

## Lisa Tan

It is characteristic of Lisa Tan's practice that she repeatedly turns to writers for answers to different questions. The intimate and personal tone of voice is another characteristic feature, along with subject matter that verges on the universal. This exhibition features three works made in the last 15 years. They address language, identity, memory and displacement, while also connecting the landscape, where you are from, with who you are.

Tan grew up in a border town in the southern Rocky Mountains, just where they end. When her parents separated her father moved to the other side of the mountain range. He later reunited with the family and moved back home when he became seriously ill. In a work with the descriptive title *National Geographic* (2009) Tan departs from a collection of 1970s and '80s editions of the magazine that used to belong to her deceased father.

The work, which originally consisted of projected slides, is shown in a version with 80 photographic prints framed as couples. The 40 parts are different, but they all follow the principle that one print is a mountain view cutout from the magazine while the adjacent one shows the verso of the cutout. The shadowy side of the mountain becomes Tan's evocation of what is unknown or dormant. Who you are and how you see the world, your identity, is affected by your own understanding of the place and context you come from. The landscape is significant for this process, she stresses.

In the film *My Pictures of You* (2017–19) we are invited into a light-hearted conversation between two closely related people during a car trip in the region where Tan grew up. Magnificent views over vast mountain ranges in a dry desert landscape alternate with black-and-white photographs from the planet Mars. Tan compares the documentary stills of the celestial body to a death mask of Earth. The question inherent in this association, whether there was once life on Mars, is asked of an expert from NASA. The conclusion is that there was previously water on the now dusty planet, and that it was theoretically possible for life to exist there. The film is a covert climate critique, but also an example of how art may help us understand contemporary realities. One clip, in which Tan is reading Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida* (1980) to approach the photographs of Mars, explicates her method. In this well-known text Barthes touches on the lasting emotional imprint left by photography and uses the 'winter garden photograph', a picture of his own mother as a child, as an example. *Camera Lucida*, written after her passing, is as much a reflection on

death as a text about photography. Tan suggests a reading in which 'Mother' is replaced by 'Earth'. Her assumptions about Mars appear to be confirmed with

Barthes's words: 'The photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been.'<sup>1</sup>

In the work *Reading Lewis Hyde* (2024) Tan uses the art of palm reading, or chiromancy, as her method for approaching the American essayist and cultural critic Lewis Hyde. A close-up portrait of the writer in his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, takes shape as

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Transl. Richard Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 85

the conversation progresses and their hands uninterruptedly touch. One topic is Hyde's book *A Primer for Forgetting* (2019), and it is pointed out that forgetting is not just negative or passive. It also provides space for renewal and change, from an individual as well as a societal perspective. The thoughts of the book are reflected in the lines of the palm, seen as rivers, tributaries and deltas. Parallels are made to Greek mythology and to Lethe, one of the five rivers of Hades, which represents both oblivion and the future. Hyde stresses that oblivion is not about denial. It is important to acknowledge what has happened, but forgetting is necessary for being able to move on. He clarifies by outlining the process we must adhere to when we, as persons or as nations, are subjected to injustices. The truth must be acknowledged, justice must be achieved and punishment administered. Burial and other forms of ritual acknowledgment must be performed, apologies should be offered and finally forgiveness may be given. Sometimes forgiveness is granted too fast, but, as Hyde says, even that is part of our efforts to 'get past the past'.

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