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AGAINST BLANKNESS THE INHABITING SPACES OF SIMRYN GILL



FEATURES BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD FROM MAR/APR 2013

AUSTRALIA

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It's May 4, 2006. A tsunami warning has been issued for Fiji and New Zealand following an earthquake in Tonga. At Sotheby's in New York, Picasso's *Dora Maar with Cat* (1941) goes for USD 95 million under the hammer, becoming the second-most expensive painting in auction history. And in a quiet inner-city suburb of Sydney, Simryn Gill sets out from her house with no agenda beyond using up a roll of soon-to-expire black-and-white film. Gill approaches this task with a deliberate openness, stopping to converse with neighbors and strangers and photographing objects and scenes that happen to catch her eye. There are nine photographs all up: two lacquered Chinese chairs in a leaf-littered front garden; the local shopping strip with its Nu Style dry cleaners and Peking Health Supplies; a sky swollen with clouds and power lines above an old Wolseley car that is hugging the curb; a Spanish mission-style house overhung with a frangipani tree; a shopkeeper cropped from the nose down surveying a counter stacked with plastic containers; a bird's-eye view over trees as the sky brightens; the sun breaking through a railway overpass; the lacy shadows along a graffiti-strewn walkway; a railway platform empty but for the pregnant promise of arrival or departure. And Gill will do more or less the same thing for every day of the month, or 30 rolls of film in total, for what will become her series "May 2006."



MAY 2006, 2006, gelatin silver photograph from a series of 30 rolls of discontinued film, used to photograph the artist's immediate neighborhood in Sydney every day for the month in which it expired, 12.7 x 17.8 cm.

This undertaking seems simple enough and almost blithely carefree in its immersion in the everyday. But in setting out to complete this task, and opening herself up to opportunity and happenstance, Gill —perhaps best known for work that has embodied the experience of in-between-ness—arrived at a new understanding of her place in the world. As she recalls: "When you're walking slowly and looking at things, there's always someone who wants to stop and show you a flower; they're trimming their hedge or they ask you where you're from. And then you say: 'Well, where are you from? Germany maybe? Ireland?' 'I don't know, I'm Australian.' 'Oh, really. Well maybe I'm that too. Although I haven't changed my papers yet.' And you'd have these strange conversations. It was very nice."



MAY 2006. 2006, gelatin silver photograph from a series of 30 rolls of discontinued film, used to photograph the artist's immediate neighborhood in Sydney every day for the month in which it expired, 12.7 × 17.8 cm.

"I came to understand place as verb rather than noun," Gill wrote at the time, "which exists in our doings: walking, talking, living." The artist had become a maker, and her materials had become the inescapably everyday reality of Marrickville—a suburb remarkable for its relaxed racial diversity, where Gill has resided since the mid-1990s. Gone were the trappings of her other home in Port Dickson, Malaysia, where she was raised and maintains a creative base, and, stripped of any exotic "otherness" that this Asian background has sometimes lent her art in Western eyes, she revealed herself anew under the sometimes harsh Australian light, carefully attuned to the specific character of the place in which she found herself.

From June this year, Gill will represent Australia at the 55th Venice Biennale. As an artist born of Punjabi ancestry in Singapore and later schooled in India and England who has been quietly critical of her adopted country's increasing intransigence on political refugees—most notably in *Paper Boats* (2009), which encouraged gallerygoers to fashion vessels from pages of a 1968 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—Gill is aware of the irony. "It's an alarming proposition," she admits. "I think about the way in which we are not fixed, but I do work deeply with specificity and circumstance and how we live in our space—whether that's a set of ideas or a physical thing or a mobile thing. Mine is not a representative voice—in fact, it's entirely the opposite of that possibility . . . Representation is a very strange notion." As is the idea that Gill can represent anything apart from her own highly particularized and often elusive sensibility, which the artist herself has described as mercurial. "My relationship to place-ness is very wobbly and kind of ambivalent," she says, "and that's really the space that I occupy."

Gill has defied categories of artistic production as resolutely as she has defied geographical identity, and it will be fascinating to watch her artistic occupation of the Australia pavilion in the heart of Venice's Giardini della Biennale. Designed as a small temporary structure by the Sydney architect Philip Cox in 1988, and sometimes unkindly maligned as resembling a toilet block or backyard shed, the pavilion is to be razed at the conclusion of the Biennale in November to make way for a larger pavilion planned for 2015 that will cost AUD 6 million (USD 6.2 million). In this sense, Gill's installation will memorialize an impending demolition site, thus continuing her interest in exploring the in-between states of languished building projects that began with her photographic series "Standing Still" in 2000. Here she cast her net widely across the Malay Peninsula, capturing the ruins of the recent economic boom and their return to nature, before focusing on a housing estate abandoned near Port Dickson for the series "My Own Private Angkor" (2007–09). The latter work suggests not only the internalization of her gaze but also a particular suspension of time and place through the orchestration of light as it reflects off displaced panes of glass in the ransacked estate. Who better, then, to capture the dying light of Philip Cox's doomed 1980s pavilion?

Gill is circumspect about the Venice project, but the work will reprise the 2010 "Breathing Out" series of drawings, each of which encompasses collaged texts and resembles swarms of insects or birds. That series, in turn, led to a 2012 research fellowship at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, where the artist spent a month studying their collection of Hymenoptera: ants, bees, termites and wasps. Another aspect of the Venice project follows several field trips she made last year across Australia, photographing aluminum, copper, gold and rare-earth mining sites from the air. While Gill might appear doubtful that such a body of work could represent nationhood, she isn't entirely freed from the weight of

representation. “My work’s also acutely about context, about the fine nuanced details of context, and this is a very specific kind of context,” says Gill, noting the Biennale’s elaborate system of pavilions, “and so one has to think from inside of that too, and see where it takes you.”

Shying away from the public grandstanding associated with the biennial experience, Gill is drawn to more private statements of social identity, with a quiet curiosity and invisible ease that allow her to penetrate the surface of things, enacting an artistic instinct to inhabit and interiorize. In the Malay language of Gill’s other homeland, the word for “inside” is *dalam*. This was the title of the 2001 photographic series that first saw the artist’s exacting methodology played out in a public context. With polite distance, Gill photographed 258 lounge rooms on the Malay Peninsula over a period of two months, almost transforming the spaces into shrines in the process. For each house she granted herself only one view, and each room documented made the series, which was memorably arranged in a Bernd and Hilla Becher-like grid around three walls of Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2002. Gill says that such self-imposed rules help her unlock and gain access to hidden secrets and desires. “Most of us [artists] like combining a few different motives or curiosities or expediencies,” she explains. “For me, working with constraints is really necessary. Where does this idea of freedom as being anything-is-possible come from? Absolute choice is a nightmare; it’s immobilizing. So you set up constraints as a wall that you need to climb to look behind.”

It was a similar impulse that had initially propelled Gill toward art-making after she moved to Adelaide from Kuala Lumpur with her social-anthropologist husband Souchou Yao in 1987. With a gaze both sensitive and taxonomic, the untrained artist began collecting and assembling the objects of her desire from charity and vintage shops, as if unpacking her new country through touch and smell. In the early work *Forking Tongues* (1992), a line of silver cutlery and red chili peppers forms a swirling retinue on the gallery floor—a commingling of cultures but also a question mark. Indeed, central to such works, and to Gill’s practice in general, is the question she never ceases to ask: “What are we doing as artists? And of course there isn’t an answer, but the doing is that.”



MY OWN PRIVATE ANGKOR – #14,
2007–09, gelatin silver photograph, 69 × 61 cm.



MY OWN PRIVATE ANGKOR - #7,
2007-09, gelatin silver photograph, 69 x 61 cm



WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE (detail),

The wrestling and restless energy of such questioning can also be traced through *Where to Draw the Line* (2012), Gill's recent text work for Documenta 13 in Kassel. Here, seven essays written by Gill were edited, typed and arranged along seven scrolls—with no spaces between the letters. As a result, what appears almost monochromatically gray from a distance is revealed up close to be alive with nervous snippets of thoughts: “shovelsaremade” or “storiesarefunny” or “thisarticleiread.” Once again Gill is questioning herself as much as the experience shared by artist and audience of art-making and its reception. These are subjects she continues to ponder several months later: “Are we now a universe of makers rather than lookers, and writers rather than readers? In many ways, I've always been very ambivalent about making positions—I'm just asking the question. And then I'm throwing my hat in the ring as well.”

Where to Draw the Line continues Gill's seemingly insatiable hunger for words: the way they are produced, circulated and continue to colonize our thoughts. With *Caress* (2007–), her graphite rubbings on paper from typewriters discarded from Mumbai's old law courts, Gill seems to release the spirits of the nameless and faceless writers and reporters entrapped in these beautiful machines of often petty officialdom. Of course the real keepers and foot soldiers in this world of words are books, and Gill has employed an arsenal of them for her quietly revolutionary purposes. The torn shreds of pages first began insinuating themselves in interventions that Gill documented in photographic works such as *Untitled* (1994) and her “Forest” series (1996–98), whether grafting like parasitical plants or wrapped around tree trunks. Soon this pulpy residue of words became the very material of her art. In an ongoing series of private commissions begun in 1999, “Pearls,” Gill takes a book given by a friend or acquaintance and, through a painstaking act of artistic alchemy, returns the volume as a string of beads, making tactile these words transferred from mind to body. In the larger-scale and more public variant of “Pearls,” *9 Volumes of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (2008–09), audiences are encouraged to sit and literally grasp these nine volumes dating from 1969, now reduced to what appear to be boccie balls on the ground. Clearly a sensuous impulse is at play in such wearable and touchable offerings of muted wordplay. “I really love things that finish up in domestic spaces,” says Gill, “and how they grow and shrink and break and get stained and thrown away or become precious. Putting your own patina on the things that you own is like an act of love.”

However, a political imperative can also be discerned in Gill's work. Her birth in 1959 was preceded by Malaya's independence from the United Kingdom, and followed by the creation of Malaysia, which briefly incorporated Singapore. It's within this context, and within a cultural inheritance that includes British literature and democracy and the advent of conceptual art, that Gill's work resonates most powerfully, resisting the blankness that postcolonialism has often prescribed. Key here is the artist's *Untitled*, installed at London's Tate Modern in 2006. Arrayed on tables, like lambs to the slaughter, were over 100 books, many of which were open with small sections of text removed. Presented in see-through pouches alongside were bundles of identical words collected from these tomes—“always,” “because” and “then,” among others—their ordinary meanings made vaguely sinister by their collective unsettlement. As anthropologist Michael Taussig has commented, there is nothing random about the titles Gill has chosen for



FOREST – #14, 1996–98, gelatin silver photograph from a set of 16 images, 120 × 95 cm.

examination: Emmanuel John Hevi's *An African Student in China* (1963), Leon Comber's *Chinese Magic and Superstition in Malaya* (1955), and so forth. They are about another kind of unsettlement, of cultures rather than words, but once again we are presented with a shifting context that is quietly unnerving. "Everything has its specificity," says Gill, "like those words that I tore out from those books. In its own place each 'because,' for instance, sits in a very particular constellation of words, but when you take it out and it's all by itself, what is it? Is there a normal, common-or-garden, generic 'because'? Which typeface would generic be? What kind of paper? Black ink, blue ink, grey ink? What point size? What is generic? And that desire in itself is curious . . . There's no such thing as blankness. And that very idea comes from power. It comes from a kind of white centralization of the world."

It's with her photography that this refusal of blankness is made most manifest and undeniable. Gill's photographs don't document, describe or generalize, they inhabit. They occupy the thresholds between humans and nature, caught in the liminal light of dawn or dusk, when our senses are most attuned to feeling and seeing. It is these thresholds that are explored in "My Own Private Angkor" (2007–09). Over time Gill followed the filtering light in these abandoned rooms that, like her books, have been stripped of the usual signifiers of civilization. When confronted by these profoundly odd and entropic interiors at the height of summer, New York reviewers made comparisons with Francesca Woodman and West Coast minimalism. But for me they are drenched in their own precise sense of time and place. The images pierce, in Roland Barthes' sense of the word: the dislodged sheets of window glass in each photograph act as a shard-like *punctum*, not only reflecting the often absurdly fertile and obliterating vegetation outside but also reminding us of all the faces and lives that will never live in or look out of these rooms. They also take us back to the very beginnings of photography itself and its strange intractable miracle—the emulsification of time on a glass photographic plate. It's a love of the very materiality of photography that draws the artist in, to find a point of intimate focus within the frame. Viewing the scene through Gill's eyes, we are not in the past or the future, only in the present. "You're taking this thing on to film and it's stuck there," she says of photography. "It's like an insect in amber. It's that point when the dinosaur made its footprint and it was left there."

Even absence is presence in Gill's pictures, the opposite of blankness. The artist reminds us of this fact with her seamless mix of poetry and pith in the 2005 photographic series "Looking for Marcel." Here, Gill's muse is Marcel Broodthaers, the obscure Belgian conceptualist, and specifically his 1974 film *Berlin, or a Dream with Cream*, in which Broodthaers is seen reading a newspaper at a lace-covered table, cream smeared across his glasses, watched by a parrot perched from a potted palm in the corner of the room. In her tropical version of the film, Gill has taken the scene outside to an abundant palm-fringed garden in Port Dickson. The figure has vanished in the vespertine light. But, sitting on the table, alongside the curiously English silver tea service and on top of a folded newspaper is a pair of spectacles—smeared this time with the sticky, amber-colored flesh of pawpaw. There is nothing clean and uncontested in this particular act of artistic inheritance. Instead, we are left with the everyday mess of cultural survival, with all of its color and contamination. As Simryn Gill likes to say, "We all have to live with our histories."