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A Harmonic Convergence of Cultures

At the Sackler Gallery, Simryn Gill's Seamless Blend of East and West



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Editorial Review

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When Rudyard Kipling wrote, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," he must not have been paying attention. They meet all the time.

They met when Alexander marched his armies into Asia, and all along the Silk Road, and throughout the British Raj, as Kipling might have noticed. Everywhere about him, in furniture and photographs, Mughal miniatures and pop-art prints of Krishna, traces of the West meeting with the East were plentiful to see.

In "Perspectives: Simryn Gill," the artist's contemporary show at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, they don't just meet, they merge.

To make her art, she uses dried chili peppers, out-of-fashion cutlery, gardens and Great Books. Her heritage, it turns out, is similarly mixed (Gill was born in Singapore in 1959; her ancestry is Indian, her passport is Malaysian, her studio is in Sydney), and one feels this in her work.

One Eastern thing about her art is its immense patience. Gill is no more in a hurry than some Hindu holy promising to feed twigs to a fire for the next 11 years. Small brain-cleansing gestures, mantras for the hand ritually repeated, are a big part of her art.

So, too, is its newness. Gill deploys blown-up photographs. She creates installations. Label-loving visitors might describe her three-work Sackler show as conceptualist, feminist, post-colonialist or all of the above. She's shown her art all over, most recently in England, in London at the Tate Britain. One Western thing about it is it's international art-world hip.

For the piece that she calls "Pearls," shown here for the first time, Gill spent much of the past six years cutting chosen volumes -- Gandhi's "Autobiography," Che Guevara's "Bolivian Diary," "Ikebana: A Guide Book for Beginners" -- into narrow strips. She'd sometimes work all night. Her strips, once she had cut them, would be rolled into small pellets, solidified with library glue, then strung. The grayish, multi-stranded necklaces she made are hanging in her show. Are they embellishments or burdens?

She'd used weighty tomes before. For "Forest" (1996), a suite of 16 photographs, Gill began with volumes recalled from her childhood. "Robinson Crusoe," "Heart of Darkness," a book of Chinese cookery and India's "Ramayana" were among those she chose. That time she tore their pages into lifelike leaf shapes, and tendril, root and twig shapes. These she inserted into various leafy sights. They look as if they'd grown there. Ideas, she seems to say, become part of the landscape, fit into the foliage, flourish and persist.

Her sharpest work is "Forking Tongues" (1992), a floor piece on display in the Sackler's daylighted lobby. Two lines spiral into it. One line is made of chilies (some are small and scarlet, others large and purplish). Parallel to that line is another made of cutlery, of old serving spoons and teaspoons, butter knives and fish forks, of the sort that end up jumbled in the back of the drawer. Most of it is cheap colonial silverplate. Much of it is tarnished. Gill gathered it from junk shops.

A lifetime of routine half-remembered meals is what her floor piece calls to mind.

Not Western meals, surely. Few homes in the West serve so many chilies. Not Eastern meals either, at least not for the purist. Asia, after all, got its chilies from America, where Europe got potatoes.

This is typical of Simryn Gill. Her ideas may be mixed, but they're not blurred. The thoughts in "Forking Tongues" - - we're all of us impure, and products of our heritage, and creatures of routine -- are so clear you almost taste them. The floor piece at the Sackler is meant to conjure memories. Here is one that came to me: I am eating for the first time in a Chinese restaurant. All the many dishes come with little metal covers; the egg rolls are astonishments; the hot sauce is so hot it's as if my tongue might tear.

