

[Art & Photography](#)

Unearthing the post-war photography archive that fabricated a vision of modern womanhood

Amsterdam-based artist Fiona Tan has delved into the Museum Ludwig's Agfacolor photography archives to highlight the inauthenticity of their idealised visions

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The photographs of the Agfacolor archives pose an interesting paradox. The images, produced in the 1950s and '60s as advertorial material for the colour film products produced by the West-German Agfa brand and for editorial use in its accompanying magazine *Agfa Photoblätter*, show visions of young women taking part in mundane leisure activities. The cheerful subjects are seen frolicking in nature, taking part in outdoor activities and posing playfully with their male counterparts, all while maintaining an air of youthful exuberance.

Visual artist and filmmaker Fiona Tan was invited by the Museum Ludwig, where the collection had been stored and virtually forgotten, to delve into the archives and create an exhibition with the photographs as a starting point. In [GAAE](#), an anagram of Agfa and a Dutch word meaning “neat”, Tan explores time, memory and the role of women in society. Contrasting the archival images with a selection of documentary photos and her own works, the artist focuses on the concept of authenticity and the historical context in which the collections were produced.

“After discovering this almost forgotten and uncatalogued archive at the museum, I became fascinated by the inherent paradox of its images: staged and idealised scenes of models posing for professional photographers, nonetheless intended to appear spontaneous and authentic, as if taken by amateurs,” Tan told SLEEK.



Behind the editorial frames lies a forced naturalness that speaks of a thinly veiled contradiction. Whilst they are advertising the kind of aspirational life reminiscent of an American dream, they are totally unrealistic. These photos were taken in an era in which women were subservient in both family and society and were by no means the autonomous, liberated figures portrayed in these photographs.

This representation of the feminine ideal presents something of a “disquieting legacy”, but does not find itself rooted in West Germany – looking at the collection, it would be easy to mistake the shots for those found in magazines across the globe during this era.

“These photographs reflect a contemporary propaganda effort to convince women they were happy to return to their ‘rightful’ place in the domestic sphere after the upheaval of the Second World War,” notes Tan.



Among the examples of her own works featured in the exhibition are photographs from Tan’s *Vox Populi London* (2012) series, which the artist asserts as being “filled with images of what people really take photographs of” in comparison to the “generic and exchangeable” images presented in the Agfacolor advertisements. The photos are a playful ode to real people living in London,

curated from the personal albums of the local community. “To me the contrast between the ‘real’ photographic moments in the *Vox Populi* series and the posed and stylised head shots of the Agfa archive could not be greater,” says Tan.



From *Vox Populi* London, 2012.



From Vox Populi London, 2012.

The images of the Agfacolor archives depict a rose-tinted vision of young women liberated from domestic duties and expressing nothing but a total joie de vivre. Whilst they were taken half a century ago, their ingenuity is no less poignant for a contemporary audience. They evoke something of the curated images we see on our Instagram feeds – smiling, laughing faces that hide the trials and struggles of daily life and aim to be aspirational rather than realistic. For Tan, the curation of lifestyle ideals is certainly not a lost art. “The women portrayed in these Agfa photographs were never real to start with, but perhaps—even today—we somehow, very occasionally, still want them to be.”

The *Fiona Tan: GAAF* exhibition will be held at the Museum Ludwig, Heinrich-Böll-Platz, 50667 Cologne, as part of the *Artist Meets Archive* series initiated by the Internationale Photoszene Köln. The opening is on Friday 3rd May, 7pm and it runs until August 11th.

By [Anna Mackenzie](#)