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Last Chance

Deconstructing Meaning by Truly Mincing Words



Simryn Gill/Tracy Williams Ltd.

Simryn Gill's installation, at Tracy Williams, includes tables of books and bags of words cut from them.

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

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There is more than one way to take the measure of books. You can of course read them. You can count pages, lines or words. Or you can dissect their texts, parsing and weighing words until they lose meaning while gaining literal substance, and then arrange the physical remnants of this concrete poetry into an epic of their own.

This is the method employed by Simryn Gill, who was born in Singapore and lives in Sydney, Australia, for her New York debut at the Tracy Williams gallery in the West Village. Ms. Gill, 47, has worked as a photographer, and this exhibition includes large black-and-white photographs of Run island, part of Indonesia; its small, dilapidated port was once central in the European nutmeg trade. The British ceded the island to the Dutch in 1667, as part of a treaty that gave the British a place called New Amsterdam, now known as Manhattan.

Ms. Gill is also an installation artist adept at reconfiguring found objects, books included. This is clear in the show's centerpiece: a fascinating untitled work ensconced through Saturday in

the front parlor of the Federal-era house occupied by Ms. Williams's gallery. The room is a small, spare study that quickly turns strange: a bubbling brew of broken thoughts, natural history, literature, knowledge and the courses of empires.

The piece, which had its debut last spring at Tate Modern in London, has aspects of standard-issue late Conceptual Art, yet it is absorbing and often moving. To make it, Ms. Gill selected 123 books and targeted about 80 words. With the help of assistants, she combed through the books page by page, methodically tearing out by hand all instances of these words.

The torn-out words were sorted and bagged, then divided among 30 small gray archival boxes, two to four bags to a box. The boxed, bagged words and the 123 raggedy books constitute the piece, exhibited with three tables and six stools.

You can sit at the two tables where the books are lined up, to study their spines and browse their ravaged pages. At the third, you can open the boxes and handle the bags. Either way, language takes on new dimensions, by turns obdurate and frail.

The books, published over the last 80 or so years, are arranged in a specific order, starting with "Handy Pocket Guide to Asian Gemstones" by Carol Clark and ending with a 1969 edition of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" by James Agee and Walker Evans. The fluctuation of titles and subjects forms a kind of literal graph or haphazard timeline.

Miles Hadfield's "History of British Gardening" is followed by Karl A. Wittfogel's "Oriental Despotism," Buwei Yang Chao's "How to Cook and Eat in Chinese" and Sara Suleri's "Meatless Days." Stephen Jay Gould's "Wonderful Life" stands beside "Poisonous Snakes of the World," a manual for American amphibious forces published by the Navy in the 1960s as the American involvement in Vietnam was ramping up. The mental flights triggered by the titles are countered by the shared uselessness left between the covers. Hovering between literature and sculpture, these volumes are bereft, censored, fatally wounded.

At the third table the lost words are collated in a census of the censored. They resemble little flakes of bone, artifacts or specimens. One box holds two bags stuffed fat with the word "still" along with a thin, nearly empty one with a few forlorn scraps bearing the word "sill." What a difference a letter makes.

Some boxes have plump bags of a single word: two each of "found" and "water"; three each of "first," "now" and "because." In other bags alliteration plays tag with meaning: "matter," "heart," "manner," "roam."

Always the different weights document a dwindling from frequently to rarely used. "Enough," "slow," "veranda." "Perhaps," "rice," "gingerly," "lull." The words become weirdly humanized in this context, prompting thoughts about power, majorities and minorities, isolation and segregation and their crippling effects. Thus regimented, language is rendered useless. It becomes victim to tyranny.

Simryn Gill's work is on view through Saturday at Tracy Williams, 313 West Fourth Street, West Village, (212) 229-2757.