

# Xue Feng: Archive of Nature

Curator: Cui Cancan

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Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing 2<sup>nd</sup> Space

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Tang Contemporary Art is pleased to announce the opening of Xue Feng's solo exhibition, "Archive of Nature", curated by Cui Cancan, featuring more than 30 of the artist's latest paintings and installations from the year 2023, which will take place on 16 December 2023 at 4pm in Beijing 2<sup>nd</sup> Space.

## Archive of Nature

1. The first archival table in the exhibition hall displays Xue Feng's initial creative sources, providing both a retrospective of the artist's creative thinking and an entry point to understand the backdrop of Xue Feng's paintings. Several diverse editions of albums showcase Levitan's masterpiece "By the Whirlpool (У омыра)". However, what captivates attention is the intriguing fact that the same artwork appears with markedly different colors and textures in various albums, sparking Xue Feng's initial curiosity.

Let's "re-enact" the process that led to these differences. Firstly, during the capture of this "original" piece, variations in lighting conditions during shooting, coupled with the technical differences among different cameras, led to the initial transformation in the first rendition of the image. Subsequently, the process shifted from "painting" to "picture," where designers, fueled by their imagination, contemplated what kind of beauty this picturesque landscape should depict. Differences among editors then determined the secondary transformation of the "rendering." Following this, the image, now "misread" or "transformed," was sent to the printing press. The colors and textures of the artwork were no longer in the artist's control but were influenced by the technical expertise of the printing machine, the printing process, paper variances, ink purity, and dilution. After undergoing multiple changes, this masterpiece has evolved into various new appearances. It was distributed to different bookstores in batches, resulting in diverse versions that impact readers' initial understanding of Soviet art.

This process closely mirrors the dissemination and translation of art. Art originating from Europe, transformed by Soviet art, entered China and initially manifested as "oil painting." Its original form underwent repeated changes due to a combination of inevitable and incidental factors, influenced by the chosen path of dissemination, the tools employed, and the comprehension and context of the recipients. Similar to the way history unfolds, evidence from the same event is crafted into distinct archives based on the perspective of the recipient. Ultimately, the "original intent" loses significance, transforming into a series of misinterpretations and imaginative reinterpretations.

Yet, Xue Feng is particularly interested in the impact of "technique" on the transformation of dissemination. This technologically dominated "misreading" is also evident in another context explored by Xue Feng, where dozens of different versions of West Lake promotional brochures present the same scenery. Variations in framing, design, cropping, and printing result in the scenery appearing vibrant, bright, cool, or warm at different times, shaping the initial impressions of West Lake for tourists. At times, these representations resemble visual archives of West Lake, where "nature" is artificially adjusted and modified, molding and influencing people's perceptions of West Lake.

Coincidentally, such experiences are common in our daily lives. We encounter the initial portrayal of Paris in films, literature, and paintings. Different texts, visuals, and archives collectively contribute to shaping our understanding of Paris. Several years later, when we finally arrive in Paris, we become aware of the disparities. However, for us, that internalized image of Paris has long become the benchmark against which we measure reality and approach the essence of Paris.

2. Xue Feng's fascination lies in collecting diverse renditions of the same subject, be it Levitan's paintings, West Lake promotional brochures, or various portrayals of the Guest-Greeting Pine in Huangshan. Over the years, this practice of collecting, analyzing, and studying variations has seamlessly integrated into Xue Feng's creative process. It has become an intrinsic aspect of his artistic endeavors, molding a distinctive research perspective and methodology that aligns with comparative approaches found in fields such as archival studies, natural history, and anthropology. Subsequently, Xue Feng's passion for maps, geography, locales, terrain, topography, and culture has further clarified the direction for this new body of work. It serves as an exploration of how "nature" is translated through art.

3. Xue Feng exhibits a profound interest in series, combinations, and comparisons, akin to an archival researcher striving to forge connections between archives and art.

Xue Feng's creations consistently manifest in grouped formations. In contrast to the traditional pursuit of a singular "masterpiece," Xue Feng's creations defy a hierarchy of "studies" and "masterpieces." Instead, they engage in a dynamic interplay, layering, resonating, and complementing each other. Each work serves as a tangible manifestation of the underlying concept, seamlessly carrying a portion of the conceptual intent. There exists no differentiation in significance; collectively, they construct a cohesive and structured whole.

In the exhibition's arrangement, this "grouping" method finds its most thorough expression. A concept or argument is dissected into various pieces of evidence and archives. The archives serve as both corroborating evidence for the idea, forming a complete chain of proof, and as a means to enrich, extend, and expand the argument through new "archives." At times, due to the emergence of new evidence, the original viewpoint may shift. For instance, in Xue Feng's "Revival" series, where he depicts figures from ancient Greece like Aristotle, goddesses, Auspicious Animals from Tibetan Buddhism, Martin Luther from the 15th century, and modern writer Woolf, the juxtaposition raises questions: which figures come closer to immortality? In what ways is their spirit perpetuated? And which ones, after the passage of time, can undergo repeated "revival/resurrections" in the future?

4. How does a painting come into existence? Unlike many artists, Xue Feng's creative process doesn't involve direct depiction. He always establishes necessary rules and methods, making the steps intricate. The initial image undergoes several rounds of dissolution and translation before reaching the final result. Therefore, Xue Feng's works are often unpredictable, requiring a series of procedures to achieve the image and form. In this process, there is both the artist's intentional, rational setting of rules and techniques and the random, serendipitous opportunities.

Take "Seventy Million Years-9" as an example. Initially, Xue Feng finds an image of the Alps in a catalog, divides it into squares using proportional lines, transforms these squares into three-dimensional, combinable wooden board tools, disrupting their original order and position like building blocks, and reassembles them into a new mountain range—a process he calls mountain-making. Subsequently, he employs industrial printing techniques and computer color palettes to introduce color variations in these blocks. Guided by standardized color references, he orchestrates a gradual transition of colors, culminating in the formation of an entirely new composition structure. In this process, nature becomes the object of analysis and translation, and the procedures of plate-making and printing become the borrowed syntax, revealing the relationship between nature, industry, and craftsmanship in the artwork.

In other pieces of the same series, the creative steps vary. Sometimes, Xue Feng deliberately exploits the technical defects of the printer to create differences. The amount and intensity of ink determine variations in color saturation, ranging from thin to saturated. Then, using realistic techniques, Xue Feng faithfully depicts these changes. At times, he may apply strips of tape to a complete image to create different traces. These accidental and random traces become the subject of the artwork. These different steps and methods result in the ever-changing nature of the same image, each with distinct generative logics and creative syntax.

Xue Feng never directly depicts an object; he always transforms it into an image, repeatedly translating and processing it before it becomes material for depiction.

We observe that Xue Feng's collection starting from 1997, including Levitan's albums, West Lake promotional brochures, and Huangshan's landscape photographs of the Guest-Greeting Pine, laid the foundation for his interest in inkjet printing, image generation techniques, and the principles of computer coloring. Until 2008, Xue Feng had already begun experimenting with how electronic color separation, printing, and plate-making processes could give rise to entirely new forms of artistic expression.

At that time, the electronic color of the post-90s had not yet begun, and the so-called new era had not yet become popular. Thus, we realize that unlike most young artists depicting electronic colors, screen colors, and printing colors, Xue Feng's interest lies not in the shallow and intuitive visual effects but in how technology has changed the image dissemination system, created a new logic for image generation, and brought about changes in painting syntax.

Ultimately, his focus lies not in glorifying the transformations technology imposes on visual experiences or in mere appropriation of a superficial retinal stimulus. He is more interested in how these technologies reshape our visual perception and how they establish a framework for reorganizing, translating, and creating images. The central query for him is whether this method and comprehension can furnish a fresh syntax for the domain of painting.

5. For Xue Feng, the significance of crafting a new syntax for painting extends far beyond the images themselves.

6. The process holds greater significance than the outcome; this stands as the paramount insight bestowed upon the present by conceptual art. Xue Feng derives pleasure from the creative journey, a joy surpassing the attainment of any final image. The essence of his work lies not in crafting an image per se, but in the delight of intellectual exploration, the captivating allure of analysis, and the intricate interplay of logic during the creative process. In certain instances, Xue Feng's studio metamorphoses into a contemporary laboratory for image technology. This spans the spectrum—from delving into the archaeological realm of image knowledge and scrutinizing historical threads, to the electronic dissection, reshooting, scanning, and printing of images. It extends further to the meticulous carving and layering of templates, the discerning selection of materials, experimentation, and surface treatment. The culmination is the synthesis of a visual tableau, harmonizing an amalgamation of knowledge, techniques, and syntax. Xue Feng not only mimics but also transforms the "technology" underpinning image generation, shattering the representational mold of modernist painting and seeking an entirely novel relationship between painting and image.

7. Evidently, Xue Feng exhibits a relatively modest interest in the direct portrayal of landscapes, despite drawing considerable creative inspiration from his travels. Long-distance road trips hold a distinctive significance for him, with the landscapes encountered serving as both the subjects of his artistic endeavors and the genesis of contemplation.

In the 1940s and 50s, the American landscape artist Hopper embarked on two extensive cross-country journeys. He traversed the United States from its eastern reaches to the west and then retraced his route. On another occasion, he journeyed southward along the East Coast, reaching the vicinity of Miami, and then proceeded southwest into what is now Mexico. A multitude of his artworks emerged from these extensive expeditions. Today, an examination of these landscapes allows us to discern the traces and narratives of Hopper's two journeys. Frequently, Hopper lodged in roadside motels, exemplifying the quintessential American hotel style, where expansive landscapes unfolded beyond the windows. Occasionally, scattered in isolation amidst the wilderness, were white wooden houses. At times, he arrived in slightly larger towns where the residents exhibited a laid-back demeanor and reticence characteristic of small-town Americans. At times, he would sojourn in hotels nestled within bustling metropolises. Perhaps influenced by the timing of his arrival, he frequently found himself navigating the quietude of late-night street corner bars, where patrons sat scattered, distanced from one another. Alternatively, he explored the unique and somewhat unfamiliar spaces of the city's theaters, leaving an indelible mark on his memory. More frequently, however, he was on the road, covering significant distances before stumbling upon a solitary gas station. En route, he occasionally glimpsed the east-to-west railroad tracks of the United States or solitary lighthouses standing sentinel by the seaside.

This story was repeatedly mentioned during my interviews with Xue Feng. In our conversations, he expressed particular enthusiasm when discussing the landscapes outside the windows in Hopper's paintings, the potential hotels where Hopper might have stayed, and the hustle and solitude encountered along the way. I realized that, in certain aspects, this resonated with Xue Feng's numerous journeys. Alternatively, one could assert that Xue Feng's latest series of hotel-themed artworks echoes Hopper's frequent depictions of scenes within hotels. These

renowned hotels, mostly captured by Xue Feng during his travels, not only served as prominent landmarks in cities but also reflected the rise and fall of an era. The White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou, The Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong, the East Wing of Beijing Hotel, the Shanghai Hotel in Shenzhen, and the Baingoin Grand Hotel and Nangqên County's Ji Xiang Hotel encountered by Xue Feng on his journey through Tibet. Perhaps, the landscapes depicted by Xue Feng embody a distinct "scenery of the journey," featuring a certain unfamiliar perspective. Yet, due to the passage of time and the stories carried by these subjects, there is a unique sense of distance.

Perhaps influenced by Hopper's story, I initially discerned the emotive depth of the "doorframes" and "windows" in Xue Feng's compositions. They transcend mere ornamentation, serving as a revelation of the painter's position and perspective. They share a resonance with the landscapes beyond hotel windows in Hopper's paintings, a coalescence of time and space evoking a fluidity of perception. In the stratified integration of space and the elongation, approach, and dislocation of time and space, a subtle disquiet inherent to travel emerges—a solitude unique to our modern society.

8. About a year ago, Xue Feng embarked on a month-long journey to Tibet, a pivotal experience that profoundly influenced his creative pursuits. Before this expedition, Xue Feng held a deep fascination with landscape painting, where landscapes and spatial dimensions pervaded his body of work. Post-journey, his contemplation of "scenery" shifted towards an archaeological exploration of "nature," with the temporal dimensions of nature gaining prominence during this transformative voyage.

This prolonged nomadic lifestyle has cultivated in Xue Feng a more protracted and profound perspective on nature. In his latest works, two distinct temporal scales come to the forefront: one rooted in the history of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Alps, spanning approximately 70 million years; the other exists on a human scale, with a lifespan limited to a century or so.

The divergence in perspectives on time, juxtaposed with the prevalent sights of dilapidated cities during his travels, have afforded Xue Feng a unique opportunity for reflection. This phenomenon also resonates with the artist's initial aspiration of becoming an urban planner. Upon reaching any western county, Xue Feng routinely situates himself at the city's highest point, contemplating the relationships between the city and its surroundings. Beyond the rudimentary and congested urban landscapes lies an expansive plateau, occasionally adorned by uninterrupted ranges of snow-capped mountains. This striking contrast, governed by the logic of two civilizations, renders cities and architecture transient and diminutive. Perhaps, the sublime nature of the snow-covered peaks surpasses the endeavors constructed by humans, relegating "architecture" to a mere adjunct in Xue Feng's depictions of nature.

9. To delve into a discourse closely entwined with nature, Xue Feng opted to explore landscapes that serve as both a present component of the "natural" world and emblematic examples of human-made scenes—namely, "architecture." These structures, which once vigorously sought to leave enduring imprints, embodying the spirit of conquering nature and battling against time and the elements, now appear minuscule within the vast expanse of natural time. Humanity's earliest architectural forms, created a mere few thousand years ago, have transformed into ruins, surrendered to the encroachment of natural vegetation. Even acclaimed architectural masterpieces in history, such as the Parthenon Temple, Notre-Dame du Haut, the Italian Socialist Party Building, or residences crafted by architects like Frank Gehry and Le Corbusier, possess finite lifespans and significance. Slowly weathered by the relentless forces of nature, they gracefully succumb to the aging process. The once highly treasured values and aspirations are reduced to mere outlines over time. As the practical functions of these "buildings" fade away, they gracefully exit the narrative of societal history, seamlessly integrating into the broader tapestry of natural history.

10. Indeed, the lifespan of an individual is inherently limited, prompting the imperative to document ancestral stories as historical archives for transmission across generations. The eternal themes of "immortality" and "resurrection" thus persist as humanity's ultimate propositions in the perpetual struggle against the unyielding fate dictated by nature. Yet, true immortality resides only in nature, and so the "mountain" in Xue Feng's compositions emerges as a material that is closer to immortality than bronze.

The Alps formed during the course of 70 million years, and the people who gazed upon it 2,000 years ago could little substantial difference with those witnessing them today. The form of the mountain is far more enduring, and its monumental transformations surpass the capabilities of human creation or perception. This parallels Hiroshi Sugimoto's contemplation of the "sea," where water and air, transcending any civilization, are closer to "time" and echo eternal existence.

11. Milan Kundera's novel "Immortality" serves as a realist antithesis to the themes of "immortality" and "resurrection," suspending the grandiose and abstract notions in the realm of spirituality and ideals. Kundera metaphorically describes "immortality" as "reaching towards the far, towards the end of their lives, and even further, reaching towards the vastness of non-existence." Immortality is being present even after death, persistently discussed, celebrated, and remembered. In this sense, Xue Feng's utilization of the elements of air, rainwater, soil, and fire in his sculptures, drawing inspiration from Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, approaches immortality in a manner close to nature.

However, the enticement of "immortality" remains a subtle trap for humanity. Nature's eternal essence emanates from dynamism—mountains oscillate in height, rivers fluctuate between flooding and drying, the sea submerges the earth, and stones are shaped by the wind. In contrast, death brings a stillness for humans, symbolizing a cessation of occurrence and self-transformation. "Immortal individuals" can only be perpetually molded by the living, their lives fragmented into slices that are interpreted, misunderstood, and translated. Just like Levitan's masterpiece and the ancient Guest-Greeting Pine on Huangshan, their "immortality" precisely arises from a dynamic, an ongoing process of interpretation, misunderstanding, and translation, a continuous generation of fluidity.

Taut's Glass Pavilion, a temporary exhibition hall, emerges as a paragon of fluid architecture, liberating itself from perennially somber clichés of commemoration. The transparency of glass establishes an unobstructed perspective for observing nature. The essence of the building lies not in the transformation of nature but in the artful act of concealing oneself when facing it. According to Taut, only fluidity and the lightness of art can achieve this effect, manifesting a utopian vision and serving as the exhibition's centerpiece.

12. Every mountain can be seen as a living colossal relic. Its history predates humanity, chronicling a narrative far more ancient than our own. On this grand stage, nature consistently unfolds its enchanting wonders. If we were to stretch its timeline, the history we presently acknowledge and document appears as mere snippets in the wondrous archives of nature. Approximately ten thousand years ago, the vegetation, terrain, and climate of southern China exhibited significant disparities from the present day. The Hainan Island, now adorned with lush greenery, bore a semblance to an African savannah during the latter phases of the ice age, with an annual rainfall measuring only half of the current amount. However, without the scale of natural time, it is indeed challenging for us to imagine that this lush island was covered in wild grasses ten thousand years ago.

13. Perhaps this serves as nature's revelation, carrying a more transcendent spiritual impact compared to the archives left by humanity. A year ago, during my lowest and most despondent moments, I found the greatest solace amid nature and landscapes, comprehending for the first time the ancient Chinese worldview of communion with the natural world. One can endlessly contemplate how the "reality" at this moment constantly undergoes change on the scale of natural time. Placing this "reality" within a day is oppressive enough, leaving us steeped in insurmountable despair. Extending it to a century reveals nothing more than indelible ups and downs, a recurring theme in the journey of life and the flow of history. However, when examined over a thousand years, it becomes merely a story, a distant fairy tale or fable. And what about tens of thousands of years? Just half a sentence is enough to encapsulate the vicissitudes of time.

Curator: Cui Cancan  
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## About Artist

Born in Zhejiang in 1973, Xue Feng graduated from the Oil Painting Department of China Academy of Art in 1997 and later taught in the university. He has been working and living in Shenzhen since 2017. Xue Feng is recognized as a promising painter of the new millennium generation. Building upon the Rococo style, the artist employs riotous painterly brushstrokes and experiments with the construction of space on canvas. These individualistic explorations have added a unique look to the field of contemporary painting in China. Xue Feng's 'drawing games' are reflected in the movement of his brushstrokes, while experimenting with the bright colour spectrum of industrial printing to create a Rococo style of painting. In this process, the artist is constantly experimenting with new possibilities to break the established patterns of painting and thus expand the uncertainty of the same subject matter or selecting a part of the work and transforming it into something new. Whether organized in outline on canvas or left to spread, these brushstrokes painted with a free-hand and ease will be perceived as small units within a larger collective, underlining individual personalities that have been smoothed out in society.

In the decade between 2011 and 2021, Xue Feng's work has been undergoing a process of harmonization — rendering a two-dimensional space that could project a combination of the artist's state of mind, his artistic practice and the physical reality where he situates. In particular, Xue Feng employs his typical brushstrokes to depict the iconic sights and attractions that appear in tourist brochures. Sometimes the artist fills almost the entire frame with abstract brushstrokes, and sometimes sublimates the work by creating Richterian smears through simple scraping and rubbing on the all-over painted texture. Since he encapsulates a greater sense of abstraction, metaphorical references fail here. Single or varied color combinations run vertically or horizontally through Xue Feng's late-decade series, and the tonal combinations resonate with aggressive brushstrokes, leaving fragments of soaring brushstrokes at the bottom and edges of the frame.

After 2021, Xue Feng's work attenuates the pictorial form of abstract expression, using painting and production in parallel, and begins to shift towards a working method of concrete narrative. Taking naturalism as the centre of the world, the artist drove himself through the earth, gradually forming an accumulation of investigations into geography, topography, place and humanity. Combined with the perception of artificiality, materiality, spirituality and beliefs, the production of the artist's worldscape becomes a new body of artistic narratives. The process of sublimation from the pursuit of realistic image is actually a process of pursuing a balanced thinking.

## About Curator

Cui Cancan, writer, curator.