

Beijing: Stepping out of the Shadows: Interview with Xiyadie

BY LOUIS LU



XIYADIE, *Kaiyang*, 2021, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 140 × 300

*Working under the pseudonym “Siberian Butterfly,” Chinese artist Xiyadie transforms traditional Chinese papercutting into a medium of radical autobiography. His intricate compositions—in which flora, fauna, and human figures all intertwine—chronicle intimate narratives as well as the broader evolution of queer life in China since the 1980s. Following his 2023 breakthrough solo exhibition at The Drawing Center in New York, Xiyadie’s international presence expanded in 2024 through his participation in the 60th Venice Biennale’s main exhibition; a solo presentation at Hong Kong’s Blindspot Gallery (“Butterfly Dream”); and group exhibitions at Ames Yavuz, Singapore; and the Macalline Center of Art, Beijing. This momentum continues into this year with his three-meter-wide work *Kaiyang* (2021) (previously shown at the Venice Biennale) being displayed at Hong Kong’s nonprofit Para Site, while a number of his works will be included in “Queer Histories” at Museu de Arte de São Paulo, curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Julia Bryan-Wilson.*

In 2024, you participated in the Venice Biennale as well as several group shows around the world. You also held solo exhibitions in Korea and Hong Kong. And before that, in 2023, you had a solo exhibition at New York’s The Drawing Center. What has this journey been like for you? How has your life changed?

These past few years, showing my work in America, Europe, and Hong Kong has brought me so much joy. I feel like I have finally stepped out of my isolated world and found friends everywhere who appreciate my work. When my art makes people happy, that happiness stays with me for a long time. Being able to travel and visit new places also make me happy. Having museums and collectors acquire my works has definitely made my life easier—I no longer worry about putting food on the table like I used to. I also feel accepted when people from different places appreciate my work. It makes me feel that I belong in this world, that I am normal, that I can live in harmony with my surroundings, and this makes me very proud. I hope I can keep making art that shows how I see life. I try to look at the world with hopeful eyes. When I make new work, I like trying different ways of doing things—it feels fresh and exciting.

The Venice Biennale introduction describes you as “a father, farmer, gay man, migrant worker, and artist.” You seem to inhabit multiple identities. How do you view your identity as an artist? How do these different identities influence your

perspectives and manifest in your work?

My art is not limited by who I am. Everything I create comes from my life experiences, and my art reflects the life I have lived.

As you lived in Beijing for over a decade, I'd be interested to hear more about your experience within the city's art community.

Beijing's art community felt very distant from my life. I was too busy trying to make ends meet. Since I never got to know artists in Beijing, I didn't know much about their world. I just focused on making the art I love, happy in my own little world.



XIYADIE, *Gate*, 1999, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 141 × 127 cm. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

Your work has always maintained a deeply personal quality. Do you feel that viewers or audiences know you by seeing your work?

My work is like a pot of tea that I brew for everyone. The way to understand it is to drink it.

Many of your pieces use symbolic elements like snakes, needles, flowers, and architectural features. Could you discuss how you developed this personal iconography?

The animals and houses in my work are my way of speaking and mostly come from folk art symbols that bring good luck. They are a representation of how I feel connected to everything around me. There is an old folk saying: “A snake wrapped around a rabbit brings wealth.” The flowers, like peonies, mean prosperity, and vases mean peace. Together, they become wishes for a good life.

Your work spans several decades of profound social change in China. How has the evolution of queer visibility and acceptance influenced your creative and artistic expression?

Big cities are more accepting of gay people than small towns, treating us like everyone else. That’s what I have found. People show me respect. This has helped me accept myself more, and this feeling comes through in my work.

Throughout your work there is an interesting interplay between the personal and the public, in the sense that your practice seems to consist of personal diaries alongside historical documents of Beijing’s queer spaces and communities. For instance, *Kaiyang* (2021) depicts both the progression of time and your sexual maturation as you moved to the city for work. How do you view the relationship between personal experience and collective memory in your practice?

When I came to Beijing many years ago I found my place in the gay community, and that’s what I show in *Kaiyang*. I was drawn to this community. Those days in Beijing, those memories, they are very precious to me.



Portrait of **XIYADIE**. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

Your work frequently returns to domestic spaces, particularly in works like *Gate* (1992) and *Don't worry, mom is spinning thread in the next room* (2019), where family homes become sites of both hiding and revelation. Could you talk about what “home” means to you? Is it mainly a space of confinement, or is there more to it?

“Home” means different things to me. Sometimes, when the doors are closed, it feels like being trapped, but home is also where I can be alone and at peace. Traditional family expectations can make things difficult, but when I open the windows to let in fresh air, I feel free again. Home can be hard, but it’s also where I feel the safest.