

FIONA

TAN

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Fiona Tan was born in 1966 and the interest she has in displacement, an idea continuously explored in her work, begins with her own history.

Born in Pekanbaru, on the island of Sumatra in Indonesia, to a Chinese-Indonesian father and an Australian mother, Tan spent her childhood in Australia before moving to the Netherlands in her late teens.

Growing up in Australia, swimming in the sea and being taught biology by her parents throughout her formative years, Tan developed an innate affinity with the ocean and natural history.

Training in fine art in Amsterdam, Tan found some success in the 1990s before securing herself as a leading figure in the contemporary art world by representing the Dutch Pavilion in the 2009 Venice Biennale.

Fiona Tan currently lives and works in Amsterdam.



ABOUT THE WORK

Fiona Tan's exhibition *DEPOT* spans BALTIC's Level 3 and Level 4 galleries and includes a major new large-scale commission which makes reference to North East England's whaling history.

Tan works within the contested territory of representation: how we represent ourselves and the mechanisms that determine how we interpret the representation of others. She explores themes of memory, collection, archive and journey.

Photography and film – made by Tan, by others, or a combination of both – are her media; research, classification and the archive, her strategies. Her skilfully crafted and intensely human film and video installations explore history, time and our place within them.



DEPOT 2015 / Level 4



ABOUT THE WORK

Disorient 2009 / Level 3

Tan's preoccupation with time, memory and place is explored in *Disorient* 2009. The piece comprises two films that run in continuous loops on opposite walls, contrasting the fantasy and reality of the trade route between Venice and Asia.

Filmed on location in the Dutch Pavilion in Venice, *Disorient* refers to Venice's pivotal position in the history of geographical politics, centuries before the discovery of new routes to Asia diluted and irrevocably altered the city's power. Tan's fascination with geography, travellers and their journeys has led her to explore the biographies of famous merchants and their desire to acquire new experiences and possessions.

"Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings."

D Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism

The voiceover for this encompassing installation includes evocative quotes taken from Marco Polo's 700 year-old book *The Travels*. This 13th Century travelogue written by Rustichello da Pisa from stories told by Marco Polo describes the merchant's travels through Asia, Persia, China and Indonesia between 1276 and 1291 and his experiences at the court of Kublai Khan.

- When you think of your country of origin, how do you feel about it? What aspects are you most proud of? What parts of its history do you question?
- How was the country you live in described or defined 100 years ago? What is it best known for now? How do you feel about this?
- What makes up a country's culture? What have you lost from your culture of origin? What has been carried over from your parents or grandparents' lives into yours?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Disorient 2009 / Level 3

Filmed within a set created by Tan, this imaginary museum *DEPOT* is crammed with art, artefacts and various other objects loaned to the artist. They arrived across two and a half delivery trucks.

One of the screens depicts this stage set and intends to make the viewer curious and greedy, clamouring to know more about every objects' origin, provenance and value. The other depicts a more contemporary view of the route Polo travelled, footage shot by either Tan herself, or compiled from various clips of documentary film obtained from press agencies.

Tan talks about how very detailed Polo's descriptions of his journey were, describing not just the exciting peaks but the more mundane and routine parts as well. The artist incorporates this 'warts and all' approach into *Disorient*.

As the narrator talks about these cities and countries the second screen portrays contemporary clips of the present day; mentioning Baghdad over a visual of the now infamous 2003 'Shock and Awe' footage of the United States' invasion of Iraq for instance. Tan's portrayal attempts to bridge a 700-year history gap and bring Polo's 13th Century world into the present one we recognise today.

Poignantly, Marco Polo's account of the places he visited are grandiose, amazingly rich, full of scholars and free traders whereas Tan's contemporary equivalents depict rubbish dumps, backstreets, poverty and perceived military oppression.

- *Disorient* is built upon contrast. Note down some of the contrasts you see and hear.
- How accurate is film as a means to show reality? Can film ever truly capture a moment in time?
- To what extent do you believe what you see? How might one screen, make the other a deceiver?
- To what extent does *Disorient* offer opportunity to explore and celebrate diverse cultures? To what extent does it 'other' different cultures by placing them in a gallery environment as spectacle?
- How would your opinion change if *Disorient* explored Western culture? How would this change the piece?



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Disorient 2009 / Level 3

- **Think** about the objects that are on display. What do you notice? What catches your eye?
- **Consider** how one film influences the other.
- **Reconsider** why the films are exhibited in this way.
- **Try** focussing on one screen for the duration of the film. Now do the same with the other.
- **Do** you think this changes the viewing experience?
- **Be** critical. Discuss the meaning of this work. Judge it.
- **How** does the narration impact the films?
- **Imagine** if they were silent.
- **Find** an un-noticed or overlooked part of either film. Fixate on it. Point it out to someone.
- **Draw** something you see; an object, a journey, a moment, a person. Capture it forever.
- **Create** a list of words that come to mind when you watch *Disorient*.
- **Move** to a different part of the space. Change position. How does this impact your experience?
- **Stop**. How comfortable do you feel as the 'watcher'. Are you audience or voyeur?
- **Start** to think about what *Disorient* says about our choices as a society. What social, political and economical decisions impact the images you see here?



ABOUT THE WORK

Inventory 2012 / Level 3

Throughout her practice, Tan regularly works with archives and archival material. As such, she has developed an interest in the whole concept of collection; why people collect and what; what role the museum plays and how it might reflect personal and collective culture; how artefacts are chosen as part of a collection and what happens to them when they are not on 'display'.

Fascinated by the display rationale of the Sir John Soane Museum in London, Tan filmed for several days in its vast and diverse collections. Soane would hang priceless artefacts next to others that were relatively inexpensive; an exhibition strategy that explored complex ideas of value. Tan's film is as much an investigation into the human impulse to preserve, collect and document in inventories as it is a reflection of her own artistic practice. The film catalogues the various formats in which the artist has worked; Super 8, 16 and 35 millimetre film, analogue, digital and high-definition video. Each medium has its own particular resolution, quality and depth, all capturing the same objects and spaces they inhabit, but in different ways.

Sir John Soane was an 18th Century British architect and impassioned collector who created, within the confines of his own residence, a private museum of Roman and Greek antiquities including books, casts and models. In 1833 Soane negotiated an Act of Parliament to settle and preserve the house and collection for the benefit of 'amateurs and students' in architecture, painting and sculpture. On his death in 1837 the Act came into force, vesting the Museum in a board of Trustees who were to continue to uphold Soane's own aims and objectives. A crucial part of their brief was to maintain the fabric of the Museum, keeping it 'as nearly as circumstances will admit in the state' in which it was left at the time of Soane's death in 1837 and to allow free access for students and the public to 'consult, inspect and benefit' from the collections.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Inventory 2012 / Level 3

“In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power.”

Paul Valery

- What do objects like those in Tan’s *Inventory* tell us about the past? What role does a museum play in re-telling these stories?
- How possible is it for a museum or gallery to accurately exhibit a country or peoples’ culture; their customs, memories, ideas and philosophies? Is this the role of a museum? If not, where else can you experience these?
- As a collector, are you ever the owner of the objects in your collection, or are you simply a temporary custodian? How are these two titles different and what are their implications?
- What do you collect? Think about your home, your bedroom, your locker at school, your pencil case. What do you choose to keep and what do you throw away? What do these decisions tell other people about you?

Choose an artefact from *Inventory* and use it as a starting point for a piece of free writing. Write continuously for five minutes.

- Don’t stop writing even if you run out of things to say. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar; you do not need to write in full sentences.

Afterwards, scan through your writing and select five words that you feel relate best to the work you have chosen. Say the words in your head as you consider the work again.

- Read and repeat your words out loud in the gallery space. Can you gather an audience? How do other gallery visitors react to you?
- Bring together a collection of objects that remind you of your visit to BALTIC.

Your collection might include a BALTIC Today guide, other promotional print, a receipt from the shop, a napkin from the café, a metro or bus ticket, a drawing, something you found on the way here, a sweet wrapper or a photograph taken on your mobile phone.

- Record your artefacts in a Tan-like archive. Title your collection and make labels and extended interpretation if you think that’s relevant. Think about how visitors might interact with your collection.



ABOUT THE WORK

DEPOT 2015 / Level 4

For her exhibition at BALTIC, Tan has created an immersive installation especially for the Level 4 gallery. Drawing upon Newcastle's forgotten history as a principal whaling port in England from 1752–1849, *DEPOT* re-imagines a fairground attraction, 'Jonah, the Giant Whale', a blue whale caught off the coast of Trondheim, Norway. Preserved in formaldehyde, the whale toured across Europe from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, exhibited inside the 'longest lorry in the world' (76-foot long), before being abandoned in Belgium.

Tan has rebuilt the vehicle, which spans almost the entire width of the gallery and which visitors are invited to climb aboard. Instead of whale remains, the interior now contains a cabinet of curiosities, an exhibition within an exhibition. *DEPOT*, so named to reflect Tan's ongoing interest in public and private collections of objects, houses a narwhal tusk and glass models of small sea anemones by German glassmakers Leopold Blaschka and his son Rudolf (1822–95 and 1857–1939).

The presentation within the vehicle also includes a new film installation incorporating footage filmed in the depots of natural history museums in Leiden in the Netherlands and Berlin, Germany.

- Think about the story of 'Jonah, the Giant Whale'. How does it make you feel?
- In the Bible's Old Testament, whales became synonymous with the term Leviathan: a large monstrous sea creature. How is this interpretation different today? How is it the same? Think about literature, world events and conservation, mythology and entertainment parks for example.
- Jonah was described as a fairground attraction; his carcass toured around and ogled by the public. Think about our world's understanding of, and attitude towards, animals. To what extent might this old-fashioned view be different today? Are there any cases where it's the same?
- Newcastle has a little known history as a whaling port between 1752- 1849. Imagine Newcastle as a whaling port today, how do you think society would react? How would you react?



THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

DEPOT 2015 / Level 4

The amassing of specimens in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the basis for most natural history museums. However, for Tan, 'natural history' remains a curious term, an oxymoron. For her, this term encapsulates the troubled complexities of mankind's relationship to the natural world. Ironically, when it comes to collecting for these institutions, one must first kill and render lifeless that which one wishes to preserve.

Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka offered a different approach. The Blaschkas became famous for their impressively accurate and beautifully intricate glass models and between 1866 and 1889, the Natural History Museum, London, purchases 185 Blaschka models including sea anemones, octopuses, squid, jellyfishes, radiolarians, amoebas and corals. Their work, which contemporary glass artists have been unable to replicate the subtlety and accuracy of, was commissioned and for natural history museums and aquaria all over the world.

Choose your favourite sea anemone.

- Draw the whole anemone.
- Now focus on your favourite section; use a viewfinder or your hands to create a viewing window.
- Repeatedly draw your chosen section; layer it, position it, rotate it, use different materials, pressures and shadings.

This new commission builds upon several of Tan's recent works that expose collections and archives, calling into question the ways in which they are used to represent and interpret history and mankind's place in the world. *DEPOT* also reflects upon Tan's personal fascination with whales and other marine animals and her wish to consider her own relationship to the sea, the creatures that inhabit it and their mythologies.

- Think about the contrast between the original contents of the 'longest lorry in the world' and its current one. What kind of statement is Tan making by including replicas and films, as opposed to actual specimens within the lorry?

The Blaschkas solved a problem for museums, collectors and academics by creating intricate, lifelike and 3D reproductions of flora and fauna specimens that could not otherwise be studied in their natural states.

- In your opinion, which has more value; an original or a reproduction? Think about how you define value and how this influences your decision.
- When is a copy as good as an original?
- How might a copy keep the essence of something original?
- Think about making 100 copies of a drawing. Is the last copy the same as the first? How is it the same? What has it lost?
- How do you feel about the inclusion of a narwhal tusk within the exhibition?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

DEPOT 2015 / Level 4

A narwhal tusk is actually a tooth. It is used like a sensory organ to detect changes in the chemical make-up of sea water. Only male narwhals have these horns and find them useful to locate food and females to mate with.

- Tan's choice of subject matter reflects her own personal fascination with whales, sea creatures and her relationship to the sea. Think about your own interests and favourite pastimes. Think about now, and reflect back to being younger. What fascination would you focus on? What objects, ideas, words, images and/or films would you collect to express it? How would other people engage with and share your treasured choices?
- Think about the idea of collecting and building a collection over a period of time. How can this be preserved? If everything changes how can anything be treasured?



FURTHER RESEARCH

ANTIQUITY / ARCHIVE / LEOPOLD AND RUDOLF
BLASCHKA / MARK DION / FORMALDEHYDE / BEN JEANS
HOUGHTON / INVENTORY / JONAH THE GIANT WHALE
KIMSOOJA / TANIA KOVATS / NATURAL HISTORY
RUSTICHELLO DA PISA / MARCO POLO / PROVENANCE
CONRAD SHAWCROSS / SIR JOHN SOANE /
'THE TRAVELS' / TRADE ROUTE

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Contemporary art is incredibly diverse and wide ranging and can be used to support teaching and learning as part of an entire learning experience.

Contemporary art challenges, exposes and explores cultural and social issues and identities, investigating their meaning through a wide range of practices. BALTIC's programme aims to build pupils' confidence and encourage aspirations, develop their visual language and creative thinking as well as furthering their artistic skills, encouraging students to offer opinions and take risks in response to such visual, cultural and creative stimuli, safe in the knowledge that art has no 'wrong answer'. Contemporary art can be used to generate creative thinking in all subject areas, supporting and offering transferable learning across the curriculum.

BALTIC offers a variety of workshops, talks, artist sessions and research opportunities for primary, secondary and post-16 students. Many are free!

To book a session, arrange a visit or chat about an opportunity, please contact our Schools and Colleges Programmer, Vicky Sturrs on 0191 440 4929 or vickys@balticmill.com

FIONA TAN GALLERY WORKSHOP FOR EYFS, KS1&2 AND SEND, FREE

Through looking, talking, drawing and making activities, your pupils will build confidence and visual language in the gallery space. Explore Fiona Tan's *DEPOT* in this hands-on, one hour session led by the Learning Team. With lots of short, engaging and practical activities your pupils will respond to the artwork through personal opinions, drawings and other creative ideas. This session includes individual, partner and group tasks and is tailored to the needs of your group.

FIONA TAN TALK & TOUR SUITABLE FOR KS3, 4, POST-16 AND SEND GROUPS, FREE

This 30 minute introductory tour to BALTIC's exhibition, Fiona Tan: *DEPOT* will look at key works, themes and ideas.

The tour will encourage questioning, opinion-gathering and debate, giving students a more in-depth knowledge of the exhibited contemporary art at BALTIC.

ARTIST STUDIO SESSIONS SUITABLE FOR EYFS, KS1,2,3&4, POST-16 AND SEND, £100 HALF DAY, £200 FULL DAY + VAT

Practical art workshops delivered by one of BALTIC's experienced artist facilitators develop your pupils' creative inspiration, influences, skills and techniques. Artist Studio Sessions give your pupils the opportunity to get initial inspiration for projects, develop new artistic practices, work closely with a practicing artist and take creative risks.

Use the exhibitions as a focus, come with a ready-designed project, or leave it to BALTIC to create a bespoke session from your ideas and desired outcomes.

BALTIC's artist team have diverse interests and workshop skills can include sculpture, printing, textiles, installation, photography, drawing, animation and sound work to name only a few!

Artist Studio Sessions can take place at BALTIC or at your school and includes all materials.

USEFUL LINKS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BALTIC
balticmill.com

BALTIC+
balticplus.uk

BALTIC Primary School Resources Bank
balticmill.com/primaryresources

BALTIC Secondary School Resources Bank
balticmill.com/secondaryresources

The additional links:
fionatan.nl/
frithstreetgallery.com/artists/bio/fiona_tan

IMAGE CREDITS

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Fiona Tan, *DEPOT* 2015. Installation view, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Jonty Wilde © 2015 BALTIC / Jonty Wilde

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Fiona Tan, *Disorient* 2009. Courtesy of the Artist and Frith Street Gallery London

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Fiona Tan, *Disorient* 2009. Courtesy of the Artist and Frith Street Gallery London

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Fiona Tan, *Inventory* 2012. Courtesy of the Artist and Frith Street Gallery London

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Fiona Tan, *DEPOT* 2015. Installation view, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Jonty Wilde © 2015 BALTIC / Jonty Wilde

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Fiona Tan, *DEPOT* 2015. Installation view, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Jonty Wilde © 2015 BALTIC / Jonty Wilde

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