

Simryn Gill: Inland



# How We Are in the World: The Photography of Simryn Gill

*Simryn Gill: Inland* is a survey of photography and takes place in a photography gallery. It is important to declare at the outset, that while photography forms a significant and wondrous part of her practice, Simryn Gill does not consider herself a photographer; "For me, the taking of photographs is another tool in my bag of strategies, in that awkward pursuit of coherence we sometimes call art".<sup>1</sup> *Simryn Gill: Inland* embraces this conundrum as an entry point for considering Gill's photography, and how photography might function more broadly as a way of engaging with the world.

Seven major series wind almost chronologically through the gallery—in this first survey of Gill's photography—following a path, quite literally, from outside to inside, from found in nature to found in culture and back. Commencing with three series located outdoors, *Forest* (1996–1998), *Rampant* (1999) and *Vegetation* (1999), the survey moves to Gill's sweeping interior series *Dalam* (2001). On the cusp of outside and inside is *Power station* (2004), which makes a curious and visceral analogy between the interior of her childhood home in Port Dickson, Malaysia and the interior of an adjacent power station. Like a medieval Book

of Hours, the hand-sized concertina work *Distance* (2003–2008) is an attempt by Gill to convey the interior of her home in Marrickville, Sydney to someone residing outside Australia. Gill's most recent work *Inland* (2009), commissioned for this survey and photographed during a road trip from northern New South Wales to South Australia and across the bight to Western Australia, is at the heart of the exhibition. Gill's only moving image work, *Vessel* (2004), screened on SBS Television, closes the exhibition's journey with the almost imperceptible passage of a small fishing vessel across the horizon. To ground the exhibition, or perhaps to oversee our journey, one image is selected from Gill's highly regarded series, *A small town at the turn of the century* (1999–2000).

Gill's photography takes place within a broader practice that curator Russell Storer describes as "... subjecting found objects, books, local materials and sites—each of which carry specific meanings and histories—to a range of processes including photographing, collecting, erasing, casting, tearing, arranging, stitching, rubbing, wrapping and

<sup>1</sup> Simryn Gill "May 2006", *Off the Edge*, Merdeka 50 years issue no. 33, September 2007, p. 83.



from *Forest* 1996–1998



from *Forest* 1996–1998

engraving"<sup>2</sup>: Gill takes humble things in the world and shifts them; rearranges them with seemingly endless patience, craft and grace, to communicate something about how the object has come into being. This is not a matter of changing context to appreciate formal qualities as might a connoisseur, but rather a quest for understanding place.

Always evident in the found object is some kind of story that, as Gill gathers the item, is folded into the meaning of her work. The constituent parts of her installations — be they items found on the shore or collected from around her studios in Port Dickson or Sydney, or indeed a particular site Gill photographs — are gathered for their ability to evoke a history. Movement across the globe, of people and vegetation, both enforced and deliberate, if not the subject of her work is certainly a link. While not a unique story, resettlement is part of Gill's individual and familial history. Her parents originally moved from India to Malaya prompted by the range of human predicaments, from political

and economic upheaval, through to adventure and marriage. The displacement of objects echoes the journeys of people.

I have come to think of Gill's photography as equivalent in some way to the other modes of making that constitute her work. Hailed for its ability to collect, even steal bits of the world for possession by the photographer, photography is also a way of recording the world not dissimilar to, for example, making a cast. Gill casts discarded and natural objects, using materials ranging from plant fibres through to bronze.<sup>3</sup> Further, photography evokes Gill's series of graphite rubbings on paper.<sup>4</sup> Each method — casting, rubbing and photographing — makes an impression of one thing upon another surface, making a direct relationship between image and world. Each method has a different claim to truth and a different point of failure. For example, in the work *Distance*, Gill attempts to create a comprehensive experience of her home, which ultimately fails in its verisimilitude. Gill took 130 photographs on a medium-format camera hoping to 'complete the picture' as it were, and yet she

2 Russell Storer, *Simryn Gill*, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Simryn Gill: Gathering*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 20 November 2008–22 March 2009, by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2008, p. 45.

3 In works such as *Heart of the matter* (1994), *Throwback* (2007) and *Untitled (interiors)* (2009).

4 *Caress* (2007).



from 32 *Volumes* 2006. Installation photograph by Jenni Carter.



from *Vegetation* 1999

says, “the final result is almost like an incoherence, it’s too close, there is too much information”.<sup>5</sup> While *Distance* fails to communicate the gestalt of home, it is remarkable in its detail and beauty.

Gill’s broader practice is handmade, often requiring extreme patience and dexterity in pursuit of a particular materiality and aesthetic. I am thinking here of 32 *Volumes* (2006), where Gill and her assistants rubbed out every word in each volume of the *Life World Library*, or in *Roadkill* (2000) where Gill collected hundreds of objects squashed on the road and attached small toy wheels at their base. It is therefore not surprising that Gill has come to analogue photography through its material demands, as well as its object-hood. “My fascination with photographs” says Gill, “began with their other, more elusive identity as objects, things, rather than pictures alone. Like shards from some old piece of pottery, which you can hold and turn over and feel with your fingers as much as with your eyes, and which can never be completely known”.<sup>6</sup> But Gill also came to photography, as Russell Storer writes, “not through looking at art

photography, but the many kinds of photographs that appear in books and magazines: in other words, by reading”.<sup>7</sup>

Reading, engagement with materials and place underlie Gill’s first photographic series, *Forest*. On returning to Singapore from Adelaide with her young family, Gill found herself in a curious relationship with ‘home’. Born in Singapore she was however designated a visitor. As Gill writes, “I decided I needed to echo my situation in my art activities, and started making small interventions in the very rare ‘wild places’ around where we lived, like gardens of unoccupied houses, roadside growths of tapioca and yam”.<sup>8</sup> This becomes a story of Gill’s playful and unexpected interventions in the landscape, where she “started replacing elements of plants in these places — leaves, tendrils, aerial roots — with similar shapes torn out of the pages of books”.<sup>9</sup> Fragments from books, such as; *Frankenstein*, a Javanese version of the *Ramayana* and Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, were torn and minutely crafted onto plants, mimicking the parasitical epiphytes that graft onto local trees. Connections between host plants and

5 “Simryn Gill in conversation with Natasha Bullock and Lily Hibberd”, *Photofile*, no. 76, Summer 2006, p. 17.

6 *ibid.*

7 Russell Storer, *Simryn Gill: Gathering*, op. cit., p. 54.

8 Simryn Gill, “May 2006”, op. cit., p. 82.

9 *ibid.*



from *Rampant* 1999



from *Power station* 2004



their introduced texts are elusive, they seem to adapt, like an immigrant to her surroundings. Prey to disintegration and being carried off by birds and insects, this bodily experiment in making sense of place as an outsider becomes the subject of *Forest*.

Gill's approach to photographing *Forest* is revealing. Working with photographer Nicholas Leong, Gill sought particular values, "dense, flat black and white pictures, like shaded graphite drawings, grey and subtle, which only gave up their details little by little".<sup>10</sup> The large scale of these hand-printed photographs enables text fragments to be read, while their low contrast enables extravagant detail. As a result these photographs invite reading like a text rather than apprehending like an image.<sup>11</sup> Leong introduced Gill to film that required long exposures and attentive processing and handling; and which, after much experimentation, gave her the desired results. It was through working with such demanding film that Gill came to think about photography. "Slow exposure", she explains, "is like taking time into your negative".<sup>12</sup> While photography records, it

also brings its own history and materiality which have become embedded within Gill's practice, "I gradually came to draw this aspect of the film's nature into my concepts".<sup>13</sup>

Gill draws an extraordinary parallel between her vigilant attention to detail in the making of a photograph, where every formal decision has a particular meaning and history,<sup>14</sup> and her vigilance as a foreigner — "... someone who needs to be mindful of their own and other people's meanings, gestures and references ... In this condition one hovers over, rather than occupies, a place".<sup>15</sup> Gill states that she does not set out making photographs to simply make a photograph, but to think about how we are in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Seeking an understanding of the politics of place informs her most recent work, *Inland*. This series

<sup>13</sup> Simryn Gill, "May 2006", op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> "... every aspect of the picture must be self-consciously chosen, decided upon ... each choice seems loaded with conscious or unconscious references ... so that I find myself being obsessively vigilant to the final form ...". Simryn Gill, "May 2006", op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Simryn Gill, "May 2006", op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> Simryn Gill, in a telephone conversation with the author, while Gill was on the road photographing *Inland*, late-May 2009.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Russell Storer, *Simryn Gill: Gathering*, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Simryn Gill, in telephone conversation with the author, May 2009.



from *Dalam* 2001



*A small town at the turn of the century* #5 1999–2000

has a filial relationship with *Dalam*, and *A small town at the turn of the century* in its nod towards an anthropological survey. *Inland* confounds what is normally expected from photographs of Australia's interior and eschews decorous landscapes, vast horizons or smiling rugged people, for modest interiors of homes. Indeed there are no people present, only the houses they inhabit as evidence of their subjectivity.

Through an extraordinary ability to engage with strangers, Gill and her fellow traveller Mary Maguire, photographed the living rooms of 80 homes ranging widely in geographic location, socio-economic and cultural background. Without judgement, Gill applied her automatic method when taking one or occasionally two photographs in each home. Gill's choice of a standard lens brings a partial, still-life point of view, as opposed to the expansive interiors of *Dalam*. Precedent for Gill's objective approach can be found in early twentieth-century photography by Eugène Atget and August Sander, in the colonial list makers that collected images of 'natives', flora and fauna and in the conceptual strategies of the 60s and 70s.

Given the material vulnerability of photographs, Gill chooses an unlikely installation for this series. Three groups of unframed, unmounted prints equal in size

and format are stacked on a table for us to examine. Small, square cibachrome prints of interiors sit alongside a collection of black and white landscape photographs taken on the journey between towns and settlements, ranging from formal shots of the horizon to less structured sketches, at times taken without looking through the lens. A further group of cibachrome prints taken in a studio and reminiscent of a geological textbook, record small rocks or stones Gill picked up along the way. It is here in the studio with stones in her hand that Gill reveals the implicit vulnerability of her project: these photographs are testimony to the emotional interaction between stranger and host that occurs when crossing borders or thresholds.

Gill used three modes of photographing for this series, corresponding with different ways of knowing the world through the camera: looking through the lens, not looking through the lens and a studio set-up. Placing the series on a table encourages us to hold the photographs, to sort and arrange these three perspectives — inside, outside and 'in hand' — creating alternative relationships and narratives. *Inland* is literally within our grasp, inviting a more intimate and active relationship with photography and with the subject,



from *Inland* 2009



from *Inland* 2009

reminiscent of searching through family prints or the excitement of exploring a collection of found scientific images.

Gill's installation of this series heightens the provisional nature of its description of regional Australia, leaving open-ended the issue of what can be known through photography. In bringing Gill's photography together in this survey the question arises, how complete can photography be as an enquiry about the world, not just for Gill, but more generally. For example, of her series *Dalam*, Gill states "I quite simple-mindedly asked the question: "Can I see what a collective 'inside' defined by nation might look like?"<sup>17</sup> In all its sumptuous colour and glorious detail, *Dalam* falls short of establishing a definition. This failure of photography is perhaps disappointing given its relationship to the real, an issue prompted by Gill's 32 *Volumes* where all text is removed from the totalising discourse of the *Life World Library*. As Janet Malcolm writes "The great picture stories in *Life* and *Look* were actually...collaborations between a photographer and a writer, in which

each seemed to be compensating for the other's lacks: the photographer's inability to show, the writer's inability to describe".<sup>18</sup>

"I am not a documentary photographer", Gill reminds me from a mobile phone somewhere in the outback. Nor is she a collector of images for the libidinous sake of completing the series; common to much contemporary photography. If Gill were, surely the digital realm would offer her heightened capacity, speed and ease. In fact it is the materiality and demanding process that draws photography into her wider enquiry about the world. In falling between the ability of language to describe and the image's capacity to show, Gill finds an important place for photography, within her "pursuit of coherence"<sup>19</sup>, regardless of its truth-value.

<sup>18</sup> Janet Malcolm in Russell Storer, *Simryn Gill*, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Simryn Gill "May 2006", op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Natasha Bullock and Lily Hibberd, "Simryn Gill in conversation ...", op. cit., p. 17.

### Naomi Cass

Exhibition Curator and Director  
Centre for Contemporary Photography

## CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Simryn Gill: Inland* follows CCP's *Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka Portraits 1987–2007* in being a curated, mid-career survey that provides a longer look through the photography of an established artist. As large bodies of work, these biennial surveys inhabit the entire CCP, are accompanied by catalogues and are followed by extensive tours.

Working with Simryn Gill has been exciting and rewarding, I thank Simryn for her gracious and thorough participation and for the opportunity to witness the making of her new series. Characteristically Gill's work embraces the contributions of others, and I acknowledge Mary Maguire, Sandy Barnard, Jenni Carter and Minerva Inwald.

Critical financial assistance has been provided by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and Melbourne International Arts Festival (MIAF), enabling not only this exhibition but also the commission of Gill's new series, *Inland* for which we are most grateful. I thank Brett Sheehy, Artistic Director and Simon Maidment, Visual Arts Coordinator, MIAF. Aspects of *Simryn Gill: Inland* will tour with National Exhibitions Touring Support Victoria (NETS) and I thank Georgia Cribb, Director NETS Victoria. We are grateful to the sponsors listed below, all of whom contribute to CCP's ability to present *Simryn Gill: Inland*.

I also wish to thank those behind the scenes, in particular ACMI, Leonard Vary, Patrick Corrigan AM, Sally Breen, BREENSPACE, David Belzycki, National Gallery of Victoria, Anne Wilson and Amanda Love Art. I acknowledge with gratitude the talented CCP team, Rebecca Chew, Tracey Hubert, Shay Minster, Karra Rees, Tony Dutton, Michael Nichols and Mark Feary. In particular I thank Isabelle Woodley, Curatorial Assistant and CCP volunteer for her extraordinary contribution to this exhibition, ranging from highly skilled technical work through to curatorial administration. I have greatly appreciated her goodwill and intelligence.

### **Naomi Cass**

Director, Centre for Contemporary Photography

## BIOGRAPHY

Born 1959 Singapore. Lives and works in Sydney. Gill currently divides her time between Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia.

Her recent solo exhibitions have been held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2008; the Tate Modern, London, 2006; the Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2006; the Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, 2004; the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002; and Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, 2001. She received an Australia Council Fellowship in 2003.

## ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Solo projects are rarely solo undertakings and I have many people to thank. Naomi Cass found the material support to make *Inland* possible, and offered trust and friendship; Mary Maguire travelled and worked with me through New South Wales and South Australia; Sandra Barnard interpreted and printed the negatives we brought back from the journey; Jenni Carter photographed the stones and debris held in my hands, and the pictures that appear in this catalogue. Minerva Inwald assisted with all organisational matters in Sydney; Isabelle Woodley did the same at CCP in Melbourne. Last, and most of all, I thank the people we met on our journey who invited us into their homes. They are too numerous to be acknowledged but their generosity and hospitality forms the spirit of this work.

Simryn Gill is represented by BREENSPACE, Sydney & Tracy Williams Ltd, New York.

Selections from *Simryn Gill: Inland* will tour to five regional Victorian venues in 2010 and 2011 with NETS Victoria and support from Melbourne International Arts Festival.

## LIST OF WORKS

Unless otherwise noted, all works reproduced and exhibited courtesy of Simryn Gill. Measurements are image size, height x width x depth.

*A small town at the turn of the century #5* 1999–2000  
type C photograph  
from a series of 40  
91.5 x 91.5 cm  
private collection, Sydney

*Dalam* 2001  
260 type C photographs  
23.5 x 23.5 cm (each)

*Distance* 2003  
artist's book  
published by roygbiv editions, Sydney, 2008

*Forest* 1996–1998  
16 silver gelatin photographs  
120.0 x 95.0 cm (each)

*Inland* 2009  
cibachrome photographs and silver gelatin  
photographs (quantity variable)  
13.0 x 13.0 cm (each)

*Power station* 2004  
13 type C photographs and  
13 silver gelatin photographs  
19.0 x 42.0 cm (each)

*Rampant* 1999  
7 silver gelatin photographs  
28.0 x 26.0 cm (each)

Untitled photo-essay 2001–2009  
63 scanned images transferred to colour DVD,  
silent, 5 min 15 sec

*Vegetation* 1999  
5 silver gelatin photographs  
26.5 x 26.5 cm (each)

*Vessel* 2004  
16mm film transferred to colour DVD  
silent, 6 x 25 sec vignettes  
Commissioned as part of *2004: Australian Culture Now*, produced with the assistance of ACMI and SBS Independent. Video courtesy of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image

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Front and back-cover image: Simryn Gill, from *Inland* 2009.  
Photography by Jenni Carter

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