

ART PAPERS

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SIMRYN GILL
Washington



Artists who have the ability to express complex ideas in succinct and eloquently humorous forms have always impressed me. Take Simryn Gill's *Road Kill*, 2000, or *Self-Seeds*, 1998. By simply adding toy car wheels to flattened roadside debris and seed pods, Gill redefines notions of mobility. These exciting new traffic patterns provide a fresh perspective on the intersection of nature and contemporary society. Widely shown in Asia, Australia, and Europe, Gill's work is now also garnering the attention it deserves in North America. Presented in cooperation with Australia's Queensland Art Gallery, *Perspectives: Simryn Gill* [Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; September 2, 2006-April 29, 2007] marks her first major exhibition in the United States.

The exhibition stands as an important mini-survey of her work over the last fourteen years. Visitors who access the exhibition through the Sackler's entrance pavilion first encounter *Forking Tongues*, 1992, her earliest piece. There, a large double spiral made of cutlery and dried chili peppers lies on a broad neutral platform, before a large picture window that reveals a garden. Visually arresting, each of the contrasting surfaces—reflects light in its own way. By suggesting both a coiled snake and the snail shell, the giant spiral invokes persistent spatiotemporal invasion. The inherent duality of the materials—hot and cold; organic vs. industrial—and their arrangement in parallel lines refer to a simultaneous progression and imply a sense of balance. The path's obliqueness calls attention to the migration of culinary traditions. It also illustrates the commutative nature of this exchange: the trade follows a two-way route.

Nearby galleries feature a selection of eight black and white photographs from *Forest*, 1996—printed 1998, as well as *Pearls*, 2006, a series that has never been exhibited before. In both of these series, Gill's striking images feature manipulated books and usher in new meanings. *Forest* documents temporary installations made in various places including the family garden, a mangrove swamp, and a Chinese merchant's mansion. Made by cutting pages from such books as *Robinson Crusoe*, a Chinese cookbook, and *Heart of Darkness* into shapes that mimic leaves, vines or stunted growths, these installations blend so well with the settings that their presence may easily be overlooked. While the large images invite close reading, the fragmented texts defy identification and literally make no sense. In this project Gill literally returns the carrier of ideas to its

vegetative source and, in a parallel to *Forking Tongues*, reveals how intellectually based forces of change are also subject to alteration. In *Pearls*, the artist only uses books that hold deep personal significance for their owners. Guided by each book's content and material character, the artist tore the pages into strips of various dimensions to form beads. She then used those to create oversize strands of jewelry, literally turning valued literary works into precious objects.

A Malaysian citizen of Indian heritage born in Singapore, Gill's examination of transnational phenomena almost seems to be a factor of her personal history. On the surface, this survey reminds me of Byron Kim's 1996 Hirshhorn Museum exhibition *Grey-Green*, where the Korean-American painter explored the color of Koryo dynasty ceramics through a series of monochrome paintings. Unlike Kim, whose probe maintained a narrow focus, Gill addresses a broad range of issues in delightfully eccentric ways. The work's importance derives from her shrewd presentation of perspectives that challenge our assumptions about culture and cultivation, about the borders of the natural and the legacies of policies such as colonialism. Through related processes of restructuring, Gill reflects the unpredictability of cultural influences, focusing on variable modes of interpretation and use of foreign materials and ideas.

--John Gayer

ABOVE: Simryn Gill, *Forking Tongues*, 1992, installation: Silver plate cutlery and dried chili peppers, 600 x 600 cm [© Simryn Gill; collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, purchased 2001, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant; image courtesy of the artist and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington]