

Fiona Tan

Footsteps

24 November 2023–20 January 2024

Press Release

Frith Street Gallery is delighted to announce a new exhibition by Fiona Tan. *Footsteps* (2022) is a 97-minute video installation made by Tan at the invitation of Amsterdam's Eye Filmmuseum and combines archival film footage from the museum's collection with a voiceover of letters written to the artist by her father while she was a student in the late 1980s. The artist added a soundtrack to the film material that reflects the action and events taking place, bringing the century-old footage to life. As we listen to Tan's father (voiced by actor Ian Henderson) write about the fall of the Soviet Union, civil unrest in China, and the everyday lives of the artist's relatives in Australia, we watch men and women toil the land and harvest the sea, we see cows in the field and old men smoking pipes, sailboats moving across the horizon and the emergence of industry and urbanisation.

Assembled from hundreds of hours of footage spanning 1896 to the late 1920s, *Footsteps* begins with the haunting sound of a church bell accompanied by a sequence of moving images: sun and clouds, a crowd on a beach, a young girl in traditional Dutch dress, vividly hand-coloured, and the gloomy churn of the sea. Soon we hear the voice of a man utter 'August 2nd, 1988', a date that is almost a century after the earliest footage in the film, followed by the first of the letters from Tan's father. A tapestry of life in early twentieth-century Netherlands unfolds, after about 30 minutes we witness the rise of factories and technology on an industrial scale, the inevitable creep of modernity. The film portrays a society being overwhelmed by enormous, relentless machines and the need to feed and service them. The letters to the artist from her father discuss their family, the global political situation, his own memories of learning Dutch geography and history while growing up in Indonesia while also encouraging the young Fiona Tan as she goes through periods of self-doubt.

Although the footage captures a nation as it makes a transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, what emerges from the film is not a portrait of the Netherlands at the dawn of modernity nor an autobiography of the artist, but a poignant study of how anyone might contend with political and technological change. Although the letters are intimate, they are also as historically compelling as the archival footage. The juxtaposition of the personal and global invites the viewer to reflect on both the significance and the ephemerality of all lives – at the dawn of the century, in the recent past, and in the present day.

On Wednesday 22 November, Fiona Tan will be in conversation at The Photographers' Gallery, London to discuss *Footsteps* and her practice more broadly. Learn more via [The Photographers' Gallery website](#).

Fiona Tan was born in Pekan Baru, Indonesia in 1966. She studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, and the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunst, Amsterdam. Her commission for a stained glass window in St Laurence Cathedral Alkmaar, Netherlands will be unveiled in October 2023. Recent solo exhibitions include Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam (2022); Kunsthalle Krems, Krems an der Donau (2020); Museum der Moderne Salzburg (2020); Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2019) and MAC's (Grand-Hornu), Belgium (2019).