

Simryn Gill

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The sculptures and photographs in Sydney-based Malaysian artist Simryn Gill's recent exhibition, like her project "Standing still," 2000–2003, a series of photographs documenting derelict properties throughout Southeast Asia, and *Garland*, 2006, a selection of waterworn objects found during beachcombing excursions, occupied the shifting and indistinct boundary between abandonment and reclamation.

As is characteristic of Gill's practice, the works in the show were marked by a visual modesty that belies the ramifications of the stories of their genesis. In *Mine*, 2007–2009—a collection of spherical objects either found or constructed from bits and bobs picked up near Gill's studios in Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia—the convergence of the personal, the poetic, and the historiographic that makes up her art emerges most strongly through the list of materials, worth quoting in its entirety for the light it sheds on her sensibility: "paper bark, banana skins, copper wires salvaged from a burnt-out printing press and other discarded bits of electrical wire, hair bands and shoelaces found on the street, various termite soils, river clay, aerial roots from ficus trees, tropical vines, rubber casing from looted copper wires, stalks from gourd plants, scraps of paper, mangosteen skins, bark from date palms pulled off by nesting ibises, yams, cardboard boxes, cow pats, pomegranates from a friend's fruit bowl, a brick tumbled into roundness by the sea, ivy, a rock, a ball of string, rubber-bands, and palm leaves." Looking at *Mine* with this list in mind, one recognizes that much more is in play here than a simple craftlike notion of artmaking by which detritus is refashioned into quietly beautiful constellations of objects. The work is, rather, an artistic intervention embedded within historical, economic, social, and environmental narratives. It unfolds within a conceptual framework that—as the punning title suggests—posits the relationship between the personal and the material world as what enables both the excavation of meaning and the creation of art.

In a certain light, this is an obvious truth, but the process by which it is made manifest here as art appears both unusual and hard won. The two bronzes in the upstairs gallery—both *Untitled (Interiors)*, 2009—also speak to this conception of art as a personal filtering or distilling of physical reality that encompasses far broader concerns. Cast from cracks in a riverbed (dry from drought) in rural New South Wales, the works draw attention to environmental degradation while taking up the history of art in their use of the classic sculptural material, the resonance of which is amplified (with postcolonial echoes) by Gill's having made the pieces with Apisit Nongbua, a bronze caster from Bangkok pursuing his family trade.

Also in the show was "My Own Private Angkor," 2007–, a series of black-and-white photographs depicting tinted windows leaning against dilapidated European-style buildings. Documenting what seem like so many abandoned monochromes, these images come across as a rebuke to the white-boxed remove that characterizes much contemporary art. Yet that is again only part of the story: Thieves had, we learn, left the windowpanes standing against the walls of an abandoned mock-Tudor housing complex in Port Dickson after removing their aluminum frames to sell for scrap. Here too, then, multiple contexts—ranging from the colonial exportation of European architecture to the international scrap metal trade—build upon and interact with one another.

The show's title, "Interiors," seems to imply this is introverted work. But Gill's modus operandi of conflating the found and the constructed seems to undermine the very opposition of inside and outside:

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Simryn Gill, *Mine* (detail), 2007–2009, mixed media, dimensions variable.



Her art is above all a kind of documentary fieldwork, necessarily personal since the individual is an essential component of its broad and inclusive conception of place.

—Alexander Scrimgeour