exhibition does not include contemporary examples of censored books, which would be interesting, but even without this update, the show raises a number of issues about banning books and governmental attempts to



control public access to controversial texts. It makes clear that often what was once seen as problematic can later be appreciated as an important work of art. You leave this exhibition wishing if only Chinese authorities would learn this lesson today.

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