

# ARTFORUM

## *Fiona Tan*

PETER FREEMAN, INC.

By David Frankel

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The link between Fiona Tan's *Provenance*, 2008, and old-master painting is counterintuitive, for Tan is not a painter but a video artist. In this group of filmic portraits—looped video studies of barely moving figures—she also limits herself to black-and-white, so that her strongest reference is to the photographic tradition. And yet that link is quickly sensed. It's evident partly in the gravity of Tan's process, the unhurried slowness with which she looks at people, her camera standing still or incrementally panning or turning. It's partly the quality of the light, here restrained and even, there glowing from a window as in Vermeer, but always signal in its clarity, allowing a precision of vision that distinguishes and elevates Tan's subjects. Finally, there is the idea that a portrait is built up not just of the features of the sitter's face but of the details of his or her life—objects handled, used, kept close; clothing chosen and bought; environments inhabited and maintained. Just as an artist portraying a seventeenth-century Dutch merchant might have wanted it known that he wore expensive furs, Tan lets us see her subjects' apartments, their books, a child's toys, one woman's japonaiserie, another's laptop.

Tan is established in Europe—*Provenance* began as an installation at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (whose collection Tan researched to make it), then represented the Netherlands, with two more of her works, at last year's Venice Biennale—but this was her first solo exhibition in New York. She was born in Indonesia and grew up in Australia before settling in Holland. Strikingly, she begins her exemplary essay in *Provenance*'s catalogue—an artist's book of a kind, both scholarly and personal—with this biography, describing it as the project's "point of departure." She is saying, I think, that what she found, what she looked for, in her studies of the Rijksmuseum's old masters was informed by the awareness of global history to which her travels sensitized her, the travels of a postcolonial subject. Among the Amsterdam friends and family included in *Provenance* are a Turkish shopkeeper and his son, their presence referencing patterns of migration through the capitals of the West. And like the Marxist art historian John Berger, whose writing she quotes, she has an impulse to decode the material objects shown in paintings, signs not only of a portrait subject's character but of specific social histories: For Tan, an orange is not just an orange but an index of an economic structure. At the same time, the dignity of her silent images embraces their subjects. Without sympathetic relationships between artist and sitter, *Provenance* would be a very different work.

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In a second room, the exhibition included *Downside Up*, 2002, a video in which shadows on a city street seem to have more life than the pedestrians who make them, and a new work, *Projection*, 2010, a self-portrait. Whereas each of the subjects of *Provenance* receives his or her own LCD monitor, which sits on the wall like a painting, *Projection* is shown on a screen that hangs from the ceiling, an altogether flimsier-looking arrangement. And whereas the light in *Provenance* engraves Tan's sitters as clear three-dimensional presences, her treatment of herself is more obscure: Having filmed herself standing, she stood behind a hanging sheet on which that sequence was projected, then filmed the sheet as she took hold of and manipulated it from the back, her own body sometimes coming into view. In the end result, the artist comes and goes, the reality of her self-projection in question. It is as if, in *Provenance*, Tan had sought to concretize a sense of individual identity that in this pair of works seems fluid and uncertain.