

Fiona Tan

Contact us

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Editor/publisher

Sarah Callaghan
The Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521,
London W8 4GT, UK
sarah.callaghan@
asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040
fax +44 (0)20 7084 7713

Advertising

Jane Grylls
tel +44 (0)20 7300 5661
jane.grylls@royalacademy.org.uk
Paolo Russo
paolo.russo@royalacademy.org.uk
tel +44 (0)20 7300 5751

Send advertising to

Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521
London W8 4GT
United Kingdom
info@asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040
fax +44 (0)20 7084 7713

Art direction

Gary Ottewill, Editorial Design
garyottewill.com

Subscriptions manager

Heather Milligan
info.asianart@btinternet.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

Subscriptions

and administration
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By Olivia Sand

As video art started to become popular in the art world, many artists embraced this new medium. However, very few artists have consistently continued to experiment and develop the medium further. One of them is Fiona Tan (b 1966 in Indonesia), who has constantly relied on video as her primary means of expression, complementing it with photography as well as installations. Exploring political and sociological issues while addressing such themes as identity, memory and time, Fiona Tan approaches her topics in a very personal and unique way yet lets the audience draw their own conclusions. Video has inspired her to recently complete two feature films, her latest being *Ascent* based on still images and excerpts of documentaries of Mount Fuji. Presently an artist in residence at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, she talks to the Asian Art Newspaper about the making of *Ascent*.



*Fiona Tan. Photo: Peter Hirth.
Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London*

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: Some of your projects deal with world issues addressing very specific political, or sociological, affairs. Clearly, your work is based on extremely thorough research. What is the source of your information?
FIONA TAN: That is a hard question to answer, because it is very broad. I do not think I can properly explain it in a way that would be worthwhile, but I am watching and following the news and also reading the newspapers. I am simply engaged in being someone living in the times we find ourselves in at the moment. Increasingly, I find that my work is trying to respond to this situation.

AAN: What is the starting point of your images?

FT: There are certain things and images that interest me and fascinate me, that I love and I am looking into those so they do not let me go. These can be images of many different kinds: images that are in my head that do not exist yet, or as I am drawing them I decide I want to try and film them. It is a very personal starting point based on what interests me and that which means something to me. I am just trying to follow my own individual lines of thinking, feeling and thought.

AAN: How did the film *Ascent* come about? Is it based on a true story?

FT: It is fiction – not based on a true story. *Continued on page 4*



Vox Populi Tokyo (2007), photographic installation. Photo: Mudam © Aurélien Mole

story – and it is quite purposely invented. All the images are either real or from documentaries: it is not a fake mountain and we are dealing with real pictures of Mount Fuji. However, I wanted to contrast the real images with a fictional narrative. It was a way of going on a very unexpected associative journey while you are always looking at the same subject matter again and again and again.

AAN: Did you have a personal history with an experience of Mount Fuji, or are you just fascinated by the mountain?

FT: It was a process. I like climbing mountains very much. As for Mount Fuji, I am now, but at that time I was not particularly fascinated by the mountain. Of course, I know about it and I know many artworks have been made of it throughout history. I was in Japan a few years ago and was invited by the Izu Photo Museum to work with them to create an exhibition. The Izu Photo Museum is based at the foot of Mount Fuji and they have a good collection of photographs

concentrating on the mountain that feature both historical and contemporary works. When they were showing me their collection, I was particularly struck by some photographs from during the American occupation, after the second World War. These were images that I had never seen before and that I found hugely interesting. However, they also had other works from before the second World War and I thought that this was also very special material. The museum said that if I wanted to do something with the collection I could, so that got me started.

Considering this very special material, I needed to learn more about it and inspect it more closely before starting a project. Firstly, I wanted to make a small piece with not very many images of Mount Fuji, but then I realised it was probably one of the most photographed mountains in the world. Everyone takes pictures of mountains and Japanese people love to take photographs with Mount Fuji in them as it is a very important and sacred site to them. I began to think whether there was a way in which

I STARTED TO REALISE THAT THE MATERIAL WAS VERY INTERESTING AND SOME OF IT WAS INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL

I could access this huge collective database of Mount Fuji images. I suggested to the museum that we start a website where people could upload their own images of Mount Fuji for me and when they did, they would need to agree that I might work with them on a project. I wanted a mountain of images and we tried to get as many photographs as the height of Mount Fuji in metres. The mountain is 3,776 metres high and I wanted to collect 3,776 photographs. After about a year we met our target. I was sent about 4,000 images, which I then spent months looking at, organising, understanding, and researching. That is when I started to realise that the material I had was so much broader, it was very interesting and some of it was incredibly beautiful. From there on, the project started to grow.

AAN: Basically, the story grew as the images came in?

FT: The pictures came first. While I was trying to figure out what I was looking at, making sense of the pictures and finding a way to organise or catalogue them, I had to do more and more research and this became more and more interesting as I went on. As a result, the narrative started to grow because it spreads in many different directions: it is not only a love story, it is also dealing with many points of history, cultural aesthetics, as well as Japanese history. The story transports you to various places. At one point, I am talking about van Gogh, but at another point I am talking about the American occupation, or about Hiroshima. There are lots of different subjects talked about and touched upon within that narrative framework, for example, of a European woman talking to her deceased Japanese lover. He climbs the mountain and she is following him from the distance.

AAN: Has the film been shown in Japan?

FT: *Ascent* has two forms. There is a two-part installation and a version specifically for the cinema, which is the one that premiered at the International Film Festival in Locarno last summer.

AAN: How does the installation relate to the cinema version?

FT: The subject matter is the same, but it works differently as it is in a museum context. I guess it is addressing slightly diverse aspects and there is also a distinct presentation – as it is a two-part installation. There is a projection in one (the first) room which is similar to the cinema version. Then there is a second room and you exit the projection into daylight. There is a shelf along the three walls of the room and there are small printed photographs featuring a selection of the images that you have just seen in the projection room. It is almost like a storyboard of the film. They are arranged in the same order as in the film. Another thing I address in the piece itself and in the voice over is the differences and similarities

between photography and film. I can physically address these issues because you are confronted with the photographs printed out on paper after you have just seen them as film. It is something I was very keen to experiment with and see how it worked. As a person visiting a museum or a gallery, the way you approach the work and what you take from it is different than when you go and see it in a cinema, but I cannot really say how and in what way. I do not think that one is less than the other, but I am sure it is different. When you go and see a museum exhibition, you have more time to think and to come to your own conclusion: you can backtrack, you can look at a drawing, or a painting, again. You can do that with these photographs. A friend of mine said it was almost like meeting the stars for real after you have seen the movie. I find that a very interesting observation. That is something that I am very interested in thinking about with this medium: how do they work and how do we perceive them? What is an image? These are important considerations for me, all the more so as in my case, in particular, lens-based imagery is something I am constantly looking at in my work. So, this piece addresses both aesthetic and philosophical concerns.

AAN: Have you done anything similar before? Gathering lots of images with the story coming about slowly with an installation version as well as a cinema version?

FT: It is the first time I have experimented with having two versions in this way. It is something that I am keen to keep trying. Before *Ascent*, I had finished making a feature film (my first actually, entitled *History's Future*), a site-specific piece meant only for cinema, which is never going to be shown in a gallery or a museum. It was an interesting experience to work in such a way in the film world for the first time. I became increasingly conscious of the fact that I am an artist, that the art world is my metier, and that it is where I am based. Nevertheless, I remain interested in what cinema is, in what film is, and how movement

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Vox Populi Sydney (2006), photographic installation. Photo: Biennale of Sydney © Greg Weight



Ascent (2016), two-part video and installation. Photo: Susumu Endo. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

and stillness work.

I am pleased that there is a cinematic version of *Ascent*. I also very much wanted there to be this installation version. A film in a cinema is something you can 'throw away'. As a disposable experience, it is something you see once and that is it. Obviously, there are cinephiles who love film and go back to see it many times, but generally for most of the audience, you go and see it just once. You have the emotional experience, you get up, leave, and that is it. I like the fact that with exhibitions you have a more lasting resonance.

AAN: Describing the concept of the film – a film evolving around still images of one particular subject – seems impossible to people just hearing about it.

FT: It is interesting that you say that. That was my challenge: I wanted to make the impossible possible. I wanted to make magic. What I was really striving for was to work with the simplest means, just still images, just a couple of snapshots. I want to engage you for over an hour in order for you to forget that it is so little that you are looking at; I want to create a world for you. One more thing that occurred to me about the disposable cinema experience and an art work is that cinema is often talked about in terms of emotion as it is supposed to be an emotional experience where you are happy, sad, you cry, or you laugh. In my case, I am interested in a world of images, in a cinema and in films where you



Ascent (2016), two-part video and photographic installation. Photo: Masaki Kaji. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

also have to think a lot and deal with complex ideas. This is also me resisting the current trend. Working on the script for *Ascent*, I was writing all the time, rewriting and rewriting, while also editing the images. It was a considerable task.

AAN: Was the way you put *Ascent* together based on a similar approach from earlier projects?

FT: As it turns out, I have over the years worked regularly with found footage. There is a series of works which for me relate clearly to this even though I did not realise it at the time, especially with the series of photo works *Vox Populi*, five installations each centred around a different city or country. Each *Vox Populi* comes in two forms of

presentation: there is a book (a publication accompanying each of these projects) and a wall piece. The wall piece is quite a large photographic installation with approximately 300 individually framed photographs. They are like a very informal cross section, or portrait, of a city. There again, I did not take any pictures myself as I am using images that people have lent me. For that project, one of the biggest jobs was to approach close to 100 different families from all different backgrounds who live in that city and then ask them if I could borrow their private photo albums and be allowed to use any of their images which interest me. That was a similar process to making a big collection or an archive of



Ascent (2016), two-part video and photographic installation. Photo: Izu Photo Museum. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

photographs: I had to look at them, try to understand them, and organise them. Again, there was a constant questioning of what makes a good photograph.

AAN: What makes a good photograph?

FT: Wouldn't it be nice if I could give you an answer! A single, clear, sentence explaining that!

AAN: To date you have completed five *Vox Populi* installations. Are you considering making another?

FT: For this specific project, I have said that I am not making any more. The last one I did was *Vox Populi* London. As the project turned out, it was at an interesting moment in time. As I started doing it, I concentrated on vernacular colour photography and at the time just about everyone still had photo albums at home. Now, images are increasingly almost all digital. People do not have photo albums anymore and if they do, they are these books that have been printed by a company from the internet and the quality of the print is very different. Alternatively, people also started to give me CDs with thousands and thousands and thousands of images which had not been pre-selected at all. It was an extremely tiring process, as you are looking at so many images and I have always in mine a story about Bruce Chatwin, the British writer (1940–1989), who went temporarily blind. He said it was because he had been looking too much, so it was suggested that he start travelling instead.

AAN: As you pointed out, people no longer keep photo albums, but they have loads of pictures on their phones. They take pictures for the sake of taking them.

FT: Yes, it is interesting and strange. There is obviously something satisfying about pressing the button and thinking about taking something with you. It happens quite a lot at art exhibitions these days, too. People

just walk in the room and before they even have had a chance to look themselves, they take out their phone, they snap away, and then they leave! I often wonder what they have seen.

AAN: Video works are all the more challenging because these works require time and people do not necessarily want to allow the time to view them and try to understand them.

FT: It is a free choice that each individual makes on their own. If they do not feel like spending time in a room with a work, that is fine. But I have always been struck by the amount of time people spend in my installations and I am very pleased about that. Actually, I always thought that for people to allow the time was going to be difficult and that they were not going to be able to do it, but they do! My installations can also be an escape, and they may represent one of the few places where you can slow down and not process things so quickly. I think the audience is quite capable realising that they have a choice.

AAN: At this stage, would you tend to say that both practices, the one for the galleries and museums and the one for movie theatres complement one another? Would you want to keep both practices going?

FT: At the moment they do, but I am not quite sure what will be happening in the future. Currently I am working on a new piece which I do not think is going to be a cinema piece – but never say never. I do not know if perhaps next year, or the year after, all of a sudden, I will end up working on something that I feel would be best to be shown in a cinema situation. What I do know is that I am an artist first and then whatever comes after that is second. That is quite clear to me.

• *The exhibition Ascent is on view at the De Pont Museum, Tilburg, the Netherlands*



Ascent (2016) two-part video and photographic installation. Photo: Izu Photo Museum. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London