



Simryn Gill/MATRIX 210

Standing Still

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**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX

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Standing Still, a series of 114 photographs shot in Malaysia between 2000 and 2003, explores the idea that a group of photographs can capture “a place in time.”¹ The pictures record buildings in varying states of decay and dereliction. Yet, in spite of their state of abandonment, these are not all old buildings. Many were never completed or occupied and now stand as ruins of a future that never arrived. Some were large developments that came upon hard times, in particular during the regional economic crash of the late nineties: shopping centers, apartment blocks, private homes, even entire housing estates, simply left in an unfinished state. In this photographic series, the “new ruins” stand side by side with the truly old—shells of crumbling mansions and more humble homes, shuttered, vacant, and stained with time; abandoned warehouses, and shops where human presence is now a ghostly absence.

“I started looking at these strange decaying giants [of uncompleted large buildings] in relation to the older abandoned buildings that seem to punctuate the towns and the countryside in Malaysia,” says Gill. “It’s hard to know why they have been left to rot. Sometimes it’s because they have a bad history, like being used during the war for the kinds of activities that can make places inconsolably haunted; sometimes it’s because of family disputes about inheritance and the like, but often they are left and allowed to fall apart simply because they are old.”²

The two groups of derelict structures, the old and the new, make a stark pairing. They bring together the remains of an abandoned past and the projections of an arrested future to reveal an uncertain, stumbling present. *Standing Still* combines the peculiarities of location captured in the record of a passing moment.

Over the past decade, in collections of photographs, objects, and texts, Gill has undertaken what can be seen as a continuous project of making a document of place over time, focusing almost exclusively on Malaysia. The meanings, references, materiality, and imagery of various works layer upon each other, adding, subtracting, and making fragile any possibility of a coherent archive. Each separate work holds its own questions about place, and about the act of making and displaying records. For *Standing Still*, Gill queried whether a series of photographs could capture “within them, and between them, that unsettling quality of a sort of hesitation in time, stilled time.”³

Dalam, completed in 2001, is an impressive collection of 260 photographs capturing the interiors of individual Malaysian homes and revealing a vast diversity of social, economic, and religious situations. Here Gill shoots at a tight angle; the result is an intensity of objects in space. These images provide an unusual view into the private space of unknown people. No one is

Cover: *Standing Still* #95, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 114; 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.



pictured returning the gaze of the viewer, who is thus free to stare at length at intimate details exposed in the photographs. What role, then, does the viewer have? What can a viewer see in such a set? Gill has noted that when *Dalam* was exhibited in Malaysia, the images were accompanied by captions detailing specific locations. But for non-Malaysian viewers, the specifics are irrelevant and even meaningless. Each of the 260 images really exists only as a part of the whole, a personalized, albeit relatively random, survey of the Malaysian vernacular; an invisible yet imperceptibly real presence of living.

Gill says of *Dalam*: “Perhaps I conceived the project as a way to see ‘my’ country, as a way to travel through its inner landscape.”⁴ Locating herself as both insider and outsider, she probes the place, and her relationship to it, with often witty and sometimes melancholy interventions, absurd in their seemingly futile taxonomic endeavors to make sense of collective and personal identity.

In an earlier series, *A small town at the turn of the century* (1999–2000), Gill returned to the community of Port Dickson, where she lived as a child, and photographed the inhabitants going about their daily lives. In each image, however, the subject’s face is obscured by tropical fruit: paw-paw, longans, jackfruit, pineapples, bananas. The photographs could be described as an ethnographic series documenting the life of a town of fruitheads. Their effect is palpably different on Malaysian viewers, who see in the pictures a pointed

Standing Still #104, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 114; 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.



discussion of local race politics. For viewers abroad, the images are a caricature of an exotic, faraway place with some of the familiar signs of modern life. One reviewer likens the photographs to “the wry surrealism of Magritte’s faceless figures [combined] with the scrutinizing intensity of Thomas Struth’s portraits.”⁵ *A small town* also brings to mind the early-twentieth-century documentary project of August Sander, who set himself the task of making a photographic record of all the trades in Germany.

Standing Still, too, is attentive to issues in photography. In the seeming formality of the compositions, these photographs—which are closer to snapshots than their square format initially suggests—sit somewhere between the apparent modernist objectivity of Bernd and Hilda Becher and the more earnest and self-consciously revelatory images of present-day photojournalism. *Standing Still* documents a hesitant moment—now already in the past—in the life of a place. It presents itself as an authentic record of a time, made by an exile who harbors a gentle yet unmistakable longing, expressed in a repetitive, ongoing project of incomplete return.

In its presentation at the UC Berkeley Art Museum, *Standing Still* is a documentary project for a distant audience. What may we know from these pictures—traces of a haunted nostalgia? partial truths of the fragility of our economic systems? the certainty of the passage of time? Or perhaps, simply,

Standing Still #32, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 114; 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.



the strange beauty of mysterious ruins caught on an exuberant film stock that was made obsolete by the manufacturer at the very time the artist was taking the photographs.⁶

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Simryn Gill, *Notes on Standing Still*, unpublished text, 2002.
² *Ibid.*
³ *Ibid.*
⁴ Simryn Gill, exhibition notes for *Dalam* at Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2001.
⁵ Felicity Fenner, "Simryn Gill at Roslyn Oxley9," *Art in America*, November 2001, 158.
⁶ The film stock was readily available in Southeast Asia and a widely used commercial stock at the time Gill began this series.

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Work in MATRIX

Standing Still
 2000–2003
 Series of 114 C-prints
 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York

Standing Still #30, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 114; 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.

Simryn Gill was born in Singapore and educated in India and the United Kingdom. This is the artist's first one-person museum exhibition in the United States. She has lived and worked in Sydney, Australia since 1996.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2002
 "Simryn Gill: Selected Work," Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
 2001
 "Dalam," Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 "A small town at the turn of the century," Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, Australia;
 Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,
 Sydney, Australia
 2000
 "Roadkill," Project Gallery, CCA Kitakyushu, Kitakyushu, Japan
 "Natural Resemblance: Some Recent Photo Work," Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, Australia
 "Simryn Gill," Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, United Kingdom
 1999
 "Vegetation," ArtPace, San Antonio, TX
 "Rampant," Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
 1998
 "Self-Seeds," Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
 "Forest," Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Australia

Selected Group Exhibitions

2003
 "Family Ties: A Contemporary Perspective," Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA
 "After Image," Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
 "Face Up: Contemporary Art From Australia," Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany

Standing Still #4, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 114; 12 2/5 x 12 2/5 in. (31.5 x 31.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.

2002
 "Your Place or Mine?" Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
 "The Biennale of Sydney," Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
 "ForwArt," Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium
 "Identiti, Ininlah Kami/ Identities, Who We Are," National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 2001
 "2nd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art," Berlin, Germany
 2000
 "Flight Patterns," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
 "Delicate Balance: Six Routes to the Himalayas," Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
 1999
 "Au-Delà," Galerie Klosterfelde, Berlin, Germany
 "Asia Pacific Triennial," Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
 1997
 "5th Istanbul Biennial," Istanbul, Turkey
 "Cities On The Move," Wiener Secession, Vienna, Austria

Selected Catalogs and Publications

A Small Town at the Turn of the Century. Perth: Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001.
Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Brisbane: Queensland Art Galley, 1999.
Flight Patterns. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000.
Ideal Work. Adelaide: Experimental Art Foundation, 1999.
Self-Seeds. Helsinki: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998.
Simryn Gill: Selected Work. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002.
[The World May Be] Fantastic. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 2003.

Dalam #229, 2001; C-print, series of 260; 9 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. (23.5 cm x 23.5 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.

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 _____. "Local Coconuts: Simryn Gill and the Politics of Identity." *ART AsiaPacific*, No. 16, 1997, 56–63.
 Obrist, Hans Ulrich. "Roadkill: Repetition and Difference." *Contemporary Visual Arts*, May 2000, 28.
 Roces, Marian Pastor. "Simryn Gill: Slow Release." *Art+Text*, February–April 1997, 50–55.
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A small town at the turn of the century #26, 1999–2000; C-print, series of 40; approximately 36 x 36 in. (91.4 cm x 91.4 cm); courtesy of the artist and Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.