



All images © Sarah Isabelle Tan.

A recent graduate of the London College of Communication, Sarah Isabelle Tan is originally from Singapore, a place with a long tradition of having portraits made of deceased relatives. Tan initially studied fashion before photography, but her deeply personal connection with portraiture began when she beheld the framed pictures around her family home, their subjects made present yet remaining ineluctably absent.

“A fundamental part of my photography is a longing to possess what’s always beyond reach,” explains Tan. “This longing is inseparable from frustration, from the sense of loss and distance I feel when I look at a photograph. I understand that I am, in one sense, intimately near its subject. Yet in another, I will always be separate from it.”

In the stark cyanotypes of *The Distance Between Us*, Tan has transmuted her frustration into blue lament. The collection comprises photographs shot in Iceland and the Lake District, but Tan’s work is motivated by a feeling more profound and bewildering than the topography it captures. “I wanted to establish a link between physical distances and the distance between myself and the subject of a material photograph when I hold it, when I look at it,” says Tan. “The distances in the landscapes are translations of the feeling that attends this practice.” As it did for the elegiac portraiture of her childhood, Tan believes the material form of her photographs amplifies their enigmatic aura. “In my work, I keep returning to framed photographs; the material object in a physical frame has a presence.”

Working in a darkroom, where only the photographs are illuminated and there is no daylight to track the passage of time, Tan would feel the distance between herself and her work momentarily reduce. “For a fleeting moment, I envisioned myself falling figuratively into the depths of the image, transcending all limits of distance,” she says. These moments of dissolution are subtly encoded in the varying degrees of translucence throughout the collection, and the fortuitous specks and smudges, which, for Tan, emphasise the “fragility and intricacy of the photograph as object”.

Although the collection was submitted to LCC as her final exhibition, Tan’s study of distance remains – befitting its subject matter – open-ended. The project already includes a short silent film, viewable on her website, and she plans to venture further into the subject in the future, whatever form that may take. “This body of work is an attempt to comprehend my frustration,” she explains, “but I realise that distance will always be distance.” And distance, by its nature, can never be closed. **BJP**

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