

STOCKHOLM

Lisa Tan

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Ethnographers and anthropologists often occupy an in-between state known as “liminality.” Their dual roles—of participant and observer—become irresolvable. Something similar can happen with works of art. Think of Jasper Johns’s flags, endlessly asking, Is this a “painting” of a flag or a “flag” in place of a painting? They stand at a threshold. Denouement deferred. This suspension drags on in Bruce Nauman’s anguished *Clown Torture*, 1987, crushing you under its repeating silliness, an obsessive ritual: The fishbowl slips from the broom every time; the clown, the fool, never learns. The Sisyphean task plants us within a state of being nowhere, of suspension in the neither-nor, bringing to mind the way that Samuel Beckett condemned us to another sort of threshold, where every conclusion hovers just beyond reach: “Fail again. Fail better.” On this endless verge, haunted by the likes of Beckett, Nauman, and Johns, we find the work of Lisa Tan.

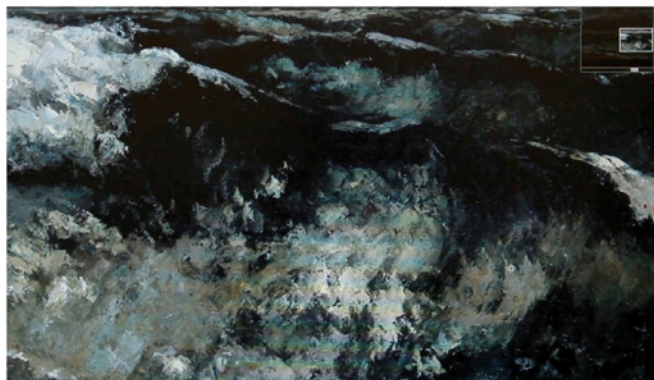
Tan’s art lives off a spirit of conscientiousness. She chooses, and with care, liminal experiences that she ultimately obsesses over. Choice or obsession? It is this conundrum, left forever unresolved, that positively intimidates, with a promise not of sublime beauty, but of insipid rhapsody: the yawning of the natural world; waves, one followed inevitably by the next, and then the next and then . . . sunsets, one unavoidably after another—the sort of experiences Caspar David Friedrich pictures in *Abbey in an Oak Forest*, 1809, yet another darkening sunset, and even more sacred ground encroached upon by God’s own age-old oaks, knotted by time, undoing humankind’s greatest achievements.

The three videos in Tan’s exhibition “For Every Word Has Its Own Shadow”—*Notes from the Underground*, 2013; *Sunsets*, 2012; and *Waves*, 2014–15—share this state of liminality, of neither-nor; in them her thoughtful, curious voice wonders aloud, as in a philosophy seminar, carried atop stretches of documentary footage of waves, of sunsets, of caverns. In *Sunsets*, for instance, she chooses a portion of a 1977 interview with the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, who, when asked about the act of writing, answers, “I think that when I write, I am dead.” Lispector is alluding, I think, to an eternal threshold between life and death. It’s what concerned Friedrich before her, and now Tan. *Waves*, a kind of documentary work, opens with routine visual tropes of seascapes, as we look over the artist’s shoulder as she sits before her computer,

eavesdropping on her self-absorbed indecision about wordsmithery. We witness yet another paradox unfold, an engaging rhythm in the liminality of her creative act. The slightly mesmerizing clicking of her laptop’s keyboard is interrupted by Tan’s voice as she relects aloud—to herself—on her own words, tautology wrapped in tautology. Something she first calls “trans-historical affection” becomes (thank God) Tan’s honest confession: She wishes to “hold hands with” Virginia Woolf, or rather with her language in *The Waves*, which critics routinely claim as Woolf at her most provisional. In all three videos, the permanently provisional becomes Tan’s guide—which, no doubt, Woolf would have preferred over transhistorical affection, but then, who wouldn’t?

The stakes here amount to more than mere self-reflection, or self-awareness of the kinds of things artists are always said to experience, such as inspiration. No, they go deeper into the experience of an unresolvable liminality. Further along in *Waves*, Tan quotes Woolf (as later ventriloquized by Gilles Deleuze): “To whom are you speaking of writing?”—a question the author answers herself with “The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with something else.” Woolf’s concern is the feeling of becoming or provisionality, the neither-nor. Tan shares with Woolf this feeling for the denouement deferred, the unsayable condition, the eternal lapping of experience, the changing of the seasons, the movement of the heavens.

—Ronald Jones



Lisa Tan, *Waves*, 2014–15, HD video, color, sound, 19 minutes 12 seconds.