



AUSTIN

Lisa Tan
Arthouse at the Jones Center

"A minor and sentimental fact..." This phrase appears in Lisa Tan's installation *Les Samourais* (2010) as a footnote, a brief wall-textual digression on the untimely death of a finch in a 1967 studio fire. For viewers of Tan's exhibition at Arthouse these words will resonate with unusual force. Minor and sentimental facts—mundane stuff with strong poetic potential—ground each of the four evocative works on display in this study of intimacy, absence and identity entitled *Two Birds*, *Eighty Mountains*, and *Portrait of the Artist*.

In *Letters from Dr. Bamberger*, an ongoing series of conceptual diptychs begun in 2001, the facts are clinical. Pairs of letters printed on pale gray stationery record the details of annual physical exams and disclose rather personal health matters. Yet the extent of the patients' vulnerability is obscured until one understands the letters as registers of emotional, as well as physical, well-being. Having encountered successive letters addressed to Lisa and Kurt, and then Lisa and Charles, it dawns on a viewer that the pages are couples portraits; and in the context of this simple, structural binary, a blank sheet of stationery marks a year of solitude. Another correspondence-based work, *In Search of the Forgotten* (2010), presents facsimiles of notes sent to the painter Eugène Delacroix by his confidante, Madame Joséphine de Forget. The author's French script is difficult to decipher, and as such the notes acquire significance less through their reading than through a regular misreading, according to which Mme. de Forget's surname appears as a synonym for memory lapse.

Language shifts also figure in the above mentioned *Les Samourais*. Here Tan makes an understated but consequential intervention into the first three minutes of Jean-Pierre Melville's cinema classic *Le Samourai*.

L. Lisa Tan, *Letters From Dr. Bamberger*, 2001–ongoing; annual post-physical letters; 9⁵/₈ x 6⁵/₈ inches each; courtesy the artist with special thanks to the University of Gothenburg, Valand School of Fine Arts

R. *Les Samourais* (still), 2010; single-channel video, lightstands, painted wood, projector; 3 minutes 36 seconds, sound; courtesy the artist and Galerie Vidal Cuglietta, Brussels

Her sleight-of-hand involves inserting another bird and a second set of chirps into the film, a partner for the drab finch featured in these opening moments. The addition is visually subtle—carried off as imperceptibly as Tan's shift of Melville's title from singular to plural—but it dramatically reorients the film's portrayal of seclusion.

Finally, *National Geographic* (2009) attempts to represent the geographical separation of Tan's family unit on two sides of a mountain. Recto and verso views of mountain vistas clipped from the well-known magazine pass simultaneously through synchronized slide carousels and appear adjacent to one another on a nearby wall. This exercise in displacement severs tandems of text and image that once shared a physical bond, and suggests the grim conclusion that what one knows of the far side of a mountain is ultimately projection.

Two Birds... succeeds in large part due to its persuasive claim that, in the end, facts aren't just facts: they are portents and symbols, rationally and irrationally sorted, coordinated and interpreted. Tan creates with impressive self-control, suppressing expressiveness while situating ordinary information in richly suggestive discourses. This temperance is a virtue, and it allows her work to transcend the specific without looking transcendental. A neutral datum becomes an emotive and imaginative prompt as it slips from the physical to the sentimental, the personal to the collective, the literal to the metaphorical, and back.

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