

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

FIONA TAN

July 23, 2019 • Fiona Tan on artifice and archive



Reproduction from the Agfa Advertising Archive (1952-68), selected and produced by Fiona Tan. Inkjet print on fine art paper, 11 8/10 x 11 8/10".

Fiona Tan often reinterprets archives in her work, which incorporates video, photography, and installation to present an intellectual aesthetic history with an acute awareness of its own methodological limitations. “I am constantly reminded that all my attempts at systematical order must be arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and—quite simply—doomed to fail,” she has said. When the Ludwig Museum in Cologne invited Tan to devise an exhibition premised on the museum’s holdings of some seventy thousand photographs, she decided to focus on the advertising images of Agfa, the German photo and camera company. Her selections channel the enthusiasm of the Dutch expression gaaf, which means cool or perfect, and is also an anagram of Agfa. The word serves as the title for the exhibition, on view through August 11, 2019.

I WAS SLIGHTLY DAUNTED by the extent of the Ludwig’s photographic collection, until a curator mentioned the archive of the Agfa photo company’s advertising department, rescued when the company went bust. This archive consisted of dozens of boxes shut away in a little, windowless room; nothing had been done with them for about forty years. I was curious as to what I might discover in all that unmined, uncatalogued material. I found folders, slides, negatives, and envelopes, all thrown in together in a haphazard fashion, and became particularly intrigued by the color stock images from the postwar period, between 1952 and 1968. They had been taken by professional photographers but were intended to appeal to amateur photographers: “If you take pictures with Agfa products, your photos could look like this.”

Each negative was stored in an orange Agfa envelope ID’d with a letter and a number. The first image I looked at reminded me very much of a photograph of my mother taken in Australia in 1960—I recognized the clothes, the makeup, the pose. I decided to focus on color portraits of women taken in the 1950s and ’60s, which was also the largest category in this archive, approximately three thousand images. The photographs with the code “AB” are very sunny portraits of women, usually outside, while “ABB” is very similar, but in the wintertime.

These compositions are perfectly staged: very superficial, glossy, and shiny. You can prick right through them. They’re fun to look at and work with, but after a while they all start resembling each other and become anonymous. In addition to the genericism and ubiquity,

what struck me was that these images taken in Germany echoed the prototype of the highly idolized American suburban housewife, immaculately dressed and preparing something from Betty Crocker's cookbook. This era has such a connotation of postwar boom, where the economy is blossoming, everything's on the up, whereas the reality of postwar Germany—particularly in major cities like Cologne, which were still completely bombed out—was for many years quite the opposite.

I was keen to juxtapose these fake or idealized shots with “real” vernacular images. My “Vox Populi” series offers a snapshot of a country or community through a selection of amateur color photographs, which I have collected and collated. In this exhibition I present *Vox Populi London*, a wall of around three hundred individually framed photographs, and several works of mine that deal with portraiture in various ways, such as *Linnaeus' Flower Clock* and *Provenance*. There are also a few street photographs from the Ludwig collection, capturing Cologne as it really looked at that time: black-and-white photographs by Hans Held and Chargesheimer, showing kids playing in the rubble and women going to work in the factory with scarves around their heads. I also wanted to show where these Agfa images came from, so rather than present them in massive, high-end formats in a sparse installation, I brought the entire archive into the exhibition room, including the shelves, boxes, cupboards, and folders, to indicate that there still remains a lot to be found. I want to ask how knowledge is organized, why archives exist, and what an archive is. There's a vexed relationship between photography and anthropology, and I felt it necessary to point the lens toward Europe, to avoid emphasizing a strange sort of exotic desire, as anthropology originally did, and sometimes still does.

When I was at the Getty on an artist residence fellowship a couple of years ago, the theme of the year was art and anthropology, and a leading anthropologist from Harvard there said that there was a crisis as to what anthropology is or should be—that, at the very least, the field needs to reinvent itself. I suppose that's what artists and art historians say about art today, too. For me, it's also always a question, regardless of the discipline, of where art begins.

—As told to Hiji Nam