

A point of departure and arrival

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There are times when a set of coinciding circumstances force you to rethink the very concepts and ideas with which you set out on a given project. In contrast, there are other occasions when those coincidences, repeated over and over again throughout the course of the plot, make the story more complex, ultimately reinforcing the original ideas. In the second of these cases, details constantly emerge during one's investigations which – although they may not be the most relevant – might serve as axes around which to build a given narrative. The fascination for this set of coinciding pieces of information might well be depicted in a map-like diagram, with dots joined to create a route, or rather the story of a journey – or in reality, many journeys, ranging from the past to the present ... or the other way round, depending where they are viewed from. It is like unrolling a ball of wool and discovering knots that allow you precisely to reconstruct the evidence of what you were looking for; because you knew they were there, despite all the differing opinions, despite the dissensus and consensus that sought not to tip the scales in one direction or another.

It is true that Fiona Tan's work in its entirety is complex and contains various force lines and intersection points. The same thing happens when one is thinking about a specific project and needs to find criteria – in this case criteria that coincide with the history of the place and the development of much of the artist's corpus, together with certain personal stories that become enmeshed with the development of the story. The fictions, either narrated through vestiges of the real or inserted into that reality; the archive work and the investigation of film and space, all come together in a particular "starting point". From there they divide up, like a journey-somewhere. It is that starting point that we are familiar with, that geography of the beginning. This is what has been established as existing and as being the place from which we depart to go somewhere else. It is that contradiction between what we know and what we do not know, between that present that is about to come to an end and that other near future that is already so close, that is so often investigated here. And it is investigated through a journey that is both physical and temporal, across continents and oceans, through cultures and through time, from the present to the past and from the past to the present by way of narrative or mental loops.

There are times too when the point of departure ends up being the point of arrival as well. Even in these cases, though, there is a great distance in time or space between that single point of departure and arrival. What was left behind is no longer the same when one returns: the experience of the journey and the whole collection of unlived experiences in that starting place means that both the traveller and the point of departure are no longer the same. Let us think of a specific example of a point of departure that ends up being a point of arrival, one that is closely related to the history of the place. Take what is considered to be the first circumnavigation of the globe, the voyage that set off from the banks of the River Guadalquivir, from the Las Mulas Quay. The squadron was led by Magellan but it was to be another of his crew, a sailor from Getaria named Juan Sebastián Elcano, who would lead the expedition back into port. A journey may be viewed from different perspectives: the journey

as adventure, the journey as exploration, the journey as knowledge, the journey as trade, the journey as domination ...

Let us consider these two last cases in particular, because that first circumnavigation of the globe, which set out from Seville to Sanlúcar in 1519 and sailed back up the river from Sanlúcar to Seville in 1522, took place in an era of European (essentially Portuguese and Spanish) colonial expansion. And in between that departure and that arrival lay everything that they were searching for and which they managed to achieve with the greatest difficulty: a route that would evade the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas, a route skirting round the Americas, a trading route with the East that eventually become the greatest expression of territorial and cultural domination in history up to that point. The intellectual and physical predecessors of that voyage were Columbus's expeditions in search of a new route to the Indies. Once again, we have the history of the place, from Seville, from the Monastery of La Cartuja, now the site of the Andalusian Centre for Contemporary Art, as the basis for an exhibition project which takes the voyage and the point from which it departed – and also its destination – as its conceptual axes.

There is some shared element between Columbus and Elcano's voyages and Fiona Tan's narrative, photographic and film loops; they all set out in search of the East. As Okui Enwezor wrote, the theme on which Tan acts from different angles and philosophical approaches is to a great extent the East. And the East was also the goal of Magellan's expedition, specifically the "Spice Islands", the Moluccas, where they were in search of trading goods – principally nutmeg, cloves and pepper. And the Moluccas Islands are situated in modern-day Indonesia, the place from whence Fiona Tan and her family began their journey. Magellan's destination was, precisely, the starting point of Fiona Tan's history, as she notes in her only clearly autobiographical work, *May You Live in Interesting Times*. It is a work that asks more questions than it answers, and which ends up with few certainties in that journey towards cultural inheritance, which she views as a "palace and a prison". As Edward Said wrote, "Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale".

The true goal of the sixteenth-century voyage of circumnavigation, like Columbus's expeditions, was to find raw materials from the East with which to trade in the West, but it also ended up being something else. The original destination was Indonesia, from which Fiona Tan first departed. Interestingly, in this collection of coincidences, *May You Live in Interesting Times* begins with a group of Chinese dancing to a Spanish *paso doble*. And the same music plays across the closing credits. As in nearly all her works, our guide is Tan's own voice. She says: 'It started out as a search'. But, like Magellan's voyage, it ended up being something different. In reality the point of departure and arrival is none other than the colonising metropolis, even if the really important thing, the heart of the story, lies along the way, in that quest. In the sixteenth century, colonial power in the Moluccas Isles (in modern-day Indonesia) oscillated between the crowns of Portugal and Spain. By the seventeenth century, though – and for over three centuries thereafter – it lay firmly with the Dutch East India Company and the States-General of the Netherlands. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Fiona Tan should return to Amsterdam in search of visual archives, and that it was there that she found the material she needed to subvert what had been handed down by history and memory.

A body of her works from the late 1990s and early 2000s makes use of the film archive. These pieces centre on the ethnographic and anthropological films of the colonial powers, a record of early-twentieth-century explorers' and missionaries' need to catalogue. As Edward Said wrote: "The

connection between imperial politics and culture is astonishingly direct". The group includes: *Smoke Screen*, *Cradle*, *Facing Forward*, *Tuareg* and *Thin Cities*. They are all portraits that can also serve as mirrors, questioning the position of the viewer and the viewed and addressing the difficult stance of the contemporary spectator looking at documents from the past. They cause a twin discomfort: the discomfort of the person about to be filmed or photographed, and the discomfort of the person looking at the scene today. On the one hand we feel the empathy of the person considered to be "strange" who had to be studied by the scrutinising eyes of the western colonial power. Yet we are also assailed by a third form of discomfort, a negative empathy with the cameraman, with the explorer, with the missionary. These moving portraits even disturb us because we feel and discover from the outset that the people really looking and interrogating are the ones on the hanging screens who stare at us – the public – from the past. As Avery F. Gordon wrote, they are recurring shapes, phantoms of memory, which interrogate the present from their watchtowers in the past. In his *Discourse on Colonialism* Aimé Césaire wrote: "The colonialists may kill in Indochina, torture in Madagascar, imprison in Black Africa, crackdown in the West Indies. Henceforth, the colonized know that they have an advantage over them. They know that their temporary, 'masters' are lying". And they are lying by equating civilization and colonisation.

These pictures, transformed by the artist together with the sound and the way they are arranged, cause within us a latent discomfort motivated by history. It is as if the western eye of today could not bear the direct gaze of the other, interrogating it from the past and questioning it about the vestiges of that mixture of surprise and curiosity that still exists today. A clear example is the installation *Thin Cities*, a succession of moving portraits. The portraits are all by others. The one exception is the one in the final part of *May You Live in Interesting Times*, when the artist comes to the ancestral village of her father's family in China. There she discovers that all the townspeople share the same surname, Tan; they are all family and many of the current inhabitants have returned from Indonesia. Taking her own portrait there, on the stairs of the Hall of Elders alongside other personalities for whom she is a stranger and whom she does not know, leads her to another consideration: despite the emotion of finding her ancestors' village, she has to recognise that she would never live there. As they are having their portrait taken, they all look uncomfortable, even Tan herself, despite her smile – just as uncomfortable as the people in the old footage in the multi-channel work *Thin Cities*. And that discomfort of the subject of the portrait makes us, as spectators, uncomfortable too. They all stare awkwardly at the camera. We all look awkwardly at the screens with the pictures, we wander amongst them. This work is almost an installation of mirrors reflecting a cultural discontent that is the fruit of the colonial era.

The portrait, it is true, is fundamental throughout Fiona Tan's career, as one of her latest works, *Seven* testifies. In the course of seven hours, it depicts seven stages in the life of seven Dutch people of different ages. But if we compare it to *Thin Cities*, we immediately notice something different: gone is the awkwardness in both the subject and the observer, to be replaced by a certain serenity, by a certain comfort and also by the tedium of the commonplace. *Seven* could be a polished black-and-white mirror of life in the old metropolises of postcolonial societies (although one might also, like Stuart Hall, ask, 'When was the postcolonial?').

The water, sea, islands, sailing, its dangers and uncertainties, a melancholy for the past contained in the archive pictures – these are all very evident in the project exhibited here. In the whole set of coincidences sought, the underlying substratum is the journey of an explorer who first sailed round the world in search of islands with natural resources with which to trade. The quay from which they

left, the ever-stormy sea, the troubled journey and the fertile island as a destination – all these ingredients might well be summarised in the titles of some of Fiona Tan's works: *West Pier*, *News from the Near Future* y *Brendan's Isle*.

Standing stranded beside the shore is a now purposeless pier: the theme of the photographic series *West Pier* is history and disuse. Here we have a burned-down structure in the sea, yet in Tan's pictures it reflects the serenity (already seen in *Seven*) of things that no longer make any sense – perhaps the serenity of declining empire, of the postcolonial era and things that have lost all their real value, left behind as a melancholic symbol of the past. In this sense it is similar to the quays from which Magellan and Elcano's expedition set sail in Seville, whose port went into decline from the end of the seventeenth century, losing its importance as a colonial centre. As in Brighton, though, there are always great unfulfilled plans to restore it to its past glory.

The water, mainly the sea, the currents, the waves, the boats, the storms and floods... *News from the Near Future* is, like many of Tan's works with archive pictures, a re-take, as Lynne Cooke saw it, in the sense that it gives forgotten pictures a second chance; it is a kind of re-filming, a take that is repeated by being manipulated, an examination of how films that are no longer watched can be recovered. This work clearly ties in with Dutch history and its relationship – like that of many other places – with water and with the sea: a fundamental relationship (trade, colonial expansion), but one that was not free of great effort, hardship and danger.

And, finally, the destination: the island(s). If the Moluccas were the goal for Magellan and Elcano, for St Brendan it was paradise, an island, the Island of the Blessed, where there is no pain, hunger or thirst. But although both expeditions reached their destination, they both returned, they did not stay there, maybe because that was not their mission. Indeed, perhaps their true mission was not so different in the two cases: the important thing was to arrive and to return to tell the tale and to profit in some way. This sound work by Tan, ties in to the idea of an earthly paradise, to legends ranging from the sixth century to the end of the fifteenth, from St Brendan to Christopher Columbus, of long and difficult journeys, of seas viewed as deserts, of exploration and the need to return.

Yet the final thing, in all cases, is not the destination, but memory – and this is confirmed by *A Lapse of Memory*. A confused memory and one which skips episodes, allowing for different narratives. Once again the setting is Brighton, in this case the Royal Pavilion: a syncretic palace, a mixture of what the colonial power understands and remembers culturally and aesthetically of its overseas colonies. The sailor has returned, he inhabits the rooms of this pavilion, but his memory is confused. The palace, like culture and memory, is also his prison. Of his mind, like the quay, only the frame is left. Perhaps Henry, the changing protagonist of this work, as Aimé Césaire writes of Europe, of western civilization, "is unable to justify itself either before the bar of 'reason' or before the bar of 'conscience'". This must be the reason why the character and his victims wander like ghosts around this palace – a place that could well be seen as a pastiche construction by western culture of all that it colonised, of the East that lies beyond the West, in the route that other sailors like Columbus first and then Magellan or Elcano opened up to European colonial expansion.