

ARTFORUM

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Fiona Tan, *Disorient*, 2009, two-channel HD video installation, color, sound, 19 minutes 42 seconds. From “Paradise Lost.”

“Paradise Lost”

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

“I believe it was God’s will that we should come back, so that men might know the things that are in the world,” Marco Polo claims in the preface to *The Description of the World*, a chronicle of his journey through Persia and the Caucasus to China. Whether or not the Venetian merchant ever uttered these words—or, for that matter, even ever set foot in China—can no longer be known. His tales were first transcribed in prison by Polo’s cell mate, the romance writer Rustichello of Pisa. These original manuscripts would soon disappear, but tales of Polo’s adventures would circulate throughout Europe in rough translations, further removing the reports from their source. In Italian, Polo’s account—while wildly popular—was known as *Il Milione*, purportedly because it consisted of a million lies. Fact or fiction, stories of his travels would inspire lurid visions of “the Orient” for centuries to come, advertising the East as the ultimate other.

“Paradise Lost,” curated by Ute Meta Bauer with Anca Rujoiu, channeled these visions

through an elegant juxtaposition of three works by artists who have each undertaken their own travels “so that men might know.” Fiona Tan, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Zarina Bhimji were all born in Asia, yet raised and educated in Europe or the United States. A sense of dislocation drives their individual quests to understand the East as more than the sum of its fictions, even as their personal histories are irrevocably marked by the collective narratives of colonial history and involuntary exodus.

Tan uses *The Travels of Marco Polo* as the point of departure for *Disorient*, 2009, a two-channel HD video installation set to a reading of excerpts of the explorer’s tales. Commissioned for the 2009 Venice Biennale, the video was shot on location in the Dutch Pavilion, which Tan reimagined as a kind of one-stop Oriental fetish shop, stocked with souvenir trinkets and baubles. On one screen, the camera pans slowly across this collection, while on the second, archival footage of Asia is looped, presented through the lenses of global news outlets, whose product is as much an aesthetic construction as the red-fringed lanterns and gold-plated paperweight Buddhas lining the shelves on the other screen.

Trinh’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989, derives from a similar distrust in the documentary format and the supposedly unquestionable authority it presumes. The feature-length film (transferred to DVD) centers on a set of interviews with five contemporary Vietnamese women, who guardedly discuss the expectations placed upon them by their society as it undergoes political upheaval. Their confessions are set against highly evocative images of rare beauties pausing to admire the rice paddies or pedaling bikes over bridges, white bonnets fluttering coyly in the breeze. Midway through the film, these women are revealed to be amateur actresses, now living in the US, reading from English translations of conversations originally conducted in French, further cleaving the truth from what has been told. “I do not intend to speak about, just speak nearby,” Trinh famously declares in her 1982 film, *Reassemblage*. “Nearby” may imply distance, but it does not specify how much; likewise, the intimacies shared by Trinh’s shifting narrators still manage to suggest a shared experience, without ever assigning that experience to one individual.

Bhimji’s *Yellow Patch*, 2011, excludes any narration whatsoever, reconstructing her father’s voyage from India to Uganda by surveying what he left behind. The product of an extensive

research process, the thirty-minute, 35-mm film (in HD transfer) is styled as a kind of painting-in-time, wringing the beauty from ruined buildings and stacks of moldering archives in Gujarat, a port city that sent its traders en masse to Africa. Bhimji shows a territory where stray dogs reign; the only human to appear is a woman, shot from behind, her yellowing braid thick along her hunched back. In the absence of explanation, the past must be pieced together from relics. Together, the three works admit that the world they seek to “know” is always susceptible to the subjectivities of its telling. After all, these paradises lost may have never truly existed.

—Kate Sutton