

Lisa Tan's "Dodge and/or Burn"

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Slicing through subterranean exhibition halls that were previously university laboratories for research in accelerator physics, Lisa Tan's first institutional show in Sweden tenders its own spatial logic through the metaphor of neurological disorders. Visitors are received by an ink-drawn diagram based on Oliver Sacks's 1970 sketch of "migraine and neighboring disorders" (from a book said to have been written over just nine days, aided by an undisclosed psychoactive substance). Here, the diagram is superimposed on a detailed schematic of the

galleries: I enter the exhibition through “protracted vegetative reactions.”

Tan treats Sacks’s diagram as a tool, scaling it up to a dizzying and dysfunctional habitable space by way of walls which operate as spatial dividers, passages, atmospheric zones, and display environments. Rhythmic and austere, this site-specific installation of previous works lays bare the delicate negotiation between control and collapse—the dissonance of being human. As an organizing principle, *Promise or Threat* (2023) reveals how rooms are diagrams, just as diagrams may be rooms, that shape the ways in which we interface with the tangible world as well as our interior lives. We move like ghosts, seen and unseen, between spaces that give form to the inner self and manifest out-of-body: the anxiety of a family dinner at home, the pressure of a deadline, the monotony of a commute, the intricacy of sex. Despite its systemized order, the installation succeeds in situating a vague, unsettling doubt in my own sense of self.

At the center of the exhibition—in an unlit lit space with a lower soffit that, according to Sacks’s diagram, represents the migraine proper—is *Dodge and Burn* (2021–23), a multichannel audio-visual installation that follows Tan’s successive attempts to film Fourth of July fireworks from the window of a plane descending towards Los Angeles airport. The slippery “room” it occupies is grounded by a dim, speckled carpet which tempers the acoustics. The space feels sensitive to light and sound. Being here offers a different level of exposure (to other visitors, to the works) compared to the rest of the exhibition; although you remain visible and vulnerable, focus is narrowed towards a single screen.

The narrative of *Dodge and Burn* is delivered in Tan’s own voice. Having only scattered words and references to engage with visually, I imagine the artist’s forehead pressed against an aircraft window as she tries to locate herself above the blinkered lights of the city. On her first attempt, she forgets to press record. Her friend, sat by another window, uses the wrong camera lens, and nothing is captured. The following July, Tan becomes engaged in conversation with a fellow passenger – a professional cuddle therapist. Meanwhile, the aircraft lands ahead of schedule. In her most recent attempt, in 2020, the plane takes another route on its descent. Yet “through this evasion,” she notes, “another image of violence revealed itself.” What fireworks she did witness “were equally beautiful and disturbing; it looked like a warzone.” Referencing the LA neighborhoods where a SWAT team was first deployed for a raid against the Black Panther Party, an election year “of extraordinary consequence,” as well as the carnal threat of pandemic, the work shifts in tone as it unfolds. Comical sequences are matched by solemn moments. One scene, in which loud explosions play against the frame of a billowing US flag set against a setting sun, provides pause to acknowledge the brutality of the past and present, and the fragility of a nation.

Placed throughout the exhibition is the multi-part sculpture *Pa* (2023): totemic light boxes that emit a thin blue light and reference a multinational electronics company. Illuminating the oak floors and white walls of the galleries, and visible at every turn, the sculpture stands as a parliament of bodies with a soothing, frosty gaze. This work lifts a form of applied commercial decoration—a “roadside duck,” in the words of Venturi and Scott Brown—and strips it of its value.¹ (In a subliminal desire to unjumble the characters that make up the sculpture, the word “Pa-n-i-c” comes to mind.) The meaning it gains in the galleries is outsized, yet passive. Citing one of the only “billboards” in the city, it speaks to a Stockholmer with a splintered sense of *déjà vu*: in 2009, the Swedish artist Anna Odell staged a psychological breakdown, psychosis, and suicide attempt on a

busy bridge beneath this billboard.² She was taken to a psychological care ward and sedated before declaring the next day that it was her graduation work for the university where, incidentally, Tan is now professor.³

This is an exhibition that gives away very little at first, demanding a prolonged visit—preferably alone. Although it appears uncompromising and disciplined—fastidious, even—it is witty, dour, at times absurdist, and gentle in its invitation. One work, *Letters From Dr. Bamberger* (2001–12), “a series of commissioned portraits” in the form of correspondence from Tan’s doctor spanning a decade of medical inquiry, embodies the detached, dry humor that characterizes the exhibition’s shrewd self-awareness. Sentences such as “you remain bothered by” and “you seem to be doing better” pepper statements about bad cholesterol, good cholesterol, and HDL levels. Dodging a burnout may be one of the messages the exhibition seeks to impart, but it provides only fragmentary, subjective clues. Experienced in its totality, it suggests that there is joy, fear, uncertainty, and madness in every method of self-presentation or perception.

Notes

- 1 Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, “On Ducks and Decoration,” *Architecture Canada*, vol. 45, no. 10 (October 1968), 48–49.
- 2 “Anna Odells fejkade psykos ställs ut,” *Dagens Nyheter* (May 12, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUtF_gBt2Zg.
- 3 Anna Odell, *Okänd, kvinna 2009-349701*, 2009.

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