



Fiona Tan captures an old man's fragmentation of identity with engaging art cinema.

HALF A MAN IN A HALFWAY HOTEL

ART/FILM

Lapse of Memory

Filmbanktour #17: Sugar is Sweet, Filmmuseum
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By Marinus de Ruiter

With *Lapse of Memory*, her latest film, video artist Fiona Tan parallels her life as an immigrant to that of an elderly man

suffering from senile dementia. Born in Indonesia and raised in Australia, 42-year-old Tan has been living in Amsterdam for over 20 years. Still, she feels like the man in her film, who tries in vain to construct his identity from loose bits and pieces. 'He symbolises a large group of people', says Tan. 'He's like a migrant who arrives in a place where he's not at home.'

Known for her film and video installations based on documentary footage, Tan is one of the most successful artists working with moving images in the Netherlands today. In recent years she did art commissions all over the world and showed her work at major international contemporary art exhibitions like the Venice Biennale and Documenta.

Lapse of Memory deviates from Tan's oeuvre in the sense that it's produced and structured like a narrative film, whereas her other work is more poetic or photographic. As an artist in residence in Berlin in 2002, she created a series of films of people living in the city that resemble still photographs or slides. In other cases, she put footage taken from television or historical film archives in a different light through repetition, montage or by using voice-over.

Identity is a major theme in Tan's art. She is fascinated by how personal identities and realities are shaped and twisted by cul-

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ture, media and history. As a child of a Chinese father and a Scottish-Australian mother, she's especially interested in the cultural juxtaposition of East and West and the possibility of thinking past this dichotomy. It's the conceptual thread that links *Lapse of Memory* to her earliest works, despite the fact that it is the first Tan film with an overt cinematic style, featuring a professional on-screen actor.

Twenty-seven minutes in length, *Lapse of Memory* depicts a day in the life of a bewildered old man, played by Johan Leyssen, who lives alone in a large building that is a strange mixture of Eastern and Western architectural styles. Tan's voice-over explains the man's dementia. He has forgotten where he comes from and he only remembers fragments of his life. Out of instinctive habit, he does Tai Chi exercises every morning, but at the same time he doesn't even know his real name.

'It's not at all clear whether he's Western or Eastern,' says Tan about her main character. 'He has attributes of both cultures, like the building he lives in. In a way, I am him. The film is about the possibility to construct or to compose your own identity.'

During the film, Tan's voice explains the *Groundhog Day*-like situation the man is in, perfectly capturing the state of senile dementia. 'He feels lost in his various selves, his possible biographies,' the voice-over comments. 'They trap him into a scenario which he does not want to live. This place can only serve him as a halfway hotel. [He] is waiting for a story which he can make his home.'

The idea for *Lapse of Memory* cropped up after Tan was invited for the Brighton Photo Biennial. Originally the festival invited her to work with the local historical film archive. On a tour past the various locations, Tan was struck by one of the city's landmarks, the Brighton Pavilion, which is one of the best kept examples of 'Chinoise' architecture.

'It represents how Westerners saw Asia in the 1900s, as a sort of kitsch Disneyland,' says Tan. 'I didn't know the building but when I saw it, I felt that it could not be a coincidence. I had to do something with it because I felt a connection with my background, growing up in the West as a child of a Chinese father. But when I finally had the permission to film inside the building, I chose not to portray it in a documentary style because I didn't want it to look like a tourist impression.'

Working in a fictional style, with a professional actor, also had its practical reasons. The Brighton Pavilion is a museum which is under very strict care. 'We weren't allowed to touch a thing and we were only able to film at night', says Tan. 'Because of these restrictions I couldn't just work with any person. Fortunately I was able to work with a very good actor and working with him was great.'

Leyssen plays his character as tragic in his solitude and at the same time comical in his erratic behaviour. Despite the long, slow shots and heavy theme, the tension between Leyssen's convincing portrayal of a brittle old man and Tan's light, distancing commentary through voice-over makes the film a very engaging, yet short cinematic experience that stays with you for a long time.