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Raising the roof

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Michael Fitzgerald

Simryn Gill represents Australia at the art world's Olympic Games



Visions of home: Artist Simryn Gill. Photo: Tamara Dean

Sun streams into Simryn Gill's studio in Marrickville as art installer Grant Wallwork reads out his checklist of tools bound for Venice. "One chisel, one paint scraper ..." For the past nine months this former factory space with a wall of north-facing windows has been a centre of calm, resembling more a library, with stacks of second-hand books from which the artist has painstakingly prised words and turned them into collages across 12 large white panels. Now leaning nonchalantly against walls, these panels are also bound for Italy, where Gill will represent Australia at the 55th Venice Biennale.

Today, Gill's project team has gathered for the unveiling and packing of another

series of works that will also wing their way to Venice - seven large-scale cibachrome photographs. At first glance, these appear to be silvery and golden abstractions. In fact, they are aerial views of open-face mines caught at dawn or dusk. As three white-gloved men whisk the burnished images away and ease them into sponge-filled, custom-made crates, Wallwork finalises his checklist. "... one canvas drop sheet, one plastic drop sheet. And that's everything so far."

The queen bee in this hive of activity is Gill, a slight figure with a round, kind face and a shining nose stud. The artist has been experimenting with the Indian ink that will coat the plaster walls surrounding her precious cibachromes in Venice, and there are ink blotches on her smock. But despite all the activity - and surely the transportation of artworks must run high on any artist's list of anxieties - Gill is unusually relaxed.



SIMRYN GILL

Pictured in her Marrickville studio. Photo: Tamara Dean

"It's such a relief," she says, watching the crates as they are taken out the door.

The Venice Biennale is often described as the Olympics of the art world. National pavilions face off in the gardens surrounding the main exhibition areas, appearing like parodies of national identity. Since 1988 Australia has been

represented by a small, white beach house of a pavilion designed by the Sydney architect Philip Cox. Despite its casual air, the artists chosen to exhibit here every two years have come under intense pressure to perform.

When Gill was named Australia's next artist for Venice, many might have asked: Who? There has been a will-o'-the-wisp quality to the rise of Gill, 53, who has lived and worked quietly in Sydney's inner-west for the past 17 years.

Mercurially mixing mediums, from sculpture and installation to photography, her subtle and intelligent work is anything but look-at-me. Indeed, one of her best known works, Pearls, is not for public display. This series of necklaces crafted from the torn pages of books are only seen and worn by those who are given them by the artist. Another work, created for curators Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru and their 1997 show *Cities on the Move*, was simply a set of handmade postage stamps sent out into the world.



A panel from *Let Go Let Go*. Photo: Tamara Dean

Yet in the international art world, where biennales rule, Gill is perhaps our most visible artist. Her work has been described by *The New Yorker* as "quietly dazzling", she has been invited to create projects for London's Tate Modern, and recently her work entered the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Her work doesn't "shout" Australia, but speaks more in a whisper common to those who live between cultures. Just the idea of representing her adopted country has given Singapore-born Gill many sleepless nights. "A pavilion in Venice has all this razzmatazz and nationality and publicity around it," she says.

The invitation to represent Australia, which carried a generous commissioning budget, was somewhat loaded; she would be the last artist in Cox's exhibition space. In December 2013, soon after Gill's show comes down, so will the Australian Pavilion, with the light, temporary structure being replaced by a grander \$6 million building furnished from dark South Australian granite. As the

last artist to inhabit Cox's "beach house", Gill might have felt pressure to be respectful - her work perhaps retiring in the space. Wrong. On accepting the invitation, Gill decided to work in a way she hadn't before; she thought big and bold. She rang her friend Mary Maguire in Kuala Lumpur to organise a series of flying visits over Australian mining sites, from Tasmania to the Pilbara. Next she enlisted her Belgian friend Catherine de Zegher, artistic director of last year's Sydney Biennale, as her curator. Most brazenly of all, she decided to take off part of the pavilion roof to reveal her work in the light of day.

"With a thing like Venice, what you have to do is a big experiment," she explains. "And if it's going to fall flat on its face, so be it. But use the opportunity to test out something that you otherwise wouldn't be able to."



Half Moon Shine by Simryn Gill. Photo: Tamara Dean

It was on a site visit with de Zegher in November 2011 that Gill decided to raise the pavilion roof. "It was autumn," she recalls, "beautiful light, this mist coming off the water, leaves everywhere. The Australian Pavilion is under this canopy of leaning trees, and I looked up and said, 'It would be so nice to take the roof off'. And Catherine looked at me and said something like, 'I don't believe you said that

because I was thinking exactly the same thing'."

Their vision for Here Art Grows on Trees was to let the outside world in, removing some of the roof panels from Cox's modular structure to expose Gill's delicate paper panels, ink walls and cibachromes to the elements. In the process, they would highlight the passing of time and the ephemeral nature of art and life. Sitting in the middle of the pavilion would be a large metal bowl shaped like a Hindu ritual vessel, cast by craftsmen near Mumbai, spilling rainwater and leaves. Perhaps pigeons would perch on the panels and, with rain, ink would pool in puddles from the walls. Gill still remembers the ecstasy of epiphany: "Imagine having inches of leaves in the pavilion. Wouldn't that be fabulous?"

Come Wednesday, when the Giardini gates open to the thousands of critics, curators and fabulously dressed hangers-on who come for the preview, or Vernissage, Gill's baby will be unveiled. The prospect seems alarming for the artist. "I worry all the time," she admits. "With the panels, which I've called Let Go Let Go, I wonder if the title might be too direct or somehow leading? There are so many things to worry about. At some point maybe I should take my own advice and let go."

And then there's the underlying message of her artworks: are the mine photographs gilded symbols of our rapacious greed and desecration of Mother Earth? Gill dreads such inevitable questions and the expectation to explain.

"Perhaps I tread dangerous ground when I say, 'Listen, I don't know'," she says. I think that the job that I have is to do things that I'm not sure of - that I don't know why I'm doing. But I bring to that not knowing a great deal of knowing, both in asking questions, and in the ability to pursue something until it can't be pursued any further, even if there's a ... madness to it."