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Miller, Megan. ““And there’s nothing I can do”: Chinese artist Su Xiaobai at Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe + in conversation.” *ArtRadar*. November 7, 2018.



On the occasion of his first solo exhibition in Japan, Su Xiaobai speaks about meditation, spontaneity and material.

Titled “And there’s nothing I can do”, this exhibition employs traditional Chinese lacquer in a series of abstracted, pensive canvases.



Su Xiaobai, 'Breeze Over Water – Summer', 2018, oil, lacquer, linen, emulsion, wood, 200 x 190 x 18 cm. Image courtesy the artist and TKG Foundation for Arts & Culture.

Toxicodendron vernicifluum, also known as the Chinese lacquer tree, is an Asian plant species native to China and the Indian subcontinent. Bearing broad green leaves and oozing a toxic, greyish-yellow sap, the tree trunks are tapped in large diagonal gashes to harvest the caustic lacquer. Once filtered, heat-treated and dyed, the material becomes a soupy liquid, slow to dry and difficult to manipulate. Nonetheless, Chinese artist **Su Xiaobai** has selected it as his central medium, applying it in rich swathes to abstracted canvases, as demonstrated in his ongoing solo show at the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, **“And there’s nothing I can do”**.

His first large-scale solo exhibition in Japan, the show premieres 25 sets of abstract works by the artist, half of which were completed earlier this year.

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Walking through Su's inhabited space is to walk through his mind, each of the large-scale pieces having been born of momentary, transient emotions. Great stretches of colour, texture and gloss speak to withdrawn moments of reflection – a private encounter which the artist has graciously allowed us to fall into. With an aesthetic nod to the paintings of **Mark Rothko**, Su's canvases also appear to be slabs of excavated organic sediment, depicting an other-worldly depth brought on by the artist's own haphazard and unplanned process.



Installation view from Su Xiaobai's solo exhibition, "And there's nothing I can do". Image courtesy the artist and TKG Foundation for Arts & Culture.

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Also on view in the exhibition is a documentary of Su Xiaobai, chronicling the artist's journey from his education in the West, to his challenges with creative block, to the evolution of his artistic practice in recent years. The documentary includes precious footage of Su's art-making processes between studios in Shanghai and Düsseldorf, Germany, following the production of his reserved, conceptual moments, to the actual layering of paint and lacquer. Insight into Su's private storage facility where he spends time with his finished work before it goes on public view, features in the film, as well as the creative process behind "And there's nothing I can do". On the celebration of the show's opening, art critic and professor **Gao Minglu** stated:

Each of Su Xiaobai's works is unique because they each represent a specific personality of Chinese lacquer, while also embodying a sense of inspiration and epiphany that arise from the long-term complex contact between Su Xiaobai and Chinese lacquer resembling a religious spirituality of inseparable daily practice and contemplation. His work should be regarded from this perspective, rather than merely as a physical transformation, but more so the discovery of culture, of taste, and of an integrated spirituality. Each time I regard his work, I do not merely appreciate, but I am moved standing in front of the work. I can also imagine his state of working in his studio every day. More importantly, Su Xiaobai has unified the beauty of objects, spiritual experience and cultural discernment into one entity.

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“And there’s nothing I can do” presents a holistic view of Su Xiaobai’s artistic practice: from conception to its final physical manifestation. For him, art-making is neither confined to the studio nor defined by the moment he wields his paintbrush; rather, the process encompasses extended periods of meditation. Art Radar spoke with Su to learn more about his visual vocabulary and how these pensive moments give life to inanimate material.



Portrait of Su Xiaobai. Image courtesy the artist and TKG Foundation for Arts & Culture.

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Could you give our readers a bit of an explanation as to why you have chosen to work with traditional Chinese lacquer as your central medium?

Good question. Normally I work with oil, but for a long time I have been looking for a way to work with fluidity and thinking about the power of flowing colours. This doesn't necessarily work with oil. I'm interested in working with a material that can freely flow and simultaneously adhere to its surface. The [chemical] property of the lacquer allows for it to run better and cover greater areas; once dried, the finished surface is glossy, but you can also insulate this shine by certain means. It is certainly more diverse than other material and, once dried, it stays firmly where you have placed it, meaning you can apply several layers. Traditional lacquer is obtained from natural raw materials, as resin from the lacquer tree, meaning the colours will always be different and give off a different lustre.



Su Xiaobai, 'Breeze Over Water – Autumn, 2018, oil, lacquer, linen, emulsion, wood, 200 x 190 x 18 cm. Image courtesy the artist and TKG Foundation for Arts & Culture.

You have mentioned that working with this material emulates a kind of meditation for you. It is through this meditative practice that your pieces

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come together, often spontaneously or without much preparation. What are you hoping comes of this unpredictable practice?

I work without planning exactly how the end result should appear. I rely on being attentive throughout the whole process. It is more of a dialogue, a dialogue between me as a creative force and the material. Over time, as I apply layers and layers of lacquer, a condition arises on the scene that I have to react to. It's an interactive process and will continue until I can see the picture is done. Once the piece finds itself in that state, I can be satisfied.

My works are created during the entire procedure, but the beginning of this process can also be quite spontaneous. Allowing my material to speak for itself, I'm not working on one singular picture until it's done. I am working on several pieces at the same time, but this is also because it takes time for lacquer to dry; only after the material is dry can the next layer be applied. I generally work on two to three projects at the same time. I have to be very meticulous in recording the whole process to keep track of everything.



Su Xiaobai, 'Breeze Over Water – Winter', 2018, oil, lacquer, linen, emulsion, wood, 200 x 190 x 18 cm. Image courtesy the artist and TKG Foundation for Arts & Culture.'

You speak almost as if your materials are living, interacting, flowing and colliding with and around one another. Can you elaborate on why you have assigned your materials an anthropomorphic existence and what role this plays in the final piece?

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Because I do not foresee the end result and am not exactly planning anything, I do not know in advance what I will do. I always emphasise: giving the materials their own agency is my job. The interactive dialogue with between the material and myself is my work. The lacquer is very special and facilitates this kind of relationship. With oil, this way of working would not necessarily work. Lacquer takes on a very different character, even while working. The communicative properties are much more pronounced.



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In connection to this, how do each the pieces – which are incredibly diverse in style and display interact with or play off of one another? And how do you expect viewers to do the same?

I do not work for an exhibition. These pieces arise during my daily work and ritual. Each is different depending on my mood and moment. They are dependent on my thoughts. Even listening to a particular a piece of music can have an influence. And I believe the works are has complex and mutable as the mind itself. The exact composition of the exhibition depends on many aspects, particularly how the premises interacts with the work and how the curatorial team decides to decipher the material within it.

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The title of your solo exhibition, “And there’s nothing I can do”, seems to be a response to your unpredictable, meditative work, where the materials develop a mind of their own. How does abstraction, for you, cast away action or responsibility? Do you mean to say that there is ‘nothing you can do’ about what images, themes or ideas are born out of your pieces?

This title describes my personal philosophy in life. My way of working is a process, a dialogue with paint and lacquer. During the course of creation, the state of the material – and therefore the mood – changes and I have to respond to it until it’s done. It also reflects my lifestyle. I always give everything to my work; it is my life. I do what I can do and recognise that I cannot do more than that. You must work with what you have and nothing more. Creation entails a lot of spontaneity. Even when the artist has done everything, how the work turns out in the end is purely at the mercy of time. I say, leave the narrative to whoever wants a narrative. All I ask for is a little light, a little surface and undulation, with a bit of color, a bit of flow.

Su Xiaobai’s solo exhibition, “And there’s nothing I can do”, is on view from 12 October to 28 November 2018 at the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of

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