

# Messages to Fiona Tan: Invisible Footsteps

Asians are the fastest-growing population in the United States. Yet most Americans cannot name a single social event that significantly impacted Asia. Writer Lauren du Graf talks about how invisible Asian-Americans are in their own country. When she visits Fiona Tan's exhibition, she recognizes the same identity paradox in the work. "An identity that is mainly determined by what is not."

BY LAUREN DU GRAF 06 JANUARY 2023

The exhibition [Fiona Tan – Mountains and Molehills](#) can be visited in Eye until 8 January 2023. We asked three writers to write a text in response to this exhibition. Lauren du Graf is a literary scholar and has previously written for The New York Times and The New Yorker.

## Invisible Footsteps

### An Asian-American Perspective on Fiona Tan's Footsteps

In many parts of the world, including where I live in the United States, to live in an Asian body is to experience invisibility and a feeling of social irrelevance. Despite the fact that Asians are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States, a recent STAATUS (Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the U.S.) Index study revealed that 58 percent of Americans cannot name a single prominent Asian American, and 42 percent cannot think of a historical experience or policy related to Asian Americans. As Donald Trump fanned the flames of anti-Asian sentiment by persistently labeling COVID the "China virus", it became clear that the violence was only an extreme manifestation of a preexisting condition — mundane racial aggressions and microaggressions that were often endured silently. Indeed, Asian-American problems are often borne quietly. Despite our numbers, we are prone to invisibility, little understood.

The problem of Asian invisibility has long been treated as an issue of representation. As with other racial identity categories in the United States, Asians are underrepresented in both media and politics, a problem often imagined to have a straightforward remedy: you boost visibility by having more Asians in the media and in visible positions of power. "If you can't see it, you can't be it", goes the saying, which Getty Images used in a campaign to diversify their bank of stock images, a strategy that they, in turn, hope will help people visualize people of color in leadership positions.

And yet for Asian Americans, the problem of invisibility cannot simply be countered with visibility. To start, the category of Asian is baggy to the extent that it is almost

incomprehensible. What does it mean to be Asian at all? What does a fourth-generation Japanese American have in common with a Hmong refugee? And where do South Asians fit into this picture? Asian identity is invisible, in part, because it is so uncertain and indeterminate. In a recent Pew survey, A Bhutanese immigrant describes why she defaults to the term Asian: “When people ask where we are from ... there are some people who have no idea about Bhutan, so we end up introducing ourselves as being Asian.” Even if labels were deployed with more accuracy and precision, it is not clear that we would be better understood or more visible. We simply do not know who we are and how we relate to one another. Writes Cathy Park Hong:

*The writer Jeff Chang writes that ‘I want to love us’ but he says that he can’t bring himself to do that because he doesn’t know who ‘us’ is. I share that uncertainty. Who is us? What is us?*

Echoing Hong, in *Stay True* (2022), Hua Hsu puts the problem in writerly terms:

*A simple pronoun of ‘I’ or ‘we,’ a first-person perspective, all of it seemed mysterious...we could never write in a way that assumed anyone knew where we were coming from...Where do you even begin to explain yourself?”*

For mixed-race Asians like myself (my mother is Chinese-Filipino, and my father is Caucasian-American) , the problem of invisibility and the unanswerable questions of what is “us” and who are “we” become even more elusive, our identities built on rickety, hyphenated firmament. These questions came to mind as I walked through Fiona Tan’s recent exhibition at Eye Filmmuseum, Mountains and Molehills. One gets the sense that Tan has been reckoning with the same dilemmas for quite a long time.

Tan, an Amsterdam-based filmmaker, was born in Pekan Baru, a city in Sumatra, Indonesia to Indonesian-Chinese father and an Scottish-Australian mother. In her early correspondence with the late John Berger, she had already surfaced certain paradoxes of identity: “my self-definition seems an impossibility. An identity defined only by what is not”.

Her latest film *Footsteps*, commissioned by the Eye, was just last week was announced to be part of next year’s Berlinale (under the title *Dearest Fiona*), described by German festival programmers as a film that “explores what potential emerges when sound and image diverge.” Yet the film goes well beyond formal experiment, indexing the incommensurable gulf between the particularities of her own family history and the Dutch archive, pointing directly to who qualifies in the imagined community of the Dutch “us”, and who, through omission, remains invisible. Through this collage, Tan reveals what it is like to make sense of yourself in a world that does not acknowledge your existence.



Fiona Tan, *Footsteps*, 2022, courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

We see men fishing and women weaving together fishing nets, farmers cutting wheat and tulips. They are images that vindicate the common person and inspire love for one's country, fortifying one's sense of belonging to a collective, ennobling the everyday worker and glorifying the countryside. They are images that present the impression of a collective truth about the Netherlands and Amsterdam, conveying a clear articulation of a "we". The people in the images are mostly homogeneously white, with the exception of the brief appearance of brown bodies, presumably Indonesian, in traditional garb, walking uniformly and orderly, clearly creating a spectacle where the walk.



Fiona Tan, *Footsteps* (2022), stills, HD video installation, tinted, hand coloured and b&w, 5:1 surround, courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

The narration of her father's letters, by contrast, describes the private, idiosyncratic lives of itinerant, presumably mixed race people for whom membership to any "we", whether it is a race or a nation-state, are constantly be under negotiation. The letters were sent by her father in Australia to Fiona while she was away at school in Europe. The letters convey news about family members in Australia and Asia, and are peppered with commentary about news items from around the world, including the prospect of constitutional reform in Australia, and an ambiance of fear surrounding multiculturalism.

Tan stitches together sound and image to create the illusion that the stories of her family and the Dutch archival images belong to the same diegetic world, an illusion that becomes hauntingly fractured as the film wears on. The soundscape is deceptively naturalistic; the narration is layered with sounds of water splashing accompany images of fishing, blurring the world of her father's letters with the century-old archival footage. The effect is almost as if the archival images are part of the dispatch from her father, snapshots of events that transpired while Fiona was away at school. And yet Fiona's father is not writing from Amsterdam but from Australia, his letters written in 1989 and 1990, more than half a century after the archival footage was recorded. The union between the two histories is only art, movie magic.

As the film draws to a close, the faces of people take a markedly grotesque, haunting turn, recalling the portraiture of Diane Arbus. So too does the natural world begin to unhinge. Fires rage, canals flood and freeze over, bodies of water are filled in. The film ends in 1990. The Berlin wall has just fallen and the fate of Eastern Europe is uncertain. Apartheid is ending in South Africa, the San Andreas fault has ruptured. Pap's letters, too, indicate a rupture in Fiona's sense of self, shifting from casual reportage to a note of concern, alluding to a "self-questioning period" that she is undergoing. It is fitting that these are the ideas that the film ends on: the futility of walls, the uncertainty of identity, the monstrous, unpredictable threat of nature, with chaos threatening to close in on every neat border and swallow every tulip. Such images point, too, to the frailty of language, and of any racial, ethnic or national category that may be upheld as an answer to the questions "what is 'us'" and "who are 'we'". Such questions, after all, can only yield provisional answers which, in the end, must be washed away, like footprints in the sand.