

BLOUINARTINFO

UNITED KINGDOM

April 15 2015



Simryn Gill's Epic "Hugging the Shore" at NTU CCA Singapore

By Nicholas Forrest

"[Hugging the Shore](#)" at the [NTU Centre for Contemporary Art](#) (NTU CCA) Singapore is Malaysian-Australian artist [Simryn Gill](#)'s first major solo exhibition in Southeast Asia. Co-curated by Ute Meta Bauer, Founding Director, and Anca Rujoiu, Curator, Exhibitions of NTU CCA Singapore, the exhibition brings together a series of works that showcase the artist's specific attitude towards the way we produce meaning and make a place for ourselves in the world.

[Simryn Gill](#) was born in Singapore and lives between Port Dickson, Malaysia and Sydney, Australia. She employs a range of media and methods, including photographs, texts, publications, collections, drawings. According to the NTU CCA, much of the artist's work results from a process of sifting through and documenting

her immediate surroundings creating quiet and at the same time commanding work marked by history, culture, the passage of time, and the poetry of daily life.

“Hugging the Shore” features three photographic series: “Standing Still” (2000-03), “Dalam” (2001), “May” 2006 (2006), and a new work, “Like Leaves” (2015). “Standing Still” (2000-03) captures abandoned building projects in Malaysia, “Dalam” (2001) comprises 260 photographs of living rooms in West Malaysia, “May” 2006 (2006) traces a one-month journey by foot through the artist’s neighbourhood in Sydney, and “Like Leaves” (2015) comprises pinned leaves from the Sea Apple tree.

To find out more about the intriguing exhibition, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with co-curator Anca Rujoiu and asked her a few questions.

The title of the exhibition, “Hugging the Shore,” seems to have multiple connotations. Could you explain what the title means and how it relates to the works in the exhibition?

“Hugging the Shore” comes from the title of American writer, John Updike’s collection of essays and reviews in which he alludes to the critic who unlike the writer stays close to the shore and does not venture far out to sea. The title was the choice of the artist and it took an even stronger understanding for me once the exhibition was completely installed. I see the metaphor of “Hugging the Shore” in relation to Simryn’s way of “approaching” the subject matter, especially in the photograph series “Standing Still” where each photograph is always centred, with a large depth of field that reflects an act of stepping back, taking distance from the object. This approach is handed over to the visitor in the exhibition space, as the process of looking at the work and reading the work replicates the process of its making. Each photograph series can be approached from a distance, seen overall as a mural, which encourages the visitor to embrace the whole work into an encompassing view.

What was the catalyst for “Hugging the Shore” and what was the point of departure? The collaboration started with a journey in Port Dickson, Malaysia where Simryn grew up and where she currently lives and works. Simryn was extremely generous; she hosted Ute and myself and took us around Port Dickson. We experienced Port Dickson through her eyes, which was very special. She made us see things that one might simply overlook, she made us find meaning in the banal.

The exhibition brings together a number of large series of photographs. Placed together in the context of this exhibition, what common themes and lines of enquiry emerge, and what do they reveal about the artist’s specific interests and preoccupations?

“Hugging the Shore” brings together three photograph series spanning almost 15 years across Simryn’s practice and a new work produced in the context of this exhibition. A first connection between the works is that all of them are a result of a durational process, of hours of wandering, looking, and collecting. “Standing Still,” for instance was produced over a three year timeframe whereas “May” 2006 took a shorter time, but a more concentrated one with the artist taking photographs every day over one month period in her neighborhood in Sydney, Australia. Another common thread between three of the works is their open-endedness: they can expand and expand endlessly. The production of these works was brought to an end

for various arbitrary reasons: a deadline for the exhibition, lack of funding, etc. When does one end a process, when enough is enough? These are recurring questions in Simryn's practice. The works also come from places in which Simryn lived and worked and had a strong personal connection: Port Dickson and Sydney. The photographs are all taken in contexts familiar to the artist. Another threading line in this exhibition is the exploration of the "familiar" which has yet to be discovered and unpacked...

The exhibition includes the new work "Like Leaves (Syzygium grandis)" (2015). Could you explain a bit about this work and how it relates to the artist's broader practice?

"Like Leaves" (2015) uses leaves from the *Syzygium grande* species of tree, or the Sea Apple Tree which is found throughout the coastal areas in parts of Southeast Asia. Previously featured as photographs in the artist's book, "Jambu Sea, Jambu Air" (2013), each page of the book is a close-up of a leaf from a single botanical species, cropped into a square by the lens of the camera. This work is presented as pinned leaves in the exhibition. As opposed to being photographs, "they are actually themselves," as [Simryn Gill](#) herself puts it, "they do not stop time on their surface, but will fade and shrivel, so that they do exactly the opposite of photos". The work draws attention to surface, material, its process of making, but also the lifespan of the work which gradually perishes in time.

The medium of photograph has come under the spotlight in recent months. In December 2014 the prominent UK art critic Jonathan Jones wrote that "photography is not an art. It is a technology". What is your response to this? How would you describe the artist's interest and engagement with the medium of photography?

When asked about her process of working, Simryn would often describe it as working through photography, objects or texts, and I think that this approach of "working through photography" is very important. Blurring the boundaries between her object-installations, text-based works or photograph series, there is a similar approach and way of thinking; her work resists to be defined in terms of medium-specificity. When referring to "May" 2006 for instance, she conceives the display of the work as words on the wall and I hope that the spatial configuration of the exhibition can further strengthen the overlaps between photograph and text, between the act of looking and reading.

["Simryn Gill: Hugging the Shore"](#) is at NTU CCA Singapore until June 14, 2015