

THE BUSINESS TIMES

27 March 2015



In search of a lost time

By Helmi Yusof

Simryn Gill, one of Asia's most respected artists, opens her major regional exhibition at the CCA on the subject of time.

IN 1988, when Simryn Gill was 29, she enrolled in the South Australian School of Art for a degree course in art. But, in a less than a year, she dropped out.

She says: "I had two young children to raise. I couldn't waste my time. They weren't teaching me anything that I wasn't already doing with my art. They weren't helping me expand the way I think. I already had a certain methodology of working through the things I was interested in."

So she stayed home, working on her art on the kitchen table, while the children played under it.

Today, Gill, 56, is one of Asia's most established artists. Her works have been exhibited in top institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim and London's Tate Modern.

Her first major solo exhibition in South-east Asia opens on Tuesday at the Centre of Contemporary Art (CCA) in Gillman Barracks.

It showcases more than 1,000 works of photography she has amassed in more than two decades of practice - which, incidentally, is a tiny fraction of her oeuvre.

"Yes, I get called 'obsessive' sometimes," she remarks with a smile.

One series of photographs titled May 2006 comprises 800 images of her neighbourhood in Sydney. Another series, Dalam (Malay for "inside"), consists of 260 images of different living rooms across Malaysia.

Yet another series Standing Still features 116 photographs of deserted Malaysian buildings abandoned after the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

What is consistent across them is their commanding, yet understated sense of time and place. Each photograph is remarkably subdued - a striking contrast to the visceral and ostentatious art of many of today's hotshots. Yet each conveys a sense of time having moved so much, and hints at the site's impermanence. "I tend to think of my photos as pieces of writing - to be read instead of being looked at."

If the motif of time runs through much of her art, the central installation at the CCA is an embodiment of time: a massive display of 500 real jambu laut (sea apple) leaves cut into squares to resemble photographs, and then pinned individually on to a wall. She had picked the leaves along the coast of Malaysia.

"I used to love these leaves as a child. I collected them when they fell off trees and watched them change colours, glorious shades of red and yellow. I used to think of them as modern paintings... So when you visit the exhibition during its three-month period, the installation would look different each time."

Gill was born of Punjabi ancestry in Singapore in 1959, but grew up in Malaysia, India and the UK. In 1987, she moved to Australia with her two children and her husband Souchou Yao, a social anthropologist from mainland China.

Despite dropping out of art school, she began to receive wide recognition. In 2007 and 2012, she showed at Germany's prestigious art show, Documenta. In 2013, she represented Australia at the 55th Venice Biennale with a work critiquing the country's immigration policies.

Today, she divides her time between Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia.

Moving from one country to another may explain why she is obsessive about capturing time and place in art. But she says: "I don't know why I pick these subjects. One doesn't decide on these things. They enter your psyche and grow inside you in the form of questions. And they don't resolve themselves until you've thought about them, photographed them. They resolve themselves in the doing."

"And you have to be so clear in the doing. It is like a fragile thread, you have to keep a hold on it, concentrate on it, not let go."

"It's a kind of thinking, problem solving and writing that doesn't involve language, and yet still is expressible and communicable to people."

Simryn Gill: Hugging The Shore opens at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Gillman Barracks, on March 31 and runs till June 14, 2015 from noon to 7pm. Closed on Mondays, open on public holidays. Admission is free