


Artist's exhibition offers new take on Western masterpieces

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If visitors at oil painter Xie Nanxing's latest show Spices in Beijing are confused by the event's title, they are in the right place. This is because Xie's solo show at Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art through May 27 is, in his words, a kind of "personal travel diary" of visits to art museums in Europe.



Spice No. 7, a painting shown at Xie Nanxing's ongoing exhibition in Beijing. [Photo provided to China Daily]

All the paintings on show are titled with a number after the word "spice", reflecting the artist's willful "misreading" of Western art, just like the exhibition's name Spices, which refers to explorer Christopher Columbus who mistook the Americas for the Indies, and a kind of Caribbean tree bark for a new spice from the East.

"Misreading is a kind of creation. There's no need to be correct about anything in the art world," says Xie, 48.

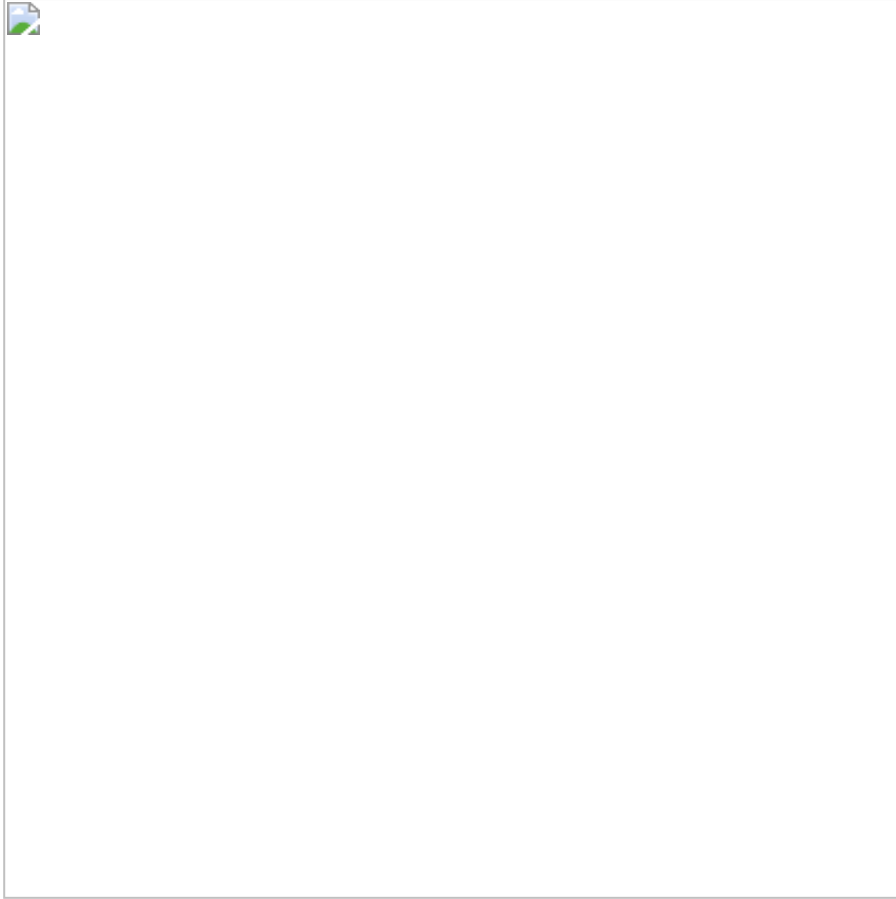
For instance, his Spice No. 7 reminds viewers of The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci or Supper at Emmaus by Italian master painter Caravaggio. But the artist says he didn't directly use elements from any of the two works. It's all about his thinking of the two masters' works combined with his personal view and experience.

The arrows above the figures' heads in Spice No. 7 are a kind of sarcasm about art education, where arrows are used to offer detailed explanations on how to understand a painting.

Xie, who has visited the Prado museum in Madrid many times, where he saw lots of paintings by Titian and Goya, likens his works to netizens' responses to articles they read on the internet.

"My Spices series is a kind of response to Western masters like Titian and Francisco Goya," he adds.

Xie, who graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute after seven years in the printmaking department, rose to fame at 29 when his works were shown at the Venice Biennale in 1999, a very rare platform for Chinese artists at the time.



Xie Nanxing, artist. [Photo provided to China Daily]

Then, in 2007, his triptych 10-meter-long paintings were displayed at the Documenta 12 in Kassel, an important art event which few Chinese artists had been to.

Speaking about Xie's work, Yuan Jiamin, a longtime friend of Xie, says: "He is regarded as a very good painter. But he often explores new things that are too experimental."

But, for Yang Zi, a curator with the UCCA, Xie knows art history so well that he is able to play with Western master painters via his canvas.

"He never repeats himself and keeps making steady improvements," says Yang.

Speaking about his work, Xie described his paintings as an art game.

The game is slow - as Xie does four or five pieces a year - but he enjoys the slowness because he spends lot of time thinking about daily life.

"Painting is not just about completing a canvas. It's also about thinking," he adds.

Xie spends most of his time in his Beijing's studio, reading extensively.

And, every two or three years, Xie produces a series of paintings which seem very different from his previous works in terms of style. But one thing that never changes is that the artist loves hiding messages in his paintings - such as inviting the audience to form their own interpretation of his works.

At his latest show, each painting is displayed with two benches. The benches are placed in such a way so as to allow visitors to view every painting for as long as they want to - to decode the artist's clues - according to the show's organizer.