

The Picturesque
YUK KING TAN



a sense of smoke

This installation weaves in and around divergent notions of transience. Yuk King Tan approaches her interest in the temporal condition of humanity with particular attention to both the physical and metaphorical implications of her works – seven low reliefs and a video recording. The effect of this is to render *The Picturesque* unstable; it can produce a sense of humorous, anarchic playfulness as readily as capturing a profound sense of isolation or vulnerability. Similarly, the individual reliefs which make up the bulk of the exhibition are physically volatile, made up of hundreds of firecrackers, meticulously laid-out to replicate the thirteen found images Tan has used as frames. This provides deliberate spaces for interventions by those who come into contact with the works.



the sound of burning

These days it is axiomatic that a visit to an art museum is akin to a ritualised act of homage. In this sense the gallery replaces a site of worship, the items on display substitute or parallel the objects that focus worship. This is reflected in the subtle means by which gallery patrons are traditionally encouraged to genuflect to the authority and aura of artworks: hushed tones of speech; softened foot-falls and retarded pace; the desire to touch the object on display suppressed. Rather than maintain such an established relationship between viewer and object, Tan advocates a new mode of ritualised encounter. Each day, an hour is set aside for visitors to light the firecrackers and thus seemingly contribute to the dissolution of the works. This is facilitated by an alteration to the monitoring of the gallery space (its smoke alarms need to be turned off during this hour) and to the manner in which it is traversed (the provision of stools of different heights makes it possible for visitors to reach all wicks). Such interventions disrupt prevailing codes of experiencing art. Not only does the visitor look at the reliefs, she or he may also become an active participant in their translation from one state (a relief of firecrackers) to another (those units burned).

That this translation is also an act of apparent destruction, a transgressive act in relation to art, further dislocates assumptions about the relationship of the art

museum to the objects it houses and the people who visit or work in it. Allowing for audience intervention is a subversive strategy on Tan's part. The thrill or shock of setting fire to works of art allows otherwise passive spectators to be anarchic. Explosions in the museum generate genuine anxieties concerning the safety of objects and, metaphorically, of ideas. Not only a platform for intervention, the act of lighting crackers noisily challenges a range of authoritative positions: institution; artist; curator; essayist. The fact that this act should evoke a sense of naughtiness reveals how pervasive conservative notions regarding the interaction of viewer, gallery and artwork remain. It is in this way that a pertinent metaphor for what is achieved by spectator participation in *The Picturesque* is the use by some cultures of firecrackers (or other means of generating loud noises and/or fire) to banish dæmons.

the touch of debris

A consequence of this ritual is a spectacle of the fugitive nature of the works. The exploded reliefs are recorded by the series of burns and scorch-marks on the walls and the associated debris of spent explosives on the floor.

The burns on the walls function in two ways. First, they act as an echo of the 'original' relief, a translation of the work as it was first installed. This is ironic, though, because the relief itself is but a detail of a reproduced detail that Tan has found and copied on to the gallery wall. These image-fragments are precursors to the works which follow because the *sfumato* effect of the image drawn by fire may or may not record the representational properties of the relief. Hence, the assumptions of a pictorial code are tested. Secondly, the burns record a trace of the relief on the wall which remains visible even after the relief itself has decayed. To an extent this is an act of marking territory, for the reliefs literally scar the pristine walls. Even so, this is a surprisingly ambivalent action because it results from the decision by viewers to intervene or not. In this respect, Tan provides an opportunity for participants to mark their territory rather than confirm her occupation of the space. Indeed, if all the firecrackers were to be lit Tan's own trace, the marks of authorship, would be fully erased.

The scattered burnt-out shells that litter the floor reinforce this apprehension of an art-work's transience. The materials of the installation seem to be literally cast aside during the time of the exhibition. This demeans the physical existence of the reliefs, subjecting them to a quickened phase of decay. Yet to see this in negative terms is to attempt to close down the aesthetic system Tan employs; the small pieces of scorched card underfoot are vital elements of the installation, not the ruins of a former work.

the smell of gunpowder

The language of these effects consciously mimics a language of bodily mortality, as if the walls of the gallery or studio were analogous to skin. The idea of a skin burned, scarred, marked or decayed threatens not only an immediate sense of well-being but acts as a vivid reminder of the vulnerability of the human body. The effect of this idea is to shift the level of attraction one might have for these reliefs: from the physical properties of the firecrackers laid out so meticulously, through the thrill of their explosion, to the particular attention one might give to the traces that that event leaves. The attraction is tinged with a fascination with an essentially violent mark.

This act serves as a reminder of those moments of violence that have affected oneself. Such events may be the result of individual choice or accident, external assault or disease, the memories of which are manifested in signs of disfigurement such as tattoos, scars, weals or wounds. That word, 'disfigurement', implies that such markings negate the solidity and singularity of the 'figure'. In the looped video, for example, Tan enacts an almost surgical burning on the narrow corner stage of her studio. A straight line modified by flares either side echoes both the regular incision made by a scalpel and the stitching of a wound. Whether bearing an inference of injury or of bodily repair, the mark is a pertinent reminder of mortality and physical vulnerability. At the same time, the artist's nonchalant demeanour (casually smoking a cigarette as she goes about her business) undercuts the sobriety of that interpretation. The video is decidedly ambiguous, both serious and gently mocking – as are the reliefs.

the sight of scorching

In addition to corporeal transience, the metaphor of decay, loss, erasure and their transformations haunts the intangible aspects of human existence: especially memory and identity. Because Tan's installation relies on an interventionist performance, the work has no finite form; it inhabits a continually changing space



– both in the gallery and in the mind of the viewer. To an extent, the installation is best appreciated by a series of encounters that charts the changing states of the reliefs through the retreat of unexploded firecrackers and the emergence of more scorches, more spent shells. At the same time, that memory of the works and what they connote will fade or change. Hence, Tan uses the physicality of the reliefs metaphorically, to remind the participant of the passing of time and the inevitability of the effects of that passing.

This experience can be double-edged, as an application to notions of culture or identity will bear out. Declarations of a particular identity mark out personal and collective locations. Held in this embrace, identity can offer certainty and a sense of place. Nevertheless, that same grasp can be overly constricting, especially if it is used

to marginalise the discourses of those who might lay claim to some form of 'Otherness'. By this I refer to a tendency to declare identity crudely, using the particular descriptor as an enveloping adjective that reduces an individual's ideas or beliefs to a single concern: gendered, culturally-encoded or class-specific, for example. By way of contrast, identity in New Zealand at the end of this millennium is neither solid nor static. It operates within a dynamic, discursive field. That dynamism, that state of constant flux or transformation, offers both vital opportunities and serious risks, for as much as a rigid definition may prove constricting, one too open can result in the loss of particular and significant cultural values.

Tan's reliefs point to the difficulty of this situation, for they articulate a position of ambivalence. While this does not mean that she is totally disengaged from the stresses that are apparent in her work, it does register the presence of a knowing irony. Such a condition serves to subtly displace our assumptions of the artist, her work or her complicity in an institutionalisation of art objects. This displacement promotes a more nuanced reading of the works, the cultural signifiers they quote and the cultural system into which they are inserted.

the taste of smoke

The haze that results from the exploding crackers mimics the obscuring veils cast over formerly essential cultural values: truth, beauty, order, judgement, permanence, assuredness. The effect of the interventions made possible by Tan's work and its interaction with the gallery (space and visitors) is to parade the very anxieties that accrue from a decline in tangible and intangible certainties. Although many people claim to embrace the multiplicity that has resulted from this fundamental cultural shift, it would be facile to assert that such a position is easy or without specific challenges. To be cast adrift from intellectual, emotional, cultural or corporeal 'truths' is an inevitability of the post-modern condition. Nevertheless, it is also inevitable that, in being released from such certainties, the participant is forced to review how the self is defined and how its place within the world is expressed.

In this regard, all parts of the self are rendered contingent. Individual senses are both truthful (the literal physical response to stimuli) and unreliable (the constant modification of sensory experience in concert with other senses). This equivocality is central to human perception. In addition, as much as perception occurs within the mutable frame of the five senses, it is also shaped by memories. This merging of the physical with the insubstantial is especially pertinent to Tan's installation. Its instability not only reflects the governing condition of human existence but deliberately brings transient experiences and changing memories to the fore in a spectator's physical involvement with the works. It is not so much a posturing of these notions but a subtle realisation of them. In this respect, the traces of *The Picturesque* are akin to a scattering of equivocal debris or wisps of ambivalent smoke.

Peter Shand
Auckland

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YUK KING TAN

- 1971 Born Australia
- 1989 Trust Bank Excellence Award
- 1991 Rose Memorial Art Award
- 1993 B F A University of Auckland
- 1996 Creative New Zealand Professional Development Grant

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 *Artistical and Orna Mental* Choice Plaza Pagoda Building, Letting Space Project, Artspace, Auckland
- 1995 *Combination no. 3 - hot off the shelf* Manawatu Public Art Gallery, Palmerston North
- 1996 *Bodyblow* Jonathon Smart Gallery, Christchurch
Escape velocity Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland
- 1997 *Installation* Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
The Picturesque Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

SELECTED INSTALLATIONS/GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 *Lightweight* George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1992 *Chemical and catalyst* Chemistry Building, University of Auckland
Group show, Elam School of Fine Arts, Sculpture Department Wellesley Exchange building, Auckland
- 1993 *Suffer II* Hamish McKay Art Gallery, Wellington
Agenda Artspace, Auckland
- 1994 *Vavasour* Godkin Gallery, Auckland
Localities of desire - Art in an international world Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
Knight Landesman Exhibition Teststrip Gallery, Auckland
Taking stock of the 90s Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
4 artists Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
- 1995 *The New Temple - I give so that you give, I give so that you may go and stay away* Window Project, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland
Fleshly worn - bodies in question A.S.A. Gallery, Auckland
The nervous system Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth/
City Gallery, Wellington
Northern exposure Robert McDougall Art Gallery Annex, Christchurch
Sculptecture Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
WOW! Yuk and Ani's show Teststrip Gallery, Auckland
- 1996 *Fusion* Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland
Asia-Pacific Triennial Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
TransFusion Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
Heirloom Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
No 3 De Etalagg Den Haag
The concrete deal James Smith Carpark, Wellington
New Zealand/New China International Festival of the Arts, Wellington
- 1997 *The oriental room* Auckland Museum, Auckland
4 artists Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland
- 1998 *Pasifica* Canberra Contemporary Artspace, Canberra

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