

Fiona Tan: 'With the Other Hand'

Biljana Purić

Fiona Tan, 'Mit der anderen Hand / With the Other Hand', Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Kunsthalle Krems, Austria, 31 October 2020 – 2 May 2021



Fiona Tan, 'Mit der anderen Hand' / 'With the other hand', exhibition view, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, 2020, courtesy of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, photo by Rainer Iglar

Exploring margins, including those created in language, visual forms of investigation and practices of movement, Fiona Tan's works linger in these spaces, creating affective points of rethought realities and imagination, often combined and put together within a single work. These margins are not just those that can be expressed through straightforward visual or verbal forms, they are also those of abstract concepts, lurking in the meanings of everyday communication and universal ideas. The contrast between the Occident and Orient, now long deconstructed and criticised, comes back in explorations of what it leaves behind, of what persists at the margins of such deconstructions that still captures visuals and narratives within the same duality. The world of Tan's works also transverse meridians of time, going back in the past, and forward, into possible futures. It reveals left-behinds – moments, movements and memories – crisscrossing lived, visceral experiences and their transformations into nodes of peripheral knowledge. Tan is also interested in archives, and in explorations of

these spaces of knowledge containment and the use of materials found in them, and it is these interests that formed the main substance of her exhibition 'With the Other Hand'.

The exhibition, which was staged at the Mönchsberg building of the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg and the Kunsthalle Krems, was the first mid-career retrospective of Fiona Tan's work. Named after actual artworks, the exhibition was divided into seven sections: 'Disorient', 'Ascent', 'Depot', 'News from the Near Future', 'Gray Glass', 'Brendan's Tale' and 'Leviathan'. The Museum der Moderne Salzburg is located on a hill overlooking the city, and its location and vistas complemented the ideas and themes of Tan's show. As the artist stated, the location of the museum and the city, nestled among the surrounding mountains, influenced the choice of art she presented, with the central piece being *Ascent* (2016), a work with a focus on Mount Fuji. The location was also used for creating new work, *Gray Glass* (2020), a three-channel video installation which was filmed in Salzburg's mountains, thus forging a strong connection between the exhibition and its location. However, Tan's poetics are not primarily associated with site-specific art. Instead, the artist locates her interest in the permanent, historical and enduring aspects of a location, interweaving the visual narratives of personal and collective importance.

A site for collection and preservation, and also the creation of knowledge, the archive is not only an institution where knowledge and memory are selected and systematised but can also be a natural history museum collection, resembling cabinets of curiosities more than a systematised archive, archival footage and family archives. The visual component of Tan's work, drawn from these sources, is complemented by her interest in literature. The title of the exhibition, 'With the Other Hand', came from Franz Kafka's writings from 1921: 'Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate... but with the other hand he can note down what he sees among the ruins...'¹

While this quote set the scene for the entire exhibition, this is just one of several literary elements, either direct quotes or references, that were an integral part of it. Marco Polo's text from the thirteenth century describing the eastern regions he travelled through and an old Dutch poem about an Irish monk's voyage to the Island of the Blessed in the sixth century were presented through audio narrations in the works *Disorient* (2009) and *Brendan's Tale* (2010). Other tales were referenced in broader examinations of sites of interest, such as mythological stories about Mount Fuji in *Ascent* and fantastic stories about sea-creatures in *Depot* (2015).

Here, I consider three works, *Disorient* (2009), *Ascent* (2016) and *Gray Glass* (2021), and explore their meanings in greater depth. The three works mark three points of the artist's recent investigations – global politics, memory and geography – that are intertwined and linked through the common use of location as a site of personal and intimate reflection and which refract through historical and regional narratives, histories and experiences. Tan is a

¹ From the introductory placard of the exhibition

narrator of intimate geographies, and this retrospective, although relatively small in scale, presented the core elements of the artist's approach to visual and physical histories, stories and spaces in her oeuvre thus far.

***Disorient* (2009)**

A play with words, *Disorient* questions our perspective on the notion of Orient and draws from the history of orientalising discourses and political decisions that have shaped this topic. This two-channel video work, first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2009 at the Dutch pavilion, uses audio and video materials that combine questions about what is known about the so-called Orient/East, how it is known and who creates this knowledge. One channel shows the inside of a room or a shop styled as a cabinet of curiosities, while the other features a mix of video footage relating in part to the contemporary middle- and far-east conflicts involving Western governments. A narrative that binds them together, played through two microphones, is a segment from Marco Polo's thirteenth-century travelogue, with its descriptions of regions, countries and people, their customs, economic statuses and traditions.



Fiona Tan, *Disorient*, 2019, video still from two-channel high-definition video installation, courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, Peter Freeman Inc., New York, and Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

The voiceover mentions sesame oil production in a region of 'Persia', while one screen shows oil drills, the bombing of Iraq and American soldiers in tanks driving through the streets of an Iraqi town. The centrality and importance of oil, in Polo's narrative a highly valued condiment, but also, of course, a contemporary fossil fuel driving military campaigns

today, shapes the fate of people in this region. Visual and audio stories are combined across different centuries in *Disorient*, demonstrating the consequences of Western expansionist politics. A return to the first screen brings viewers back inside the cabinet of peculiar objects, the contemporaneity of which is betrayed by small television sets nestled among various artefacts. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual comprehension of the Orient lingers in these objects, in the themes and aesthetics, with television sets showing archival footage of people and places easily identifiable as ‘the East’.

The video and audio aspects of the work combine into a story of visual stereotypes, memories and global politics that continue to define how ‘the East’ is perceived, approached and engaged with. Its borders can span various areas of land and territories, depending on vantage point – it is Marco Polo’s East, a land ‘infested with lions, bears’ and here and there inhabited by ‘barbarians’, but it is also a territory rich in natural resources to be exploited by the West.² The work also shows the consequences of such politics, in the dramatic scenes of warfare, torture and ecological destruction. Fiona Tan disorients the understanding and location of the Orient, showing it as a construct that is still present, defined through political decisions and with its culture and visuals being indiscriminately amassed as in a cabinet of curiosities.

***Ascent* (2016)**

A two-part installation, *Ascent* consists of a 77-minute video work and a selection of 150 amateur photos themed around Mount Fuji. Divided across two rooms of the Museum in Salzburg, the work tells a story about the constant presence of geographical *topoi* in culture, memory and everyday life. The story is both intimate and collective, as it involves the personal recollections of two narrators, interspersed with the examination of the cultural presence of the theme of a mountain and in particular of Mount Fuji in various artworks. The Japanese Ukiyo-e tradition, van Gogh’s fascination with Japanese prints and even Leni Riefenstahl’s film *The Holy Mountain* (*Der heilige Berg*, 1926) are mentioned, exploring the motif through the meridians of history, media and geography.

Mount Fuji is in the background of family photos, military photo-ops, artworks, and on painted backdrops from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studio photography. Two narrators, Mary and Hiroshi, talk about the mountain, its cultural significance and the personal toil of ascending it. The story does not say much about their relationship; it is a tragic one, as we learn that Hiroshi is dead, but nothing more is revealed. Instead, the eternal presence of Mount Fuji is examined in relation to the passing of everything else: life, blooming flowers and history. Consolation is found in the Japanese language and the understanding of the lack, of the void; it is never negative but instead filled with possibilities. A passing leaves a space that can be occupied again. The images of the mountain from all the

² From the audio segment of *Disorient*

various perspectives have their opposite in the images of its shadow as it seizes the land. Even when the gaze is averted from it, the mountain is present. During the US occupation of Japan, Mount Fuji was a forbidden motif in films, but naturally its presence lingered; the visual lack of it overflowed with meaning.



Fiona Tan, *Ascent*, 2016, detail from two-part installation, room 1: 16:10 projection (colour, 7:1 surround sound), room 2: 150 mounted colour photographs on wall shelf, courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, Peter Freeman Inc., New York, and Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

Mythology, geography, politics and reminiscences on the characteristics of photography and film all combine in the video through the stories of its actors. However, the melange of topics is not overbearing. Instead, they complement each other and create a kaleidoscopic view of the mountain, as do the numerous vistas in photographs.

Gray Glass (2020)

Created for the Salzburg exhibition, this three-channel video installation explores the visual heritage of Romanticism and its historical aspects. The loneliness of a romantic subject is underscored through stunning black and white aerial footage showing a single male figure

toiling his way through the Alpine snow. The man is shown in close-up on the second screen, sitting pensively outside a hut, in front of a burning lamp, and then again as he finds his way through a cave. The contrast between the vast whiteness of the snow in the wide-shot vistas of mountain ranges and the darkness of the cave underlines the tension between the natural forces and human presence. The contrast is also one of emotion, of feeling free and confined, with the associated tensions of the inner and outer world, emotions and reason, nature and culture, body and mind, playing through in changing perspectives – wide-angled shots and close-ups – and black and white tonalities.



Fiona Tan, *Gray Glass*, 2020, film still from three-channel ultra-high definition video installation, video (black and white, stereo sound), commissioned by Museum der Moderne Salzburg, with support from the Mondriaan Fund and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, Peter Freeman, Inc, New York, and Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

Gray Glass brings to mind the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and his focus on presenting human beings in wide, natural vistas. At times small enough to almost disappear from the scene, Friedrich's figures seem in awe of their surroundings, comprehending fully their insignificance in a larger order of things. Tan's approach to such emotions is charted in contrasts of frames and colours, but it is also tempered somewhat through some calming, close-up footage of a mountain creek and melting snow that shows a mellower side to a harsh winter climate. The man can perhaps find his way off the mountain, if that is his goal, and deliver the mirror he is carrying on his back to its destination. This mirror on the man's back is turned to face the surroundings, reflecting the mountains and snow and the footprints he leaves behind. *Gray Glass* is inspired by two stories, which Tan again combines into one, creating a thoughtful piece for the exhibition. The first relates to the eighteenth-century English poet Thomas Gray, who used to carry a black, pocket-size mirror in which he would observe what was around him. The mirror would reduce the colour range of a landscape,

making it more easily transferable into an image. The second is the story of the Italian mirrors which were so expensive that the most secure way to transport them over the Alps was on foot, and on a special frame that men would carry on their backs. The stories emphasise the importance of mirrors in human history, and particularly their use as conveyors of specific reality, the one that is more easily comprehended. Mirrors reduce the landscape to the human gaze, limiting its vastness to fit a human grasp. Tan engages with these stories and creates a visual reflection on their meaning.

Other works in the exhibition further examined personal and collective histories, and included images and stories about the skinning and gutting of a whale, children's games and our relationship with water and the sea. They question our practices of engaging with nature and its other inhabitants, our daily habits, and our ways of preserving stories and objects. The archival impulse is a constant motif in Tan's work; she enters archives of curiosities, of natural history museums, and shows us textures, colours and dynamics present in these spaces. Being an artist of mixed origin, with an Indonesian-Chinese father and an Anglo-Australian mother, Tan explores the world from this decentred position.³ In one interview she has described herself as a 'professional foreigner', a person that does not belong fully to either Europe or Asia.⁴ This position, although not a dominant presence in her work in terms of modes of personal reflections and questions, plays a part in topical choices and, more importantly, in the ways these choices are visually realised. The stories originate from other foreigners, from persons real or imagined who are searching for their place. A monk travels into an uncharted sea searching for a paradise on earth, for example, while others repeatedly take photographic images of Mount Fuji in an attempt to attach their existence to this eternal marker. This retrospective for the artist aptly combined these various aspects of her work, showing her complex approach to identity, history and personal memories.

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³ See Jacqueline Lo, 'Moving Images, Stilling Time', *Third Text*, vol 28, no 1, 2014, pp 56–66, p 57

⁴ Ibid