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Fiona Tan, *Elsewhere*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 16 minutes 10 seconds. Installation view.

Fiona Tan

FRITH STREET GALLERY | GOLDEN SQUARE

With her film *Ascent*, 2016, Fiona Tan turned her gaze to landscape, creating an eighty-minute montage from thousands of amateur photographs of Japan's Mount Fuji. For her exhibition "Elsewhere," she dealt with a different terrain: that of Los Angeles, where she recently spent one year. This time, Tan handled the camera herself, filming from a hilltop studio at the Getty Center. As in *Ascent*, this new project saw her grappling with a mythical subject: The notoriously sprawling city has not only featured in countless cinematic representations, but it has also continuously generated new images of itself. As the exhibition's title suggests, the very condition of Los Angeles is one of being constantly on the move to another place, literally as well as metaphorically.

Nothing exemplifies this cultural condition as perfectly as the freeways that traverse the city and that are so central to its image. In Tan's exhibition, seemingly endless nighttime traffic looped through three videos, all made in 2018. Tan shot the videos with a static camera; they were shown here on wall-mounted, vertical screens, like paintings. In *Vertical White*, a short, tightly cropped segment of multilane freeway pushes up against the picture plane, where traffic rolls down and toward the viewer, while in *Vertical Red*, cars head in the opposite direction, accompanied by a piano melody composed by Tan and synchronized with their brake lights. In *Vertical Wide*, traffic seen from a greater distance flows in both directions. From this zoomed-out view, glistening streams of red and white light evoke a range of visual associations, with everything from lava to angels. In these seemingly simple but precisely edited videos, Los Angeles is always suspended between two states, whether of light and dark, pleasure and boredom, or heaven and hell.

If the freeways signify constant circulation in a place without a center, they also point to Los Angeles's self-presentation as a city of the future. Tan's film *Elsewhere*, which is just over sixteen minutes long, begins with a new dawn. Shots of the cityscape gradually take on color as the sun rises through the clouds; meanwhile, the screen's peculiar installation—floating in the middle of the gallery space—and an ambient crackling noise suggest that this is a remote place, an idea rather than an actual location. During long, absorbing takes—sunlight reflects on skyscrapers and bathes the valley in a golden sheen, until the sky slowly grows dark and the stream of white headlights begins flowing again—a narrator explains that this city has no crime, no poverty, no pollution. And, in a trope borrowed from classic utopian literature, it can only be reached after an arduous journey. Only at one point does the speaker express doubt, wondering about the absence of history in a place eternally perfect, but then ultimately praising the bliss of oblivion. Would imperfect reality be better? But then, as Norman Klein once said, isn't the real Los Angeles, with its freeways, actually a city of erasure?

The disjunction between image and audio in *Elsewhere*, reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977), lets the viewer experience the city's contradictions—until image and audio sync up unexpectedly in the end, yielding an unsettling moment of stability. Even when all we see is only beautiful surface, the troubled context still impresses itself on the viewer. As post-truth politics, artificial intelligence, and climate change encroach on everyday reality, and while compelling visions of a better future are hardly forthcoming, Tan's work is disturbingly timely. Asking how to get a true representation, it reminds us that utopia and dystopia can be hard to tell apart.

— Elisa Schaar