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New York

Afterall

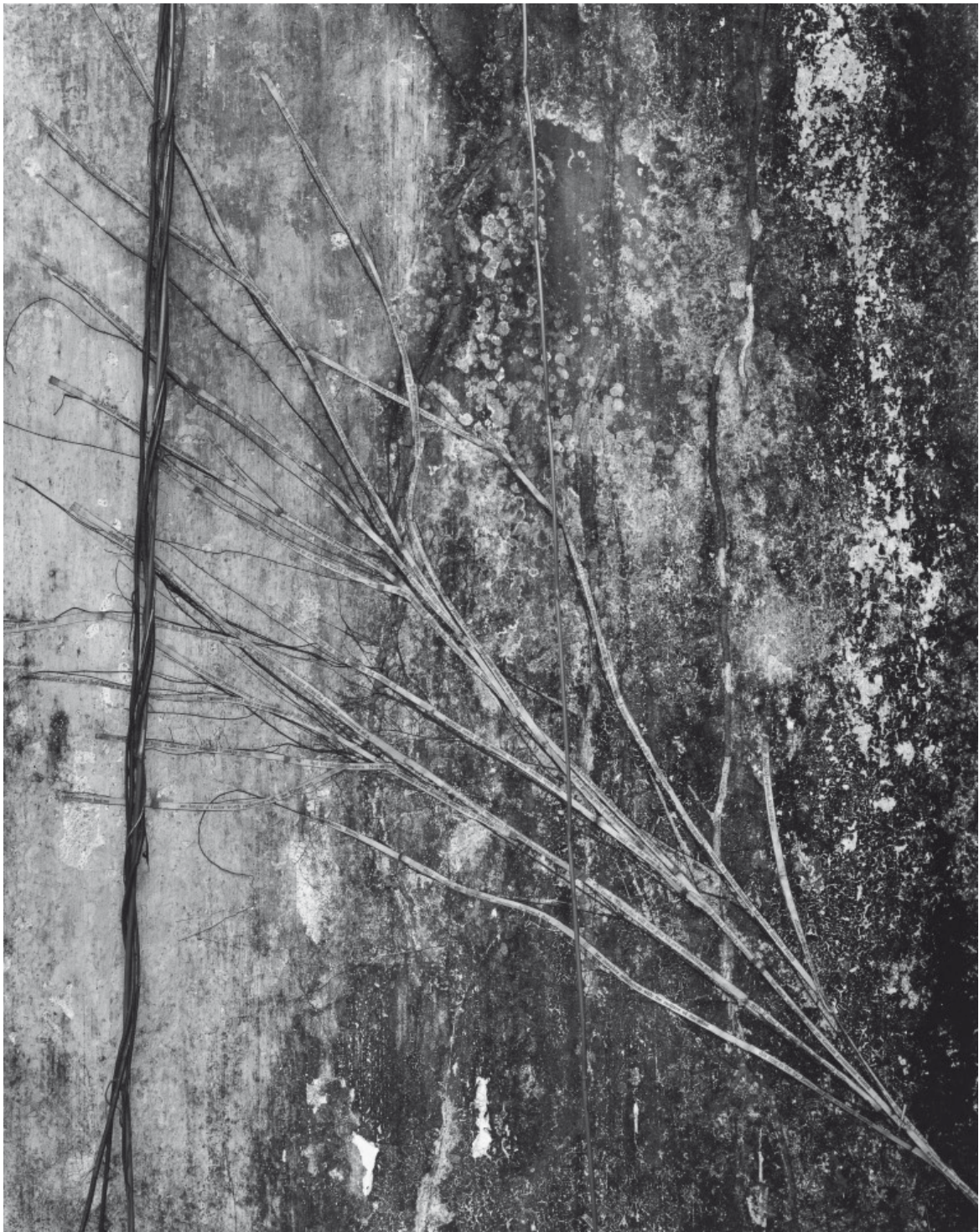
Summer 2013

“Present and Unread: Simryn Gill’s *Where to draw the line*,” by Lee Weng Choy and
“O, Outside, show me your innermost!': Simryn Gill’s *My Own Private Angkor*,” by Anders
Kreuger



...who's seen a memorable one...
...of rightousness and...
...gangster clubs) and...
...rich port, religious...
...perity, and a constant...
...of the world looking...
...screamed models were...
...ood panelled mansions...
...the largest TV saw was...
...isation for the France...
...lective of Kuala Lumpur...
...for cold, Atahouse in...
...din rede, a mel, wedr...
...ern coast, a state, wedr...
...acres, and in which the...
...alt, mber, of the sort...
...heservice of dispensing...
...in the old days were...
...the India, in bondag...
...nes, the who houses we...
...bly small accommodation...
...inning and jumping, foot...
...r, a young man from the...
...time of the state, I ca...
...conditions which would...
...mul, the water had to be...
...electricity. They were...
...ighbouring families wh...
...they offered us water fr...
...noth declined. (Afterw...
...get them out of the mout...
...nancetogivetothem, we...
...y, we never found the pl...
...the state quarters, do...
...recently removed. We vi...
...on that boasted of bei...
...tion through friends in...
...e - I think it might hav...
...ture of the living room...
...rtles, you can see the...
...s and around doorways. We...
...ult in the country, I hav...
...certainty, biggest, nes...
...right, perfect, - onto...
...past all the facilities...
...nyard. And, at the bott...
...placed in the practised...
...previous incumbents, an...
...otake us on a door-knock...
...ting to become quite ex...
...gers). But Mary, I could...
...vious, herdiscomfortw...
...exploitation (all rolle...
...other used to - you cou...
...ad baby craft, and how...
...to feel that there was...
...t what we had gained by...
...ased to own this activi...
...t, and the conversations...
...o, in her part which cert...
...at up at the next town...
...degalook in there...
...bigger towns and cities...
...uld they knock directly...
...ther than saying we hav...
...njoyed that they are are...
...that they can be of servic...
...t Dickson who moved from...
...suspect they lock their...
...he only who you have is...
...Hello to get your atten...
...v adomestic maid, serv...
...over. And so, for Kuala...
...up at what were relied on...
...cajoling to persuade our...
...ilson our behalf. But th...
...ce we had to eh, I dwek...
...not to believe that that...
...like the whole countr...
...rused to be in the 1970...
...hout vpl canoes, glacie...
...ness. Hot, white hot sam...
...put them in later, in the...
...senighbourhoods, cans...
...alled electric ones so th...
...wide for them master and...
...icourse there is the ind...
...but the most apparen...
...end of the last centur...
...c, and even though I hav...
...re saying in that book...
...villages, four for the...
...ve, persuasive, and un...
...ed, opaque - in - English...
...there petition on the ou...
...loored, split-level, bo...
...enext, and then next, was...
...rown, each of us occup...
...k Boy, from his songs o...
...ttlespace? Repetition...
...fference fall away, and...
...od taste: the magazin...
...ghtly more magazine; m...
...shinteriors, I have a...
...re: less a habitatio, mo...
...the ones around the count...
...from old coffee shops...
...franchise for Authent...
...and as photo de leganc...
...swe photo graphed in a...

...business of figuring out how to make a...
...yself here, because when I wanted to paint the underwater...
...about the past and the future and the present are grown-up...
...n who could make a painting of any picture they saw in the...
...anted to be...
...inking. Still, I remain miles behind in my desires. Trailingsom...
...of perhaps bashfully? I cannot say. I would have to take to...
...ort and other sweets, one's secret, for stated intentions...
...existentia badialth: the waiter who over-act his part, p...
...insincerely hammed-up version of waiting? Does he mean that...
...sincerely exhibiting waiter'sness begood faith? The Belgian...
...is a little while being good for nothing. I am, too, wonderd...
...tealmymind and I set to work at once. At the end of three months...
...ed doing. "But this is art," he said, "and I will gladly show it...
...and find myself returning, for guidance, to the things I had...
...and not to think about the meanings and contexts. Don't thi...
...I liked MB's work the moment I saw it, reproduced in a bo...
...al though I had no idea what it was doing, the contrarian im...
...ise as his contrariness. I could not make it out. What was he...
...due. Was he serious? What was lurking underneath that had...
...ned, not deep at all, just what you see is what you get, cow nar...
...s didn't speak and was the elegant modern graphicness of thick and...
...ply the form that was presented, which was itself, and no mo...
...lation had the look of profound depth, of intellect, of more...
...and less sage, I saw a silent alarm. Hmm, yes. Very interesting...
...for woods. I'm not in the tropics anymore. I'm in the north...
...round you, of course, learn away to become invisible in this...
...I have another improvised version of the verse I started...
...honour of that confounding writer of English prose, V. S. Na...
...travelled Indian myna, which can some times be made to imi...
...almic whitemen - he gave one of his early novels that very tit...
...yuna pushed a fashion perfume in his early novel that very tit...
...gmao! Arrival, a semi-fictional autobiography in which he...
...self-living (as he does in real life) in the vicinity of that...
...re is a longish quote from that book:
...the solitude of the walk, the emptiness of that str...
...o indulging myself in a cornish historical fantasies, and...
...ger in England. Accident - the shape of the field, and per...
...ilitary - had isolated this little region, and had th...
...Daily walked in the wide grassy way between the...
...sometimes like a Himalayan valley strewn in mid-summer...
...ised some centuries before. The number of these mound...
...ned again in the sky and looked like pimples on the land...
...Daily walked in the wide grassy way - perhaps in...
...t to the valley to the crest of the way and the view: the...
...y: grey against green and sometimes lit up by the sun. Col...
...of those bygone times, climbing up to have this confir...
...And I said "Prefering was what MB declared himself to be...
...The word like covers a lot of ground. It crops up in many...
...conjunction, as a noun, as a verb, always to do with qual...
...objects in a comparative way to something else, she is lik...
...as a noun, as a verb, always to do with qual...
...Side by side, in soft, open, even, plain, relations (H...
...nted to make a captures like Eva Hesse, but never found the...
...silver rather than substantial, I've quality is perhaps there as...
...like you can, or I wish I could feel comfortable at - part...
...who consider these things, even though the sekinds of sent...
...ediction which comes from my computer). Perhaps the di...
...insufficient power or specificity in defining the nature...
...ely why I like the word like. And then there's the current usa...
...not so young, as a piece of string, you might say, to tie a car...
...mpanionship, he said, "Like why worry about what a l...
...them down, I should think to say was... like what I sw...
...and stuff. Wasn't like ordinary thing, but colourful st...
...y that I know even though this may not be as burdy word, I th...
...ed, unqualified attraction and fascination that we have fo...
...ay aspire to. For many of us, to like is the starting place in...
...iketodraw and paint, still do, if I tell the truth, they don...
...I bear a familiar path for many people | my desire to draw, which...
...rt, which led me away from the simple pleasures of making and...
...ense. And now I think that how to manual on drawing which wa...
...itor.
...Some times we like things and we don't know why we like the...
...nd I know for myself that often I am drawn to things that lie ju...
...pabilities, in signs and symbols that that are on viantly...
...n. Some times you see a thing, and I am talking about a there...
...an make your hair stand on end, just rationally. Like a col...
...as no happen in words. That comes later, when you might ask...
...? And some times it's seven aching that one might actually...
...t can trigger that feeling. I've like a wash of anxiety and ex...
...ngs so slight you get under one skin, and yet other, hard-work...
...cture that get you are I what you call good photos in...
...back-and-white even. So to ask that question again: what...
...erged, growing-up that bubbles at the edges of one's conscio...
...host-in-the-room feeling. And of course, more prosaically...
...ose magazines I read in my small Malay island town childho...
...all three equally mesmerisingly unattainable, in the row...
...n washing worked, on some level, I think I am saying that I am...
...icourse it would have left some residue. And what was that...
...relative interpretation, in the understanding of something...
...alogies, visual comparisons, approximations and as suppo...
...r, through a kind of fantasy work, do here and there, they ma...
...apping traits of Malacca are pretend Mediterranean and...
...like an archaeological site, the ruin of an ancient citade...
...and think you mean like those tall ones out my window in Port...
...sit about exoticness, something far away like a tropical...
...ness, tropical-ness (or is sun a thomable reasons), what...
...eeness? Silver beech trees, what would they mean in a botina...
...my language? And what would they mean in a botina...
...that intensify, I am explicit on those palm spals in Belg...
...near it is over there living in a beech forest, like a denizen...
...noam (I am king to) who is listening, looking, who care s...
...ear breathe, deeper and deeper into the maze of whose s...
...-working, the world and the world to the maze of whose s...



Simryn Gill,
Forest #1, 1996–98,
silver gelatin print,
120 × 95cm

Previous spread:
*Where to draw
the line*, 2011–12,
ink on paper,
105 × 189cm
unframed /
113.5 × 201.5cm
framed, detail.
Photograph:
Sylvie Ball.
Both images courtesy
the artist and Tracy
Williams, Ltd.,
New York

Present and Unread: Simryn Gill's *Where to draw the line*

– Lee Weng Choy

'can we be ironic'. Typewritten on a plain sheet of paper and centred on the page, with no spaces between the words, the question, albeit without the mark, is repeated four times — not in a single row, but one right on top of the other, and, again, without any breaks between either words or lines. In the first instance, 'can' is typed in red ink, with the rest in black; in the second, it is 'we' that is in red; for the third, it is 'be'; then it is 'ironic'.

Back in the day, when we still used typewriters to write school assignments, we did not have to think of fonts. Now, it is not just designers and typesetters who are aware of names like 'Courier', 'Palatino' and 'Helvetica'; we all are. Oh, how one remembers, with ineluctably nostalgic fondness, those lovely clacking sounds.

In anticipation of the moment he will encounter Simryn Gill's *Where to draw the line*, Lee Weng Choy revisits a gift given to him by the artist, and speculates about the role of intimacy in her practice.

But dig a bit deeper into memory, and you are struck by a small recognition: when was the last time you thought about spools of typewriter ribbon, with the black ink upper half and the lower red? Trying to recall the mechanics of it all, I got caught up with a reminiscence of how you had to press the shift key with some force, physically shifting the basket of typebars. With the shift lock key you had to wait, even if it was just a fraction of a second, for the click to lock. But what I should have been searching for in my mind was that lever you had to flick to change the ribbon

strike from black to red. Writing with machines was once so material. It is now much less so. We used to literally cut and paste fragments of paper. Today, writing is almost immediately cerebral and cybernetic. It is about the screen and not the page — certainly not about ink or a sheet of wood pulp.¹

The subject of this essay is an artwork I have not actually seen. Simryn Gill's *Where to draw the line* (2011–12) was first exhibited at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel in 2012. The premise of the piece is straightforward enough: the artist wrote a series of long texts on five themes, after which she worked closely with an editor to finalise them; she then asked a typist to set the entire contents onto nine scrolls of paper, without any spaces between words, letters, punctuation or lines. The display is also rather straightforward: the nine scrolls (on 'Women', 'Work', 'Snake', 'House', 'Copycat', 'House', 'Snake', 'Work' and 'Women' respectively) are placed right next to one another, and the whole thing (105 by 189 centimetres) is encased in a simple white frame hung on the wall. At least that is what I can tell from looking at pictures of it online, from having read some reports and after speaking with the artist. And from what I can tell, it is a difficult thing to read — it is like a text that is hiding in plain sight. Yet I imagine that as you come close to it, certain words will pop out at you, and then you cannot resist scrutinising it, discerning sense from the strings of letters, constructing sentences — though, sure enough, after a while you will give up trying to read. Still absorbed by it all, you will step back, and instead attempt to apprehend the whole thing as some kind of textual tapestry — something

1 I remember listening to a podcast that argued that the typewriter would eventually become a short interlude in the long history of writing. Incidentally, Mark Twain noted in his autobiography that he was perhaps 'the first person in the world to apply the type-machine to literature'. See <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/yankee/cymach4.html> (last accessed on 12 March 2013) for a reproduction of a Remington typewriter advertisement that quotes Twain's autobiography, citing an excerpt from *Harper's Weekly* (18 March 1905). Nowadays almost every writer uses a computer, although we still have a long way to go before our use of the word processor surpasses the typewriter's century.



seemingly solid and weighty, even if it is only ink and paper — present and unread.

I hesitate to write about art that I have not seen in the flesh. Yet I do think it is acceptable for someone familiar with Gill's body of work to speculate a little on *Where to draw the line*. This essay is written in anticipation of the moment when I finally do confront the thing. And it is as if I were preparing myself by trying to recall certain objects and images made by Gill that I saw a number of years ago. What is it about rummaging through memories that seems like the right approach to *Where to draw the line*?

That sheet of paper containing the four repetitions of the phrase 'can we be ironic' was a gift from Gill, although it is currently not in my possession. I cannot remember exactly when she made it or gave it to me; my guess is sometime in the mid-1990s. In the last decade, I have moved house a few times, and the item has found its way, along with some other things that I keep meaning to retrieve, to a friend's home. It has been framed, but has not fared too well in the tropical climate; a few spots of mould have appeared on it. A piece of paper, aging and increasingly fragile —

we know from Marcel Proust that something slight can trigger many thoughts. But surely, in imprinting these four words four times, Gill is not being earnest or sentimental. Sincere, perhaps, but then impossibly sincere. If we are not quite laughing at a joke she has told, we are, together with the author, smiling at how terminally old-fashioned it is. A carefully crafted tone is conveyed in the play of message and medium, and the evocation of contexts and unconscious subtexts. Is it an artwork? I really cannot say. Let us just say it is a gift from Simryn. (Speaking of which, the exchange of gifts — in fact, the process of gift-making — is central to Gill's ongoing series *Pearls*, which she began in 1999. To make a set of *Pearls*, the artist chooses a book owned by a friend or acquaintance, or, more often, asks them to choose a book for her; the choice is carefully deliberated upon, because each set of *Pearls* is highly personalised. Gill then tears its pages apart and reconstructs the strips of paper as beads, which she strings into a necklace. Then she gives the *Pearls* back to the book's owner, and often the owners give the artist, in return, a photograph taken of them

Simryn Gill,
Nicolas Bouvier,
Histoires d'une image
(Geneva, Editions Zoé,
2001), 2007, linen,
138.5cm, 12 strands,
from the series *Pearls*
(1999—ongoing).
Photograph: Jenni
Carter



Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* — *Reflections on Photography*, tr. Richard Howard (London, Fontana Paperbacks, Flamingo Edition, 1984, 3rd impression, 1990), 2006, linen, 90cm, 3 strands, detail, from the series *Pearls* (1999—ongoing). Photograph: Jenni Carter. Both images courtesy the artist and Raking Leaves, London

wearing their *Pearls*.)² I have this conceit that ‘can we be ironic’ could function like a motto for Gill — and that the piece of paper with those four words could be, for me at any rate, the key to understanding that larger work, *Where to draw the line*. It could even be the key to all of Gill’s works, but then I am not being entirely serious when I say this. One thing I do know: even though that piece of paper with the words ‘can we be ironic’ is not presently at hand, it is something I feel I have lived with; it has been recessed with old remembrances. That, I would speculate, is one of the things at stake when one stands in front of *Where to draw the line* — feeling the presence of distance and memory.

Local Ginger was an ephemeral installation that Gill created in her backyard in Singapore in 1994. The artist had come to the island city state after spending a number of years in Adelaide, Australia; before that, she had lived in Kuala Lumpur. After a few years in Singapore, Gill and her family relocated back to Australia — though this time to

Sydney, where she still lives, dividing her time between there and her hometown, Port Dickson, in Malaysia. For *Local Ginger*, Gill tore strips from pages of novels and stuck them together to make longer strips, fixing them onto the tree in her yard in such a way that they resembled parasitic plants or epiphytes. On the leaves of the ginger plants next to the house she engraved passages from Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81) — letter by letter with some old movable metal type she had found. She also ink-stamped words onto dried leaves, which were collected from under a tree across the yard and then scattered back on the same spot. Curator Russell Storer has noted that these works were inspired by the plants that ‘latched onto and grew out of trees around the city, a form of natural grafting endemic’ to the tropics, and that they ‘register the way in which the artist entered into the place where she found herself, making small transformations of her surroundings as a means of understanding and building connections with her new environment’.³

² See Simryn Gill, *Pearls* (artist’s book), London: Raking Leaves, 2008.

³ Russell Storer, ‘Simryn Gill: Gathering’, in *Simryn Gill* (exh. cat.), Sydney and Cologne: Museum of Contemporary Art and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008, p.51.

The passages Gill chose from *Portrait of a Lady* were of parlour conversations, reflecting the intricacies of domestic adaptations. The cold European interiors of James's nineteenth century contrasted with the tropical outdoors of *Local Ginger*, conceived over a hundred years later. At first one could make out the texts on the lush, textured greens, but their condition degraded quickly, so wounded were the leaves by the imprinting of James's words. Both *Local Ginger* and that piece of paper with the words 'can we be ironic' evoke or illustrate a chain of indexical connections. Indeed, the relationship between text and texture in *Local Ginger* could be considered an indexical one, based upon a direct bond between the sign and its object. With your typical paperback novel there is no material

At the time, I did not pair the words 'irony' and 'sincerity', but what I wrote back then foregrounds what I have just said here about that coupling: a way of maintaining the tension between location and metaphor; of speaking from a place but not about one; of drawing from one's life, as all artists do, but without trying to make symbolic capital of it.

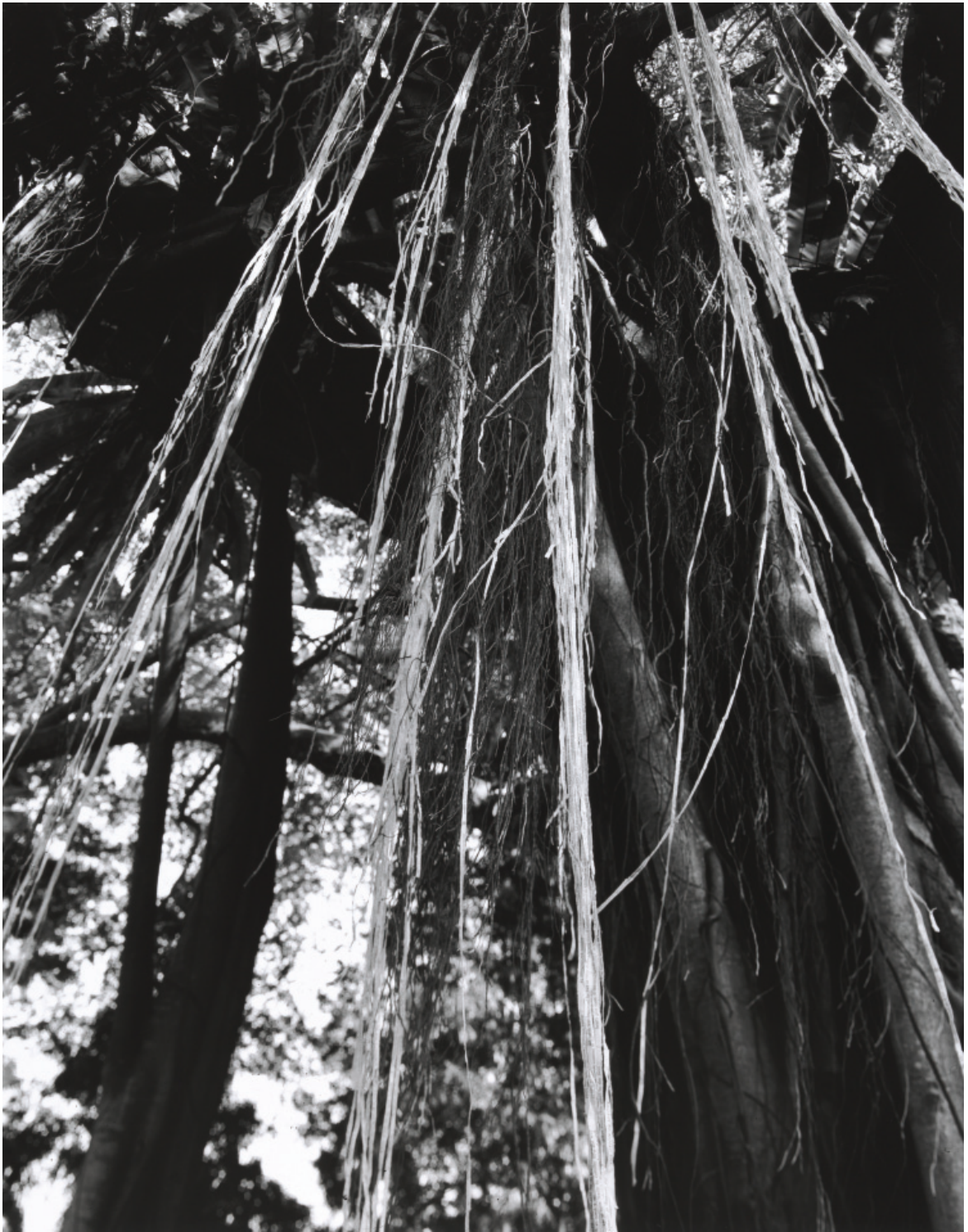
link between the words on the page and the world they conjure, but with *Local Ginger* the meaning lies in the transformation of material support (leaves) into printed matter (passages from *Portrait of a Lady*). Other indexes that *Local Ginger* brings to mind include the connections between 'art' and 'place', or between 'artist' and 'home', 'art' and 'nature', 'nature' and 'culture' — I could go on. The classic index in art is, of course, the one that links work and artist: the signature. When the typewriter became the dominant mode of writing, it brought about a mechanical separation, and we lamented the loss of corporeal and sensorial attachment between our words and our hands. With

the advent of the computer word processor, we now look back at the typewriter and miss its physicality and the intimacy we had with the written page. That piece of paper with the words 'can we be ironic' teases us with this desire for the lost index, but it registers nostalgic distance not through sentiment but humour. Moreover, it raises the question of whether a gift is an index of the true feelings of the person who bestows the object. By coupling irony and sincerity together, 'can we be ironic' makes one feel that the latter is impossible without a little bit of the former.

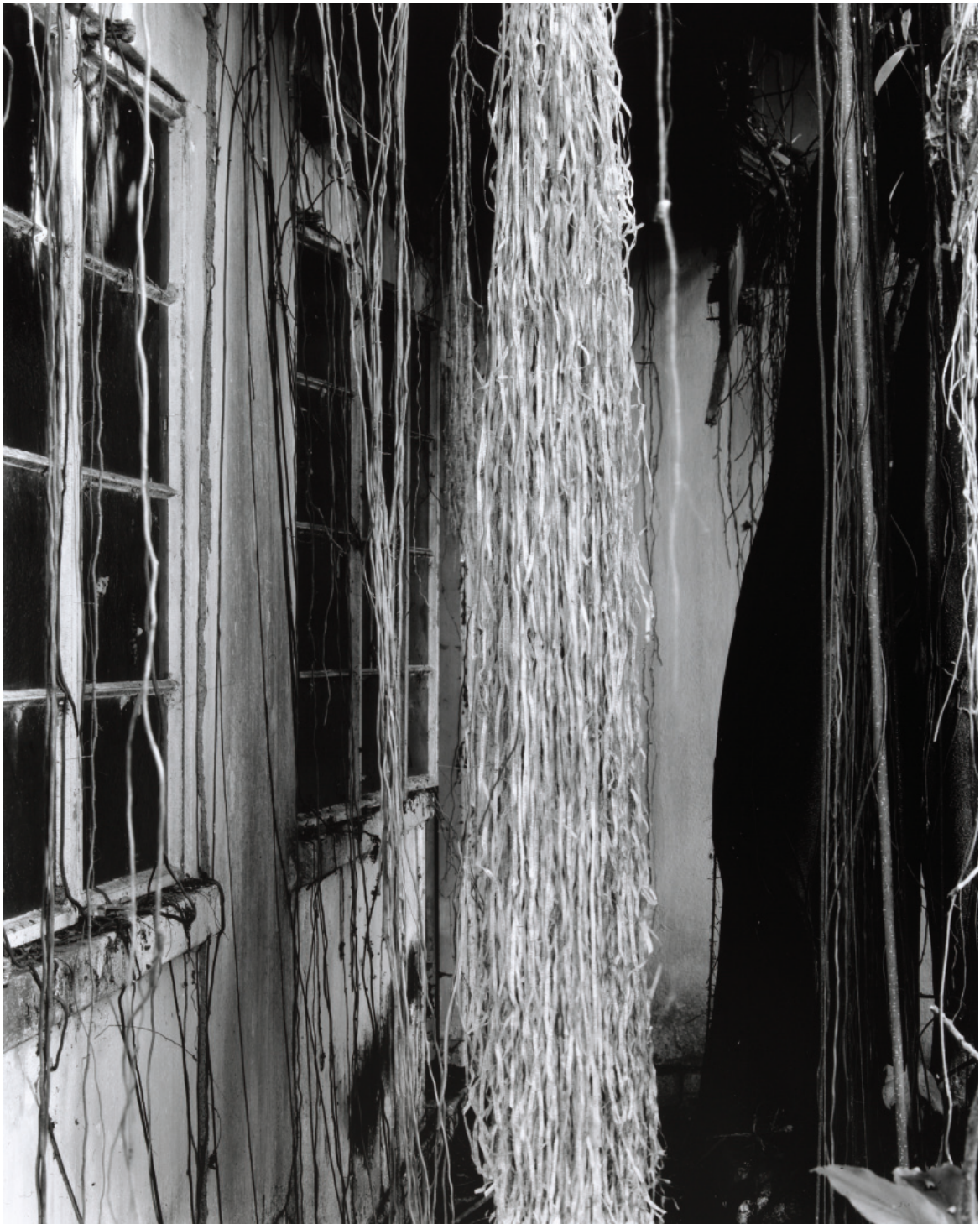
Local Ginger eventually led to *Forest* (1996–98), a major work for which Gill made strips from books (including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859)) and inserted them into various sites — a Chinese *towkay* mansion,⁴ a seaside bungalow, a British colonial garden — and then worked with a photographer to capture each installation in a single black-and-white picture. The photographs were taken with a large depth of field and have been presented in a couple of incarnations, including a series of sixteen low-contrast gelatin silver prints, 120 by 95 centimetres each. The images ask for a long, slow read, even if the fragments of printed pages within each scene are not always legible. In returning to *Forest*, it is not just my memory that serves me here, but a few texts about the series, including a fifteen-year-old article of mine.⁵ There I argued that Gill's engagement lies in the grammar of things, in how the positioning and proliferation of terms makes possible as well as undermines that which moors meaning. At the time, I did not pair the words 'irony' and 'sincerity', but what I wrote back then foregrounds what I have just said here about that coupling: a way of maintaining the tension between location and metaphor; of speaking from a place but not about one; of drawing from one's life, as all artists do, but without trying to make symbolic capital of it. In a more recent article, art historian Kevin Chua expounded upon the artist's insights into how colonial

4 Deriving from both Malay and Chinese sources, *towkay* is a colloquial word used in both Malaysia and Singapore that means 'big boss' and refers to someone of Chinese ethnicity.

5 See my article 'Local Coconuts: Simryn Gill and the Politics of Identity', *ArtAsiaPacific*, no.16, 1997, pp.56–63.



Simryn Gill,
Forest #2, 1996–98,
silver gelatin
print, 120 × 95cm.
Courtesy the artist
and Tracy Williams,
Ltd., New York



Simryn Gill,
Forest #7, 1996–98,
silver gelatin
print, 120 × 95cm.
Courtesy the artist
and Tracy Williams,
Ltd., New York

history has marked the subject matter of her photographs. His expositions traverse widely, from medieval forests and the literature of Joseph Conrad to the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s; foregrounding how Gill's practice is replete with citations and graftings of multiple sources, themes and historical contexts. To imagine the forest is to conjure dense woods, but also to conceive of a clearing apart from the vegetation, and Chua's essay captures this tension:

*Gill seems to be calling into question the moment of scale itself — our prelinguistic apprehension of the world around us. We waver between an intense absorption in these strange text-landscapes and a need to withdraw from them, to take in the larger, encompassing view. [...] Our entry into these photographs becomes, in turn, a perceptual dance between remembering and forgetting, coming and going. A dialectic between grammatical scale and metaphorical size.*⁶

Grammar operates through a constraining force towards order, but metaphor makes meaning through open-ended and multiplying associations. As I envisage it, to read *Where to draw the line* is to experience the straining of grammar, though the metaphorical powers of the piece depend precisely on the fact that these are not simply random words but carefully constructed sentences and paragraphs. Size and scale are not the same, of course, as the latter is always a relative measure. In the case of *Where to draw the line*, one could argue that the work is large in size yet remains intimate in scale, perhaps even on the order of something as diminutive as a gift of paper with the words 'can we be ironic'. However, to think on this — and to ask what happens to the light-hearted interchange of irony and sincerity found in the smaller item when it is projected onto the larger scale of *Where to draw the line* — makes one wonder what the measure of intimacy is. Gill's artistic gestures, from a gift of words to the transplantation of texts, may be playful and metaphorically expansive, but they are always grounded in the personal care with which she handles her materials and sources. In this itinerary I have offered — leading from the piece

of paper with the words 'can we be ironic', to *Local Ginger* and *Forest*, then back to the future when I finally encounter *Where to draw the line* — Gill's work reminds us of the pleasures and agitations of indexical contact, as she explores the signs of the past and their hold on us.

6 Kevin Chua, 'Simryn Gill and Migration's Capital', *Art Journal*, vol.61, no.4, Winter 2002, pp.9 and 21.



Simryn Gill,
My Own Private
Angkor #2, 2007–09,
silver gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm.
All images courtesy
the artist and Tracy
Williams, Ltd.,
New York

‘O, Outside, show me your innermost!’: Simryn Gill’s *My Own Private Angkor*

– Anders Kreuger

*In genom gallerfönstret flög en fågelfjäder
Vinden förde den hit
Eller någon annan förde den
Den fick ligga på golvet, länge
Innan jag tog den i handen
– en vanlig duvofjäder*

*Nu vill jag säga dig en fånges hemlighet:
Alla duvor är inte vanliga!*¹

Now, you may ask, what is the point of beginning an essay about a Malaysian-born Australian artist with a poem in Swedish? Please bear with me. I can assure you that I am not going to riff on the untranslatability of poetry, or poetry as translation, or the poetry of visuality, or vice versa. Indeed I am not going to dwell on any topic that doesn’t directly concern my attempt to analyse some of the finest imagery produced in the last years. For me there is nothing ordinary about making and using

Gunnar Ekelöf, around the time when I myself was conceived.² Not that such bibliographic or biographic information really matters here; what I shall attempt is the ‘right’ balance between explication and explanation. Here is my own, intermediate-English rendering of the Swedish words Ekelöf chose to use:

*In through the barred window flew
a bird’s feather
The wind brought it here
Or someone else brought it
It lay on the floor, for the longest time
before I took it in my hand
– an ordinary dove’s feather*

*Now I want to tell you a prisoner’s secret:
Not all doves are ordinary!*

Again, I don’t intend to discourse on what is lost when the poem is reproduced in words that only allow you to grasp its content, nor to lament the fact that the stylised colloquial phrasing and bird-song-like tones of Ekelöf’s Swedish will remain inaccessible and inaudible to most of you. No, I want to discuss something else, as an introduction to the ninety or so black-and-white photographs by Simryn Gill that wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for a failed speculative property development in Port Dickson, a seaside resort just north of the historical city of Malacca in Malaysia. And for that I need us to remember the friction between the supremely crafted original text and its more ordinary version in a common language. Aesthetic enjoyment is often associated with this kind of nuance, but does it have some sensory specifics that help us identify it? Quite a few poets delve into the semantic field defined by ‘sweetness’ to convey the pleasant emotions that ‘high quality’, at best synonymous

Anders Kreuger writes on content and context, ambiguity and clarity, inside and outside in Simryn Gill’s photographic series *My Own Private Angkor*.

images in the way Simryn Gill does, and I believe that what she achieves in her work must be addressed as directly and unceremoniously as possible. In this essay I make it my task to ‘show’ her photographic series *My Own Private Angkor* (2007–09).

To avoid misunderstandings I must first share with you the linguistic meaning of the twenty-first *dīwān* for the imprisoned, tortured and blinded Prince of Emgión. This minor late eleventh-century Kurdish ruler was conceived by one of the few truly great writers of my own language,

1 Gunnar Ekelöf, ‘*dīwān* no.21’, *Dīwān över Fursten av Emgión* (*Dīwān for the Prince of Emgión*), Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965, p.31.

2 ‘Concerning the Prince of E., no more can be said about him than what is clear from the poems: that he was an Oriental, possibly imbued with some half-Christian ideas. Neither was he a Mohammedan. Greek, Arabic and Iranian concepts are blended in his soul.’ *Ibid.*, p.103. Translation the author’s.

with 'bliss', awakens in us. I always found this a bit inaccurate. Real pleasure, I think, can be described as sweet only inasmuch as it evokes the creamy absence of flavour characteristic of the best Italian bottled water. It has no discernible taste or smell, but the exact balance of this inversely defined quality matters a great deal.

Milk is another possible comparison — if you are from a region where drinking it as an adult is not considered repulsive, such as Scandinavia or the Indian subcontinent. Simryn Gill, who is of Punjabi extraction, speaks of a Hindu myth of creation where the world emerges from a sea of milk. She remembers a mural of it at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, one of the temples in Southeast Asia that was submerged in vegetation for centuries and thus paradoxically preserved until our times.³ She mentions this in relation to her work *32 Volumes* (2006), for which she erased all text from a complete set of the 1960s book series *Life World Library* by gently sanding all the captions off the pages and painting over the covers in white gesso, leaving people and places from all over the world alone and floating in the blankness of their cultural overdetermination as constructed mainstream images.

The association with milk, as an image of opaque luminosity or visceral refinement, may also be accurate for *My Own Private Angkor*. The interiors we see in these photographs were never inhabited. Perhaps that is why they might be mistaken for artists' studios or film sets, where something is in the making or being dreamt. In fact, they are just unsold bungalows in Simryn Gill's home town, built in a half-thought historicist style and then abandoned to the intrusive powers of tropical nature, and to the 'entrepreneurial' energy of those who remove all components they can sell for scrap: aluminium window frames, copper electric cabling or any other metal armature. The leftover glass sheets haven't been shattered, however, as would most certainly have happened almost anywhere else in the world. Instead they are neatly stacked in semi-transparent ensembles against the walls. Simryn Gill

never touched or rearranged anything. She just entered repeatedly during a period of two years, at certain times of the day, to catch two kinds of light, much valued by photographers, that she is familiar with from her earliest years: the sprightly but evanescent morning sun and the full-bodied, lingering late afternoon sun. As similar and different as water and milk, perhaps.

Sunlight, arousing or sedative, playing over the various surfaces of rooms that were meant to be mediocre but instead became sublime. This, along with Simryn Gill's compositional act of choosing spots from which to photograph, is really the only 'content' of *My Own Private Angkor*. The 'context' for the work may be interesting but may not offer any substantial clues to understanding it: Port Dickson's location by the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes; the collapse of many tourism and building projects after the Asian financial crisis of 1997; the high international demand for metal before the latest global crisis in 2008; or the postcolonial state of mind that a mock Victorian or Edwardian row house in Southeast Asia supposedly illustrates — it is best to mention these things, because when we know them we are less likely to attempt other, less relevant contextualisations.⁴ But do they actually help us to look at the many photographs in the series?

Here I allow myself to go back to Gunnar Ekelöf's poem and its unflavoured statement of the obvious. Every inner space is, in some sense, a prison cell — also the artist's studio and any substitute for it that she might find on her daily walks. The outside world usually finds ways to send its emissaries, often in the guise of ordinary objects or fragments of life, into the most hermetic of those enclosures. The formal arrangement of such messaging agents — be they typewritten Swedish words or the impact of the Malaysian sun on a light-sensitive emulsion — is almost inevitably turned into a powerful system of signs, which alerts us to the imperatives of perceiving the world and interpreting what we learn from it, even when we are blinded by enemy forces outside or inside ourselves.

³ Conversation with the artist, 12 October 2012.

⁴ Some reviewers have compared *My Own Private Angkor* to Francesca Woodman's photographs from the late 1970s. (See for instance Barry Schwabsky, 'Simryn Gill', *Artforum*, vol.51, no.3, November 2012, pp.278–79.) This is an understandable association on the surface level, and it situates Simryn Gill's work within an established canon. Yet while there may be some formal correspondence between the spaces depicted by the two artists, the programme of Simryn Gill's series is only distantly related to that of Woodman's explicitly anthropocentric, even auto-erotic, photographs.

Otherwise, it is intimated, we have experienced nothing.

Now I think we know what we absolutely need to know about what *My Own Private Angkor* depicts. So let us look more carefully at some of the photographs in the series and what they make us see. They are numbered, but I don't feel obliged to address them in numerical order. Like the other images in the series, *My Own Private Angkor #2* is ultimately about movement. The photographer is stealthily trespassing, but taking her time in search of her motif. She is moving through unused living rooms, while the sun is making a film on the wall about how foliage behaves under pressure from a not-too-strong breeze. This looks like afternoon light: saturated, creamy, can't be rushed. We have already noted that the window frames have been removed. Doesn't the echo effect of the two dark squares reinforce the tension between an Inside and an Outside? And doesn't this bring Ekelöf's captive prince to mind? The cell-window, high on the wall and opening up to almost nothing but darkness, signifies the outside world, but so does the subtly slanted rectangular reflection of another, more luminous segment of foliage in the toned glass sheet deposited on the floor. What else? It might take us too far, but the 'empty' room with the lazily flickering light seems to reverberate with some of the best-known myths and parables about image and imagination — not just Plato's Cave but also Pliny's Maid of Corinth tracing the shadow of her lover's profile (and inventing painting in the process), or Leonardo da Vinci taking pictorial inspiration from the blotches on the wall by his bed in the morning.

Three steps ahead in the image count, *My Own Private Angkor #5* convincingly uses juxtaposition and superimposition, two visual interpretations of what Sigmund Freud's English translator calls 'condensation' and 'displacement'.⁵ The image elements simultaneously reinforce and negate each other, and we, the viewers, are left monumentally stupefied. The area of the picture where the glass from the dismantled window overlaps the view

onto the courtyard is small, just a little rectangle in what we sense must be the centre of the composition, but the effect it creates can only be described as shattering. The function of the windowpane as a manufactured object is briefly restored; it shields the outside from our vision once more, but this causes the whole assembly of picture elements to break up. The four agents of meaning — glimpse of trees outside, wall beginning to crumble in the damp heat, glass casting tinted shadows, floor littered with rotting leaves — will never quite find each other again. We will not be able to fit them back together in a unified field of vision. We sense that this event must be coded into the image, as a moment of discovery that isn't meant to happen immediately. When we try to focus our full attention on the small area of consummated superimposition, the entire composition starts performing a pulsating shift between the now disjointed parts. The fact that the glass doesn't seem to fit the opening makes our descent into confusion all but unstoppable.

The two sheets of glass in *My Own Private Angkor #31* appear to have the same dimensions — perhaps they once cohabitated as part of a divided window opening inwards — but this time the metal thieves have left the rubber moulding sticking to their edges. Leaves have been whisked into the house by the wind. They lie in an amorphous heap on the floor, and their size and texture indicate that they have grown and withered in a warm climate. But again, these contextual considerations matter less than the hard compositional facts the image is made to convey. Let us compare with the two photographs we have already discussed. Two is different from one, and two of the same is different from two different ones. Simryn Gill thinks through such fundamental truths in this long series, without allowing it to become mere exercise or letting her quest for visual accuracy slide into formalist perfection.

Similarly, the composition of *My Own Private Angkor #39* is frontal, centralised, even hieratic.⁶ Here the truth

5 For a brief and clarifying discussion of James Strachey's choice of English words for *Verdichtung* and *Verschiebung* and other Freudian terminology, see David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?: The Amazing Adventure of Translation*, London and New York: Penguin Books, 2011, pp.309–10.

6 I always liked this old-fashioned term, so beloved by art history textbook authors, but only now did I think of double-checking what it really means: 'Hieratic, adjective: 1. Of or associated with sacred persons or offices; sacerdotal; 2. Constituting or relating to a simplified cursive style of Egyptian hieroglyphics, used in both sacred and secular writings; 3. Extremely formal or stylised, as in a work of art.' Available at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hieratic> (last accessed on 26 February 2013).



Simryn Gill,
My Own Private
Angkor #5, 2007–09,
silver gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm



My Own Private
Angkor #31,
2007–09, silver
gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm

*My Own Private
Angkor #39,
2007—09, silver
gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm*



*My Own Private
Angkor #41,
2007—09, silver
gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm*





Simryn Gill,
*My Own Private
Angkor #3*, 2007–09,
silver gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm

to be demonstrated is that three is different from two. We may already be vaguely aware that trinity cannot be reduced to dualism but that the latter can somehow be extended — ‘sublated’⁷ — into the former. Simryn Gill isn’t trying to prove or disprove this or any other insight. Instead she is offering us a statement of fact, a meditation in saturated shades of grey and black on how three randomly stacked windowpanes can be persuaded to dominate a symmetrical but dynamic visual structure. This image yields a little more contextual information than the last one. Again the floor is strewn with rotting vegetal matter, but we also notice the snake-like rubber leftovers. The plastered wall has been ripped open in the hunt for precious ounces of metal. There is the cropped view of the slender young trees growing between the bungalows that we recognise from another photograph. Here, too, it looks a bit curious, as if it were a pasted-in, unrelated shot or a poster on

the wall rather than a glimpse of the outside world. Although the image speaks of the number three, it can be subdivided into seven parts of speech, as it were: wall, mark on wall, floor, debris on floor, stacked windowpanes, outside view and, as an overall element affecting all the others, shadows. Yet this complexity isn’t there to cause confusion — it reinforces the main message. We begin to realise that the various photographs of this series have been entrusted with rather different tasks.

As if to prove this point, *My Own Private Angkor #41* introduces a perspective and a range of sub-topics that we haven’t encountered in our first four images. The camera-eye is lower, almost as low as in Yasujiro Ozu’s films from the 1950s and early 60s, where it was very often placed at the eye level of characters seated on the floor in traditional Japanese houses. Come to think of it, those films are perhaps not a bad point of reference for Simryn Gill’s

7 This is another classical but dubious translation from the German, of Hegel’s *Aufheben*, which might alternatively be rendered as ‘bringing to a new level by cancelling out’.

Antoine Watteau, *Comédiens François* — *Galli Comædi* (*The French Comedians*), 1731, etching with some engraving, 38.3 × 43cm. Published in Paris, print made by Jean Michel Liotard after Antoine Watteau's oil painting of 1716. © The Trustees of the British Museum



work. Both she and Ozu are masters of the infinitely meaningful differences that gradually emerge from what first appears to be an affirmation of sameness: the same actors doing and saying almost the same things in film after film, the same visual components or materials recurring in image after image, work after work. The more restrained the overall approach, the greater the drama when we suddenly understand what precariousness and upheaval these artists' formats may generate. Avoiding the too minimal is part of this strategy, since it tends to be comfortingly purposeful and trustworthy. There must always be some distraction, some disturbance; something must always go a little wrong. Here Simryn Gill watches diagonals of different inclination interfere with each other, among them the faint reflection of the staircase, the shadow cast by the corner and the rubber moulding caught up in a persistent jungle weed. Is it morning light that bleeds into the orifices of the gutted house? In any case this image articulates instability, within the framework of the balanced composition that determines *My Own Private Angkor* as a whole.

The unflinching loyalty to frontality and centralisation is combined, in *My Own Private Angkor* #3, with visible traces of movement into a flamboyantly theatrical *tableau* where smoke-coloured glass stands for human activity in a man-made outdoor setting. It is as if Simryn Gill had decided to reinvent Antoine Watteau's *Comédiens François* (*The French Comedians*, 1720–21) — only without the actors and their silver-embroidered costumes and powdered *allongé* wigs and plumed hats. And of course the action takes place in Malaysia, which is not beside the point but also not quite of prime importance, I feel. The floor tiles in both images echo each other, the plaster balustrade is a credible approximation of the painted backdrop with Corinthian columns and the wind-blown foliage might conceivably be impersonating the fluttering ostrich feathers, while Simryn Gill's discarded rubber mouldings appear ready to start a conversation with the crumpled love letter thrown to the stage floor by Watteau's *figures de différents caractères*.⁸ One should never insist on or make too much of such unsubstantiated comparisons. Yet I allow

8 *Figures de différents caractères, de paysages et d'études dessinées d'après nature par Antoine Watteau* (*Figures of Different Characters, of Landscapes and of Studies Drawn from Nature by Antoine Watteau*) is a posthumous edition of engravings based on 351 drawings by Watteau, overseen by his friend and promoter Jean de Julienne and printed in Paris in 1726–28.



Simryn Gill,
*My Own Private
Angkor #35*,
2007–09, silver
gelatin print,
39.4 × 37.5cm

myself to put this one forward because I believe it contradicts the tendency to situate Simryn Gill's work in a sun-drenched Asia-Pacific mental space that discourages a more bookish, but also more open and associative, reading of her intentions.

Sun-drenched, tropical, postcolonial — don't these epithets, on the other hand, accurately account for what the image labelled *My Own Private Angkor #35* asks us to look at? Yes, but only up to a point. The two square plaster columns with their crude approximation of Vitruvian order could easily belong to a nineteenth-century planter's mansion in any of the European empires of the Global South (perhaps with the exception of the former German colonies, which tended to avoid too Mediterranean-looking styles), so they don't necessarily signal 'postcolonial' in the temporal sense. Even their spatial arrangement seems to be non-linear; we

feel that we are observing the beginning of a zigzag movement rather than a fragment of a steadily progressing colonnade.

Tropical nature appears as biological debris and a sun-blocking intruder, not as the life force that dried up the mother's milk of creation and now yields multiple annual harvests. Simryn Gill doesn't aim at universalising the topics or materials she uses for her work.⁹ Her installations, objects and images are thought and realised in strong and convincing relation to location: a house, a garden, a study, but also a culture, a continent, a climate zone. Yet her use of form and meaning is such that the work always transcends the specificity of both content and context. Take, for instance, the sheet of glass in this image, bending the laws of both perspective and composition as it leans against one of the columns at an impossible angle and outlines an indescribable shape.

9 Simryn Gill's work *Throwback* (2007), shown at documenta 12 (2007), consisted of 82 parts from a 1980s Indian-made Tata truck, cast in the following materials: termite mound soils, river clay, laterite, seashells, fruit skins (banana, mango, mangosteen), leaves (bodhi, sea almond, durian), coconut bark and fibre, areca nut casings, kapok, lalang grass, banana trunk, bougainvillea flowers, gelatin glue, damar resin and milk.

In this position it becomes a screen that simultaneously attracts and repels the light-energy of the scene. Not quite milky, but not quite clear either. Not dividing Outside from Inside — that is very hard to do on a columned terrace — but neither bringing them closer together.

Simryn Gill's *My Own Private Angkor* must have begun as an exercise in capturing the light inside and outside these decaying bungalows. From the outset there must have been a liquid, uncontained thought, always in movement like the shadow play on the slowly deteriorating plaster walls. This thought needed repetition and variation to become a coherent visual statement. It needed to be pursued over time, in an ever-growing number of photographs that form a series of individual images, but also become one long piece of uninterrupted 'writing'. *Where to draw the line* (2011–12), presented at DOCUMENTA (13) in the summer of 2012, confronts us with nine texts on nine joined-together strips of paper, so densely typewritten, without any blank spaces between the words or sentences, that after a while they become all but illegible and ask to be regarded as images instead. We might consider this work the opposite of *My Own Private Angkor*, but only if we take into account that true opposites are interconnected, complementary, even symbiotic. True opposites presuppose, create and reinforce each other.

*O, Outside, I wanted to see your Inside
Was it red? Was it white?
O, Outside, show me your innermost!
Is it white? Is it red?
You, Outside, are you brave enough?
You, Inside, are you brave?
Tell me what disguise you wear
how you paint yourself so white and so red
to make your cheeks so beautiful
and your feet so small
that they are barely visible
under a flowered fabric.¹⁰*

The opposition of the internal and the external that I have tried to trace through seven samples from *My Own Private Angkor* is only one of the conceptual engines that drive the series towards a

climax, which arrives only in the fullness of the different solutions to the different problems that it proposes. Yet this opposition has the advantage of making visible the overlap between visual and linguistic imagery that Simryn Gill's art stages: what I would, with some hesitation, call its metaphorical quality. Metaphors are language-images. As graspable entities they can really only exist inside language, but they can sometimes be 'sensed' through other means of expression, if they are formulated with enough precision to allow for meaningful interpretation and, at the same time, with enough nuance to have the necessary ambiguity. As a poet, Gunnar Ekelöf has the advantage to be operating with metaphors of the proper, clear-cut linguistic kind. He can choose to make them efface themselves until they all but dissolve into thin, odourless air. This lightness of touch also allows him to display and disguise his esoteric orientalism in one and the same breath.

Like all visuals, Simryn Gill's photographs are less able to wilfully step into and out of contextual references and unambiguous meaning than statements relying on language. Language is more predictable and inflexible than other forms of human communication. It has to be, because if it were as supple and ethereal as images (or music, or tastes or smells) it could not serve one of its prime purposes: that of allowing us to read each other's minds with as little misunderstanding as possible. Yet unlike poetic metaphors, successful images such as the constituent parts of *My Own Private Angkor* attain blissful, self-fulfilling clarity without having to downplay or disavow any aspect of themselves. They don't have to bother with eliminating misunderstanding, which in the end is little more than a technical task. Instead they can aim directly at understanding.

10 G. Ekelöf, 'dīwān no.17', *Dīwān över Fursten av Emgiön*, op. cit., p.27. My translation of the seventeenth *dīwān*, which in the original looks and sounds like this: 'O, Utsida, jag ville se / din Insida / Var den röd? / Var den vit? / O, Utsida, visa mig ditt innersta! / Är det vitt? Är det rött? / Du Utsida, är du tapper nog? / Du Insida, är du tapper? / Säg vad förklädnad du bär / hur du sminkar dig så vit och så röd / för att dina kinder skall bli så vackra / och dina fötter så små / att de nätt och jämnt syns / under ett blommigt tyg.'