MINING THE ARCHIVE

Erika Tan & Anthony Lam

"Mining The Archive" brings together a selection of works by London-based artists Erika Tan and Anthony Lam exploring the theme of archives, history and memory. Over the last several years, both artists have independently produced projects that originated from specific collections and archives, namely the British Empire and Commonweath Museum's Moving Image Archive and the McKenzie Heritage Picture Archive.

This exhibition provides a context to re-visit the artists' engagements with 'heritage' issues through a series of video and photo-based installations that have involved the investigation and construction of bodies of knowledge through archives and museum collections: *Persistent Visions*, *The International Collection of Cultural Cross Dressing*, and *Between Cultures*.

In addition to these works, the artists will also be creating an *Interpretation Space*, through which individuals are invited to participate. The concept of archival materials holding inherent information forms the basis of this enquiry. Individual experience, knowledge, heritage and interpretation provide a multiplicity of readings. This area will encourage the documentation of these diverse readings.

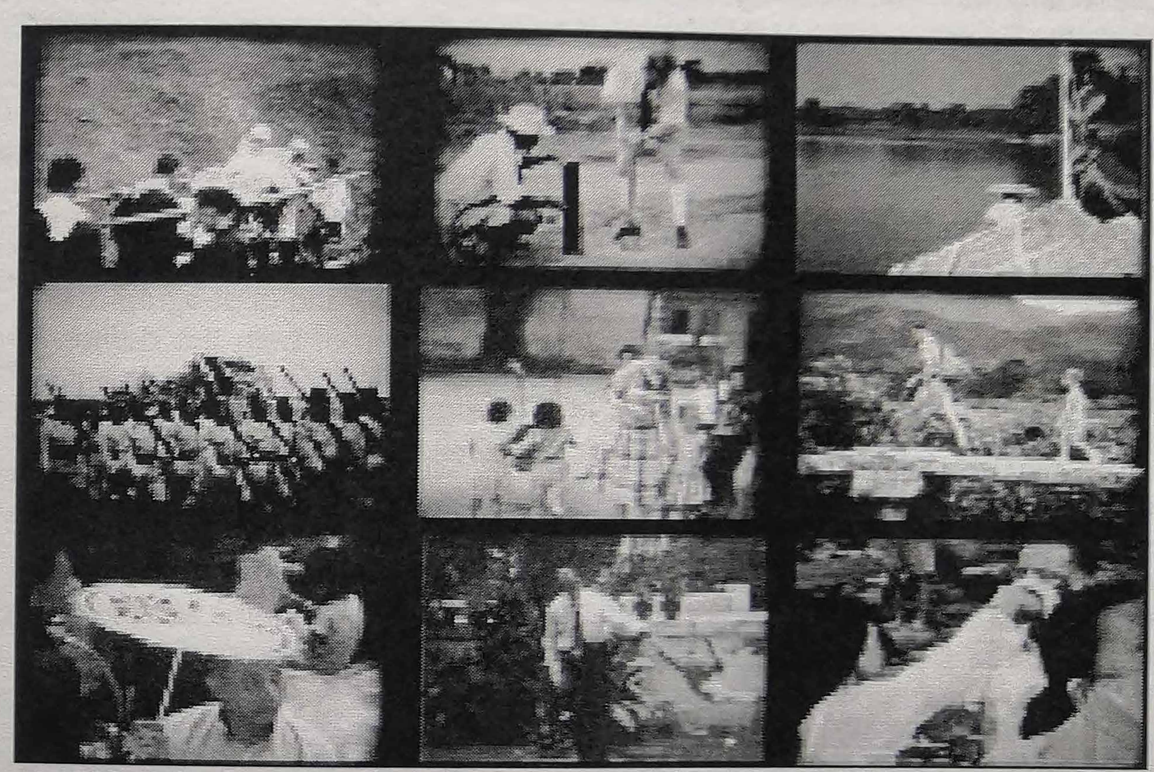
Please feel welcome to sit and look, watch, think, write and record. Audiences are also invited to contribute to *The International Collection of Cultural Cross Dressing* by bringing along a photograph of themselves in a mode of cultural cross-dressing.

Persistence of Vision. *A film term for the production of moving images from still pictures. The process of creating a moving image is dependent upon the eye/brain's persistence of vision, whereby the the memory of the image is retained by the viewer.*

All images for *Persistent Visions* courtesy of the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum

PERSISTENT VISIONS by Erika Tan

Persistent Visions is the culmination of Erika Tan's research in the Moving Image Archive at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. The title is a film term for the production of moving images from still pictures. The piece uses super 8 film shot by individuals and families who were once stationed in the former British Colonies as part of the colonial elite, and whose filmic collections are now held by the archive. The filmic explorations cover vast regions, from Malaysia to Kenya and The Suez Canal to Hong Kong.



Having grown up in a commonwealth country, namely Singapore, and with her background in anthropology, Tan is interested in museological issues such as the nature, status and classification of archival collections. Her work is often informed by specific cultural, geographical or physical contexts, exploring different media to excite and confront an audience.

ARTIST STATEMENT Erika Tan

Persistent Visions marks a pause in my journey through the Moving Image Archive of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum and the histories encapsulated there. My initial proposal of "illuminating hidden meanings and messages, unearthing personal and subjective histories hidden by the grander structures of empire" has not fully been realized, or indeed has changed. The actual physicality or materiality of the archive and the process of navigating indexes, accessing film clips, identifying content, moving between fast and present formats and meanings has been overwhelming, but even more so has been the question of the archive's status as historical 'evidence' and my 'take' on the imagery viewed.

A few decisions have been key to the way the work has developed. The first is the use of 'amateur' film footage held by the archives rather then 'professional' footage. In the main, this has meant working with less highly-edited material and no explicitly over-arching authoritative story lines. The material stretches across a time frame of about 50 years (1930's to 70's) and is geographically unbounded. The content acts as personal recordings of both the domestic and the public lives and contexts of the filmmakers. The development of film technologies and mediums such as 8mm, 9.5 and super 8 provided much more accessible and transportable cameras. Cine cameras were used to record a personal response to family and working life in a particular place and time. This can be seen in the diversity of material and film locations.

My second decision was to try and include the materiality of the archive and the experience and process of research within the work. I became interested in both the status of the archival material in terms of its references to the past but also its material existence as fragile film, collated into 'collections', indexed, notated. Many of the film reels within the collections have been spliced together, not necessarily chronologically, and jump from location to location. Without the guidance of a sound track or the original film makers intentions, or knowledge and experience of the specifics of a place and its history, the remaining 'film evidence' is left in a liminal state of indeterminacy.

'Who is that person?' 'Where is this place?' 'What is happening?' 'What status does this material have in terms of history and understanding?' These are questions asked, but not necessarily answered in the work.

In foregrounding the actual experience of working with an archive and placing the materiality of the film as central, it has meant that rather than going into the archive looking for material to support a predetermined narrative, I have instead sought to explore the archive with an appropriate openness and respond to the narratives perceived within the material itself. What this has actually thrown up was not the "hidden meanings and messages" as anticipated, but instead a persistence of visions, images that kept reoccurring over time and space, and remained with me on my departure from the archive. The piece has resolved itself to become a reference to the centrality of the film medium and to history as memory.

Credits: *Persistent Visions* is presented with the support of the following who have kindly donated to the archive and given permission for their material to be used. The collections used are: Boles, Dalyell, Duke, Fisher, Fromings, Gaskell, Hartgill, Harley, Hawley, Hayburn, Knowles, Lorimer, Morrison, Selkirk, Silk, Vernede, Wicksteed and Wilson. Special thanks also go to the archivist Jan Vaughan, for her generosity in helping me access and navigate the collections, and David Elsbury, a volunteer at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum and magic lantern specialist, for transferring the fragile cans of film onto tape for future generations. Thanks also to the Picture This team, who commissioned, supported and made the project possible.

Persistent Visions is commissioned by Picture This with support from the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, as part of *Ghosting*, a series of research-based commissions on the themes of archive, memory and ethnography funded by Arts Council England.

THE INTERNATIONAL COLLECTION OF CULTURAL CROSS DRESSING by Erika Tan

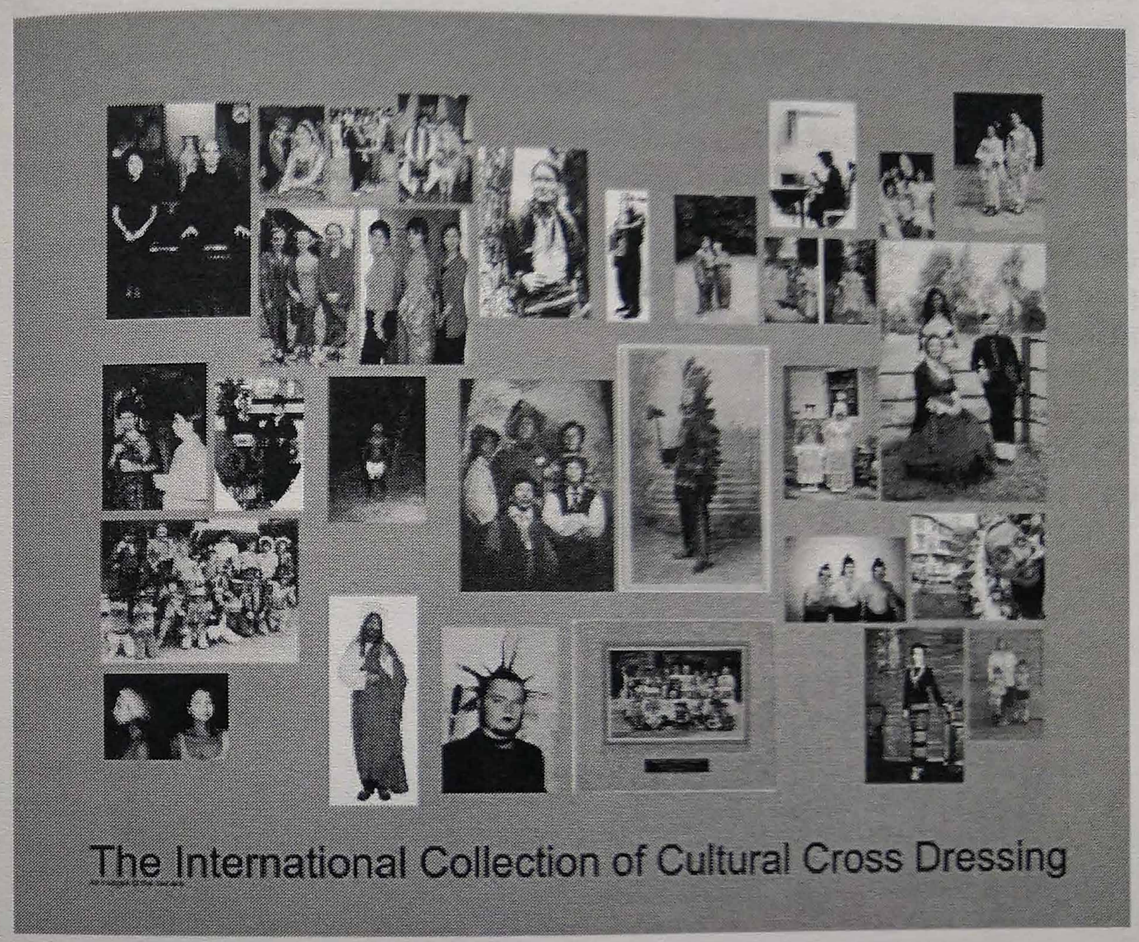
> Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself.
>
> — Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia U P, 1991); also quoted in the opening essay by Judith Stewart to the exhibition catalogue *Strangers To Ourselves* (Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, 2003).

This particular work was developed for a multi-sited exhibition titled *Strangers to Ourselves*, after a book similarly titled and written by Julia Kristeva. The project was based across the South East of England, an area associated recently with mass immigration concerning asylum seekers and refugees from all parts of the globe.

My starting point was a local history museum in Hastings, UK, where the story of one of Hastings' most (in)famous men, Grey Owl, a.k.a. Archibald Stansfield Belaney born "English" in 1888 in Hastings and died "Ojibwa" in 1938 in Canada, is on display. Whilst his story is a fascinating tale of multiple adaptations and passings, it was the photographs of him dressed up in beaver furs and braided hair that interested me.

Apart from these obvious 'signs' of difference, with hindsight and today's current understandings of cultural fluidities, Grey Owl looks less 'Ojibwa' then he does Archibald Stansfield Belaney. However, of more importance to me, was something else entirely.... what this image of Grey Owl reminded me of, was a photograph of my own English grandfather in the 1930s, dressed in leathers and feathered braids....

In contrast to *Persistent Visions*, *The Collection of International Cultural Cross Dressing* is less about reading and interpretation as it is about the power of archives and museum collections to represent and structure reality, and their unwillingness to embrace cultural change, hybridity and ambiguity. Focusing on the area of cultural cross-dressing, I have collected and continue to collect a growing body of diverse images. These photographs are donated by people from around the world, showing themselves dressed in clothes that they themselves identify as 'other'. The contexts range from situations of necessity to those reflective more of desires, play, and fantasy.



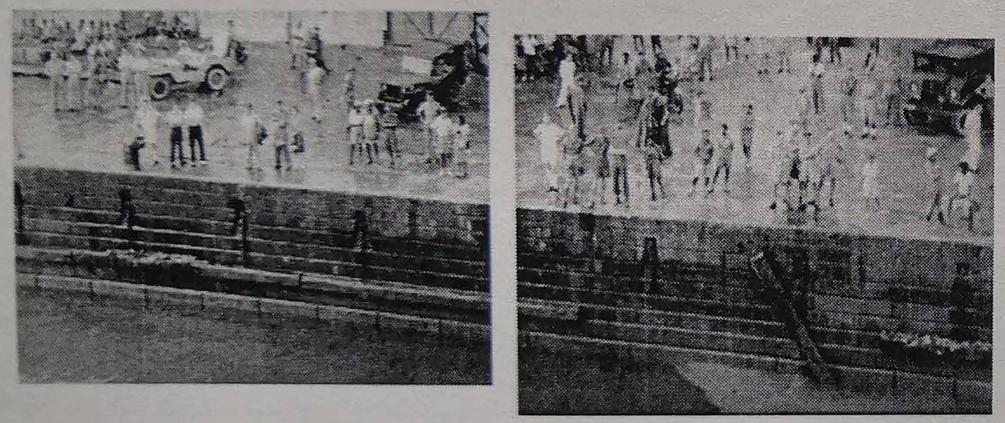
Credits: The collection would not be possible without the generous participation of individuals who contributed images—some of whose names appear below: Rosemarie Tan, Ming Tiampo, Caroline van Ketel, Farooq and Kiran, Tamara Stuby and Esteban Alvarez, Brett Murray, Kutala Dlambulo, Jackie Kirk, Joshua Fried, Anna Sherbany, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Alison Williams, Carl Jaycock, Ming Wong, Claire, Tan Family, and Anthony Lam.

Thanks also goes to Judith Stewart who commissioned the work as part of the exhibition *Strangers To Ourselves*.

BETWEEN CULTURES by Anthony Lam

With *Between Cultures*, Lam has constructed a narrative from a body of photographic archival work (authors unknown) which is fundamentally about travel, transition and the transmission of ideas concerning power and the gaze in the context of Britain's Imperial project. Lam's intervention displays points of interaction between both sides of the (colonial) equation allowing space in the selection and sequencing of the images to explore a personal subjectivity.

Between Cultures imparts a sense of ambivalence and provides a visual prelude to the Empire's end. It challenges viewers to explore questions and points of interest pertinent to their contemporary (postcolonial) selves. The project consists of five individual components. *Heaven's Command, Parts 1 & 2*, *Foray Part 1: Dread and Envy with Foray Part 2: Duel*, *Rank*, *Unseen (Correspondence)*, and *Rule Britannia*, a sound piece that plays every hour on the hour.



Heaven's Command, Part 1

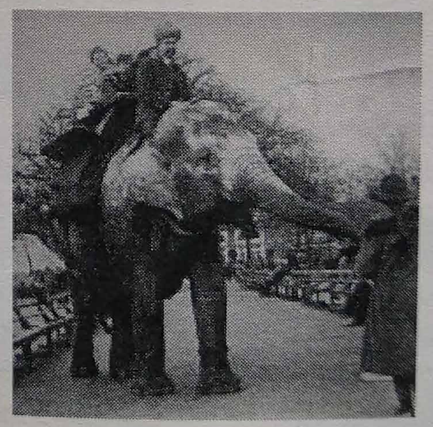
Heaven's Command takes its title from the lyrics of Britain's unofficial national anthem, "Rule Britannia," in which 'Britannia rules the waves, Britons never, never, never will be slaves...' The piece explores a period of time (circa 1930s) when Britain's Empire was starting to unravel to be eventually replaced by a Commonwealth of postcolonial countries and subjects. *Foray Part 1: Dread and Envy with Foray Part 2: Duel* continue the theme with images taken in Africa by European visitors to the continent. In *Rank*, the textual backsides of cigarette cards for the UK market are displayed only, denying the front visual images of the British Empire's military in India that allude to the (carefully managed) hierarchies and divisions in castes and religion. *Unseen (Correspondence)* is a collaborative piece with audience members in which Lam invites people to write and comment on an archive image (not to be displayed) for inclusion in the exhibition, adding a further contemporary reading and investigation into the archival material.

Credits: Isabel Lilly & Andrea Davidson at Independent Photography, Anita Mckenzie at the Mckenzie Hertitage Picture Archive.

ARTIST STATEMENT Anthony Lam

In 2002, I was awarded an artist residency at the McKenzie Heritage Picture Archive, London UK (www.mckenziehpa.com), in partnership with Independent Photography (www.independentphotography.co.uk). The process of this residency and in particular the unearthing of a hand-made book of original anonymous black & white negatives literally at the bottom of a filing cabinet, has proven to be a persisting memory within my own history as an artist.

The negatives formed the main body of work (*Heaven's Command*) for *Between Cultures* and informed the direction and investigation into the making of a new archive of images focusing on how we read and interpret visual records made by anonymous individuals about colonial histories and journeys. The reinvigoration and interpretation that this process allowed impacted on how, as an artist, I view and work with photographic imagery. It opened up a way of seeing concerned with the ways in which narrative can be constructed and remade many times over with a diversity of interpretations. It also provided new opportunities and ways of engaging with an audience, as with the *Unseen (Correspondence)* component of *Between Cultures*, which actively engages with viewers of the exhibition and encourages participation. For *Unseen (Correspondence)*, an image from the archive with instructions for viewing and contributing comments is handed out before the exhibition, making new commentary to be viewed alongside my visual interventions within the archive.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

The image you have before you has been selected from the archives of McKenzie Heritage Picture Archive by artist Anthony Lam as part of the exhibition Mining the Archive at Centre A.

Anthony Lam would like you to carefully consider and look at the image.

You must place this image in a prominent place, where you will see it every day.

Each day spend time looking at it. Do this for one week. Write down any thoughts that the image provokes in a note book.

At the end of the week write your thoughts onto the card provided. There are 2 cards for you to use. You do not need to use both.

You do not need to put your name on the card.

Send the completed card or cards back in the self-addressed-stamped envelope.

Many thanks.

Unseen (Correspondence)

The original siting of this exhibition project within the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich, London, UK (the historic departure point for England's Naval ships), was very significant to the images used and this context added a further important layer of understanding to *Between Cultures*. The re-staging of the work within a new international space at Centre A will reinvigorate the issues and points of arrival and departure for both audiences and artist, and add another dimension to the work as it travels and collaborates anew.

Rule Britannia lyrics

When Britain first, at heaven's command,
Arose from out the azure main,
Arose, arose, arose from out the a-azure main,
This was the charter, the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain:

Rule Britannia!
Britannia rule the waves.
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

Rule Britannia!
Britannia rule the waves.
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

The nations, not so blest as thee,
Must in their turn, to tyrants fall,
Must in ,must in, must in their turn, to tyrants fall,
While thou shalt flourish, shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.

(Chorus)
Rule Britannia!
Britannia rule the waves.
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

Rule Britannia!
Britannia rule the waves.
Brittons never, never, never shall be slaves.

BIOGRAPHIES

ERIKA TAN

Persistent Visions, 2005
Video installation

The International Collection for Cultural Cross Dressing, 2002
Photo-based installation

Erika Tan is a London-based artist and independent curator who has worked on a wide range of projects including site-responsive installations, lens- and time-based works, curatorial projects, and building/urban regeneration schemes. Initially trained in anthropology at Cambridge, much of her on-going work is informed by issues of cultural diversity, hybridity and the development of a practice which celebrates and fosters ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction. Tan has participated in numerous exhibitions in the UK and internationally, including EAST International in Norwich; "Incommunicado" and "Cities on the Move" at the Hayward Gallery; and "Science Fictions" at The Esplanade in Singapore. Recent commissions and projects include working with Arts Council East, Channel 4, BBC Radio London, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, Film and Video Umbrella, Terra Incognita and Picture This. Tan is also making new work for Singapore's first International Biennale (2006).

ANTHONY LAM

Between Cultures, 2002
Photo-based installation

Anthony Lam is a London-based artist primarily concerned with interrogating, exploring and expanding his relationship with and to the photographic image. His diverse practice is located within conceptual, representational and social concerns, addressing issues of identity, culture and place from a personal and socio-political viewpoint. Holding a Master's degree in Photography from the London College of Printing and a Diploma in Photojournalism from the London College of Printing, Lam creates multilayered pieces that involve a wide variety of approaches and responses, ranging from photographic stills, archival and digital imagery, installations and interventions within spaces, to the use of projected images, light boxes, objects, sound and text. Ultimately, Lam's artworks are transitional works that comment and reflect on the inability and challenge for photography to represent and resolutely fix the human experience. His works have been exhibited in Abu Dubai, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, UK and the USA.

"Mining the

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The artists thank the many individuals who participated in their projects and the staff and volunteers at Centre A for their support and assistance.

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This exhibition booklet accompanies the two-person exhibition, "Mining the Archive," by Erika Tan and Anthony Lam, held at the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A), April 22 to May 27, 2006. "Mining the Archive" is curated by Alice Ming Wai Jim.

CENTRE A

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