

frieze

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Fiona Tan

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Fiona Tan's work in 'Akte 1', her first major retrospective, is a confident exploration of the familiar territory of cultural voyeurism, identity politics and the construction of memory.

Countenance (2002), which was shown at Documenta last year, is a life-size video projection of Berliners looking into the camera. The series references August Sander's studies from the 1920s, yet the unguardedness of Sander's original subjects is from another age - we have now become so used to being documented that our relationship to the camera is more self-conscious. It's the cracks in the surface - the way a subject's eyes in Countenance occasionally dart

off-camera, for example - that reveal the personality underneath. Tan teases out her subjects' anxious awareness of themselves, incorporating it into an endless feedback loop: we know that they know that we're watching them.

Although Tan categorizes the people she has portrayed by occupation and marital status, it's up to us to invent their stories: what are they telling us? What predilections are they concealing? Of course it's all conjecture, as if Tan is suggesting that taxonomizing identity based on demographic minutiae is a necessarily futile pursuit in an age when people simultaneously inhabit any number of political and cultural selves. Tan's own biographic profile, for example, is almost cartoonishly multicultural: a Chinese Indonesian Australian based in Amsterdam, working in Berlin. Identity is as slippery as time is elusive and

memory is fleeting: if the sales manager portrayed in *Countenance* gets fired today, will he still be himself tomorrow?

The themes of time and recollection are everywhere in 'Akte 1'. In *Tuareg* (1999) an old film loop of an anonymous family is accompanied by various soundscapes. Depending on the context, the same loop - or the same memory - becomes familiar or distant, comforting or harrying. Time can be a benevolent archivist, allowing us to look back fondly on a seemingly simpler age. Yet it's also unsentimental: the people we see in *Tuareg* are dust now, and no amount of freeze-framed smiles can undo that.

By mixing found footage with her own, and without always announcing which is which, Tan nimbly mimics the workings of memory itself. Is the image in my mind's eye indeed my own recollection, or was it planted by family photos or grandparents' anecdotes or TV or a dream? Is that an original idea, or is it something I just read? Who can be certain that the memories we hold dear, that ground our sense of self, aren't largely apocryphal? Tan's seamless blending of the two keeps her work buoyant; merely 'culturally relocating' found footage is a tired concept, yet relying too heavily on camcorder musings can equally invoke the deathless solipsism of art-student travelogue.

Lift (2000), in which Tan was briefly lifted into the Amsterdam skyline by massive balloons, was well documented, yet only a few stills of Tan suspended in mid-air were included in this show, alongside several freeze-framed images of children with balloons. By encouraging the viewer to imagine their own version of her flight, Tan addresses the fragmentary nature of memory. Think, for a second, of a long-lost friend: the image in your head probably isn't a film loop or video, but rather a still frame, blurry around the edges, perhaps a bit shaky, like a videotape on pause. The stills from *Lift* are, like our own memories, tentative, tenuous, possibly manipulated. Tan doesn't withhold the registration of the event; she simply presents one version that requires more input.

The sophisticated installation of 'Akte 1' was impressive - it's a rare show these days where all the film loops actually loop and the projectors don't overshoot the screen by a sloppy inch or three. This smoothness of execution contributed to the exhibition's meditative quality. *Saint Sebastian* (2001) is a good example of this. A vivid double-sided projection based on a Japanese ritual depicts the concentrated faces of young women shooting arrows at targets we never see. As in *Lift*, only part of the picture - faces and hands - is visible. The bull's-eye, the easy dénouement, is something we have to imagine for ourselves.

Douglas Heingartner