



Where
In the world
I am

A response to Ho Tam's *Cover to Cover* by Tricia Wasney

One of my favourite classes in Landscape Architecture was a botany field studies course where we tromped through a mixed Manitoba forest and took samples of plants contained within a metal frame that we tossed onto the ground. We recorded as many plants as we could within the three-by-three-foot space under the tree canopies and were amazed at the liveliness, the diversity of flora and fauna, seeing things we didn't realize were even *there* except for careful watching. For contrast we went to a planted forest where there was only one species of barely surviving trees and virtually no undergrowth. It was still and apocalyptic, the only other feature being some termite mounds. It made clear the notion that within an ecosystem everything impacts everything else. In the forest dominated by one tree, little else can exist. In the healthy forest each plant needs, and is dependent upon, the actions of the others. Ho Tam's art practice reminds me of this.

I studied film many years before that, which required another kind of careful watching. Oh, *The Gaze*. There are many theorists who have spent their lives studying seeing and looking but it was the work of Laura Mulvey that resonated. Mulvey suggested that the male gaze objectified women for male pleasure and was so pervasive that even women saw women on screen through the heterosexual male gaze, a result of centuries of patriarchy and invested power. Ho Tam's work reminds me of this, too, for the way he subverts it because in much of Tam's practice *he* is the gazer and the gazed upon as well as the watcher and recorder of aspects of Asian culture and history. His practice places him at the centre of a larger ecosystem that includes his reality as an Asian man overlapping with the broader mainstream culture.

These ideas of overlapping networks, or ecosystems, and the holder/power of the gaze is present in much of Tam's work and is particularly evoked in the bookwork *A Brief History of Me (hotam #1)*. On the cover is the artist looking directly out. We are not used to seeing Asian men on the covers of glossy magazines looking right at us. Some feeble recent attempts aside, (women of colour! women of all sizes!) our usual experience of glossy magazines at the checkout counter are of (usually) blonde, thin women in expensive clothes. Within Tam's magazine is a timeline of world events starting with the Dutch leaving New Guinea in 1962 (the year of his birth) and ending with the Syrian poison gas attack of 2013 (the publication of *hotam #1*). Each event he chooses to note along the way is connected to a photo of the artist - as a baby on his parents' lap, on vacation, at family events, in a theatre, at college, in a restaurant, in a car, an office. This seemingly simple correlation is devastating. While here I am celebrating a birthday, someone else's world is ending. Or as I endure crises of my own, the world marches on. We are apart and a part.

Tam's choice of a typical magazine format for his artist books is sly, lending the publications a kind of mainstream stamp of approval. In *hotam Magazines (hotam #6)* he uses the familiar masthead of well-known magazines like *People*, *National Geographic*, *Newsweek* and more, but places them against photos those

magazines would never sport. There is a subtle humour at work here too – the photos are *kind of* subversively related to the word. Underneath PLAYBOY a middle aged man wearing a ball cap, shirt and pants wears a placard reading “United Steelworkers Local 2952 ON STRIKE”; underneath GLAMOUR is one cast-off and well-worn woman's strappy sandal. And unlike the 'real' magazines, there is no other text advertising what awaits inside. For your consideration is only the image and the word from which to draw your own conclusions.

There is something incredibly egalitarian and, dare I say, uplifting about Tam's work. I say uplifting not because the subjects he tackles are happy or uncomplicated ones but because he approaches them sincerely, directly and simply, investing them with power just by putting them there to consider. I found myself repeating to myself this phrase: here I am, look at me, I am occupying space. Take *Other People's Business (hotam #2)*, another magazine-format production. It is pages and pages of business cards, photocopied and laid out ten to a page, representing artists, physicians, librarians, marketing managers, health administrators, mortgage specialists and more. I like collecting business cards for utilitarian purpose; at work, they know my fondness for the Rolodex. I've never thought of a collection of cards as a kind of community as they are represented here, an ecosystem, an extension of the collector. It is as if being in this book together makes them equal but individual, defined but complex, and part of a larger whole.

Tam is a prolific artist working not only with artist books but in painting, drawing, and video. His video works explore his reality as an Asian man; as he writes on his website, he is “interested in tracing my own personal history and identity as it intersects with mainstream culture. In doing so, I seek, therefore to reinvent aspects of the diasporic journey of a certain Asian man in the world today.” There are too many video works to do justice here but I'll mention one: *Season of the Boys* is a “beautiful, melancholy, poignant video” (to quote Kegan McFadden) created from footage shot at the Chinatown Basketball Tournament in New York City in August 1997 and overlaid with a poetic narration by the artist about a mythical 'boy season' that, as the artist writes, “documents the Asian boys who can jump, or at least pass the ball. Living between Black and White Americans, the yellow boys attempt to negotiate a space for themselves.” It is an elegy and, like much of Tam's work, a tender yet challenging look at the everyday and the under-examined. He demands a space for himself in a world that has other ideas of how to represent Asian men and Asian culture. In doing so he reminds any of us who have felt marginalized or defined by a dominant culture that we all have our place in the world. And of how much we all impact each other.

Here we are. Look at us. We are occupying space.

Ho Tam was born in Hong Kong, educated in Canada and the U.S. and was employed in advertising companies and community psychiatric facilities before turning to art. Tam works in a multitude of disciplines including photography, video, drawing, painting and print media. His first video, *The Yellow Pages*, was commissioned by the public art group PUBLIC ACCESS for an installation/projection at the Union Station of Toronto in 1994/95. Since then Tam has produced over 15 experimental videos. He was included in the traveling exhibition *Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video* by Walker Art Center, Minnesota. His feature documentary film "Books of James" was awarded Outstanding Artistic Achievement (Outfest, LA) and Best Feature Documentary (Tel Aviv LGBT Film Festival). Since 2010, Tam has been focusing on his publishing projects. Among them, *HOTAM* and *POSER* are two ongoing projects. Tam is an alumnus of Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program, Bard College (MFA) and recipients of various fellowships and artist's grants.

Tricia Wasney is an artist and arts administrator in Winnipeg.

EXHIBITION

04 November - 17 December 2016

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday 04 November | 7 PM

ARTIST TALK

Saturday 05 November | 2 PM

IMAGE | *untitled*, Ho Tam, 2016

PLATFORM

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PLATFORM would like to thank the Manitoba Arts Council, Winnipeg Arts Council and the Winnipeg Foundation for their continued support.