FIONA TAN: TOWARDS THE NEGATIVE MIRROR

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

William Faulkner

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 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

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. (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 anomic, 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. 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.

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 ethno-graphic documentation of “primitive” and exotic peoples. Tan observes: “I have selected one particular sort of scene from a myriad of films. I call

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 Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art

Rain, 2001
video installation
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 Andriesse, 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 Andriesse, 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
Endtroducing, 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 Trippenhuis
KNAW, Amsterdam
Biennale d l’Image Paris 98, E.N.S.B.A.,
Paris
Entré-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
Video as a Female Terrain, Steirischer Kunstverein, Springer Verlag, Vienna
Monshouwer, Saskia. Een kinderdom – Tijdloze beelden en existentiële 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
Be Biennale de L'Image en Movement, catalogue Centre pour l’Image Contemporaine Geneve
Zugluft, catalogue Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Rotation vandenborg & wallroth inv.
International Biennale of Photography, Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City
Tan, Fiona. Uit 't zicht, 'De Filmkrant' nr. 203, September
Mouhtar, Esma. Smoke Screen – Tussen beeld en blik, 'Skrien' nr.236
Stevens, 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 Lanschotprijs 1998, S.M.A.K., Gent
ter Borg, Lucette. Fiona Tan – Linnaeus’ Flower Clock, Traces of Science in Art, catalogue Het Trippenhuis KNAW, Edita Amsterdam

1997
Cities on the Move, edited by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Wiener Secessioin 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