

## Unknowing Culture by Lucy Cotter

Ten winter landscape paintings gently bob up and down against the night sky, held up by young women and men, whose earnest faces peer over the damaged surfaces of the canvases. This barely moving vignette is the focus of Aram Lee's video *A Dissonance of Landscapes* (2019), whose location on a boat is discernible only from the sound of water and the distant hum of an engine. The moving vessel is rendered invisible, lending a certain abstraction to this unspoken conversation between static objects and people. We are left to imagine the dark stillness of the surrounding landscape and to scan the paintings' imagery for clues about the significance of this obscure nocturnal event.<sup>[i]</sup>

The frozen terrains depicted in the paintings are reminiscent of Northern Europe, yet there is something about the stylized frills of the rock formations, the flattened rendering of the human figures, and the translucent quality of the white vistas that make it impossible to securely identify the works. Rather, in being "almost but not quite" Dutch or Flemish, Scandinavian or Germanic, they reveal their status as something "other." Excavated by the artist from the archives of Amsterdam's Tropical Museum, built as an ode to its colonial exploits, these are Cantonese paintings from the 1800s, made by artists living in a subtropical region. These depicted winter scenes are forged by imagination as well as being informed by traditional Chinese repertoires, and by prints and drawings brought by Dutch traders. Their heterogeneous landscapes are not fictitious representations; they bear witness to an intercultural imaginary, to a conversation still waiting to be heard.

In Lee's video, these "ten export landscapes" are taken on a precarious journey from Amsterdam's IJ channel to the open sea. Instead of telling us "about" histories of Dutch-Chinese trade and uneven cultural exchange, she plunges us into an underexamined space between centuries and continents; a tale whose neglect is materially manifest in the paintings' cracked and roughly taped surfaces. The darkness of the scene intimates that this space is located in the mind as much as in material reality. We become fellow travelers in this imagined geography, not knowing our destination, but experiencing how the journey unfixes stable markers. We notice that certain occupants of the boat have Asian features, echoing the physical presence of the Chinese painters whose names have gone unrecorded, while the gait and physique of other passengers might have stepped out of a Rembrandt painting, reminding us that the genealogies of colonial histories lead to the present. Yet all of the boat's occupants are familiar with the lights of Amsterdam and the low bridges the boat must traverse on its way. Self-contained histories do not exist here, only entwined lives, past and present. There is no "arrival" to or from a fixed point, only the constant inextricable journeying of cultures and peoples; an acknowledgment that begs for a redistribution of cultural capital.

When contemporary artists engage with cultural heritage, artifacts often take on a quality of materiality. They are reformed, reimagined, and repositioned, occupying a state of alteration of the relation between time and meaning, matter and words. The best artworks never close down this dynamic, even when they are finished. It is precisely this destabilization of reality, this nonclosure of narratives that breathes new life into apparently known and thus closed historical accounts. Through contemporary art, we are refused the distance of historicity, the possibility of one account. Rather, as in Lee's work, we are asked to temporarily inhabit an encounter, a specific episode in history. We are made to position ourselves, and in doing so, we find the multiplicity of ways in which the history or object at hand implicates us; the ways it doesn't allow us to untangle the now from the then, to isolate one national or cultural account from another. We discover instead how it can have an often unexpected resonance with our current lives and our futures as the artwork circles the question of whose narrative is being told, dredging up the unevenness of cultural encounters and confronting us with their repercussions in contemporary society.

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<sup>[i]</sup> The "Ten Export Landscapes" that appear in Aram Lee, *A Dissonance of Landscapes* (2019) are from the Tropical Museum collection of the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW), The Netherlands. Lee's project was realized with support from the AFK and Framer Framed, Amsterdam.