FOREWORD

With *Eyes On: Xiaoze Xie*, the Denver Art Museum initiates a series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists who we believe should have fuller exposure to our audiences. The artists presented have practices that further develop strengths within our holdings. Xiaoze Xie’s work has resonance with our entire Chinese collection, both historic and contemporary. He addresses the preservation of cultural tradition and the circulation of information in libraries. The custom of collecting and preserving written knowledge was established sometime between the sixteenth and eleventh centuries B.C.E. by Chinese emperors and scholars. Yet it wasn’t until the 1800s that public libraries were established in China.

When the Denver Art Museum began to collect contemporary Chinese art in the early 2000s, we focused primarily on artists who lived and worked in China. Xie lives both in Beijing and the United States and has since 1992, when he moved here to pursue an MFA. Although his subject matter has expanded to include Western libraries and national archives in addition to Chinese institutions, he remains passionate about exploring obscure Chinese books that once were banned or considered “dangerous” by a particular ruler or dynasty. His still-life paintings of books and installations of banned books are especially poignant at a time when the world is shifting from paper-based to digital means of storing information.

Watch for new *Eyes On* rotations every six months in the Logan Gallery and Fuse Box in the Hamilton Building’s fourth floor.

Christoph Heinrich
Frederick and Jan Mayer Director
EYES ON: XIAOZE XIE

Political struggles, human tragedies: these are things that are important concerns in my work, that compel me to work.

—Xiaoze Xie, interview with Lisa Claypool, 2009

Xiaoze Xie has had a lifelong fascination with books. In his worldview, books are conveyors of prestige and signifiers of collective cultural knowledge; they are repositories of historical meaning, cultural conflict, and political strife. The contrast between two childhood memories informs the tensions and scope of his studio practice. When he was young, his grandmother would gather with other elders, open a thread-bound book, and regale her friends with familiar tales presented in song: histories of emperors and kings, the noble and the wicked, the heroic and the beautiful. He also remembers seeing books that had been deemed “bad” by the leaders of China’s Cultural Revolution piled up in the office of his father, a school director, prior to being destroyed. From the disparity between these memories, Xie deduced that books were inspirational, instructional, mysterious—and sometimes forbidden.

When Xie entered graduate school at the University of North Texas in 1992 after earning degrees in architecture and painting in China, he struggled to decide what he wanted to paint and to find a practice that had significant personal meaning. His training as a mural painter in China paved the way to exploring scenes of everyday life in America. But Library No. 1 (1993) was his breakthrough canvas: a small black-and-white still life of two shelves of books, tightly cropped and rendered in soft focus. This painting laid the foundation for twenty-five years of investigation. Xie has since developed a large body of monumental still lifes of books in addition to renderings of archives in all states of preservation, including public destruction, as happened during the Nazi regime in Europe and in various political movements in recent Chinese history.

With an archaeologist’s zeal, Xie visits libraries worldwide to photograph their contents: books resting on shelves, stored in boxes, or wrapped in saffron-colored cloth as an act of veneration. He photographs them as he finds them, because he believes that their positions and sequence trace the workings of the human hand, human activity, and, ultimately, the human mind. But these books are also ciphers. The words and images inside encapsulate the ideas of a particular time and place.
His 2011 video *Transience*, on view in the DAM installation, has both historical and personal references. When Xie studied in Chinese universities during the 1980s, an influx of Western ideas, available through the loosening of regulations on banned books, gave students access to the work of Sartre, Nietzsche, and Freud, as well as political doctrines and religious philosophies. These are the books that shaped twentieth-century intellectual thought and influenced world history. But in that decade, Chinese politics changed rapidly, leading to programs and policies that contradicted each other. The growing social unrest eventually culminated in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and crackdowns in 1989.

The video features books being tossed into the air. At first the books flutter in the breeze. Soon they collide and begin to break apart. The pages are strongly lit from below; as the pace intensifies, the lighting becomes reminiscent of flames and brings to mind book burnings throughout history, from incidents in Qin dynasty China, through the Inquisition and Nazi book burnings, to recent burnings of the Qur’an.

The titles featured in the video include books that influenced the artist during his formative years in college, and are also suggestive of the taboo books that accumulated in the artist’s father’s office. Xie undertook a massive study of banned books and forbidden knowledge in China. Using government documents that list censored writings, the artist has amassed a large personal library of titles that have been restricted by various regimes since the early twentieth century. These books range from political treatises to romance novels, from unauthorized publications to generic-looking diaries containing hand-copied contraband texts.

The *Objects of Evidence (Modern Books)* installation in Fuse Box features selections from Xie’s collection of manuscripts and publications. The process of assembling the collection is shown in Fuse Box in the accompanying documentary film.
For the second installation in Fuse Box, *Scrutiny (Ancient Books)*, Xie scoured library catalogs in China to unearth old books that contained information deemed “dangerous” by various dynasties and rulers. He received permission to review the books and photograph them. Themes related to sexual pleasure, filial betrayal, political insurrection, and maps or descriptions of certain terrains were often censored. The imperial class restricted general access to these books and only allowed certain elite citizens to see them. Censorship is, of course, not unique to China; in the past three years in the United States, books ranging from the Bible to novels by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison have been challenged, according to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, part of the American Library Association.

For an exhibition in Beijing in 2007, Xie requested that the following couplet by the contemporary poet Xi Chuan be included on the gallery wall:

> History only records the achievements of a minority  
> The majority speaks in a confluence of silence

Resisting this truism has become the artist’s life work. His studio is a form of library that indexes books, histories of censorship, and printed news to recover voices and perspectives that have been muffled by a powerful minority. Xie’s “confluence of silence” takes vivid material form in his formal visual practice. The painter treads a fine line between silence and cacophony:

> I am not in any sense a revolutionary; I don’t want to give up painting for installation or video, I don’t want to give up the figurative for the abstract, I don’t want to give up the political for the cultural, I don’t want to give up my Chineseness for the universal, I would never give up sincerity or beauty for irony. I want all of these in my work. For me, a good work of art should generate layers of meaning.  

Rebecca R. Hart  
Vicki and Kent Logan Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

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1 Xiaoze Xie, excerpt from a lecture at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Penn., Oct 14, 2010.
XIAOZE XIE

Born in 1966 in a small town in Guangdong Province, China, Xiaoze Xie is the youngest of three children. Xie recalls making artwork from a very young age: “When I was young, I loved drawing. My father used to work as a teacher, a school director. I was able to pick up chalk in his office and draw with it.” In 1988, he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in architecture from Tsinghua University in Beijing before earning a master of fine arts degree from China’s Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1991. In 1992, he moved to the United States to study at the University of North Texas, where he graduated with an MFA in 1996. While he is perhaps most recognized for his photorealist paintings, his practice has evolved to include photography, sculpture, and video. Xie currently works from a studio at Stanford University, where he also teaches as the Paul L. & Phyllis Wattis Professor of Art. He has exhibited widely in the United States and abroad, and his work is represented in several prestigious private and public art collections. He has received numerous awards, including the Painters & Sculptors Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation (2013) and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2003). He lives and works in Beijing and Stanford, California, and is represented by Chambers Fine Art.

FILM SCREENINGS

Tracing Forbidden Memories, screened in its entirety (55 min.)
March 3 & June 2, 2018, 2 pm
Sharp Auditorium, Denver Art Museum
For details visit denverartmuseum.org

EYES ON: XIAOZE XIE
December 3, 2017–July 8, 2018

Chinese Library No. 57
2014
Oil paint on canvas, 48 x 74 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

The Queen’s College Library at the University of Oxford (K24, New Testament)
2016
Oil paint on linen, 36 x 52 in.
Private Collection

The Morgan Library and Museum (fj18)
2017
Oil paint on canvas, 48 x 82 in.
Collection of Jerry Nussmann

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto No. 2
2016
Oil paint on linen, 36 x 52 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Tribhuvan University Library Rare Book Room
2016
Oil on linen, 36 x 72 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Through Fire (Books that Survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance at Tsinghua University, No. 1)
2017
Oil paint on linen, 48 x 74 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Scrutiny (Ancient Books)
2014, printed 2017
Archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Objects of Evidence (Modern Books)
2012–ongoing
Collected antique books, dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Transience
2011
Single-channel video with sound
Duration: 12 min. 32 sec.
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Tracing Forbidden Memories
2017
Single-channel video with sound
Duration: 25 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Eyes On: Xiaoze Xie is organized by the Denver Art Museum. It is presented with the generous support of Vicki and Kent Logan, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, and the citizens who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD).

Cover and inside covers front, back: Objects of Evidence (Modern Books), details
Back cover: Scrutiny (Ancient Books), details