

Nika's four-hour drive took us to Abastumani, a quiet hill town in southwest Georgia. With our feet sinking into the marshy ground, we each stretched our stiff muscles. The sky hung low, and the air was thick with the grayish haze of recent rain. Standing in neat formation, the newly built Georgian wooden houses lined up like an exhibit, flaunting their retro-style uniformity—a disjointed flamboyance in the town's laid-back mood. As we slowly made our way toward the monastery, Thea began to share the history of the place.

The town is famed for its fresh air and sodium-sulphur springs, where Russian Grand Duke George Alexandrovich, who died of lung disease here, had hoped to set up a spa retreat for himself and other nobles. In 1898, at the age of 36, Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942) was handpicked from Kyiv to spend six years painting the murals of Akhali Zarzma Monastery, which, of course, is why we were here.



A bus stop in Abastumani. Photo: the artist.



Mikhail Nesterov, *The death of Alexander Nevsky* (c. 1904), Akhali Zarzma Monastery, Abastumani.  
Photo: the artist.

The crudely restored exterior of the monastery gave little hint of the fresh yet aged hues of Nesterov's murals, which had been damaged by years of neglect. As we paced and paused, our gazes traveled through the apse and along the walls, full of Nesterov's interpretation of Russian Orthodox iconography: Christ Pantocrator, St. Paraskeva, Theotokos, and, most strikingly, a scene of the death of Alexander Nevsky—the saint who gives the monastery its second, more imperial name. The murals emphasize flatness and are rich in decorative motifs, the style of which recalls Western painting influenced by the sensitivity of design (think Burne-Jones, Mucha, Bakst). Located in this sleepy town, its muted splendor echoes the parade of wooden houses we had just passed.

It seems that over the past century, with many regime changes and efforts by the elite to enliven the place, none have truly succeeded (thankfully, perhaps). We walked back to our car, excited by what we had just seen. The mud on our shoes

thickened. A rusting, empty bus stop stood by the roadside. Inside the small shop, the locals caught up with familiar faces, possibly reminiscing about their past stories.

I guess their stories probably rarely include this rather forgotten Russian painter, who worked through the Tsarist regime, the 1917 Revolution, and into Stalin's era. Amid political upheaval, standing at the threshold is a 1916 work, *In Rus: The Soul of the People*, a nearly five-meter-long oil painting on canvas that portrays the Volga River as a spiritual unifier of all walks of Russian life, as envisioned by the painter. Created in the lead-up to the 1917 Revolution, it became the last of its kind in the painter's oeuvre. It was soon suppressed and removed from public display until the 1980s.

The crowd in this painting, rendered as symbols to be read, seems summoned by a tragic, divine force. They gather along the riverbank, where the landscape appears to be purified, standing pensively still or marching in a unified direction. Their uncoordinated steps are meticulously orchestrated—an organized mess. A diverse range of characters appear uneasy in their own ways, yet all seem to find a shared sense of peace, tinged with sorrow, in submission. The composition hints at a faint sense of three-dimensional depth while emphasizing flatness, like a sculptural relief. With each deliberate brushstroke, Nesterov painted as though a humble bricklayer would construct. Every element, from the foliage in the foreground to the distant mountains and the chiseled, cloudy sky at the back, is carefully crafted, building this painterly hall brick by brick, blending humility with his distinct poetic touch.

What role does oil painting play in building a new nation? Oil and some colorful mud, oxidizing into a solid, tangible layer of film, can serve the purpose of figurative representation. Yet, this very transformation—from chaos to order, fluidity to permanence, formlessness to concreteness—almost mirrors the process of nation-building itself. It is no surprise, then, that many artists, as revolutionaries striving for a modern, national home—whether they themselves are wanted in this new home is a different matter—placed high hopes on the medium. In their hands, extracted through fieldwork, individuals become “the people,” customs transform into “folk traditions,” and daily activities are elevated to “symbols and signs.” In contrast, the actual people and

the things they do, much like wet, muddy paint yet to be fully organized and solidified, often appear trivial, too lazy, and too rusty compared to their idealized potentiality. For the revolutionary artists, the normalcy of the rust must be rigorously studied for it to be transformed.

Yet in this grand, somewhat awkwardly transformative five-meter canvas, I also sense the artist's hesitation and discomfort. In between the trembling, twisting strokes, he has left behind private moments—playful gestures or small self-indulgences the artist may have secretly taken pride in. Or perhaps, with the weird glance of a character or an out-of-place arrangement, he inserted some involuntary distrust into the orderly hall this work was meant to build. From the many small cracks of intimacy, I hear a flurry of whispers deemed too trivial and too out-of-place, too individualistic. It is as if a heroic orator, in full public display, is caught in a moment of embarrassing hesitation. Their tongue rusty, their shoes full of mud.

Today, Nesterov's paintings also serve as conduits for Russian religious conservatism and ultra-nationalist ideology. What was once a complex body of work produced in a turbulent time has been fully detached by many from its author, its medium, and its history. Ironically, what I see as a conflicted sensibility of rust—a shadowy vacillation behind a frontal, performative will, a kind of closet, perhaps—has become a stable “common sense,” a fabricated patina for a supposedly more natural, yet undeniably modern, past. And, of course, regarding this kind of tragedy, there is nothing a not-quite-revolutionary, dead painter can do.

Nesterov was deeply influenced by European fin-de-siècle art (think Klimt, Bilibin, Hodler), favoring line, graphic clarity, and romantic ornamentation. Like many of his contemporaries, his work was also indebted to a distant, modern European gaze upon the “exotic Orient,” perceiving their art as petrified in the past. Borrowed inspirations allowed them to discard the old, and the idea of the old becomes a cage for the alterity. The modern observer often steps out, coolly gazing from afar, while those observed—at home or elsewhere—remain trapped in their rust, unaware.



Mikhail Nesterov, *In Rus: The Soul of the People* (1914–1916). Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow internet image

Without any firsthand examination, like what I did with Nesterov's monastery piece, I tried to maintain the position of an outsider, performing the role of a mirrored European fin-de-siècle gazer. I've only studied *In Rus* through low-quality online images and indulged myself in a destined yet deliberate fog about its rich symbolic nitty-gritty. Perhaps it was precisely this distance that allowed me to project a tenderness and, therefore, naively search for small betrayals behind the artist's apparent conviction. Driven by a desire to follow the rust, unknowingly, I found myself in Rus, immersed in someone else's grand hall—a place I usually disdain. However, I cannot quite step away, nor can I offer a coolly detached, more ideologically correct hindsight from afar.

As one often cast as a distant, rusty other, does it also secretly lure one to long for the rust that is professedly the domain of the other?

Li Yong Xiang

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Translated and edited by Zian Chen



## Li Yong Xiang: *In Rust*

Antenna Space presents *In Rust*, the first solo exhibition in China by Berlin-based artist Li Yong Xiang. Known for his research into overlooked visual legacies and his ability to weave diverse references across media, Li's practice bridges past and present, conjuring resonance that feels both distant and uncannily present.

The exhibition centers on a major painting installation, *In Rust* (2025), comprising six paintings in which Mikhail Nesterov's *In Rus: The Soul of the People* (1914–1916) is restructured and restyled. The frames appear to stretch and morph into an abstract architectural hall—both physically supporting the paintings and conceptually guiding the viewer toward a more reflective mode.

At the heart of the painting installation is Li's journey with fellow artists to Georgia's Akhali Zarzma Monastery, where he first encountered Nesterov's Symbolist murals, painted around 1904. Infused with Russian Orthodox iconography, these works blended emerging European styles, transcending the conventional spiritual reverence the public tends to associate with the artist.

While Nesterov has been linked to Russian movements like the Peredvizhniki (1869–1899), which have had a lasting influence on Chinese art education, Li absorbed this influence in his early art education, albeit from afar. While reflecting on the historical national ambitions of the Peredvizhniki and Nesterov's work, Li distances himself from its conservative interpretations. Instead, he is drawn to Nesterov's stylistic eclecticism. This departure from the Peredvizhniki's realism embraces a dreamlike religiosity and, according to Li, a purposeful flatness influenced by the mid-to-late nineteenth century European aesthetic movements such as the Pre-Raphaelite and Art Nouveau styles. These diverse influences reflect the artistic debates of the era, navigating the roles of art in both nation-building and cosmopolitanism.

Accompanying the installation is a six-channel soundtrack, *Untitled (Ebb Tide)* (2025), featuring layered artist's own vocals resonating from different corners of the space. This piece is the artist's versioning of a popular barbershop harmony, originating from The Righteous Brothers' 1965 hit.

### About the artist

Li Yong Xiang (b. 1991, Changsha) is a Berlin-based artist. In 2020, Li completed Meisterschüler at Städelschule, Frankfurt. He received the Prize of the Rainer Wild Art Foundation in 2023, and was nominated the eighth Huayu Youth Award in 2020.

Recent solo & duo exhibitions: *Of Strangers*, Shahin Zarinbal, Berlin, Germany (2024); *Mannered in a sleeve*, Deborah Schamoni, Munich, Germany (2023); *Paris+* par Art Basel – *Yong Xiang Li: 8 Chairs (Adolescent Fabrications)*, solo presentation with Antenna Space, Grand Palais Éphémère, Paris, France (2022); *Inside Job*, LC Queisser, Tbilisi, Georgia (2022); *Late*, Futura, Prague, Czech Republic (2021); *Superfluous*, Schwabinggrad, Munich, Germany (2021); *Curl*, Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna, Austria (2020); *Companion*, Jean Claude Maier, Frankfurt, Germany (2019) among others.

Selected group exhibitions: *The Utopia of Rules*, 72-13, Singapore (2025); *Horizons: Is there anybody out there?*, curated by Robin Peckham, Antenna Space, Shanghai, China (2023); *Biennale für Freiburg*, Kunstverein Freiburg, Museum Für Neue Kunst and various sites, Freiburg, Germany (2023); *Painting Unsettled*, UCCA Edge, Shanghai, China (2023); *Identity Not Proved: New Acquisitions of the Federal Collection*, Bundes Kunsthalle, Bonn, Germany (2022); *The View from There*, Sadie Coles, London, UK (2021); *Indistinct Chatter*, Layr, Vienna, Austria (2021); *The Eighth Huayu Award Finalist Exhibition 2020: A Long Hello*, UCCA, Beijing, China (2020); *Breathing through Skin*, Antenna Space, Shanghai, China (2020); *L'esprit*, Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (2020); *The Deficit Faction*, Long March Project, Beijing, China (2019); *Ford Every Streams*, Galleria Acappella, Naples, Italy (2019); *Fruit Suspended and Swaying*, Aedt, Düsseldorf, Germany (2019); *Double Trouble*, Root Canal, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2019); *Appearing Unannounced*, painnale 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand (2018); *Radio Ufff! at fffriedrich*, Frankfurt, Germany (2018); *Back to Them*, Gärtnergasse, Vienna, Austria (2018) among others.