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Intimacy and secrecy: Tako Taal and Rae-Yen Song

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Cover image:

Intimacy and secrecy: Tako Taal and Rae-Yen Song

by Greg Thomas • 02.02.2022

The two solo exhibitions currently on view at Dundee Contemporary Arts offer reveries on diasporic identity while holding their secrets at arm's length. A multimedia installation and double-channel film by the Welsh-born artist Tako Taal (b.1989) transports viewers to her father's birthplace in The Gambia, while a vast, insect-like temple by the Glasgow-based artist Rae-Yen Song (b.1993) invites us into the belly of an obscure family history. In one sense, there is a conceptual gulf separating Taal's understated installation and film-based practice from the flamboyant maximalism of Song's Pop-Surrealist sculpture. However, a deeper affinity unites these shows, which were not explicitly devised as a pair: 'After starting conversations with both of them', the curator Eoin Dara notes, 'it became clear that both were talking, in very different ways, about connections to family, and home, and ancestry – different ways of working out how one might belong'.¹

Such an impulse is more palpable in Taal's exhibition. *At the shore, everything touches* is devised as a 'landscape': a web of objects and ephemera that cumulatively trace a path through and around Juffureh, a small town on the north shore of the Gambia River in West Africa. Juffureh has loomed large in the Western Anglophone imagination since its depiction as the home of Kunta Kinte, a boy sold into slavery in North America in Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots*. The breakout success of that book and of subsequent film and TV adaptations has spawned what the exhibition notes refer to as 'an ethically complex tourist industry'. Indeed, the village today is presented as indelibly imprinted with patterns of colonial and postcolonial exchange. At the same time, this landscape is a personal one. Juffureh is not the artist's place of birth, but it is a site of forces that, it seems, have shaped her from a distance, and to which she has returned to shore up a sense of identity just out of reach.

These two framings of the village – as biographically and culturally significant – are borne out in an allusive arrangement of 'things' spread across the two galleries. Immediately on entering, the viewer is faced with a patch of terracotta-washed wall, which serves as a pinboard for an array of memorabilia **FIG.1**: family photographs, sketches of domestic objects and a 1980s calculator **FIG.2**. To the left, a large transparent plastic sheet hangs perpendicular to the clay-coloured strip, weighted to the floor by

piles of rice and coins; the same coins are also represented in a series of rubbings on tracing paper **FIG.3**. A traditional Gambian embroidered wool cloth hangs on the opposing wall **FIG.4**, and a 1990s cassette player floods the room with scratchy radio noise.

In Taal's work, narrative suggestions dart to the surface and then fade away. Small-scale agricultural economies seem to be at stake, and the outmoded technology and scattered coppers suggest a story of scarcity or thrift – of peripherality to Western consumer markets. The intimacy of gesture and material also implies that the lives portrayed are those of people the artist knows, or at least knows of, through her paternal family. *Memoirs of Seedy 1976–78* (2021) – a series of six giclée prints that incorporate reproductions of poems and a 'memoir' by Taal's father – consolidates this supposition. These are presented as archival documents as much as aesthetic objects, again inviting the viewer to piece together a buried history. The poems record stories of migration and globalisation:

They assembled
At the common place
Some weeping
Others with half smiles
and the children jiggling
A son, a brother, a grandson
is leaving.²

The memoir, by contrast, remains impenetrable: illegible pages of bleached, slanted cursive are all that the viewer sees, reproduced as though back-to-front, copied through the surface of the paper.



Fig. 1 *Sad deserted shore, your fickle friends are leaving*, by Tako Taal. 2021. Glitter vinyl, emulsion, oleander flower, brass, lemon peel, c-type prints, coins (various origins), rice, muslin, silk thread, newspaper cutting, plastic wallet, solar powered calculator, lightbox, portable radio cassette and infinite tape, dimensions variable. (Photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Dundee Contemporary

Arts).

As all this might suggest, secrecy is a quality that defines Taal's practice. But so too does a loaded, oblique symbolism. Although it is clear that something is not quite being said, it is not being said with a great depth of feeling. These two qualities find a form of reconciliation in the two-channel video work *SAMT utterance_01 (how a name becomes a step, a rhythm, a loop)* FIG.5. Footage from site visits to Juffureh is spliced with spoken and written monologues and family photographs, while stretched and looped vocal sounds play alongside snatches of music. 'This memory I carry with me', the voiceover states, 'others I leave behind in the landscape. I find some are too big and must live outwith my body'. Juxtaposed images show rough stone walls and mottled tree bark teeming with ants: surfaces that are almost anthropomorphic in their ruddy textures, as though the land is a body concealing a secret FIG.6.



Fig. 2 Detail from FIG 1. (Photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).

The impression of partial exclusion from meaning that the viewer might experience on encountering this show is an appropriate mirror for the artist's own encounter with her material: a home that cannot be reclaimed, a threshold that cannot quite be breached. Unearthing some of the facts underlying certain pieces – rice is the main crop in Juffureh, for example, and its cultivation is traditionally defined as 'women's work', and the wool garment is a naming-ceremony gift Taal was given as a baby – certainly enriches appreciation. However, Taal's ambivalence of gesture is also to be acknowledged as an integral quality of her enquiries.



Fig. 3 Detail from FIG 1. (Photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).

Song offers a notionally similar encounter with familial narratives, but the work's ambiguity coupled with stylistic extravagance nudges the audience into more free-roaming interpretation. The title of Song's exhibition, ▷▣●▷ (pronounced 'seoh'), consists of four abstract symbols, which also serve as a minimal aerial diagram of the work on view. A huge, multicoloured creature welcomes the viewer, inviting them to walk beneath its many legs – and an alarming looking orifice – into its 'belly' FIG.7. Squatting beneath is a statue robed in a luridly patterned cloth, sitting on a rich red carpet. The carpet leads to an inner sanctum – a geodesic dome of sorts FIG.8 – where the viewer encounters a suspended four-legged deity, which casts amphibian and arachnoid shadows on the walls FIG.9. Videos are screened around the hanging creature: two in gold frames that resemble inflatable swim rings and one on a screen housed in a cauldron sitting beneath the being's posterior. A set of hand-drawn animations show amoeba-like forms swimming through a primordial or intergalactic soup. The distinct parts of Song's installation have titles plucked from the vaults of a glittering idiolect: *ah kong*; ● *yap* ● (belly); and Wūūwūū.

In some ways this installation could not be further from the delicate freighting of Taal's neighbouring exhibition. However, Song shares a similar fascination with family identity and broaching dialogue with deceased ancestors. 'Guided by my mother's tongue, this architecture is an enclave', their exhibition notes tell us: 'a backdrop for an imagined dialogue with a long-departed grandfather. He was a being from another time and place, and my conversation with him addresses crossing, migration, loss, survival and labour'. The difference between this work and Taal's is that the signs and symbols that tether Song's practice to biography appear to be embedded at a much greater depth. It is difficult to

identify the precise details of the intergenerational dialogue alluded to above, for example. This is not a work that visitors will necessarily interpret in relation to migrant identities. Its wider allusions to a kind of new-age syncretic spirituality rooted in East-Asian religions and to microbial and intergalactic life – various domains of non-human sentience – are more easily decipherable.

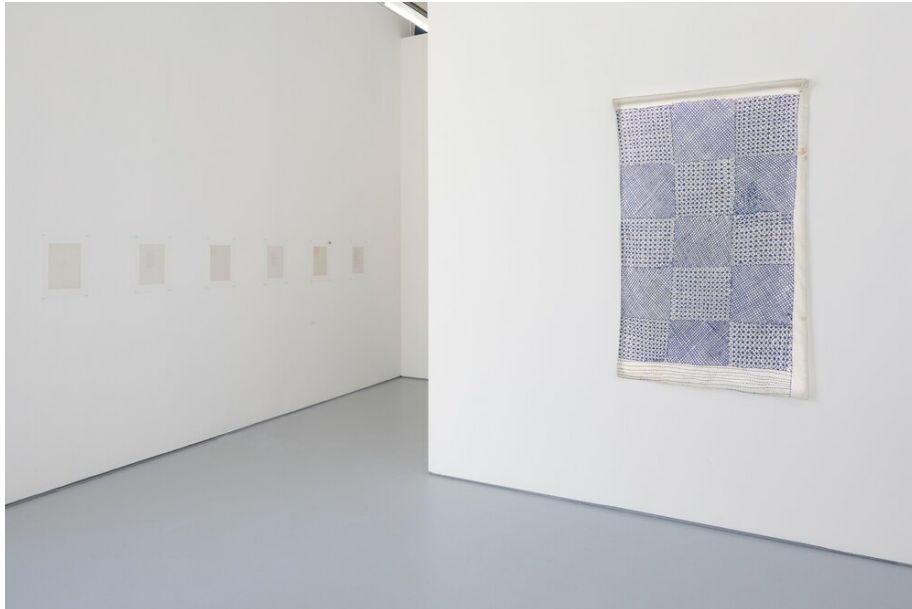


Fig. 4 Installation view of *Tako Taal: At the shore, everything touches* at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2021, showing *our black saga*, by Tako Taal. 2021. Wax carra (wool embroidered cloth), lightbox. (Photograph Ruth Clark).

In another context or time period, these exhibitions might not appear so bound together by a focus on diasporic family narrative. It is arguably a sign of the present, and very understandable, cultural importance of this interpretive framework that Song's work is not contextualised, first and foremost, as an open-ended paeon to personal myth-making, or as a secular, post-humanist temple. Nonetheless, the shared emphasis on dialogue with departed ancestors in the work of these two artists, and their common employment of feint and subterfuge, make them fitting and mutually affirming partners.

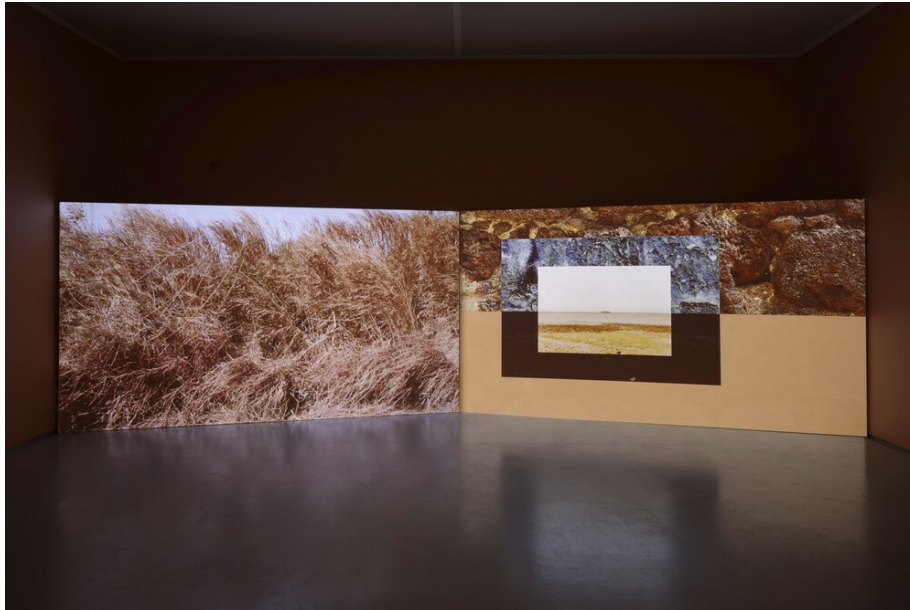


Fig. 5 *SAMT utterance_01 (how a name becomes a step, a rhythm, a loop)* by Tako Taal. 2021. Two-channel HD video, stereo sound, lightbox, portable radio cassette, infinite tape, sigh, duration 33 minutes. (Photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).



Fig. 6 *SAMT utterance_01 (how a name becomes a step, a rhythm, a loop)* by Tako Taal. 2021. Two-channel HD video, stereo sound, lightbox, portable radio cassette, infinite tape, sigh, duration 33 minutes. (Photograph Ruth Clark; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).



Fig. 7 Installation view of Rae-Yen Song: ㄟ ㄣ ㄣ ㄣ at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2021. (Photograph Ruth Clark).



Fig. 8 Installation view of Rae-Yen Song: ㄟ ㄣ ㄣ ㄣ at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2021. (Photograph Ruth Clark).



Fig. 9 Installation view of Rae-Yen Song: ▷▮▮▮●▷ at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2021. (Photograph Ruth Clark).

Exhibition details

Tako Taal: At the shore, everything touches

Dundee Contemporary Arts
1st February–20th March 2022

Rae-Yen Song: ▷▮▮▮●▷

Dundee Contemporary Arts
1st February–20th March 2022

Footnotes

- 1** Eoin Dara, quoted from conversation with the present author, 13th January 2022.
- 2** This poem, entitled 'Departures', also gives its name to a film Taal made in 2021. *Departures* will open at Site Gallery, Sheffield, in March 2022, as part of the Jerwood Arts touring exhibition, *Survey II*. In the film, the camera spans the textures and patterns of the woollen garment that now hangs in the exhibition under review. See G. Thomas: 'Articulating identities: A conversation between Jamie Crewe and Tako Taal', *Scottish Art News* (2nd July 2021), available at www.flemingcollection.com/scottish-art-news/news-press/articulating-identities-a-conversation-between-jamie-crewe-and-tako-taal, accessed 1st February 2022.

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