"Correction" by Fiona Tan at the Museum of Contemporary Art

by Joshua Siegal

In revealing a particularly ignored segment of the American demographic, Fiona Tan exposes much about the nature of viewing and being viewed, and spotlights her audience's preconceptions as well. Centrally located within a large space at the MCA, the work consists of a ring of vertical video screens that might either have been widescreen projections turned sideways or carefully customized somehow. Onto these screens are projected images of people in the American prison system. The figures are presented in their incarcerated environments, all posed standing, video representations of portraits. Each shot lasts for several minutes, the subjects quietly dealing with the camera's gaze, some registering confident calm, some shifting uncomfortably, some noticeably twitching, all seemingly aware that others, people outside the confines of their imprisonment, will view them.

The audience is invited to sit inside the perimeter of the projections, on a series of benches arranged in an inner ring. Thus viewers can take in images from many of the screens at once and can even directly view one another, though this may be an unintended consequence of the physical arrangement. According to gallery information, the ring-within-a-ring spacing and the subject of prisons is meant to evoke philosopher Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, described in a series of his letters as a method of imprisonment whereby the guards and prisoners occupy concentric circular buildings, the guards always able to look from their central tower out on the prisoners, who never know when they are being watched. In Tan's piece, however, it is disturbingly unclear who is watching whom. The audience must deal with the eerie effect of many gazes at once, just as surely as the prisoners must deal with the fixed eye of the camera and the millions of possible viewers behind it.

Visually, the shots are selected with an eye toward the environment as well as the subject. Inmates are guards are shown in their natural prison settings: cellblocks, guard stations,

hallways, kitchens, laundries. The shots are well selected and many of them put their subject in some kind of continuum, a long row of cells, for example, that suits the nature of their situation. It is hard to tell whether Tan has mastered the video to create a bleak lighting effect or whether this is a combination of the fluorescent bulbs used in the prisons and the monochrome (typically blue or brown) prescribed clothing worn by both inmates and guards. Either way, the low light in the gallery space and the smooth quality of the projections carry off this effect well.

Each projection screen has a speaker above that projects the ambient sounds of the prison that were present while a particular video portrait was being made. The volume is kept at a relatively low level, so that the sounds retain their atmospheric effect. The sounds remind the viewer of the world to which these guards and prisoners will return when the camera is turned off and also reduce the differentiation between filmed space and gallery space.

Of course, one cannot escape the subjects themselves. Tan has chosen these people precisely because they are so largely ignored. With a greater percentage of its population behind bars than any country, America willfully cuts itself off from huge numbers of its own people. Here Tan puts us literally face to face with these people, lingering on each of her hundreds of subjects as they pose for a disturbingly long time. Even the guards are temporally trapped within the prison, and some seem more unhappy than many of the prisoners they guard. Perhaps this represents an artistic choice by Tan and perhaps it is merely a fact of prison life, or both. The *Panopticon's* situational authority is at times subverted when a plainly frightening individual (be it inmate or guard) takes one of the screens and glowers angrily out. This effect is heightened by the large size and position of the screens well above the audience's eye level, and is especially imposing when the viewer is seated on one of the benches.

It is hard to avoid judging one's own judgments while observing this piece. Many times I caught myself wondering how many guards were guilty of having beaten prisoners or trying to guess which among the inmates were innocent. Watching other patrons in the

installation, one could see similar thoughts and reactions going on – or could one? Was this just more preconceived judgment? To bring suspicion and self-suspicion of this kind across time and through the space of an installation is a phenomenal, troubling success.

Also disturbing is the huge number of subjects: the constant carousel of human faces eventually forces a reaction from the viewer. Eventually a visage will appear, as happens when walking down the street, that the viewer connects with for some reason, and then the universal aspect of the piece sinks in. Someone on the screen is someone's mother. Someone is someone's lover, brother, father, daughter. Some of these people surely do not deserve their sentences. How many deserve worse? Bentham's *Panopticon* was not just a design for prisons, but also for any place where people must be controlled by suspicion that they are being watched – factories, hospitals, etc. When the viewer begins to identify with the faces on the screens, other controlling, institutional influences in American life may start to cognitively roil.