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FIONA TAN: WILLING SUBJECTS, RESISTANT SOULS

By Matthew Guy Nichols

Still from *Provenance*. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc., New York.

One of Fiona Tan's latest works is a self-portrait titled *Projection* (2010). To create it, Tan filmed herself standing erect and mostly still, her hands sometimes adjusting the navy blue shirtdress she wears over a pair of jeans. She then projected the footage on a suspended bed sheet and recorded her image a second time as it wavered in a gentle breeze. The resulting video, a 1-minute loop rear-projected onto a 32-by-18-inch screen, shows the artist fluttering before our eyes. Tan's diaphanous image is legible, but occasional ripples pass through her body and compromise its integrity. While reminding us that many portraits are contrived and only skin deep, *Projection* also posits Tan's own identity as something fluid and endlessly changeable.

Projection was one of three works featured in Tan's recent solo show at Peter Freeman gallery in New York. Fittingly, it is also the first video that visitors encounter in "Fiona Tan: Rise and Fall," an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery of seven films and video installations made over the past five years. Organized by senior curator Bruce Grenville, the show demonstrates Tan's abiding interest in portraiture, her thoughtful interrogation of the genre's traditional modes and limitations, and her inventive use of film and video technology to deepen our understanding of her subjects' identities.

Tan was born in 1966 in Pekan Baru, Indonesia, the daughter of a Chinese father and an Australian mother of Scottish extraction. Most of her childhood was spent in Melbourne, and as an adult she relocated to Amsterdam, where she continues to live and work. These biographical facts are often invoked when discussing Tan's work of the late 1990s, which frequently explored the construction of postcolonial identities through the strategic editing of archival films, most of them shot by European ethnographers confronting the "exotic" cultures of the non-Western world. While none of those early works appear in Vancouver, the show does contain *May You Live in Interesting Times*, an hour-long film that Tan produced for a Dutch television station in 1997. In this autobiographical travelogue, Tan searches the Chinese diaspora for family members who fled Indonesia in the mid-1960s, when a violent anti-Communist purge led to the slaughter of thousands of ethnic Chinese. In a voice-over toward the end of the film, Tan explains that she "started this journey in search of mirrors," but quickly admits that her "self-definition seems an impossibility, an identity defined by what it is not." This poignant concession may help explain the trajectory of Tan's more recent work, which since 2006 has largely jettisoned documentary imagery and its attendant claims to truth. In its place, Tan has begun writing scripts, drafting story-boards and directing actors on location, ultimately creating fictional characters who variously sift through their memories.

Writing in the show's catalogue, Grenville suggests that despite its reliance on found photographs, a 2006 installation titled *The Changeling* prompted this shift in Tan's practice, as it was the first of her works to employ the voice-over of a professional actress. *The Changeling* consists of two small wall-mounted monitors, one of which displays roughly 200 photographs of anonymous Japanese schoolgirls in looped succession. Extracted from a 1929 yearbook that Tan found in a flea market, these sepia-toned portraits are studies in strict conformity, as every girl wears the same lapel pin on her dark jacket while gazing at the camera from beneath a bluntly cut bob. Tantalizing signs of individuality may be detected in some of the girls' facial expressions, but each picture disappears within seconds, ceding momentary visibility to the next. As if to relieve the viewer's frustration, Tan placed another monitor on the opposite wall, where one of the schoolgirls is singled out for sustained meditation while a woman's voice recounts episodes from her life. The 12-minute-long narrative defies the limitations of the photograph, granting the girl an imagined identity and an extended presence that her counterparts lack. A local performer reads the translated monologue wherever *The Changeling* is presented (in Vancouver the voice belonged to Canadian actor Martha Burns), straining to connect subject to viewer across temporal and cultural chasms.

Tan introduced another imaginary character in *A Lapse of Memory*, a 2007 film that marked her first attempt at directing a live performer. Shot in color and presented on a wide screen in Vancouver, *A Lapse of*

Memory was inspired by a visit to the Royal Pavilion, an extravagant architectural folly in the seaside town of Brighton, England, that was constructed for King George IV at the turn of the 19th century. A stylistically hybrid monument to British imperialism, the building's exterior mimics the grand palaces of Mughal India while its interiors reveal a period taste for fanciful chinoiserie. Tan's episodic narrative begins inside this building, where a grizzled, silver-haired elderly man, asleep on the floor, twitches into consciousness. Upon awakening he practices tai chi, prepares tea on a tatami mat and, mostly, wanders from one room to the next, all of them decorated with dragons, pagodas and other Orientalist motifs. A woman's voice identifies the man as Henry, speculates that he may have traveled to the East in his youth and mentions that he now suffers from senile dementia. A bit later the man's name is changed to Eng Lee, and the narrator describes his initial exposure to the Western world.

If the voice-over sometimes seems overly didactic, needlessly repeating that Henry/Eng Lee "feels lost within his various selves," it is because Tan's imagery alone conveys the reclusiveness and confusion of a man who is Caucasian but nonetheless practiced in particular rituals of Asian origin. In an especially affecting scene towards the end of this 24-minute-long film, Henry/Eng Lee, wearing spectacles, wields a flashlight to examine the surface of a large globe in a dark room, apparently seeking a sense of place while inhabiting a building that represents scrambled identity and postcolonial dislocation.

Tan abandoned voice-overs but continued to work with actors and ambient sound in *Rise and Fall* (2009), which was commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery. With two streams of video imagery presented on adjacent screens, each measuring 98 by 55 inches, she conjures the fluidity of memories, demonstrating how they can evoke an irretrievable past while also exerting a profound influence on the present moment. Tan's protagonist in these expertly edited videos is a woman in her autumn years, who in the opening panning shots is twice shown asleep in bed, although a slight shift between the two camera angles implies that her physical presence is coupled with a dreamy drift elsewhere. As the videos progress, her image is frequently paired with that of a much younger woman, who we eventually sense is the older woman's former self. In similar intimate close-ups, both women are shown bathing, dressing and writing in a journal, and wider shots sometimes reveal them moving through the same houses and gardens. At various points in their 22-minute loops, the two videos may display identical images, contiguous glimpses of a larger visual field or entirely distinct scenes, thereby plotting the spectrum of feelings that memories can engender, from warm familiarity to disturbing déjà vu. To the same end, *Rise and Fall* also incorporates some spectacular footage that Tan shot of Niagara Falls. Though perhaps an obvious metaphor for the swift passage of time, the interspersed clips of moving water are also poetic analogies for the women's varied recollections. At times

the flow between screens is placid and continuous, as if seamlessly linking past and present. In other moments Tan's hovering camera suddenly plunges us over the falls's precipice, where the churning water sends up an occluding veil of mist.