

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

On Provenance by Fiona Tan

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One can acquire everything in solitude - except character. Stendhal, On Love

Perhaps it is true that we do not really exist until there is someone there to see us existing, we cannot properly speak until there is someone there who can understand what we are saying, in essence, we are not wholly alive until we are loved.

Alain de Botton, Essays in Love

The portrait stands at the origin of painting, according to mythology, and the first portraitist was a young Corinthian lady. When her lover was sent to the battlefield, she drew around the shadow of his head on a wall to create an outline. This image is what remains when the lover has gone, as a permanent reminder to alleviate the pain of absence. Joseph Wright of Derby painted this mythical scene in *The Corinthian Maid* (1782).

Why are we so attached to portraits? What is it that makes us want to look at the likeness of other people? And if the origin of the portrait lies in the projection of light, is it possible to conceive of a portrait in film, not as a story, as in a documentary, but as an image that is comparable to a painting? Can you look at a film as though it were a painting?

Provenance (2008) provides some possible answers to these questions. The Atelier Rijksbouwmeester, the office of the Government Architect, commissioned Fiona Tan to create this work, inviting her to 'do something' with the collection of the

world-famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which is now undergoing extensive renovation. Tan responded with a cinematographic investigation into the degree to which our perception is formed by our own cultural background and what we project of it onto other people. She seized the opportunity of this commission to take a long and careful look at paintings in the museum's depot in Lelystad, concentrating on seventeenth-century Dutch portraits in particular. These portraits show residents of Amsterdam and are a reflection of the self-assured ruling elite and the rising merchant class in the city where Fiona Tan has now been living and working for over twenty years.

Looking at the faces of men, women and children, captured in oil paint on canvas three to four centuries ago, Tan asked herself: Who were these people? How did they live? And how do their stories relate to Tan's Amsterdam? She wrote a lively essay on this theme, which was published as a book. In this essay, she discusses lesser-known painters such as Michiel van Mierevelt, Jacob Cuyp and Andries Beeckman, but deliberately leaves the great masters out of the picture. Tan writes that she wanted to look in an 'uninformed' way, unencumbered by any prior knowledge. This makes the subject of her investigation comparable with the material with which she normally works: photographs and films of strangers, found more or less by chance. The paintings remind the artist of cities and street names, of her own past and earlier works. And once chance has found Tan, it continues to pursue her. A stream of associations leads from the whale fisheries of Spitsbergen to the fur trade of Manhattan, from Tilanusstraat in Amsterdam East to the death camp of Sobibor. The result is a series of personal observations, in which art and biography, past and present, Amsterdam and the rest of the world, become closely intertwined.

Fiona Tan asks repeated questions about the form and function of the portrait: about the uniformity of portraits from the Golden Age, for example, or about the 'tronie', in which the sitter poses in a certain role, a genre that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. She attempts to visualise the role of painting in a world without photography (and observes that most portraits in the seventeenth century featured the rich and the famous, while our own age has brought many likenesses of unknown people into circulation). Or she speculates about alternatives to the self-portrait, which in the case of Egbert Lievensz van der Poel, for example, might consist of a long series of depictions of the gunpowder-store explosion in Delft in 1654, in which the artist apparently lost his young daughter. Just like the mythical silhouette of the absent lover, his cityscapes of catastrophe are all about farewell and loss.

The essay is unrelated to Fiona Tan's six film portraits of modern Amsterdammers, which she grouped under the title of *Provenance*, but it does throw some light upon the interests and aspirations that led to the film installation. The work was first shown at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2008. Although inspired by portrait painting in the Golden Age, these film portraits are not imitations of paintings, as we

might expect in the work of Peter Greenaway, for example. Each portrait is a loop of three to five minutes. The films run simultaneously on six small, vertical led screens, hung at eye level on the wall, like paintings in a museum. Tan recorded the pictures on 16mm and then digitised them, optimising the definition. The small format of the monitors and the brightness and clarity of the images invite the viewer to observe them from close up.

What is there to see? A woman, staring at the screen of her laptop. A little boy, fast asleep. A shopkeeper looking straight into the lens, while his restless son obviously finds it difficult to keep still. A man with round glasses and thin white curly hair, reading the newspaper, then rummaging through his files and peeling an apple. A schoolgirl, surrounded by dozens of photographs illustrating her young, vibrant life. An older woman in a chair at the window, in a stylish interior that is both modern minimalist and oriental in style. There is scarcely any action; the films are more like moving photographs. Living room, bedroom, study – the personal surroundings in which the people have been filmed serve as an extension of the portrait. Close-ups of a Japanese vase, a toy, or a photo on the wall perform the same function as accessories did in painted portraits of days gone by, creating a direct connection between the people depicted and specific places, cultures and histories or, as the title states, their provenance.

All of the people in the portraits are unique individuals, not so much because they differ dramatically from one another, but because their calm, composed manner shows how perfectly comfortable they are in their own skins. This is perhaps most strongly expressed when they create eye contact through the camera with us, the public, for several moments, just long enough to make us feel that we are not looking at them, but they are looking at us. Although some of the pictures may bear a slight resemblance to religious iconography (the pregnant woman, illuminated by skimming light, naturally reminds us of depictions of the Annunciation), the films are, on the whole, remarkably unspectacular. These are not portraits that underline the wealth or status of the sitters, nor are they portraits that admonish us, or want to teach us something, or obviously want to seduce us or play on our emotions. These are tranquil tableaux that invite careful contemplation and offer the viewer the chance to enter into someone else's life.

While in previous works such as *Tuareg* (1999), *Countenance* (2002) and *Correction* (2004) Tan presented herself as a sort of anthropologist who wanted, by means of large numbers of film portraits, to penetrate into the essence of other groups of people, *Provenance* focuses on her own small circle of family, friends and neighbours: her youngest son (Niels Dijkstal), her mother-in-law (Marry Knol), a friend (cabaret performer Sanne Wallis de Vries), a former tutor (filmmaker Kees Hin), a neighbour and his son (Najet and Tunahan Olmez) and an art student (Tessel Schole). Like the essay, the film installation reflects the artist's own living environment in Amsterdam in the year 2008. This possibly makes the installation more personal and intimate in nature than the previously mentioned works, which

were mainly about the public representation of the other (the workforce of Berlin in *Countenance* or the American prison population in *Correction*).

Ever since the fifteenth century, portraits have been made of family members or friends of the artist. The end of the nineteenth century saw a boom in paintings of this kind, demonstrating the growing authority of the artist at that time. Whether people were worth painting no longer depended on their background, wealth or status, but on their relationship to the painter. The portrait implied an intimacy between artist and model, which the audience could share through the painting. The focus was increasingly on the identity of the artist, and less about the identity of the sitter, a development that culminated in the portraits of Chaim Soutine, Vincent van Gogh and Egon Schiele.

It is hard to state exactly how Tan's camerawork tells us something about the personal relationship between the artist and the people she films, but it is a virtual certainty that these portraits could not have been made without some degree of affection or connection, extending far beyond the outward appearance or social status of the sitters. The relaxed atmosphere of trust and comfort is significant. If this group of friends and family has any archetypal value, it lies in the fact that the six of them can be seen as representative of different stages of life (child, teenager, adult, elderly person), while the film of the Turkish shopkeeper and his son serves as *pars pro toto* for the modern multi-ethnic population of Amsterdam. And, of course, *Provenance* is also simply an indication of the everyday work of the visual artist, who for centuries has been accustomed to working with what is within easy reach. Rembrandt famously used his son Titus and his wife Hendrickje as models.

While most works by Fiona Tan are akin to the documentary in their style, showing pictures of real people in the real world, *Provenance* has more in common with the movie. Tan records camera settings, angles and framing in detailed sketches. 'The angles are the director's thoughts; the lighting is his philosophy,' stated filmmaker Douglas Sirk. *Provenance* is filmed with natural light. Where necessary, the effects of daylight are simulated as realistically as possible. Warm sunlight streaming in through the windows casts deep shadows in all of the portraits, cloaking the sitters in a chiaroscuro that complements these seemingly endless moments of peace and attention. The lack of colour means that the accent lies on variations in shade and contrasts between light and dark. Some of the shots appeal to the sense of touch, to the sensation of warmth and softness. The shot of little Niels sleeping on a sheepskin, in corduroy trousers and a fleece jumper, is a cinematographic response to the stunning depiction of fabric in the portraits of the old masters, where it almost feels possible to stroke the lace, fur, velvet, brocade and satin.

Can you look at a film in the way that you look at a painting? The radical differences between the two forms of expression are obvious. Film, as a medium with a fixed duration, can dictate the length of the perception, while a painting

reveals itself in one glance and cannot prescribe the attention span of its audience. In *Provenance*, Fiona Tan succeeds in extending the audience's experience of the portrait. By minimising action and movement and avoiding the use of sound, she is able to approach the motionlessness of the painted portrait in her film portraits. The form of the loop, which creates a sort of vacuum in our awareness of time, also contributes to this effect. She exchanges a compelling narrative with a beginning and an end for a loose succession of scenes, of close-ups and half-shots, of stasis and movement. Every film portrait is a condensation of various observations that are of similar value, just as the different parts of a painting each make a contribution to our experience of the whole.

Why does looking at people remain so fascinating? Unwritten laws dictate that in our everyday dealings we do not look directly into each other's eyes for longer than five to ten seconds. Any longer and we become uncomfortable or feel threatened. The camera is to the artist what the projection screen is to the audience: an excuse to fix our gaze on someone for longer than is considered polite. But why would we want to do that? Does looking at another person, as has sometimes been suggested, satisfy a deep-seated desire within us to reinforce our image of the species to which we belong? The editing of *Provenance* has created a sequence of images that is specific enough to say something about the sitter, but at the same time also offers viewers the chance to project their own memories or associations onto the images.

At the heart of all portrait art lies the desire to make that other person, who is not here, who has gone on a journey, or who is no longer alive, permanently present once again, to 're-present' the person, in the most literal sense of the word. According to Aristotle, our pleasure in seeing a portrait lies in the recognition of resemblance. In our minds, we replace something that is present (the portrait) with something that is absent (the subject of the portrait). Not only does the portrait have the power to make the absent present once again, it can also appear to bring the dead back to life. And perhaps that is the abiding attraction of the portrait, a notion that is already present in the myth of its origin: the ability to overcome the painful separation of absence or death. This magical force is one of the reasons why viewing *Provenance* is such an intense experience.









