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Storer, Russell. "Simryn Gill: A Small Town at the Turn of the Century." Ed. HG Masters "20/20 Feature" in *Art Asia Pacific* 86, November/December 2013.



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SPECIAL FEATURE

Events may be clearer in hindsight, but these are 20 moments that still deserve another, closer look

20/20

A yearlong project to mark *ArtAsiaPacific's* 20th anniversary, "20/20" revisits influential artworks, exhibitions and artists' projects from each year of the magazine's history, 1993 to the present. The selected projects are an attempt to rediscover influential but noncanonical moments in artistic production across Asia, events that were seminal at the time, or else have gained greater appreciation in recent years.

The essays in "20/20" are written by individuals who saw or were involved with the original projects and who offer reflections about what they meant at the time and how they look in retrospect. These recollections also depict the surrounding milieu, the particular moment in the artist's practice and the community's response. Mirroring AAP's geographical breadth, the commissions consider formative moments across the Asian continent, from the Middle East to the Subcontinent, Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific region.

In this fourth edition of "20/20," we hear from curator Russell Storer about Simryn Gill's photographic series "A Small Town at the Turn of the Century" (1999-2000) that depicts residents of the Malaysian coastal town of Port Dickson wearing elaborate fruit headdresses.

Storer reflects that the series had particular resonance when shown in the early 2000s because "the growing impact of globalization was causing deep anxiety in many quarters in Australia, following the country's regional repositioning and embrace of multiculturalism in the 1980s and early 1990s."

Jumping ahead five years, curator Alexandra MacGilp recalls the reaction to Lida Abdul's videos, particularly *White House* (2005), made on the artist's return to her native Afghanistan following decades of devastation due to Soviet, Taliban and American invasions. From Turkey, we talked with Hale Tenger about her installation *Where the Winds Rest* (2007), created for a little-seen exhibition in the western city of İzmir, in the aftermath of the assassination of an influential Armenian-Turkish newspaper editor, Hrant Dink, in January of that year. Finally, we turn to Lebanon, where writer Maymanah Farhat reflects on the flurry of interest in the writings and paintings of Beirut-born Etel Adnan that began in 2010 and has continued since as the 88-year-old artist is recognized for a life's work.

BY HG MASTERS

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SIMRYN GILL

A Small Town at the Turn of the Century

BY RUSSELL STORER

If you visit Simryn Gill in Port Dickson, an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur on Malaysia's west coast, she'll take you on a personal tour. Port Dickson ("PD" to the locals) is best known for its beaches, but Gill will take you to the old cemetery, the Chinese restaurant she went to as a child, and a selection of half-finished buildings, many stalled since the 1997 financial crisis, that are being overtaken by plants and mold. PD has been a popular resort for decades, though it now also hosts army bases and oil refineries. The Straits of Malacca wash its shores, and the hazy outline of Sumatra is visible beyond the procession of tankers lining the horizon. This is where Gill grew up, and where she still maintains a home, despite having lived on and off in Australia since the late 1980s.

Port Dickson is the unstated location for "A Small Town at the Turn of the Century," a photographic series Gill made from 1999 to 2000. The series consists of 40 single and group portraits of residents and visitors posing in various locations: on the beachfront, at the yacht club, on the golf course, in the grocery store, at home. Each subject wears a tropical-fruit headdress, an elaborate construction that variously comprises jackfruit, coconuts, mangosteens, bananas or rambutans. Their faces covered, the models become mysterious and unidentifiable, members of a weird tribe who appear both completely at home and totally alien. I previously wrote about the "Small Town" series by discussing *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—the 1950s sci-fi movie about a town's inhabitants being replaced by alien doubles—in an attempt to capture the work's powerful sense of inside/outside. Gill puts the viewer instantly into the position of an interloper: the stranger from out of town who will never fit in.

I saw "Small Town" at its first showing in early 2001, at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. It was Gill's first series in color, and it commanded that cavernous and rather difficult space. Part of a small solo survey, it seemed startlingly direct in relation to the other works. Although the series had obvious precursors in photo works such as *Vegetation* (1999), in which Gill "played native" in different landscapes wearing headdresses of local plants, and witty installations such as *Self-Seeds* (1998), in which seed pods with tiny wheels trooped across the floor, "Small Town" felt like a bold departure. An essay from 1997 by Marian Pastor Roces on Gill is titled "Slow Release," and this botanical term fits perfectly with the way her work grows on you, with its nuanced ideas and quietly pointed use of materials. "Small Town," by contrast, is gorgeously seductive, cinematically surreal and flat-out funny. It also, unusually for Gill, proposes a distinct narrative: we become "honorary anthropologists," as Ashley Carruthers wrote in 2002 in *Forum on Contemporary Art & Society*, establishing the town's pecking order and ethnic makeup through the dress and surroundings of its residents—although perhaps in the end "we realise we have learnt

precisely nothing." Gill's parodic August Sander-ish snapshot of this unnamed small town in an unidentified country in an unspecified century tells us little about Port Dickson, the town that she lives both inside and outside.

"Small Town" was exhibited around Australia over the next two years, including a prominent showing in the 2002 Biennale of Sydney. It appeared at a time when the growing impact of globalization was causing deep anxiety in many quarters in Australia, following the country's regional repositioning and embrace of multiculturalism in the 1980s and early 1990s. This was evident in the rise of anti-immigration politician Pauline Hanson, the panic around terrorism following the attacks of 9/11, and harsh government responses to asylum seekers in the name of "border protection." Gill, like many migrants to Australia, felt the impact of these tensions acutely, and "Small Town," while not addressing the situation directly, offered a disturbing vision of localness and difference that continues to resonate.

Gill had already been recognized as a significant artist in Australia before "Small Town," but the series was the first to gain wide attention. While she is one of the country's most internationally exhibited artists, arguably her local contribution has been to propose a more provisional, multidimensional mode of being in Australia, one linked to deep currents of culture and history that flow across the world. As Ross Gibson wrote in the catalog for Gill's Australian pavilion exhibition at Venice in 2013, she "helps us sense how being Australian might actually mean being untethered or placeless . . . which means appreciating how to live in dynamic patterns of time rather than in native plots of place." She can be in Sydney and PD at once: one continually informs the other.

Gill has always been concerned with place—how to come to terms with where you find yourself, and how to represent it from where you stand. Since "Small Town," Port Dickson has cropped up again and again in her work: her family home and the adjacent electricity plant in *Power Station* (2004); various objects collected from the town's beaches in her *Garland* works (1993–2012); an abandoned faux-Tudor housing estate on the town's outskirts in the photographic series "Looking for Marcel" (2005) and "My Own Private Angkor" (2007–09). In each case, its people are conspicuously absent, leaving us with the material traces of human life. "A Small Town at the Turn of the Century," however, puts them front and center, even if they seem to be gradually merging into the landscape. Gill's evocation of home as both familiar and strange, present and past, here and elsewhere—a condition rather than a physical site—has become only more relevant over time, as we become ever-more mobile and small towns vanish into the great metropolises of the world.



SIMRYN GILL, 1999-2000, Image #28 (detail), from the series "A Small Town at the Turn of the Century"
C-type print on paper, 5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tracy Williams Ltd., New York