

PRESS RELEASE

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Williams College Museum of Art presents four related exhibitions that demonstrate the power of photography and film to evoke the rich complexity of culture while also questioning the implications of representing identity.

***Beyond the Familiar: Photography and the Construction of  
Community***

***Fiona Tan: Countenance***

***Independent Film and Ethnography***

begin September 20, 2008

***Liu Zheng: The Chinese***

begins November 15, 2008

WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass.— Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) presents four related exhibitions focusing on the role of photography and film to reflect, and potentially construct, cultural identity. Each of these artists have defined a group—whether by race, class, occupation, or neighborhood—and depicted individuals in a manner that moves beyond portraiture. Instead, each artist explores personal identity in the larger context of social groups. A special celebration marking the opening of these exhibitions will take place on Thursday, October 16 from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. at the museum. This free event is open to the public and all are invited to attend. Following the reception, artist

Tina Barney will give a talk at Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall about her photography project "The Europeans," which is featured in the exhibition *Beyond the Familiar*.

*Beyond the Familiar: Photography and the Construction of Community* provokes dialogue about the role of photography in the construction of cultural identity. The exhibition brings together 10 photography projects from around the world that span the history of the medium. These projects portray individuals from distinct cultural, economic, and professional groups. For example, Tina Barney's project "The Europeans" features the social elite and the intimacies of their relationships. In contrast, Peter Henry Emerson shows country people from East Anglia in their rural settings using a simple, direct manner. Most of these photography projects were initially distributed in the form of albums, portfolios, or publications as a visual archive. The earliest projects tend to assert a belief in photography's ability to faithfully represent a social group. Later projects point to the impossibility of that idea, calling into question the idea that photography can reveal "truth." Artists included in the exhibition are Felice Beato and Peter Henry Emerson from the 19th century; Edward Curtis, August Sander, and Aaron Siskind from the first half of the 20th century; Robert Frank, Barbara Norfleet, and David Goldblatt from the second half of the 20th century; and recent work by Tina Barney and Zwelethu Mthethwa.

Fiona Tan's ambitious video installation, *Countenance*, takes as its inspiration August Sander's lifelong project, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*. While Sander photographed people living and working in Germany with the goal of creating an archive that represented all types of people, Tan updates Sander's project in video, both echoing and investigating his ideas. Composed of multiple screens, each showing vignettes of Berliners posing for a video portrait, *Countenance* is an archive of representative types and a critical reflection on the role of an archive. Can Tan's portrayal of a baker standing by his mixing machine really tell us about the class of "all bakers"? Can he even typify male bakers, or bakers in Berlin, or young bakers? Tan creates a carefully calibrated tension between the purported objectivity of Sander's project and a more subjective approach.

*Independent Film and Ethnography* surveys a variety of independent film projects. Films include Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Luis

Bunuel's *Las Hurdes: Land Without Bread* (1932), Dennis O'Rourke's *Cannibal Tours* (1987), Jean Rouch's *Jaguar* (1957), Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1965), Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* (1975), and Ruben Ortiz-Torres's *Frontierland/Fronterilandia* (1995). These films range from pure ethnography to critiques of the ethnographic impulse.

*Liu Zheng: The Chinese* features all 120 photographs taken by Liu Zheng between 1994 and 2001. These photographs, recently acquired by the Williams College Museum of Art, portray the Chinese people and culture during a time of momentous change; his subjects are an array of characters, including coal miners, Taoist priests, Buddhist monks, prostitutes, convicts, and even waxwork figures from historical museums. These individuals come from all walks of life and every social station, but Liu also included unexpected photographs of those who are dead, dying, decrepit, or disabled. These tragic images illustrate the darker side of China's cultural history and the ways in which history replays itself in contemporary Chinese society. This is the first time that all 120 photographs will be on view together at the museum.

"Together, these four exhibitions explore how photographers use multiple images to portray the complexity of culture," says exhibition curator John Stomberg. "Making comparisons between these projects, between photography and film, allows the richness of each project to emerge with their inherent contradictions intact. It is up to the viewer to think critically about how each photographer portrayed each group and to decide what can, and cannot, be determined from photography about race, class, occupation, and character."

These four exhibitions were organized by John Stomberg, Deputy Director/Chief Curator and Lecturer in Art with assistance by Aimee Hirz, Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, Class of 2007, Tianyue Jiang and Amanda Hellman, Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, Class of 2008, and Andrea Gyorody, Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, Class of 2009; Jeanette Campbell, Williams College, Class of 2008, and Natalie Diaz, Williams College, Class of 2009.

*Fiona Tan: Countenance* is on view until February 11, 2009. *Beyond the Familiar* and *Independent Film and Ethnography* are on view until March 8, 2009. *Liu Zheng: The Chinese* is on view until April 26, 2009.

### **Related Events**

Gallery Talk: Thursday, September 25

4:00 pm

“Beyond the Familiar”

John Stomberg, Deputy Director/Chief Curator and Lecturer in Art

### **Season Premiere Party and Artist’s Talk**

Thursday, October 16

5:00–7:00 pm

Reception at WCMA

Thursday, October 16

7:00 pm

Artist’s Talk: Tina Barney

“People, Places and Things”

Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall, Williams College

Tina Barney was born in 1945 in New York. Barney is best known for her photographs documenting the lifestyle and relationships of her family and close friends, many of whom belong to the social elite of New York and New England. She was also one of the first photographers to explore working in a “directorial” mode in the 1980s. Her photographs are often carefully constructed, from the lighting to the poses and gestures of her subjects. Barney’s work can be found in the collections of the George Eastman House, Yale University Art Gallery, and the Museum of Modern Art, among others. She currently lives and works in Rhode Island.

Gallery Talk: Thursday, October 30

4:00 pm

“Questioning Reality: The Archives of Fiona Tan and August Sander”

Aimee Hirz, Public Relations Assistant, Williams College Graduate in the History of Art, Class of 2007

**Williams College Museum of Art**

The Williams College Museum of Art is open Tuesday through Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is free and the museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information, please contact: Suzanne Silitch, Director of Communications and Strategy, 413.597.3178; [wcma@williams.edu](mailto:wcma@williams.edu); <[www.wcma.org](http://www.wcma.org)>.