



Fiona Tan, *Nellie* (detail), 2013, still from the 3-minute 9-second color HD video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising framed cloth.

## Fiona Tan

### WAKO WORKS OF ART

Nicknames, for the most part, arise from familiarity, even intimacy. As such, the pet name “Nellie,” which gives the title to a 2013 video by Fiona Tan, is a wry foil to the work’s flaxen-haired cipher of a subject. Loosely based on Rembrandt’s illegitimate daughter Cornelia van Rijn, Tan’s preteen protagonist remains unknowable throughout the video, her inner life anyone’s best guess, as she poses her way through a sequence of successive indoor vignettes, pale-skinned and beatific, her gown a blue-and-white patterned chintz. She moves languidly and sparingly: a model in a tableau vivant, almost, but one unable to hide her ennui. There’s Nellie in bed, Nellie slumped on a writing desk, Nellie pacing across a wooden floor. One moment, she’s seated against the wainscoting of a water-stained wall, her undone hair brushed into a volumetric frizz; in the next, she’s listlessly supine.

The video's inviting visual evocation of Dutch golden-age portraiture makes its subject's inscrutability, by contrast, seem all the more acute—and it poses an apt question about Cornelia van Rijn: Given that her half-brother Titus appears regularly throughout their father's oeuvre, to what extent was patriarchal bias to blame for her eventual obscurity? With its sly ambiguity, *Nellie* is also perhaps Tan's most humorous work yet: Is this a universally resonant portrait of a sullen teenager with nothing to share? Or is Nellie a period-drama heroine created by a screenwriter short on historical fact?

In 1670, the fifteen-year-old Cornelia van Rijn married painter Cornelis Suythof and followed her husband to Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), where he became a prison warden. Little is known of her life after their move, but she lived out her days in Indonesia—which happens to be the country of Tan's birth. Here again was an instance of the artist's own heritage appearing in the discourse around her work. In 2009, when Tan represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale, the catalogue's introduction by Hans Hoogervorst mentioned her Chinese father and Australian mother, and the artist's history in Indonesia, Germany, and the Netherlands. "The almost inevitable consequence," wrote Hoogervorst, "is that Fiona Tan's work focuses on the hybrid identity of individuals in an era of globalization." And yet, in an interview that same year, Tan sought to articulate a shift in her oeuvre: She'd "left 'all that'—meaning my post-colonial roots/routes—behind." Still, Tan's concurrent show at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography this summer featured videos such as *Disorient*, 2007—inspired by Marco Polo—that focus explicitly on cultural confusion and exchange, making her self-coined status as "professional foreigner" hard to let go. Which raises the question: How are we to understand the elements of cultural dissonance that still crop up in newer works?

One answer lay in the installation of *Vox Populi (Tokyo)*, 2007, the Japanese edition of a project in which Tan hangs, salon style, amateur photos taken by residents of specific locales. Her images of Tokyo's denizens first appeared at the Kunstverein Munich, where they surely conjured anthropological perspectives, as a glimpse into a world nearly six thousand miles away. Reinstalled at Wako, where most visitors would be seeing photos of compatriots, the work disoriented not by foregrounding chasms between cultures but by revealing specific details about the lives of strangers next door.

*Vox Populi (Tokyo)*, like the versions of the project that Tan has done for London, Sydney, and other locales, offers little to help viewers get their bearings; absent are wall texts, family trees, names. This seems a reproach to the recent proliferation of archival and data-based art. As so many artists traipse through unknown lands conducting interviews and recording histories, there's an unspoken faith in the artist-as-researcher's powers to extend the boundaries of human knowledge. That stance—call it an epistemic optimism—seems to be Tan's target. In both *Nellie* and *Vox Populi (Tokyo)*, we see an artist placing all her chips on uncertainty, ambiguity, and questions no amount of research can resolve.

—Dawn Chan