

ARTFORUM

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By Nuit Banai

BOSTON

Su-Mei Tse

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

Well before audiences entered the dimly lit room housing Su-Mei Tse's installation *Floating Memories*, 2009, they heard the soft crackling of a stylus tripping along the groove of a vinyl record. This subtle auditory encounter evoked a time and place far removed from the environs of the museum—perhaps a setting, at once intimate and domestic, in the predigital era—and paved a conceptual path for the many disjunctions that animate Tse's work.

While the physical armature of *Floating Memories* is rather spare, the work is rife with suggestive layers that engage not just personal recollection, as the title indicates, but art-historical precedents and the history of the museum. On the floor, a large wooden platform serves as a frame enclosing a gold carpet made from Chinese silk, whose shimmering hue elicits a Turner sunset or Mark Rothko's light-infused painterly surfaces. Roughly half the platform's wooden surface is engraved with a delicate floral pattern taken from a frayed seventeenth-century Italian textile that once covered the walls of the museum's Dutch Room (from which four paintings were infamously stolen in 1990). Tse discovered the aged damask in storage as an artist-in-residence at the museum in 2007, and she subtly reproduced its imperfections in a green patina that coats the engraving. Completing the installation is a wall projection of a spinning LP, which seems to levitate above the record player and wavers like a desert mirage.

Despite the installation's extreme refinement, Tse's goal is not the perfect integration of sound, image, and sculpture; rather, she disperses the work's meaning through multiple forces and points of contact,



View of "Su-Mei Tse," 2009.

allowing slight rifts to appear at the interstices. An incommensurability persists among her media: The industrially produced carpet functions much like a monochrome painting; the wood engraving enacts the tactility of fabric; and the digital video depicts an analog technology. The installation also generates a fruitful friction between divergent cultural contexts, historical time frames, and modes of perception; it connotes East and West, early modernity and high modernism, and elicits both aural and visual sensations. Tse's ambulatory subject is urged to simultaneously collect and create pieces to this puzzle, both external and internal to the work, aware that a coherent picture—a singular meaning—will remain elusive. Indeed, the material integrity of the objects and the coherence of the narratives that bind them are strained to the breaking point. *Floating Memories* rests on the verge of provoking unlikely chains of associations, chance recollections, and perceptual incertitude.

Following the artist's active proliferation of multiple frameworks of spectatorship, it is difficult to disregard the many empty frames left hanging in commemoration of the notorious art heist. Tse similarly replaces plenitude with dynamic absence, which the spectator is invited to mobilize. More than presenting a simple replay of Duchamp's "creative act" or Eco's "open work," Tse weaves physiological perception and personal memory together with art-historical and institutional technologies of vision, extending power's scope along another vector into a thicker stratum of embodiment.

—Nuit Banai