

Xue Ruozhe

One Table, Two Chairs 一桌二椅

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Xue Ruozhe's first exhibition with MASSIMODECARLO London, *One Table, Two Chairs* 一桌二椅, brings together an entirely new body of work conceived specifically for the gallery's space. It marks the first time the artist has drawn on the conventions of Chinese theatre as a structural framework. In traditional Chinese opera, a single table and two chairs can conjure a palace, a battlefield, a riverbank; the stage stays bare, and the audience does the rest. Across the three rooms of the show, that same bareness becomes structure.

For the paintings work on a related principle, one Xue absorbed early in their culture: that black contains five distinct colours within it. Working almost entirely in neutral and warm colours, they push restraint to its limit – a simple tone worked and reworked until it yields warmth and coldness, distance and proximity, all from within itself. A dress rendered only in grey will read as blue if the scene around it asks for blue; colour, when it appears at all, is suggested rather than mixed. It is the same instinct behind the classical ink painting principle of *Liu bai* (留白, literally "leaving blank") - where parts of a surface are left empty, not as absence but as active room for the eye to complete what isn't there. Xue has spoken of wanting to stop the brush where it should, and entrusting the rest to the viewer's imagination.

Two girls recur throughout the exhibition – crossing a river, catching their own reflections, turning to face one another only to reveal they are the same figure appearing twice within a single space, they can be rotated reflection of each other. Where Xue's earlier paintings held two moments of the same body rotating through time, here the mirror has been removed altogether: the figures now share one instant, one space, united by devices like (invisible) mirrors and cameras, their doubling no longer a record of before and after but of two things being true at once.

Running quietly beneath the paintings is a further doubling, mythological this time: Perseus's mission to retrieve the head of Medusa, told through Perseus's eyes – except that Perseus, in Xue's telling, is a girl, and Medusa never appears at all. It is a choice consistent with how the artist has described their own presence in the work more broadly: each painting

functions as a kind of self-portrait, staged through the girls – often friends – who pose for it. Perseus becomes protagonist and witness at once, standing in for painter and viewer alike.

One Table, Two Chairs 一桌二椅 takes its title from the theatre's own restraint: with almost nothing on stage, an entire world becomes possible. Reduced to almost black, white, and the barest suggestion of colour, Xue Ruozhe's paintings hold just enough to summon a river, a mirror, a myth – and leave everything else to be imagined.

Xue Ruozhe

Xue Ruozhe was born in Jiangsu Province. After graduating from the Oil Painting Department of China Central Academy of Fine Arts, they continued their studies in the Painting Programme of the Royal College of Art, and obtained their master's degree in 2015. They were the winner of the Neville Burston Prize, Gordon Luton Prize for Fine Art, and the Tom Bendheim Prize, also the recipient of China National Scholarship. They were shortlisted for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2022. Xue currently lives and works in Beijing and Guangzhou.

Using painting as their main artistic approach, Xue's works explore the re-contextualization and re-enchantment of figurative painting in contemporary media ecology, in the rift between painting and imagery, painting and its own history. Underneath the restrained pictorial narrative are Xue's hints about what has yet to be presented or is about to happen. Working with a highly restricted methodology, Xue pushes the psychological density of their paintings to the limit, the reality is then distorted by constant subtraction until the paintings reach a state of suspension and stagnation.

In recent years, their works have focused on exploring the boundary of reality.