



JUST IMAGES

IN THE WORLD SURROUNDING AN INDOOR PLANT, JOHN CLANG REVISITS FAMILIAR IDEAS OF MEMORY AND REMEMBERING, AND PRESENTS ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF LOOKING AT AND LOOKING FOR IMAGES.

TEXT + YVONNE XU
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"Not a just image, just an image," Godard says. But my grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy – justesse: just an image, but a just image."

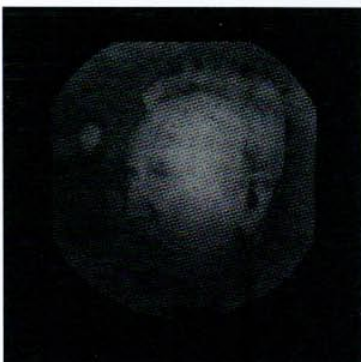
– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

"The indoor plant is me. I spend most of my time on my own, looking around quietly. Being the indoor plant is like observing family and friends in a very residential kind of frame, because the plant doesn't really go out, and it needs very little water and sun. All it does is just look."

– John Clang

AS AN ARTIST WORKING PRIMARILY with the media of photography and film, John Clang has developed a particular relationship with the camera – he doesn't use it per se.

"I am known to be someone who doesn't carry a camera," he revealed at a public talk with artist and author Regina Maria Möller hosted by FOST Gallery on 16 July. "I always believe that when I see something in front of me, if I pick up my phone to take a picture, I have something in between [me] and the subject. It blocks the sensations, the understanding of the topic. It obscures," he said.



Top: An installation view of the exhibition, which grew from a desire to probe deep into the roots of memory

Bottom: *He is my father* (fine art archival print mounted on aluminium, H100 x W100 x D4.2 cm, 2016)

Clang is keenly aware that the camera sees differently from the way we do. The camera performs a mechanical visual recording while the human perceives – with all our senses and faculties, including our capacities for memory and imagination. Clang is more interested in this human perception. *The World Surrounding An Indoor Plant*, consisting of both photographic prints and video works, explored such negotiation with photography and the image.

As Clang rejects the filmed or photographed image as the 'true' or 'just' image, he introduces a process he calls a "re-expression" to "reduce the photo into a pure impression." The process starts with him photographing his subjects. The photographs are projected onto paper via a magic lantern, and Clang traces the projections in charcoal on paper. He finally photographs the sketches and presents them as photographic prints.

"The idea is to create an imprint on that piece of paper – to retain the information that resonated with me and to exclude the noise that is not part of the original intention," Clang explained. "To reduce the photograph, only to see the imprint that is embedded in my head, this forces you to imagine ... to use your own personal history ... to slow down the whole process of understanding an impression."

The result is the intervening image that slips back and forth between photograph and drawing, signifier and signified, impression(istic) and expression(istic), reduced and expanded, blurred and focussed, dark (the workings of charcoal) and light (of the camera). These in-between states open up spaces for us to read images, both in Clang's work and in the wider visual culture.

When he was fifteen, Clang understood that the photographic plane presented alternative potentials. He had shot his very first roll of film and the photos had been underexposed so they turned out as a black blankness. Yet it was in this very glossy blankness that the photograph became a reflective plane that mirrored back the image of its beholder – an 'instant self-portrait', as Clang explained jokingly to his friends at that time. He has since been interested in the possibilities and power of bringing tension and humour to his images, of "stretching the canvas of photographic print," as he explained at FOST.

With the video works in *The World Surrounding An Indoor Plant*, similar negotiations of the image could be seen. Silent black-and-white videos were projected on postcard-sized screens. Words that bore no relevance to the content of the looped videos (recalled by Clang from overheard conversations) were overlaid as kind of soundtrack to influence the viewer's experience. As with the photographic prints, there was a sense of the conjoined – of silence and the (un)spoken, the theatre and the intimate, the public (universal) and the personal – and, above all, a sense of re-remembering.

Re-remembering always involves a dis-membering – not least, of the image, as seen in the works in this exhibition and in Clang's previous works. Clang likes to revisit subjects (this itself is a re-remembering) and these are always personal. A key idea Clang returns to is his family (again, a subject connoting membership).

"When I look at the mirror I think of them [Clang's parents]. It scares me. In my memory, my mother is forty years old, in [reality], she is sixty years old. If one day, when they pass away, and I don't remember them and require a photo to remember who they are, do I still remember them?"

Clang's preoccupations remind one of Roland Barthes looking for a 'just image' of his own mother in *Camera Lucida*. It's a familiar story – at once universal and personal. When we look at images we are not just looking at them, we are looking for them. For Clang, a memorable anecdote surrounding such searching, such looking, involves an early conversation had with his father, who used to take photos but never processed them:

Clang: "Why don't you process the film?"
Clang's father: "Why process the film when I remember the images?"

The World Surrounding an Indoor Plant by John Clang was shown at FOST Gallery from 2 July to 4 September 2016.

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• JOHN CLANG



Top and bottom: Video stills from *It's raining outside. Bring an umbrella* (top) and *What should we have for dinner* (bottom, both single-channel video installation projected on paper, 2016)