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Where do I belong?

Fiona Tan's long search for a sense of identity led her to ask questions about how every individual finds his or her place in the world – from Chinese-Indonesian refugees to US convicts. By **Ana Finel Honigman**

Like Jim Morrison, Fiona Tan understands that 'people are strange when you're a stranger'. Born in Pekanbaru, Indonesia in 1966, the child of a Chinese-Indonesian father and a Scottish-Australian mother, Tan was raised in Australia and educated in Germany and Holland. And although she has lived in Amsterdam since 1997, when she finished her studies at the Rijksakademie, Tan's art is still restless. In her film and photography-based installations, she calls on anthropology, documentary and autobiography to investigate the impact of stereotyping, collective memory and mythology in cultures as diverse as colonialist Indonesia, rural Norway and America's correctional institutions.

By Tan's own account, she is a 'foreigner by profession', and her diasporic experience informs her work. As she has said, 'My confusion about my own identity triggered a considerable number of my artworks. Because of my mixed background and migrations, I have been asking questions about where cultural and individual identity is located. I started working with found footage, searching for images which functioned as mirrors, images that told me more about myself.' Without the arrogance of someone who takes their place in the world for granted, Tan's art is empathetic but never domineering, inquisitive instead of didactic and sensitive without becoming sentimental.

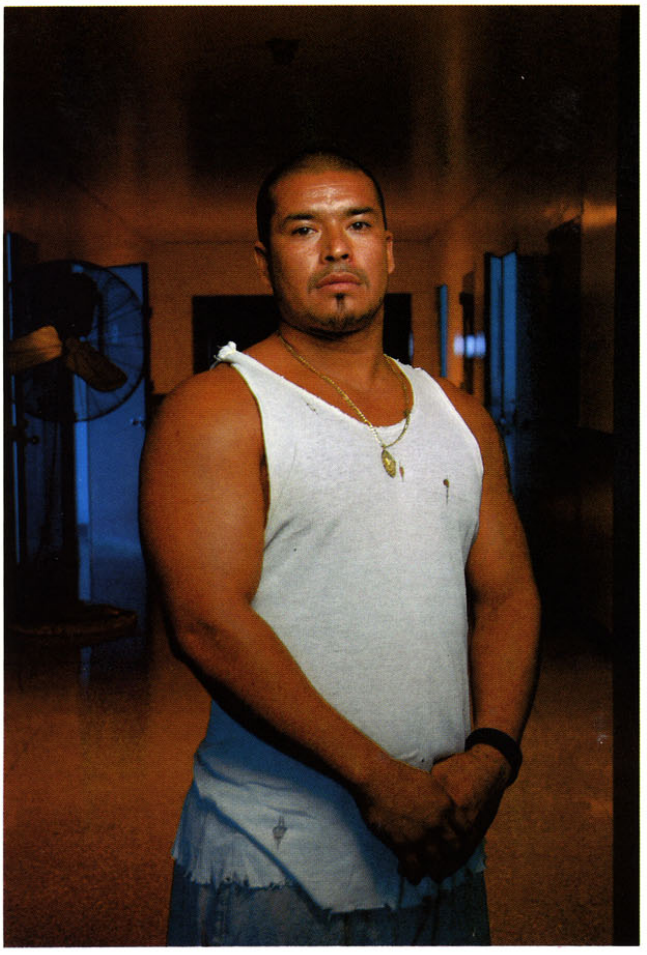
In 1997, Tan's quest for moorings motivated *May you live in interesting times*, a documentary made for Dutch television, for which she was awarded the prize for best debut in the Netherlands Film Festival. For this video, Tan travelled to Jakarta, Cologne, Melbourne and Hong Kong over a period of three years, tracing the branch of her father's family forced to flee anti-Chinese persecution in Indonesia in the 1960s. In a 1999 article for the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, Tan concluded that after making the film she was 'at peace with the realisation that I belong everywhere and nowhere between East and West'.

One's first impulse when encountering Tan's nomadic work is to seek ties between her subjects; to interpret it as an updated version, or a critique, of MoMA's 1955 exhibition 'The Family of Man', which grouped over 500 photographs of world peoples under themes – love, death, children – considered common to all cultures. Colonialist exploitation and imposition are issues she frequently confronts, but Tan's art is not just the illustration of theory or the visualisation of politics. Tempting as it is to hope that she will provide answers, her real power as an artist is that she offers no conclusions, only a series of compelling introductions. Although she recognises that first or surface impressions are limited, they are also vital to the process of how we come to know each other. 'Art, that is *my* art, is visual,' she once explained. 'It's all about images, what they mean, what they do to us. I am interested in areas and thinking beyond words.'

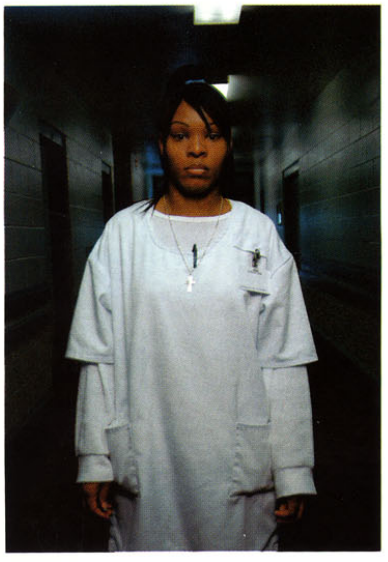
At New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art this month, Tan presents *Correction* (2004), a video installation dedicated to representing America's pariah prison population. Commissioned by a consortium made up of the New Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, *Correction* comprises more than 300 video portraits of prison guards and inmates filmed at correctional facilities in Illinois and California.

Tan became intrigued by America's penal system when she read a newspaper article stating that the US prison population exceeded 2.2 million: a nation within but outside a nation. Tan felt compelled to show the faces from which the statistics are compiled, so she filmed volunteers from two women's and two men's prisons standing ▸

Right: Fiona Tan, *Correction*, 2004, video still



According to Tan, to look at her portraits is to become 'less aware of the image, and more aware of the person as an image'



Top, left and opposite page: *Correction*, 2004, video stills

before jail doors or concrete walls, silently confronting her camera, with routine prison sounds providing a faint soundtrack. By using the time-based medium of film instead of still photography, Tan's portraits create the disquieting impression of a conversation. She describes this experience as 'becoming less aware of the image and more aware of the person as an image'. Because she is not interested in the stories of the inmates or the officers but in their physical presence, her subjects stand in front of us as though waiting for someone to find something to say. As the awkwardness escalates, the frustrated desire for connection becomes harder and harder to bear.

Correction might seem like a departure for an artist trying to comprehend how individuals find their own place in the world, since a prisoner's complex social identity is removed once he or she is incarcerated. But to a certain extent, criminals represent the essence of a society in clearer and more profound ways than do its free citizens – after all, societies define themselves by what they deem transgressive. And by filming the guards as well as the prisoners, Tan emphasises how prison is a microcosm constructed around the same divisions that determine how general society functions and knows itself.

Tan continues her critical use of vintage material and original footage in her multi-channel film installation *Countenance* (2002), which was originally presented in Documenta XI and will be back on view at Modern Art Oxford. Like *Correction*, *Countenance* consists of a series of cinematic portraits – this time of Berliners, shot on 16mm black-and-white film and presented life-size. *Countenance* is Tan's response to August Sander's extensive photographic essay *People of the 20th Century*, a portion of which was recently on view in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Between 1892 and 1954, Sander photographed more than 500 German citizens and organised the portraits into seven portfolios according to profession or social status: Farmers, Workers, Women, Occupations, Artists, the Big City and the Last People (social outcasts). As Donald Kuspit has pointed out, Sander's portraits exemplify the German term *Schicksalgemeinschaften*, meaning a group defined by a shared fate instead of common choices – such as people shipwrecked together on an island, or the victims of a random disaster. Sander's categorisation says less about his individual subjects than about the lives they have been forced to lead.

Sander's objective was to construct an encyclopaedic ethnographic portrait of his time represented by specific examples of general types. His subjects were identifiable by their costumes and the tools they carried but also by their stance, their posture and their comfort level in front of the camera. Similarly, in *Countenance* Tan tells us her subjects' occupations and their marital status. But rather than making any assertion, Tan seems to want us to reflect on the possibility that the assumptions we draw from our brief encounters with her subjects can only be conjecture. With its scientific organisation and methodological clarity, Sander's project was as quintessentially modernist as Tan's is postmodern: Sander was trying to understand how individuals fit together to form society, whereas Tan is investigating how society shapes the individual. Tan acknowledges that she cannot adequately articulate society's complexities by using neat categories; her conclusion, she has said, is that 'identity is not a constant, a fixed point, but an ever changing and oscillating idea'. By working to update Sander's project, Tan shows that mutual curiosity is one thing, if not the only thing, that strangers all share.

'Fiona Tan: Countenance', 5 April-29 May, Modern Art Oxford (+44 (0)1865 722733, www.modernartoxford.org.uk); 'Fiona Tan: Correction', 9 April-4 June, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (+1 212 219 1222, www.newmuseum.org) and touring