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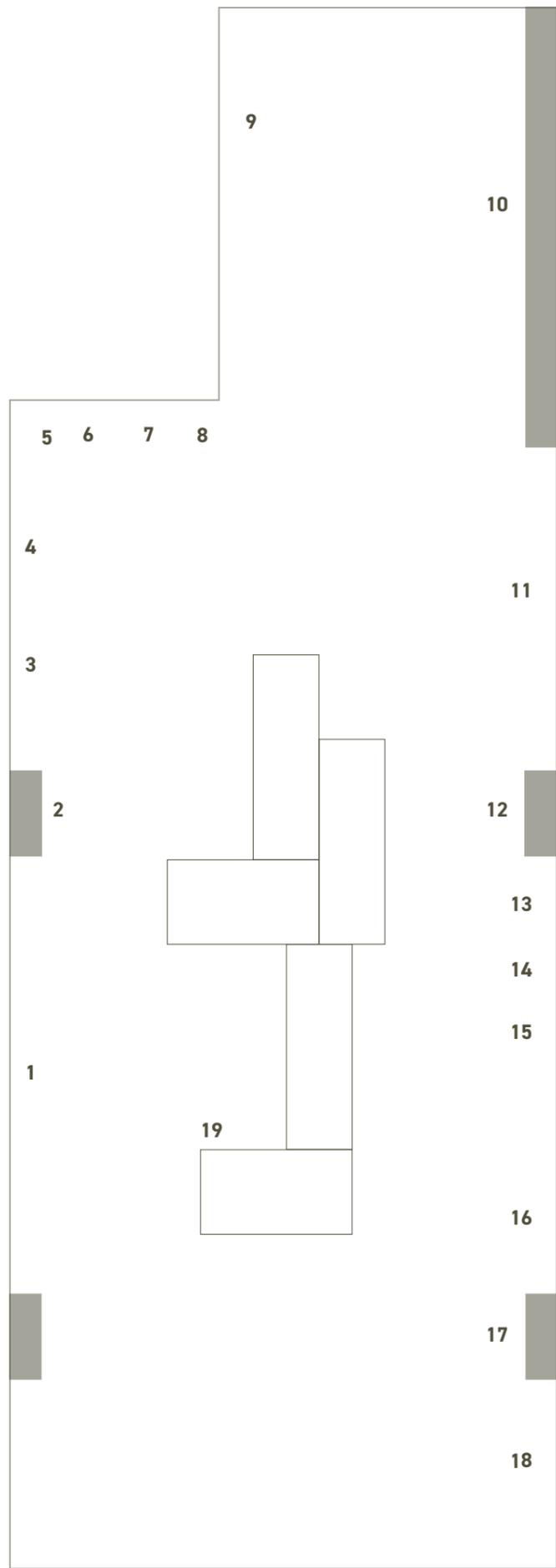
MAIN
DROITE



ELISA TAN

CONTAINER OF DISTANCE

9 October-16 November 2025



1 Various works on paper
1970s–1980s

2 Untitled
Undated
Ink, graphite, and marker on paper
50 x 25.5 cm

3 Untitled
1990
Paper collage and pen ink on paper
74.5 x 52 cm

4 Untitled
1990
Paper collage, pen ink on board
43.7 x 48.1 cm

5 Untitled
Undated
Acrylic on canvas
30.5 x 30.5 x 2 cm

6 Untitled
Undated
Acrylic on canvas
30.5 x 30.5 x 2 cm

7 Untitled
Undated
Acrylic on canvas
30.5 x 30.5 x 2 cm

8 Untitled
Undated
Acrylic on canvas
30.5 x 30.5 x 2 cm

9 Untitled
1991
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 73 cm

10 *30 photos d'une enveloppe plastique*
Photographic prints (exhibition copy)
15 x 30 cm each

11 (L-R)
Untitled
Undated
Ink, graphite on paper
30 x 40 cm

Untitled
1989
Watercolor on paper
24.9 x 32.6 cm

Untitled
Undated
Watercolor and graphite on paper
24.9 x 32.4 cm

12 Untitled
Undated
Pencil on paper
50.1 x 25.5 cm

13 (L-R)
Untitled
Undated
Ink on paper
24 x 33.5 cm

Untitled
Undated
Ink on paper
24 x 33.5 cm

14 (Top to bottom)
Untitled
Undated
Ink on paper
24 x 33.6 cm

Untitled
1974
Pencil on paper
32.3 x 25.4 cm

Tomorrow (In Chinese)
Undated
Ink on paper
23.9 x 33.9 cm

15 (Top to bottom)
Untitled
Undated
Collage
17.5 x 21.7 cm

Untitled
2021
Collage
17.9 x 20.2 cm

16 (Top to bottom)
Untitled
Undated
Marker ink on paper
18.2 x 20.5 cm

Untitled
Undated
Marker ink on paper
20.7 x 17.6 cm

Untitled
Undated
Collage
19.5 x 27 cm

Untitled
Undated
Marker ink on paper
18 x 20.6 cm

Untitled
Undated
Marker ink on paper
18 x 20.6 cm

17 Untitled
Undated
Marker, ink and pencil on paper
150 x 25.6 cm

18 Untitled
1972
Acrylic on canvas
35.7 x 61 cm

Province Town
1974
Acrylic on canvas
38.2 x 61 x 2 cm

19 Archive
Timeline

Conversation on Elisa Tan

Saturday, 11 October 2025, 3 PM
with Cristina Juan and Flaudette May Datuin

A conversation on Elisa Tan and her practice between Dr. Cristina Juan, an academic who runs the Philippine Studies Program at SOAS in London and who also works with the artist's estate, and Dr. Flaudette May Datuin, a professor at the Department of Art Studies of UP Diliman who has written on women artists in the Philippines and Asia.

Book Art: Merging of Structure and Concept of Books

Saturday, 8 November 2025, 3 PM

A lecture-demo on book art, with samples by Loreto Apilado, a book and paper conservation consultant since 1991 who is currently affiliated with the Ortigas Foundation Library. Aside from conducting workshops, he has also exhibited hand papermaking and book arts in the US, Australia, Italy, and Germany.

Container of Distance, the second solo exhibition of Filipino-Chinese artist Elisa Tan (1937–2022) in the Philippines, gives space to an artist whose remarkable practice synthesized minimalism, conceptual art, and a deeply personal meditation on language, migration, and belonging.

Despite having an extraordinary artistic journey that spanned three decades and three continents, Tan has remained largely unknown. After graduating with a degree in Fine Arts from the University of the Philippines Diliman in 1963, Tan spent a decade in the United States (1964–1974) developing her painting practice. Her artistic evolution took a decisive turn toward the conceptual after moving to Europe in 1975, as she transformed the envelope and postal material into both material and metaphor—containers carrying “the absence of one in the presence of the other.”

As a member of Paris's *Le Collectif Femmes/Art* between 1976 and 1978, Tan created work that challenged traditional boundaries between image and text. Her writing performances—typing endless conjugations of verbs or filling envelopes with the word *mots* (“words”)—engaged her deeply with the acts of labor and time.

In Tan's practice, repetition served multiple functions simultaneously: emptying words of communicative function while filling them with personal significance (language learning anxiety, migration experience), and creating visual texture while maintaining linguistic content. Her “emptying” was strategic rather than absolute—a way of opening space for new meanings to emerge.

It is important to highlight that up to this point, Tan had not actively engaged in exhibitions in Manila. Her world was consumed by trying to survive in Paris on a small salary while working on her art. Tan's position as a Filipino-Chinese artist in European avant-garde circles was complex. She navigated multiple marginalizations—linguistic, economic, cultural—while participating in the emergent artistic developments of her time.

Tan's practice anticipated conceptual art's return to materiality and personal narrative. Her innovative artist's books, which include an edible book and copious pages filled with meticulous repetitions, transformed mundane acts into profound meditations on existence and communication. The use of ephemeral materials, specifically a baked good that could disappear through consumption, pointed toward a participatory art practice. In the early 1980s, her conceptual ideas grew increasingly bold, as did her spiritual search. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the notion of nourishment referenced not merely the physical self, but also evoked biblical sustenance—words to nourish the soul.

In 1996, Tan returned to the Philippines and devoted herself to a spiritual life, setting aside her art practice. This exhibition, developed through careful research of her archive in Baguio, offers the opportunity to encounter an artist whose unexplored work resonates with clarity and contemporary relevance.

Elisa Tan arrives in 2025 through Cristina Juan, an academic who runs the Philippine Studies Program at SOAS in London and who works with Elisa Tan's estate. Cristina met the artist for the first and only time on 30 December 2021. They spoke about opening her crates, establishing a modest gallery, and having the proceeds of any sale go towards supporting poor and persecuted Christians. Several days after their conversation, Tan died of a heart attack at home in Baguio, a day before she was supposed to turn eighty-five.

The trajectory of Tan's life and practice seems to have been marked by a peculiar existential restlessness—an uneasiness with the world that cast shadows over her existence. Her autobiography, written after she had finally discovered a sense of purpose for her life and a possible utility for the art she had set aside in 1996, is punctuated by moments made precarious by strangeness and unfamiliarity.

The intersection of the secular and the sacred is not new in art practice. Tan certainly spent decades wrestling with a disquiet that found an outlet through creative expression. Her art practice explored not just various modalities, but through these approaches—sparked by an incessant searching—engaged with larger ideas of migration, language, gender, and politics. The space of her art had cultivated the very conditions for the life of her soul.

It is a rare opportunity to produce an exhibition, as well as write about an artist and her practice, in the mode of a first encounter, a new discovery, even as the artist herself has passed. The awe that we have at being part of Tan's recovered “newness” exists alongside the melancholy of a posthumous recognition. It is an uneasy oscillation: the dual experience of advocate and mourner, of joy and sadness, as we share a work that arrives to us complete, fully formed, and—infuriatingly—beyond dialogue with the artist, her intentions, thoughts, and ideas. Such circumstances place a particular weight on interpretation, as custodians not only of the exhibition but of its introduction to a wider public.

—Joselina Cruz

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MCAD COMMONS
ELISA TAN: CONTAINER OF DISTANCE

SPACE63, COMUNA
2/F, Comuna
238 Pablo Ocampo Sr. Extension
Makati

Hours:
Tuesday to Sunday
10 AM-8 PM

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MCAD Commons is conceptualized as a programmed space removed from the main gallery space of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila.

Conceived as a project to continue the expanding activities of the museum, MCAD Commons brings MCAD's singular programming to a larger audience that allows for the engagement with creative development, ideas exchange, and support of the artistic process across the areas of research, art practice, and curatorial discourse.

Following the thinking that art responds to its context, the choice of space is developed in step with the creative formation of the show rather than as a passive, neutral container. The varied formations of the projects will tie in with the publics that sustains the site and the process of art making.

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND DESIGN (MCAD) MANILA

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