

Colonialism from either end of the lens

VIEWFINDER | Artists Erika Tan and Anthony Lam juxtapose photo and film images to explore intersecting cultures

MINING THE ARCHIVE

Erika Tan and Anthony Lam
Centre A, 2 West Hastings, until May 27

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Erika Tan and Anthony Lam are London-based artists who are interested in how archives — collections of photographs and films, in this case — tell stories both about the collectors, and the subjects, of the art. For *Mining the Archive*, this new show at Centre A, Tan and Lam have assembled a great collection of snap shots and home movies from around the world, to tell the story of colonialism, from the point of view of the colonizer, as well as the colonized. And they've done this without ever forgetting about art.

Erika Tan has two projects in *Mining the Archive*. One, humorously titled *The International Collection of Cultural Cross Dressing* (2002) is made up of over 50 snapshots of people dressed up in an "other" culture's garb. This ranges from Europeans dressed as native Indians, to Asians dressed as New Zealand pioneers, to mixed-race couples dressed as one race. The effect is like coming across a family album of the global village, or a Mardi Gras party that spans time zones and continents.

The origins of Tan's project are both personal and archival. Doing research at the Hastings Museum in southwest England, she came across pictures of the infamous Grey Owl, Britisher Archie Belaney who impersonated an Ojibway man in the 1920s and '30s, fooling not just the English, but many in Canada as well.

Tan then remembered a family portrait of her maternal grandfather, from the same period, dressed up in Native kitsch, complete with tomahawk and war bonnet. She began soliciting pictures from

acquaintances — and, now, viewers at her art shows — of themselves when dressed in another ethnic culture's clothing. Tan's work shows us both how we like to imitate the "other" — be it politically correct or not — and how we then feel the need to document it.

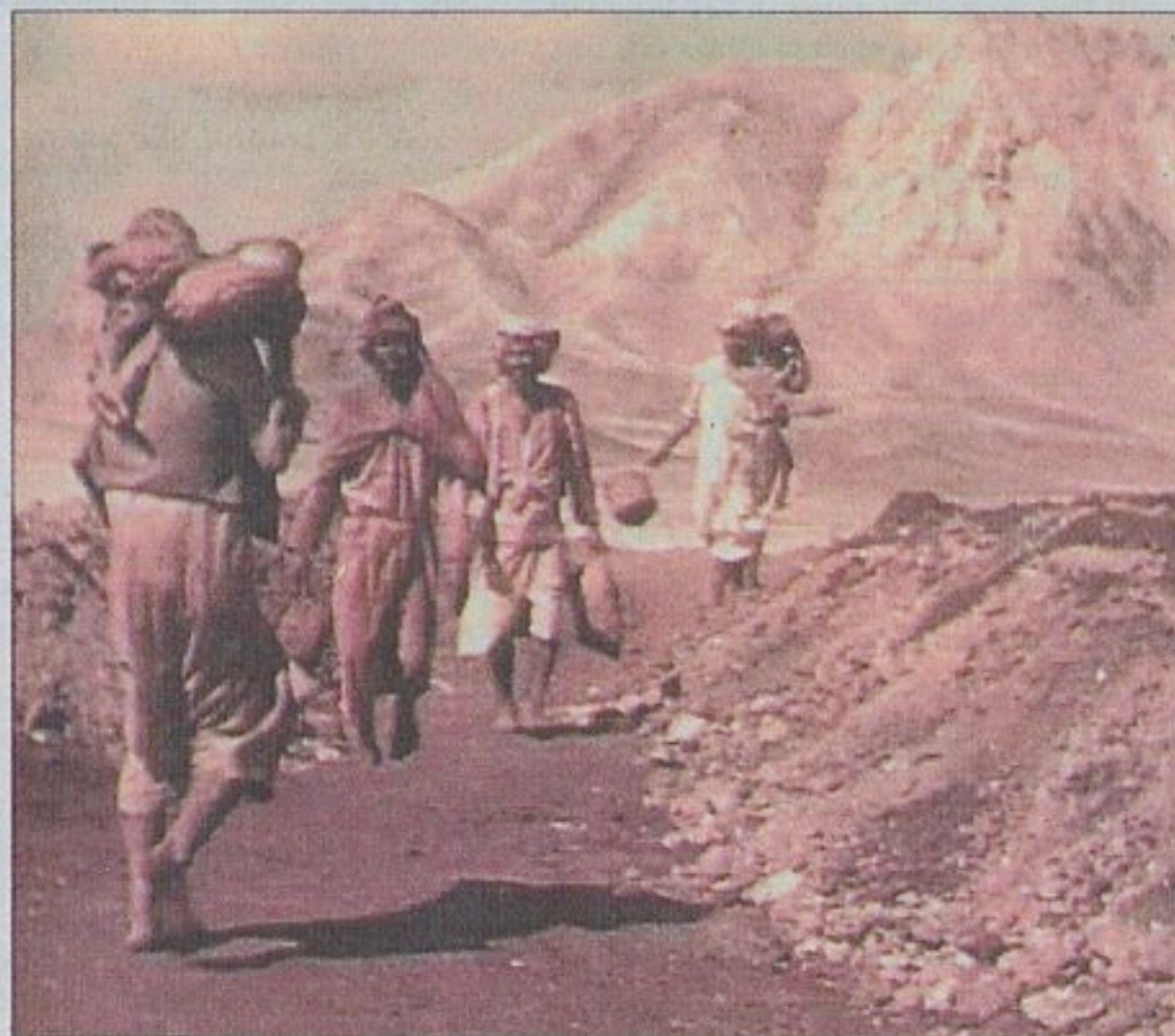
This interest in amateur photography or art carries over to Tan's other project in *Mining the Archive*, called *Persistent Visions* (2005). This is a video installation that grew out of Tan's work at the Moving Picture Archive of the British and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. The work is projected onto three screens and runs about 24 minutes long. When Tan was researching the holdings of the museum, she found that its moving images were divided between professional films — usually government documentaries — and home movies that private citizens shot when living in the colonies. These home movies — from the 1930s to the 1970s — were what captured her interest.

And you can see why: Tan's editing of the home movies results in a wonderful silent archive of the exotic and the everyday, the colourful and the black and white, from the pyramids of Egypt to skimpy bridges over treacherous rivers. We see picnics in India with a few British people on horses followed by a dozen Indians carrying their packages.

We see hesitant Africans or Arabs meeting these strangers with a movie camera in their hands, and we see Europeans running up and glad-handing everyone in sight. We see native children posing awkwardly, and a voyeuristic camera lingering on bare-breasted women doing manual labour. But there is always an esthetic to Tan's compilation here, in her use of repetition, her editing of the images, that belies any knee-jerk denunciation of the "colonial gaze." Rather, we have



A photo from Anthony Lam's project *Between Cultures*, part of the *Mining the Archive* show at Centre A Gallery.



A still from Erika Tan's video *Persistent Visions* from *Mining the Archive*.

the document of encounters between peoples, a document that leaves the interpretation up to us, rather than ramming it down our throat.

So too with Anthony Lam's project here, *Between Cultures*. Like Tan, Lam went to work at an archive not really knowing what he would find: in this

case the McKenzie Heritage Picture Archive, an archive of West Indian photography in London. Lam found a box of negatives that evidently came from a naval officer who had travelled to the Far East in the 1930s. The images are anonymous, and vary from clichéd shots of women in kimonos in

Japan to British soldiers waiting for a ship to arrive (or depart) in Singapore. There are also many of those homoerotic shots we see of white soldiers or sailors in hot climates, bare-chested, able to live a little looser whilst so far from the centre of the empire.

Lam has paired his arrangement of these photos with a series of texts from cigarette cards that depict Indian soldiers in the early 20th century.

The texts describe the soldiers in a predictably condescending fashion: thus Gurkhas are "sturdy little hillmen of Mongolian stock."

Another passage seems chillingly up-to-date considering the American difficulties in Iraq these days. Describing the 7th Rajput Regiment, it reads: "It is one of the 15 Indian cavalry and infantry units which have been selected for Indianization. No further junior British officers will be posted to these units, though senior British officers will remain with them till Indian officers are available to take their place."

With its quirky take on issues of colonialism and appropriation, of multiculturalism and image, *Mining the Archive* seems to be a perfect show for Vancouver. With no finger-wagging, but also no shying away from the complexities of our global history, Tan and Lam have forged a show that archives a gold mine.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver author and educator.