



Back to Our Future

A commentary on Lisa Tan's *My Pictures of You* (2017-2019).



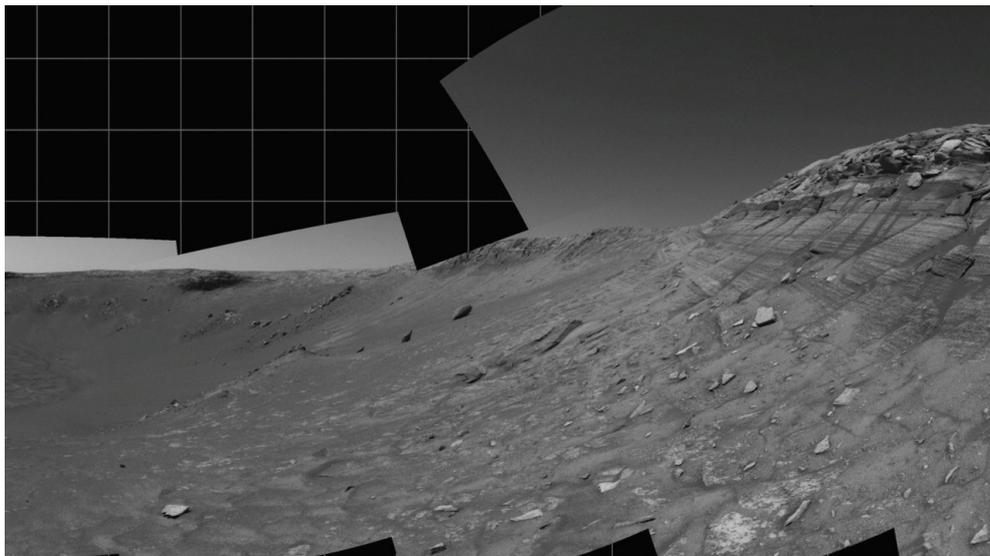
Lisa Tan, *My Pictures of You*, 2017-2019, video still, courtesy of the artist and Galleri Riis, Oslo.

Since entering into a pandemic state and resorting to a most unusual domestic reality, I find myself frenetically scrolling through the feeds of galleries, museums and art collectors on Instagram at such a pace as to contribute to my time spent on the app reaching an all-time high. The extent of the struggles facing the cultural sector at this time is evident. However, what becomes equally evident is the commendable amount of effort, energy and creativity that is being channelled into finding new moduses operandi of bringing art to the public via digital and accessible means.

One such player in the local art scene is the private art institution Bonniers Konsthall which was quick to react and recently inaugurated a digital exhibition programme on its platform online which will feature selected films by contemporary artists. Currently four are on view by artists based in Sweden, one of them

being Lisa Tan's *My Pictures of You* (2017-19). Duly excited and from the confines of my own private quarantine, I settle in to watch this latest video work of Tan, most recently exhibited last year in full installation mode for the occasion of her solo exhibition at Galleri Riis in Oslo.

In 2015 NASA's instrument "Curiosity" identified evidence of water on Mars further spurring proposals of terraforming the planet in order to render it habitable. The "Curiosity" rover's documentation of the topography of Mars is the starting point for Tan's own exploration of nations around the future and death of our own terra. As a series of black and white photographs depicting the Martian landscape unfolds on the screen, Tan recalls her first reaction upon seeing such photographs, noting; "I was amazed that I was not more amazed". The lack of amazement signifies the visual similarities the two planets possess and is a reaction the viewer chimes into as the series of Martian still images are gradually interchanged with a film sequence documenting a road-trip scenery. As Tan and her companion traverse the American desert-like nature, Erasure's *Blue Savannah* is heard ever so non-intrusively yet clearly, from the car stereo: "My home is where the heart is / Sweet to surrender to you only / I send my love to you", as the scenery is replaced with images of the Martian landscape.



Lisa Tan, *My Pictures of You*, 2017-2019, video still, courtesy of the artist and Galleri Riis, Oslo.

As in Tan's past trilogy of video works, *Sunsets* (2012), *Notes From Underground* (2013) and *Waves* (2014-15), the interplay between imagery and words stemming from a literary or theorist figure is a central material approach in the present work too, as per Roland Barthes reflections on photography in the seminal *Camera Lucida*. Tan and a scientist working with the Mars expedition are found scrolling through these said photographs of Mars, further elaborating on the similarities of the two planets' topography. As the conversation ensues, Tan introduces the idea that the pictures of Mars are the death masks of Earth. From this perspective, the photograph is still a document of what has been in accordance with the Barthesian proposition. What has changed is that we are observing the imagery from a point of time in the future, looking at the Earth's death mask for traces of its past existence.

The process of finding the Earth through the observation of the Martian imagery is aided by the recitation of certain passages of Barthes' book. Together with the study of the Martian landscape, they come to act as a sort of Ariadne's thread guiding the artist's reflections on earthly existence. The chosen passages relate Barthes's memories of encountering photographs of his mother after her passing. As Barthes discovers that *one* photographic image that gives him a "sentiment as certain as remembrance"; an access to some form of truth, the exploration of the truth of the Earth is at parallel play here. Much like Barthes goes through the photographs of his parted mother, while not so much in order to experience some Proustian-like memory of the subject but rather in order to find or rediscover the image of a face loved, so could Tan's sifting through of the imagery of Mars be considered to illustrate a journey of rediscovering the terrestrial past of a planet loved.

The scientist is asked to replace in his mind the words "mother" and "her" with "Earth" when reciting the relevant passages. As the recitation ensues, the viewer enters into the same practice. Observing the images

under this light, we are no longer paying attention to their simple likeness to the Earth's topography; we are entering the process of looking after traces of our own personal connection to the planetary past existence, seen from a point of time in the future. In the same way Barthes meticulously studies the features and expressions of his mother, we observe how Tan and the scientist in similar fashion zoom in on the images, discussing the dustiness, the traces of salt, whether or not they can discern signs of water, as if sketching out the traces of a life that in a Barthian sense is both real and now in the past. A melancholic note on the fragility of the Earth as mother, as a person or body loved, echoes on as the imagery is replaced by colourful shots of the Earth.



Lisa Tan, *My Pictures of You*, 2017-2019, video still, courtesy of the artist and Galleri Riis, Oslo.

The element of water is a most prevalent visual theme too. Water, the very essence and source of earthly life could be likened to the eyes we peer into to find the soul of a beloved face. Tan's visual narration moves on to images of water and a recurring scene depicting an indoor swimming pool. The clear blue water glistens as the sunlight beams through the windows in the far back, just as a song comes on; "I was swimming inside / Lost in your eyes".

Corina Wahlin is a contributor in the editorial team of C-print.

Images courtesy of Lisa Tan and Galleri Riis in Oslo, representing her.

Lisa Tan's *My Pictures of You* can currently be viewed via the recently launched online exhibition room of Bonniers Konsthall, alongside works of Lap-See Lam & Wingyee Wu, Éva Mag and Iris Smeds.

www.bonnierskonsthall.se



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