

F I O N A
T A N
A S C E N T

A Floating World

Airport, The

In *History's Future*, Fiona Tan's 2016 feature film, a man who has lost his memory finds himself passing through airports over and over. Each time he leaves the arrivals gate, it's as if he's emerging from the wings onto a stage to perform a play in which he has no part. With its white light, large open waiting areas, steel barricades and blank walls, the airport becomes a channel between possible identities. Initially full of hope, the man encounters someone from his past upon every arrival, and retreats from the character they offer him. Are the stories they tell memory or fiction? He ends up building a makeshift home in a storage facility, another space that is neither here nor there.

Between

Betweenness, fictitious memory and impossible futures are key themes in *Between's* three works: *Ascent* (2016), *Vertical Red* (2018) and *Elsewhere* (2018). Formally they hedge their bets, pitching between gallery and cinema, photography and film, past and future, close-up and wide shot, improvisation and score. Image and sound frequently occupy different spaces, perspectives keep changing, the ground shifts. In *Ascent*, a moving image is positioned to the upper left, leaving a gutter along the bottom and right side to allow for English and Japanese subtitles. The asymmetric position gives the image a hovering quality, as if it might drift off at any moment. In *Vertical Red*, a vertical screen displays six lanes of evening traffic stop-starting along a Los Angeles freeway. And in *Elsewhere*, the narrator is stranded in an impossibly perfect future, while the dreamlike light of Los Angeles shimmers over a city in crisis.

Construction

In the iteration of *Ascent* shown in the Samstag Museum of Art's Gallery 1, the work has two parts: a 77-minute-long film built from still photographs of Mt Fuji, and, in an adjacent room, a collection of 155 of those stills. The room holding the projection is dark, with comfortable seats. Together, the film and collection draw out the underlying relationship between moving image and object, and illustrate the differences in scale between the large floating screen and the postcard-sized prints. In turn, this contrast between an image that is immersive and an image you can hold draws attention to the physical scale of the mountain and the way its iconic shape—most frequently captured from a distance—loses form when seen up close.

The photographs that make up *Ascent* include historical images from the Izu Photo Museum archives, as well as postcards and images—including everyday family snapshots—submitted by the public via a website that Tan set up in collaboration with the museum. Some of the most affecting are photos of parents and children standing in front of Mt Fuji. Eighteen minutes in, there's a photograph of a man and boy standing beside a path, a hill of yellow grass sweeping away from them and overlapping the mountain slope. The image is perhaps from the 1980s, the day might have been windy or still. The framing is uncertain but beautiful, and the figures stand awkwardly, as if they're not sure what they are posing for.



Cinema

In the film, stills are arranged and edited to give an impression of cinematic movement. At first, a tiny image appears in the middle of the screen, followed by a moment of black—like the gap between slides in a carousel—, then a larger image, then black again, and then a larger image again. Glimpses of Mt Fuji stutter forward in this way until the image completely fills the screen. There is a breath as a cloud-scattered sky appears, underscored by the hollow sound of whistling wind. As one photograph fades slowly into another, Mt Fuji's peak emerges and the clouds seem to be moving. Later, two peaks unexpectedly appear simultaneously, doubled in the upper and lower frame, grounded and airborne at the same time.

Time is given to us via the film's rhythm. In the room of stills, however, separated from the artist's constructed flow, the time of each image and the relationships between them open up to the audience. We are left in charge of what we look at, and for how long.

Detour

Ascent is driven by the voices of two narrators: a woman speaking English and a man speaking Japanese. The man is dead; they talk to each other across an impassable gap. Like the narration in Chris Marker's *San Soleil* (a key reference point for *Ascent*) the conversation drifts in all directions—volcanic ash, grief, war, history, language and the particular affects of photography and cinema.

Sometimes the images are presented categorically: shots of Mt Fuji with flowers in the foreground; as a portrait studio backdrop; with people standing in front of it; as a military training ground. In between are images documenting the path taken by thousands of people between July and September each year—lines of climbers in rain jackets, the silty grey of the earth, the wooden structures that guide visitors up the slope. The film veers to the side, to images of volcanic dirt.

Winging it

Vertical Red hangs in Gallery 3 on a single vertical monitor. Onscreen, the slow stop-start evening traffic along LA's Interstate 405 forms a sort of score on which a pianist improvises an avant-garde cluster of loose percussive notes, the sound cascading down from a speaker above. Twice during the film's 8 minutes, the image of the traffic doubles briefly; the shot loops back on itself and repeats while the pianist presses forward, winging it, in a cascade of tumbling angular tones.

Light

"The sky was already bright, though the sun was still occluded behind a low-clinging fog bank over LAX. The Malibu mountains up ahead were dark and clear and distinct, and seemed as if freshly minted. Presently, the sun must have broken out from behind the fog bank—I realised this because suddenly the sand around me turned pale purplish pink and my own long shadow shot out before me. I looked up at the mountains and they were *gone*: lost in the airlight."⁽¹⁾

In his essay *The Light of LA*, Lawrence Weschler follows a trail of beauty and pollution to uncover the particular qualities of the Los Angeles light. He meets an environmental engineer who describes the way specifically sized particles in the air reflect the sunlight to create the white haze that makes the LA light so perfect for filming. It's pollution beautifully named: airlight.



“The thing about particles of that size is that they happen to have about the same diameter as the wavelength of natural sunlight. So that, when the sunlight from over my shoulder, say, hits one of those particles floating between me and the mountain I’m trying to make out, the light bounces off the particle and right into my eye. [...] It can get to be like having a billion tiny suns between you and the thing you’re trying to see.”⁽²⁾

Upstairs in Gallery 2, this light shimmers over the surface of *Elsewhere*, a 10-minute assembly of locked-off views of the city from the Getty Centre, under varying light conditions. Suspended above the gallery floor on a floating screen, the image is expansive while the sound remains intimate: you need headphones to hear it. The film oscillates between wide views and zoomed-in shots, creating a push-pull rhythm between enlargement and breadth. The haze bounces against the static on the soundtrack; it blocks off distance and fuzzies edges, regardless of whether the shot is wide or zoomed in. Even in the shots with the clearest light, the sky is like gauze. “The air is pleasant, cool and above all clean”, a woman speaking from a distant future reports. In the image, the air is stifling, hot and thick with airlight.

“It can almost get to be as if the world were made up of energy rather than matter.”⁽³⁾

Void

In Japanese, the word for ‘void’ is *utsuro*, says Hiroshi, the Japanese narrator in *Ascent*. He riffs on the word’s last syllable so *utsuro* becomes *utsuwa* (bowl) and then *utsuroi* (transience). There’s a long tradition of the void in photography. Photographs of space without a clear focal point that cause the relationship between figure and ground—that hallmark of Western visual language—to be erased: the figure simply isn’t there. Sometimes the void operates within the mode of ‘late photography’, the method of photographing what remains in place after an event has happened. Late photography is usually associated with sites of trauma—war, disaster, ethnic cleansing—and late photographs often depict site as void, as if afterward there is nothing.

The images in *Elsewhere* are neither photography nor late, but because the images are so still, because the camera is placed at such a distance from the action, and because the image and narration occupy such irreconcilably different time periods, the work evokes the sensation of lateness. In the time of the narration, the event has already happened. In the time of the image, the event has begun, is happening in the very moment of recording but has not yet happened and, due to the distant vantage point and the haze, is out of sight.

Zenith (or, The Peak)

In the three moving image works shown in this exhibition, the world is surveyed from a peak and made intimate through sound. There is something about this elevated view that gives the three films the quality of being *things*, as if the screen image has somehow turned from an immaterial shimmer of pixels and light into a material, sculptural object. I keep circling around the notion of the ‘view’ of Western landscape painting and its colonial associations, and the wedded history of war between Japan and the US. I don’t know what to make of these thoughts. I think of the old globes, the world turned into an object that can be picked up, held and observed, measured, so that the distance between things contracts to a size that feels knowable on a human scale. It’s safe here on the peak, we say, and hold on, hold on.

Sarinah Masukor, 2019

1 Lawrence Weschler. 2004. “The Light of LA”
In *Vermeer in Bosnia*, New York: Pantheon Books. 307.

2 *ibid.* 307.

3 *ibid.* 301





Image: Fiona TAN, *Ascent* (still), 2016, 16:10 colour projection, colour, 5.1 surround sound, 77 mins.

Fiona Tan: *Ascent*

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Galleries 1, 2 & 3

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The Samstag Museum of Art brings a concise
selection of works by Fiona Tan to Adelaide.
Centring upon the Australian premiere of
Ascent, this is the first significant presentation
of the artist's work in our country in ten years.

Ascent is not only a reflection on Mount
Fuji—a mountain of great significance to
the Japanese—but also a study of its visual
culture, and a tribute to the history of both
photography and film. Tan spins a fictional
narrative that shifts and bends the distinction
between still and moving images. Resonating
with the climb to the top of the mountain,
the story alternates between narration and
history, from Western imperialism to modern
tourism, from the early days of photography to
the present day.

Living and working in the Netherlands,
Indonesian born and Australian raised artist
Fiona Tan is widely regarded for her poetic
meditations on representation, time and
place. Skilfully crafted and ambitious in scope,
Ascent is a work that draws upon Tan's full
range as an artist. Filling the Museum's largest
gallery, it is accompanied by a selection of
earlier work demonstrating her singular ability
to create beautiful things that people can enjoy
and think about.

A Samstag Museum of Art exhibition
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Film Festival for the 2019 OzAsia Festival,
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and Anna Zagala
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Gallery Attendant: Callum Docherty
Installation: John Axe, Ashleigh D'Antonio,
Peter Carroll, Emily Clinton, Daniel Tucker

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Cover image

Image: Fiona TAN, *Ascent* (still), 2016, 16:10
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