

Portraying the 'other'

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Fiona Tan, 'Facing Forward', 1999

"The presence of the stranger presents democracy with this radical new double challenge: for equality and social justice and for the recognition of difference, neither existing in a pure state, both qualifying and modifying the other in a ceaseless struggle."

- Stuart Hall, "Democracy, Globalization and Difference", 2002

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Introduction: The (portrayed) 'other'

The 'other' has been a subject for photography since the medium's inception, when he made his way into history by standing still. Sometime in 1838, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre took a view of the Boulevard du Temple from his window in Paris. In it can be seen the silhouetted image of a man with one leg raised, apparently having his boots cleaned. Actually, there are two people there, including the man who attends to the boots. But the bootblack's form is obscured, and in most histories of photography he is not mentioned at all. Geoffrey Batchen points him out and notes that the image is probably 'the first to illustrate both labor and class difference, and in a particularly graphic fashion (standing middle/upper-class being served by kneeling worker) (1).' The daguerreotype records a triangulation in which one stranger confronts another across social, cultural and economic barriers while a third documents the exchange, spatially and visually bringing distance with a camera.

The 'other' as apprehended by the camera was usually someone removed from the photographer's social, cultural or economic circles. Photographs were used (among other things) to sort out and classify the racial and ethnic groups encountered in the course of exploration, colonization, and enslavement. The standardized mug shot, for one, was developed by a French police department clerk, Alphonse Bertillon, as part of an anthropometric system to identify, categorize, and control the 'dangerous' outsiders that authorities thought were drawn to city life.

In the early 1930s, photographers capitalized on the mobility afforded by the development of small, high-quality cameras. Nowadays, in the 21st Century, anyone walking in Nagoya, in New York or in London, will certainly pass by kids holding cheap digital high-tech cameras. Fifteen years ago I would have to sneak around my mother's room to find her old analogue Olympus and, eventually, take a shot making sure that she would never notice it. With the nowadays' increasingly mobility of both individuals and materials, people's most fleeting gestures, momentary and, eventually very odd expressions can be captured without the knowledge of the portrayed. In how many touristy photographs have I been caught? I certainly prefer not to know.

The area of negotiation concerning the status of the image has undergone several processes, and one is certainly the negotiation of the possibilities of the portrait and the way in which the portrait is a battlefield and a process for change. The understanding of identity has evolved at great velocity. These changes intensify the urgency of the use of photography as a recognition strategy, whether the

(1)
Geoffrey Batchen,
'Burning With
Desire: The
Conception of
Photography', MIT
Press, 1997, p.136

portrait is taken as an aesthetically device or a metaphorical one. We cannot escape the metaphorical character of the body that transfigures before us, or that establishes itself as a field of possibility for recognition or expectation.

For the last three decades, photography, and the hesitant status it created for itself, both as specific genre and as technical device, that has inevitably mixed with other practices in the broader field of the visual arts, has reflected the enormous changes in the recognition of the body. In fact, in the exhausted field of our relation with the image, photography occupies a privileged place that is simultaneously unprotected. The paradox of the claim to the image by a universe that, having emerged from a said conceptual context of the 1960's, has established a claim of authenticity for the photographic image. It derived the permeability of the artistic/photographic through documentary photography.

The archetypal documentary project was concerned to draw the attention of an audience to particular subjects, often with a view to changing the existing social or political situation. To achieve this goal, documentary photographs were rarely seen as single, independent images. They were usually accompanied by or incorporated into written texts. The postwar consumer boom, exemplified in the introduction of television and the growth of car ownership produced a very different society to that of the 1930s. In commenting on this new social and cultural scenes some photographers produced work that was to transform the nature of documentary photography.

Especially in the USA, documentary began to be concerned with new kinds of cultural spaces, in particular those that were encountered in everyday life, rather than places that were exemplary of guiding poverty or social injustice. In his collection, 'The Americans', Robert Frank offered his own version of American life in which he eschewed the usual subjects of documentary investigation and presented us instead with cool and ironic images of the fleeting moments of ordinary life. Significantly enough, the introduction to the book was written by Jack Kerouac, who said: 'After seeing these pictures you end up finally not knowing anymore whether a juke box is sadder than a coffin' (2).'

Any attempt to understand historical photography is permanently crossed by a contamination with the history of art, or, to say the least, by a compulsion to revise the statute of the image 'whilst art' even when its origin is situated in another production field. Sometimes, this process is deeply perverse; other times it allows to a context and to a re-centering of photography that can contribute enormously towards the effacing of the polemics around the 'truthfulness' of the photographic image.

(2)

Robert Frank,
'The Americans', NY
Grove Press, 1959, p.5

Within this diversity one first specificity can be discerned: the representation of the body, with no voyeuristic violence but stemming from a fascination (certainly), but mostly from an attention to the changes conveyed by the body, and that it made convey, through the photographic image, in the numerous avatars produced by the historical body.

Portraits are shown to us, that is, it is for us, for our compulsive voyeuristic gaze that it is conceived, that it makes sense as an image - and that, as a consequence, forces us into the condition of the 'peeping tom' lastly described by Sartre. An image-for-us sinks into a sort of abyss into which our gaze is sucked into, completing in this way the conspiring triangulation that the photograph claims for itself.

19th Century and the 'other'

Some of the most dominant ideological and photographic constructs were developed during the 19th century, a period of Imperial expansion. This history has affected the representation of people who differ in whatever way from European 'white people' in all forms of photographic practice. The camera was used to record and define those who were colonized according to the interests of the West.

The history of photography is integrally linked to colonial and economic exploitation. A sense of submission, exoticism and the 'primitive' were key feelings, which these photographers documented and catalogued. Europe was defined as 'the norm' upon which all other cultures should be judged. That which was different was disempowered by its very 'otherness'.

Lindt and the 'Atlas' - 'Specimens' instead of 'People'

For Roslyn Poignant, Lindt's photographs embody the displacement of Aboriginal people from subject to object, and the disempowerment that attended the processes of colonization. Outdoor photography of aboriginal people was not uncommon in Australia in the nineteenth century. Lindt himself had taken photographs of aboriginal people outdoors, as had Antoine Fauchery and Richard Daintree in 1858. Yet Lindt's outdoor photographs of aboriginal people never gained the fame and circulation of his studio portraits. It is worth considering why this may have been the case.

Lindt's 'Black Gin and Child' was reproduced in the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia (1886-1888). This photograph is one of only a handful of images, which are acknowledged as being from a photograph. Indeed, the makers of the Atlas harbored an open opposition to photography that was based on the feeling that photography was antithetical to Art, to discovering the beautiful in nature. The Atlas did use photographs quite extensively as sources for its engravings. There are numerous photographs by Nicholas Caire, for instance, which appear with only the slightest modifications as engravings in the Atlas, and none of these photographs are acknowledged. So, in the case of the Lindt image, it was not unusual that photography was used but the fact that it was acknowledged was significant. The question must then be asked: why would the Atlas go against its own stated opposition to photography and explicitly acknowledge Lindt's photograph in a caption?

If photography was important in establishing the validity of the specimen, then one might also expect to see photographic acknowledgment in other specimens

represented in the Atlas. One would expect, for instance, to find photography acknowledged in the many images of native flora and fauna, which are reproduced. Yet this is not the case. In fact, the Atlas specifically commissioned artists such as Louis Belton and Marian Rowan Ellis to produce illustrations of flowers and plants. Birds, flowers, kangaroos are all sketched, or at least there is no acknowledgment of photography in these images. If photography were an important sign in establishing the scientific validity of a specimen, one would expect to see captions acknowledging the use of photography in these illustrations. So although indigenous Australians were constructed as specimens, they were specimens of a distinct type with a unique affinity to the photograph. Other specimens were comfortably incorporated within the art world of sketching.

Moreover, looking at the photographs of Lindt that are used in the Atlas it is quite clear that they are not being used to effect an impression of chance or randomness. In fact, few illustrations in the Atlas are as painstakingly contrived as Lindt's photographs. In common with Lindt's other photographs, even his later work with a dry-plate camera, 'Black Gin and Child' is almost hyper-composed. The image is arranged in the triangular convention of a Madonna painting. The woman is wearing a modest white robe and to either side she is bounded by a tall stand of maize and a neat bark shack, all of which had been assembled by Lindt in his studio in front of a painted background of rolling hills. The scene rings with conflicting echoes of the nativity and the Garden. The tidy plenitude of the setting contrasts with the forlorn face of the woman at the centre of the photograph. A whole connotative field (sacrifice, divine ordination, earthly paradise secured) is generated under the cover of what is

ostensibly a 'mechanically' attained image. In fact, it is as though the explicit photographic origin of this image enhances the scope for its compositional manipulation. Despite the improbable histrionics of the pose, the explicit photographic origin impregnates the image with an awkward feeling of 'reality'.



Lindt, 'Black Gin and Child'

_20th Century - an attempt to see beyond 'difference'

Walt Whitman tried to see beyond the difference between beauty and ugliness, relevance and triviality. His aim was to embrace the real American life, aspiring to demystification. As noted in Lindt's photographs, early attempts in photographing were committed to a mystification, a kind of idealized world (be it Australia, America, Africa or wherever and whoever would be different to the already known) that only existed in an imaginary world created by minds and impossible to materialize without creating a stage and characters to act there.

After Whitman, generations of photographers continued the pursuit of the trivial and the vulgar. Whitman claimed enthusiastically for humanism without thinking that he was possibly abolishing beauty instead of generalizing it. After the World War II, it was inevitable to assist to an emergence of photographers such as Stieglitz who showed a 'movement from affirmation to erosion to finally, a parody of Whitman's program. In this history the most edifying figure is Walker Evans. He was the last great photographer to work seriously and assuredly in a mood deriving from Whitman's euphoric humanism, summing up what had gone on before (for instance, Lewis Hine's stunning photographs of immigrants and workers) (3)'

Nowadays, encountering 'others' is one of the defining activities of urban public space, which no doubt accounts for the hold that the figure of the 'other' has exercised over the modern literary and sociological imagination. In the sprawling cities that ring the planet, the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people are filled by countless fleeting interactions with persons whom they've never seen before and likely never will again. The result is a familiar mix of fascination and fear that permeates urban culture and much of the literature that partakes it. Think of the way that the experience of wadding into an teeming crowd, for example, becomes the occasion for a specifically edgy, erotic thrill in the writing of literary modernists from Charles Baudelaire to André'e9 Breton to John Dos Passos.

(3)

Susan Sontag,
'On Photography',
Penguin Classics,
England, 2002, p.29

_21st Century Strategies in portraying the 'other' – Beat Streuli and Fiona Tan, two examples

When aims change, strategies to achieve it change naturally at same time. Photographers of 19th century like Jack Hillers or Charles Milton Bell aimed to document cultures, which were believed to be rapidly changing or even dying out in the face of white settlement, technological change and central government policy towards Native American people. Thus we see groups posed carefully to show traditional pottery making, or clothing or domestic scenes such as dressing hair. All the photographs were described in detail for anthropologists who might use the images. For instance, the original 1885 caption for the image in this page is 'A group of [Hopi] girls, showing their characteristic head-dress and apparel. The hair is worn in this way so long as they remain unmarried, after which it is worn down.'

Two centuries from then, photographic aims have changed. This process is parallel to a new thinking, an alteration of looking at difference. Contemporary photographers, such as Fiona Tan, have been using historical photographs to re-engage with history on their own terms. Through this work, some have drawn attention to many of the complex issues of modern Native identity, such as ownership of the land and legal rights, as part of the growing political voice of Native (American, Australian,

i.e.) peoples in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Other contemporary photographers, as Beat Streuli, got interested in urban daily life, with their inhabitants falling in love, getting angry at daily routines, catching the bus, waiting the next train, running for work, embracing their children. A mix of stories that is in constant dialogue of a reality that is impossible to avoid – the spread of non-places and its flatness that is reflected in people.

_Beat Streuli – a photographer of the Global Age: people and 'non-places'

There is a good deal of Baudelaire's flâneur in Swiss photographer Beat Streuli, whose photographs are filled with ephemeral and fugitive moments. For him, modernity means an increasingly standardized and global urban world that is subject to the defining pressures of film, television, advertisements, fashion trends, and lifestyle statements.

That a society consists of individuals may sound like a foregone conclusion, and trivial enough at that. That human beings cannot be simplified to the term 'society', that the public spaces they populate play a deeply influential part and that again, 'society' cannot be restricted to a particular territory or a specific social group, is demonstrated by Beat Streuli in his photographs of people from major international cities.

Streuli's art is fuelled by his interest



Native American and Pots
Photograph by Charles Bell



Two Lakota Leadres.
Photograph by Jack Hillers



'A group of [Hopi] girls, showing their characteristic head-dress and apparel. The hair is worn in this way so long as they remain unmarried, after which it is worn down.'

in what moves people in large cities. He ponders urban situations, their delights and disappointments, their countless psychological states and social networks [4]. The photographer submerges, as it were, in the crowd, whilst preserving some detachment from the passers-by through his telephoto lens. His pictures consciously evoke a hint of voyeurism and this consistently accompanies his perspective on people. Nevertheless, it is not a negative voyeurism, in the sense that it is not in any instance evaluative, speculative and, above all, an ethnographic gaze or curiosity does certainly not characterize it as one can see in Lindt's photographs or in the first attempts to portray Americans.

The artist highlights situations that encapsulate a global reality. The manner of his protagonists' entry on the scene is calculated to make a personal impression. All strive for individuality, but all are variants of a type of metropolitan youth with an internationally shared, generation-specific mode of presentation manifest in clothing, certain accessories, special fashion brands and in gestures and postures. In the process, it becomes clear that the quality of individuality is becoming standardized to a worldwide pattern.

In the nineteenth century the exotic and the search for 'otherness' were replete of pre-conceptions and imaginary. In the early twenty-century, we can assist to a twist with a clear attempt to portray differences with objectivity rather than idealizations turned 'real' through technical devices. With Beat Streuli and some other contemporary photographers, we are now faced with our own flat reality – the phenomena or contemporary life: mass culture, the effects of new media such as internet, interactive video and embedded digital information on society, the increase in global mobility of individuals and the spread of non-places.

The consistency in Streuli's serial approach and his different forms of presentation are evidence of an analytical turn of mind. The idea for a photograph comes to him before the instant of the shot itself. Chance and spontaneity are part of that approach – he does not arrange the subjects, he arranges himself. It is not about making a set and constructing a reality that is going in his mind but simply walking, observing and documenting his observations. Although, even if his unswerving recourse to the same shooting procedure may lend the result the air of having been turned out in fast serial production, every shot is the outcome of a considered artistic process, both at the moment of shooting and later in the designating of the subject to be shown. In other words, his art is guided by conceptual methods. It is consistent that the greater concept of the oeuvre is always part of the subject of the individual picture and only those subjects that accord with the general concept are candidates for pictures.

[4] Trevor Smith, 'Everyday Arcadias' in 'About the World', Bondi Beach, catalogue for Beat Streuli's exhibition, Sprengel Museum, Hanover (1999), p.3

In the literature on Streuli there is repeated reference to his proximity to Walker Evans's Subway photos [5], for each of which the photographer took with a concealed camera of the person opposite him in the carriage between 1939 and 1941. The observation that the element of the seemingly chance in Streuli is not unlike Evans's is not untenable at base; but it overlooks the genre's sheer abundance of street scenes with passers-by, so that this alone is not a significant factor. Like Evans, Streuli sought an impersonal kind of affirmation, a noble reticence. Both Evans and Streuli's projects still descend from Whitman's: the leveling of discriminations in opposition to the early photography that replicated unequal relations of power between sitter and photographer, and perhaps unconsciously dehumanized the sitter – Native American women, portrayed by Edward S. Curtis, i.e.: Curtis's pictorial, romantic, and idealized images of Native people obscure reality including due to the editing of 'modern' elements, such as alarm clocks and automobiles, from the views and, especially for his use of props and costumes. From the very basics, Evans and Streuli differ from Curtis, in concept and strategy of portraying people – there is no set, idealization or characterization (or caricaturizing?) of the portrayed.

Jean-Christophe Ammann speaks of Streuli's 'missing his subject when he takes a photograph' [6]. It is the overall situation, however, the mood and atmosphere in these pictures along with the societal information they convey, that constitute Streuli's central theme and thus the individual subject. It never subsists in the people alone.

Portrait-like views allow us to look a person in the eye so that we may, as Kant had it, 'be aware of that which we should have to expect from him. [7] The independent individual shows and simultaneously conceals her/himself. In the 1980s, Thomas Ruff also took on this question of individuality. He took photographs of young people he knew personally and who belonged to his generation and social sphere. They were, for the most, students at the Kunstakademie at Düsseldorf or people who were accustomed to photographic shooting situations and the general idea of that kind of artistic project. Ruff aimed to show the impossibility of subsuming an individual's personality in a photograph and that at best one might have an image of the sitter's face. Whereas Ruff's figurative depiction categorically denies the possibility of showing a person with all that would imply Streuli poses the question anew. A passing encounter with another human being – with an unprepared glance that chances upon us, or one with other thoughts or no distinct thoughts at all behind it, is far more apt to indicate some centre, a person's inner being and the presence of a life of the soul, than would a deliberate studio setting arranged with that aim.

[5] Trevor Smith, 'Everyday Arcadias', Hanover, 1999

[5] Jean-Christophe Ammann, 'Beat Streuli' in exhibition brochure at Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, 1998

[6] Immanuel Kant, Anthropologie in pragmatischer Absicht VI, 1964, p. 639

Streuli's work is not a venture of sociological analysis; but its precise depiction of realities and the concentration on certain groups render a many-layered picture of societies in large cities. Although the subject photographed usually projects an aura of vitality and self-confidence, it is disconcerting to see the same look, the same fashion, even the same body language. In his own way, the artist is posing D  rri  da's question 'What is Diff  rance?' What is different in a global (and mass) age? As Jacques Tati, in 'Mon Oncle', he takes us to an extraordinary mix of dualities: public and private; mass culture and individuality; surging activity and solitude; alienation or vulnerability.

Again, in opposition to what one can see in nineteenth century ethnographic photographs, in Streuli's images we are faced, as if in a mirror effect, with equality wherever the set is. Through his portraits, Streuli speaks about a global age described by Marshall MacLuhan in 'The Medium is the Massage' and takes us to Marc Aug  e's 'Non-Places'. Without crops or digital fancy devices, he avoids sentimentalism and shows us the banal. The 'other' as he and she is – equal to him and to the third one who sees the photograph.

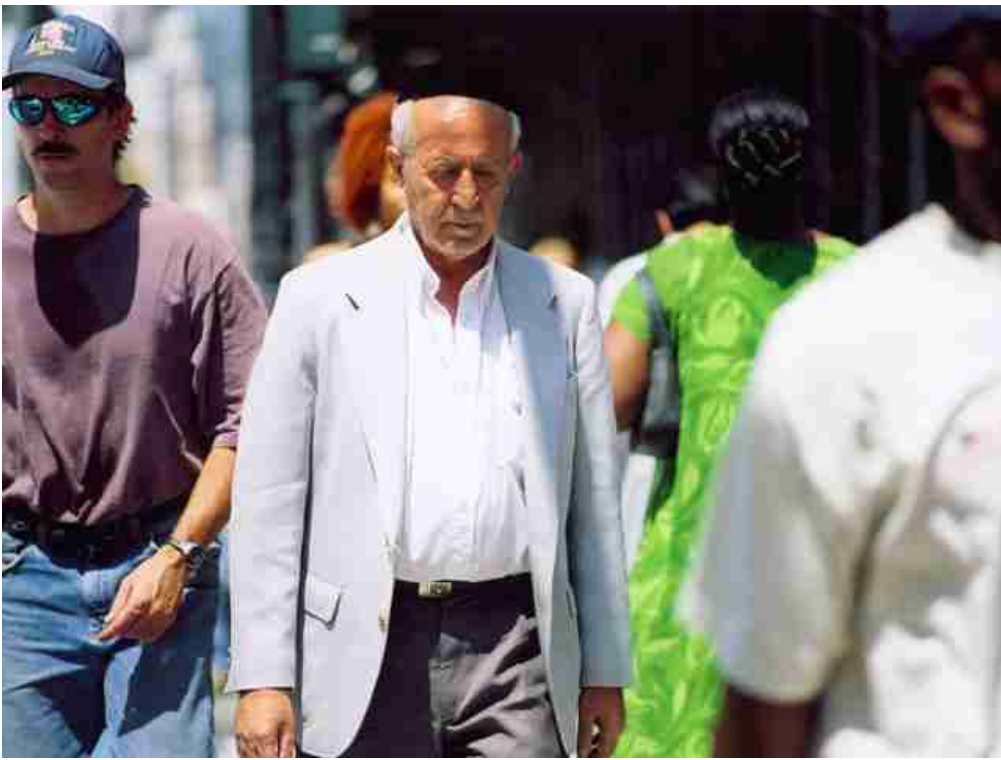
In his art, Streuli invokes a new, redeemed humanity that has rediscovered immortality by dint of repetition. Whenever the individual may come into the world or for that matter, depart from it, – he will not have missed anything there. The bodies of the young girls present the eye of the beholder with the eternally identical sight. It is this subtle analogy between the viewer's sojourn in the projection area where the eternal recurrence of the same is put on stage and the sojourn of every human being in 'real life', that makes Beat Streuli's works so engrossing and human. Here the inner unity between life and art is mooted anew – perhaps, the oldest Utopia of them all.



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002



Beat Streuli, 'Portraits', 2002

Fiona Tan – ‘People’ instead of ‘Specimens’

Fiona Tan's cross-cultural biography is replete with questions of immigration, colonization, dislocation, ethnic identity, language negotiation, and sorely tested family ties.

Two centuries were needed after Lindt's 'Black Gin and Child' to one be able to see a non-manipulated and humanized ('people' rather than 'specimens') documentary of Australia. Indeed, in Tan's first feature documentary, 'May you Live in Interesting Times' (1997), she explored both her mother's Australian heritage and the experience of her father's family as part of the Chinese minority in Indonesia, tracing events back to remote location in China that her relatives left many years ago. What emerges is a personal, but also critically astute, portrait of migration, upheaval, and complex intercultural exchange.

The same issues are central to many of Tan's videos and films. Some of these feature new material and others recast archival anthropological material to seriously question and undermine how we, meaning primarily Western viewers, approach these subjects, from Balinese children in the 1930s to Tuareg children from the Sahara. In 'Tuareg' (1999), Tan uses archival film footage to portray the moments just before and after a group of children were photographed. The effect is uncanny. A fixed, stylized formal pose is supplanted by energetic motion; the children suddenly seem much less constrained and more themselves. Tan is well aware that anthropological photographs and films are anything but objective. Chock-full of colonialist ideology, they are highly manipulative vehicles that, under the guise of research, often do more than demonstrate how exotic, remote and different Western viewers are from their subjects. At this point, is important to go back to Lindt's photographs. They are clearly taken in a studio, and the obviously imported props merely serve to heighten this fact, to point in a faintly absurd manner to their 'studioness.' Indeed, the staged quality of these pictures is at the same time naive and sinister. It is less sinister as watching Tan's 'Tuareg' for a very simple reason: Fiona Tan takes us (Western people) to 'behind the scenes' and the feeling is of absurdity and even a bad feeling for a past that we are not part of but, inevitably, feel as ours.

In 'Smoke Screen' (1997), a ten-second excerpt from a 1930s Dutch government film about the 'Tropical Netherlands' – present-day Indonesia – depicts three Balinese children smoking cigarettes directly in front of the camera. The film was shown outdoors, displacing the type of billboard advertisement that might easily tout one or another brand of cigarettes. The colonial past and consumer society of the present come together in a work that both exposes and challenges

the ideological underpinnings of mass-media information.

In Lindt's Atlas, 'Black Gin and Child' is positioned in the centre of the page with text surrounding it on all sides. The text, written by anthropologist and Wesleyan missionary Lorimer Fison, describes, or attempts to describe, the origins of the indigenous people of Australia, and to provide an account of how they lived their lives. It describes their tools, diet, and weapons, hunting techniques, rituals and social structure. Differences are noted, as a sign of intimate knowledge, but then dismissed as aberrations or as isolated intrusions of the inexplicable caprice of life. If much anthropological imagery – and, indeed, the colonialist gaze, in particular – presupposes that 'we' are looking at 'them', and that we have the right to be the surveyors and chroniclers, Tan effectively turns the tables by fashioning works in which the subjects seem to be studying us in a frankly unnerving reversal of accepted power relations. 'Facing Forward' (1999) features portraits culled from archival material, and invites the viewer to consider the importance of the encounter within the context of the domineering colonialist framework.

Tan's highly acclaimed 'Countenance' (2002), presented at 'Documenta 11', features filmed portraits of about two hundred contemporary Germans from both the eastern and western parts of the country. Referring to August Sander's photographs cataloguing the physical characteristics of German population, Tan's work bridges the lingering divide between East and West in Germany, and effectively questions the biases and assumptions that operate when it comes to that divide. Moreover, as one voyeuristically looks at person after person, taking cues from their clothing, expressions, and body language to build a hasty story of their lives, one also becomes aware of the personal biases, value judgments, and assumptions that so impact one relationship to strangers.

Fiona Tan juxtaposes archival and contemporary material to create visually riveting works that directly mediate the often-conflicted exchange between individuals and between cultures. In her last exhibition, held at The Photographers Gallery, London (March 2007), she filled two walls, from bottom to top limit, of one white and bright room with framed photographs. Hundreds of assembled photographs collected from Australian family albums.

From the different sizes to the different themes, all the communication of the exhibition is incredibly evocative of a metropolis where people live, laugh, cry, run, fall, and grow. Tan is certainly not showing us the touristy Sydney but the Sydney city inhabited by people and their banal (maybe that's why they look so

familiar and beautiful) stories. As in looking at my own family album, I have had the feeling of being there sharing that stories, laughing at some and getting emotional at the one of the crying child falling from his (eventually) first bike ride or the old couple sat on the park bench and smiling at each other. I cannot imagine other way of looking at those images that is not emotional.

What can be less theatrical than family albums? Fiona Tan shows us neither an Australia that is the Lindt's staged, inhabited by strange people nor the touristy leaflets' Australia of exotic beaches and ridiculed people wearing flowers. Tan's Sydney is a city as familiar to us as Rio de Janeiro or New York. With its' singularities, of course. But hasn't every single city its' own characteristics? Even in a global world, portrayed by Beat Streuli, there are differences. I can only see good things in those differences. And that's not up to me. It's due to what is given to me, from the people who photograph the places I do not know.



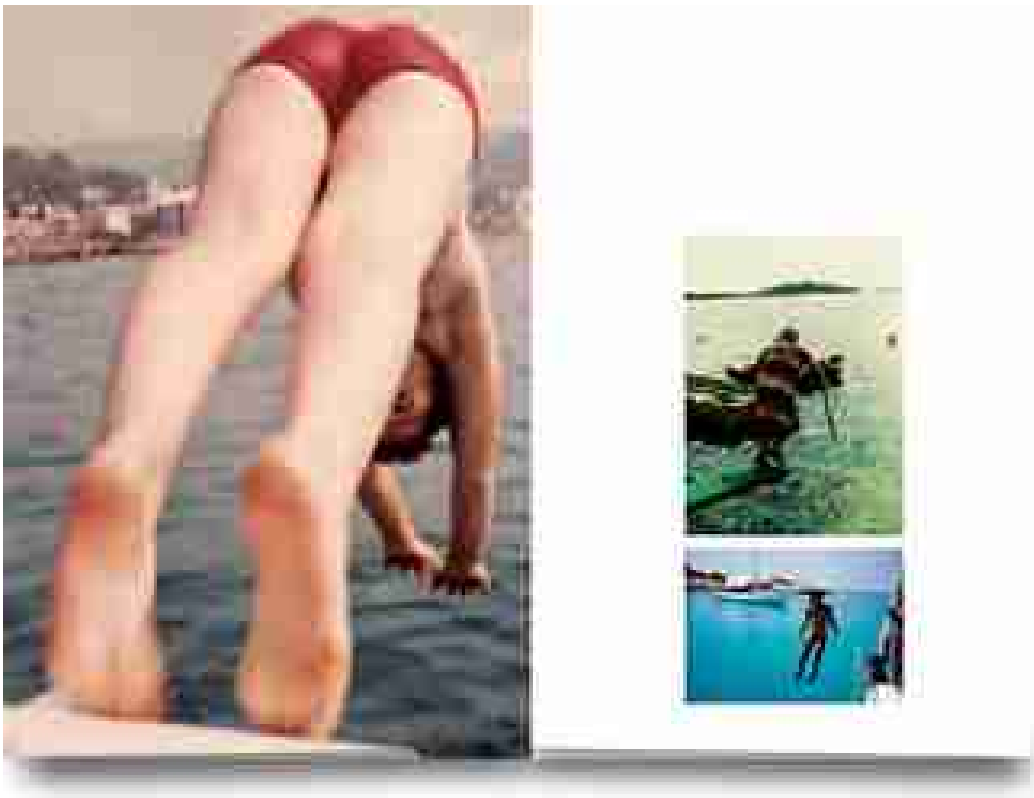
Fiona Tan, 'Facing Forward', 1999



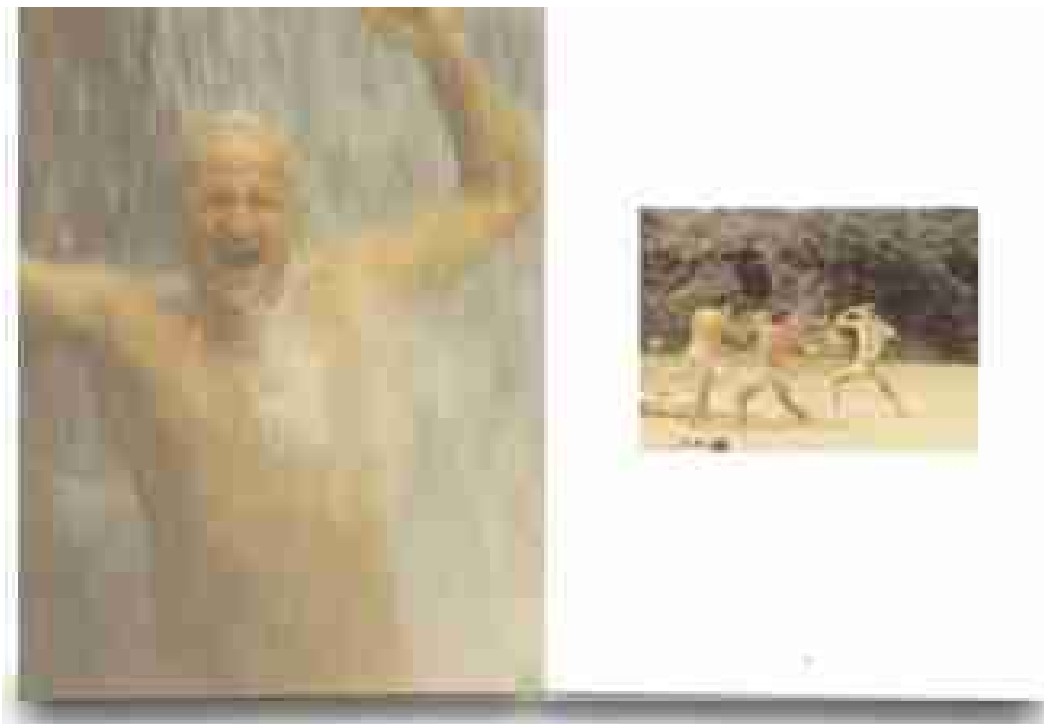
Fiona Tan, 'Facing Forward', 1999



Fiona Tan, 'Facing Forward', 1999



Fiona Tan, 'Sydney Family Albums', 2006



Fiona Tan, 'Sydney Family Albums', 2006

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