

FIONA TAN

MATRIX 144

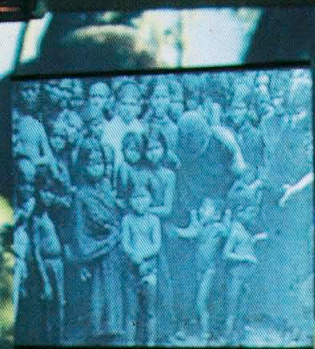


MAY 19 - SEPTEMBER 2, 2001

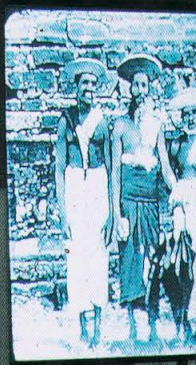
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Thin Cities, 2000
video installation











FIONA TAN: TOWARDS THE NEGATIVE MIRROR

The past is not dead. It is not even past.

William Faulkner¹

One of the remarkable things about Fiona Tan's film and video work is that it investigates familiar themes in unexpected ways. This is true not only of the compositional structures and editing techniques with which she fashions her works, but also of the issues they raise. Consider Tan's use of appropriation, which exhumes from film and photographic archives images to be set into motion once again according to a new



Still from *Facing Forward*, 1999
video installation

logic. Tan's objective here is neither a postmodernist-style questioning of authorial presence, nor a strategic re-deployment of culturally iconic images in order to make them strange; their authorship is mostly unknown, their existence all but forgotten. The sequences of scratched and faded old film compiled in *Facing Forward* (1999) suggest, perhaps, a return of the culturally repressed. The redeployed images are arresting in their pathos and affecting in the relations of power they document. Tan explains their origins: "The images in *Facing Forward* stem entirely from early silent archival film footage characterized as colonial and

documentary footage shot in foreign and exotic countries for a Western audience."

In *Facing Forward*, as in a number of other works, it is clear that personal identity in a post-colonial world is one of Tan's central themes. Tan was born in Indonesia to an ethnic Chinese father and an Australian mother of Scottish extraction. She grew up in Melbourne, Australia and has lived all her adult life in Europe, where she is now based in Amsterdam. Tan uses documents – both visual and literary (Linnaeus and Calvino are quoted) – yet her work comprises less a documentation than it does a meditation. Her investigation of subjectivity leads not to a reductive or essentialist view of ethnicity or identity, but to a recognition of the self as an alignment of multiple possibilities, always shifting. Tan's work reminds us that our subjective experience of the present is informed by a genealogy of political, cultural and personal histories, all of them linked – to the extent that they persist in memory – through images.

Fiona Tan's work crosses easily the borders of genre and institutional presentation. She has made numerous film and video works of varying scale and duration, as well as films for theatrical release and television broadcast, site-specific presentations and gallery installations. This variety of media and context provides Tan with an unusually wide range of formal approaches, from narrative documentary (*May You Live In*

¹Quoted as an epigraph in Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Knopf: New York, 2000.

Interesting Times, 1997) to multimedia installation (*Thin Cities*, 2000). At the same time, Tan has engaged different modes of address, from the mass audiences of television to the specialized arena of contemporary art. The continuities across these genres are nevertheless remarkable. They are thematically linked by Tan's focus on subjectivity – with its attendant themes

and film, articulated through an editorial touch that builds structure and form with the precision and eloquence of musical composition.

Fiona Tan's Matrix exhibition includes four works from the past five years. The first piece to be encountered on entering the gallery, playing without beginning or end on a monitor, is *n.t.*



Still from *Facing Forward*, 1999
video installation



Still from *May You Live In Interesting Times*, 1997, documentary film

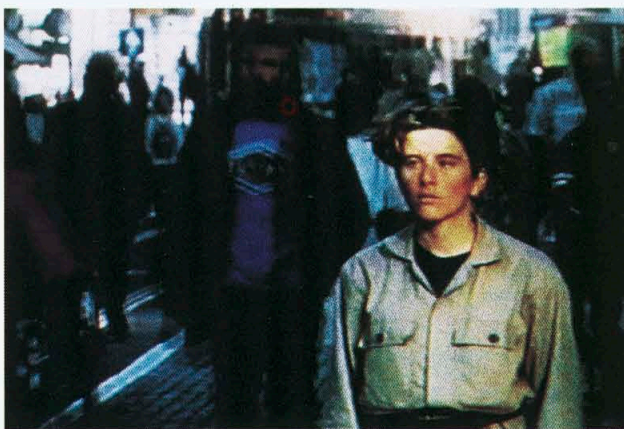
of origin, memory and temporality. They are also infused with an artistic sensibility based on a profound feeling for the grain and texture of photography

(*Leidsestr.*) (1997). Essentially a self-portrait, Tan is pictured standing still on a busy Amsterdam street. A sense of dislocation between the artist and her surroundings is created by the speeded-up motion of everything but Tan's own figure, standing somewhat

anxiously as the city literally rushes past. It is an image of urban anomie, of the isolation of the émigré, and of the artist. It evokes Walter Benjamin's description of urban experience as one of endless connection yet without any real contact.

Cradle (1998) is a film installation in which a piece of found film footage is projected onto a handkerchief suspended from the ceiling. The original black-and-white film, to which Tan has added a red cast, was shot in Indonesia. It depicts a baby being gently rocked through the pendulum-

like motion of a suspended cradle. The short piece of film is imperceptibly looped, echoing the action of the cradle itself, which moves as if propelled by an unknown force. The piece is perhaps Tan's most literal use of an archival film fragment and her most sculptural single-image installation.



Still from *n.t. (Leidsestr.)*, 1997
video installation

The translucent cloth onto which the image is projected allows it to be seen from both sides and in counterpoint to the whirring mechanism of the antiquated film projector. The handkerchief appears to breathe with the susurrus of shifting air.

Tan's interest in repetition as a structural device takes a different form in *Facing Forward*, which features images from early silent film shot as ethnographic documentation of "primitive" and exotic peoples. Tan observes: "I have selected one particular sort of scene from a myriad of films. I call

these scenes photographic moments. Quite simply, they consist of the countless times that – as if for a photograph – people pose in front of the film camera." Drawing our attention to the often awkward moments of posing, Tan de-naturalizes the encounter between camera and subject, revealing

its complexity in both political and personal terms. The film becomes a meditation on the inextricable relationship between the other and the self, the past and the present. Tan quotes from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*



Cradle, 1998
film installation

where an imagined conversation takes place between Marco Polo and Kublai Kahn. Polo's words stand as a metaphor for Tan's project, where a journey of discovery is inevitably a recognition of loss: "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have."

A coda to the exhibition is provided by Tan's most recent work, a video installation on two monitors mounted on a wall, one directly above the other. Like *Cradle*, *Rain* (2001) is composed of footage shot in Indonesia, in this case by Tan herself during a recent visit. The same simple scene is pictured on both monitors – two buckets gathering water during a tropical downpour. A sheltering dog looks on, unworried. The only difference between images is that the buckets shown on the lower monitor are full to overflowing, whereas those above are only half full. The sound of pouring rain continues, but the buckets never fill. Time, it seems, is arrested, as Tan's simple play with duration, repetition and variation opens a richly evocative space of contemplation.

During a period in which unprecedented numbers of artists have turned to using moving images, Fiona Tan stands apart. Uninterested in high-tech effects, her use of a particular medium or editing technique always serves the idea at hand and is never an end in itself. At the same time, her works are

neither narrowly didactic nor sensually arid. What Tan's art offers, at its most complex, are interwoven layers of image, text and sound which cohere in the creation of an experience that is at once aesthetically satisfying and emotionally resonant.

Nicholas Baume
*Emily Hall Tremain Curator
of Contemporary Art*

***Rain*, 2001**
video installation



FIONA TAN

BORN IN PEKAN BARU, INDONESIA
IN 1966, LIVES AND WORKS IN
AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS
AND BERLIN, GERMANY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2001

Fiona Tan, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

Fiona Tan – recent works,
Galerie Michel Rein, Paris

2000

Lift, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam

Carwreck Cinema, Aussendienst Hamburg

Facing Forward, Galerie Massimo de Carlo,
Mailand

Scenario, Kunstverein Hamburg

1999

Roll I & II, Museum De Pont, Tilburg

Cradle, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam

Elsewhere ..., Begane Grond, Utrecht

1998

J.C. Van Lanschot Prize, Stedelijk Museum
voor Aktuele Kunst, Gent

Linnaeus' Flower Clock, Stedelijk Museum
Het Domein, Sittard

1997

Open Studio, Rijksakademie van beeldende
kunsten, Amsterdam

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2001

Yokohama Triennale, Japan

Endroducing, Villa Arson, Nice

Berlin Biennale 2, Germany

Mobile Walls, recent acquisitions

1996-, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen,
Rotterdam

Venice Biennale, Italy

2000

Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai Art Museum,
Shanghai

<hers> *Video as a Female Terrain*,
Steirischer Herbst 2000, Graz

Still/Moving, Museum of Modern Art Kyoto

Powersources, FRI-Art, Centre d'Art
Contemporain, Fribourg

Art Unlimited, Art Basel

Biennale de Lyon, Institut d'art
contemporain Villeurbanne

Exploding Cinema, Museum Boijmans van
Beuningen, Rotterdam

1999

Stimuli, Witte de With Centre for
Contemporary Art, Rotterdam

8e Biennale de l'Image en mouvement,
Centre pour l'Image Contemporaine, Geneve

Life Cycles, Galerie fur Zeitgenossische
Kunst, Leipzig

The Power of Beauty, Gemeentemuseum
Helmond

International Biennale of Photography,
Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City

Zug(luft), Museum Kurhaus Kleve

Go Away, Royal College of Art, London

1998

Power Up, Gemeentemuseum Arnhem

World Wide Video Festival, Stedelijk
Museum Amsterdam/De Melkweg

Traces of Science in Art, Het Trippenhuys
KNAW, Amsterdam

Biennale d'Image Paris 98, E.N.S.B.A.,
Paris

Entrè-fiction, Centre d'Art Contemporaine
Rueil-Malmaison

*Kunst nu – Rineke Dijkstra/Tracey
Moffatt/Fiona Tan*, VMHK Gent

unlimited.nl, De Appel, Amsterdam

1997

2nd Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg

Cities on the Move, Wiener Secession,
Vienna, CAPC Bordeaux, PS1, New York
and tour

The Second, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
and tour

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2000

Scenario – Fiona Tan, Amsterdam
essays and texts by Lynne Cooke, John
Berger, Oscar van den Boogaard, Heddy
Honigmann, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen,
Fiona Tan. Distribution: DAP, New York

<hers> *Video as a Female Terrain*,
Steirisc[her]:Jbst, Springer Verlag,
Vienna

Monshouwer, Saskia. *Een kinderdroom –
Tijdloze beelden en existentielle inzichten*,
'Kunstbeeld' nr. 9

Lütticken, Sven. *Fiona Tan – Paul
Andriesse*, 'Artforum', December

From #3, #4, Witte de With Center for
Contemporary Art, Rotterdam

[Scenario] – Fiona Tan, Kunstverein
Hamburg, texts by Stephan Schmidt-
Wulffen, Fiona Tan

1999

8e Biennale de L'Image en Movement,
catalogue Centre pour l'Image
Contemporaine Geneve

Zug(luft), catalogue Museum Kurhaus
Kleve, Rotation vandenbergh & wallroth inv.

International Biennale of Photography,
Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City

Tan, Fiona. *Uit 't zicht*, 'De Filmkrant' nr.
203, September

Moukhtar, Esma. *Smoke Screen – Tussen
beeld en blik*, 'Skrien' nr.236

Steevensz, Bert. *Het absolute bestaat niet*,
'Metropolis M', nr.1

1998

Cream – Contemporary Art in Culture,
Phaidon Press, London

Bos, Saskia. *Framing is a choice*, J.C.
van Lanschotprize 1998, S.M.A.K., Gent

ter Borg, Lucette. *Fiona Tan – Linnaeus'
Flower Clock*, *Traces of Science in Art*,
catalogue Het Trippenhuys KNAW, Edita
Amsterdam

Dercon, Chris. *Fiona Tan, The choice of the
experts, 11 museum directors choose a
young artist*, International Press Centre
Nieuwspoort, The Hague

1997

Cities on the Move, edited by Hou Hanru
and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Wiener Secession
and capcMusée d'art contemporain de
Bordeaux, Verlag Hatje

Tan, Fiona. *Collecting Presents*, Hong Kong,
RABK 1997, Amsterdam

Trade Routes, History and Geography, 2nd
Johannesburg Biennale

*The Second – Time Based Art from
The Netherlands*, Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam, Montevideo/TBA

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

n.t. (Leidsestr.), 1997

endless video, color video monitor,
DVD player

Courtesy Galerie Paul Andriesse

Facing Forward, 1999

video projection

transferred from 35 mm film, 11 min.

video projector, DVD player, amplifier,
hi-fi speakers

Courtesy of the artist

Cradle, 1998

film installation

16 mm film projector, loop device, tripod
table, white handkerchief

Courtesy Galerie Paul Andriesse

Rain, 2001

video installation

two 14-inch color video monitors, two DVD
players brackets, shelves

Courtesy Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

MATRIX LECTURE

2 pm, Saturday, May 19, 2001

Fiona Tan delivers an informal lecture on
her work in the Museum Theater.

GALLERY TALK

12 noon, Tuesday, May 22, 2001

"Fiona Tan's recent film and video"

Nicholas Baume, Emily Hall Tremaine
Curator of Contemporary Art

**MATRIX 144 has been made possible
by the Mondriaan Foundation and
Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro**