

Housekeeping: Domestic Views by Simryn Gill and Tino Djumini

Lilian Chee

Take the table: a crazy jumble of a table with some dreadful metalwork. But *our* table, *our* table! Can you imagine what that meant? Can you imagine what wonderful hours we spent at it? ... And the pictures of my parents! What dreadful frames! But they were a wedding present from my father's workmen. And this old-fashioned chair here! A leftover from grandmother's home. And here an embroidered slipper in which you can hang the clock. Made in kindergarten by my sister Irma. Every piece of furniture, every object, every thing had a story to tell, the story of our family. Our home was never finished, it developed with us, and we with it.¹

Househunting...

At first glance, the photographs of Simryn Gill's *Dalam* (2001) and Tino Djumini's *Kerabat* (2004) seem to be at odds with each other. Gill's full colour images show household interiors, specifically living rooms of West Malaysian homes rich in bric-a-brac but markedly devoid of inhabitants. Like the vacant scene of a crime, each room confronts the viewer with familiar possessions – a now-tatty-but-once-opulent Persian carpet laid on a bare concrete floor, a shiny television incongruously placed against peeling posters of Bollywood matinee idols, pink and gold upholstery in florid patterns, oversized decorative paper fans showing placid hill-and-lake landscapes, plump cushions with tassels, bright plastic flowers, a baby's milk bottle, lace curtains, vinyl table covers, painted porcelain deity figurines reverently placed on polished wooden altars, fish tanks, picture frames on walls, and display cabinets lovingly filled with memories. Ashley Carruthers sees the objects in Gill's interiors as 'uncanny' not because they are alien or new but precisely because these cosy possessions call to mind 'the final impossibility of securing a perfectly homely space'.² We take in these objects readily but we are also compelled to look beyond them, that is, to mentally revisit our own living rooms of past and present, and the desires these spaces fulfill, project or frustrate.



On the contrary, Djumini's black-and-white portraits depict familial bonds between father, mother and child. Indonesian families, some wistful, others defiant, yet others jubilant, some in full force, others sadly missing a member or more, pose in front of the camera's all-seeing eye. But Djumini's family album, as Carla Bianpoen notes, 'deviate(s) from the stereotypical and the make believe'.³ Despite its utopian ideal and expectations of kinship, the photographs strain with a certain pathos. In documenting the family away from the neutral backdrop of the photographic studio, these portraits also problematize the spatial construct of a contemporary 'family' by placing its protagonists against the more revealing surroundings of 'home'. In Djumini's photographs, 'home' is loosely defined as the key space in which the family chooses to represent itself. This location ranges from interiors and exteriors of houses to family-owned workspaces (for example, shops and fields), or nondescript spaces territorialized only by particular accoutrements of the breadwinner's trade (for example, a trishaw or a wheel of a pushcart) where tell-tale belongings of heart and hearth materially redefine or exclude the individual. Family members pose with each other but also make way for monstrous birdcages, prized crystal ware, stuffed tigers, treasured paintings and framed photographs, the family couch, or else in the case of the dispossessed, a blank wall to be furnished in future. Each portrait beckons myriad



narratives of families who stand in limbo between where they presently are, or desire to be, located.

Moving in...

The visual frames of reference adopted in the two works are significant. In *Dalam*, we are invited to 'peer in' the metaphorical front door or window, that is, through the use of image after image measuring precisely 23.5cm by 23.5cm, a size calculated by Gill to be the optimal threshold beyond which the viewer would be ultimately 'drawn in'.⁴ *Kerabat* borrows the language of the family portrait where the patriarch defines and presides over his family members. The pithy captions such as 'bank director and his family', 'three wives of an Islamic teacher and their grandchildren' and 'journalist, his wife and their son, a student activist', appear to reinforce the family portrait's visual convention and familial hierarchy. These frames of reference are, moreover, spatial. As observers, we perceive and gain entry into Gill's interiors and Djumini's families through the slippage between the space of the image and the physical spaces of home, which are familiar to us, that is, through association with our personal living rooms and individual family portraits. This spatialized mode of looking, as architectural theorist and historian Charles Rice argues, requires a "seeing beyond" the photograph⁵, an activity which is relational rather than individual or divisive, or as Murat Nemet-Nejat suggests, it is a mode of seeing that opens up another key space that lies beyond the frame of the image:

The most powerful space of the photograph resides in its peripheral space and the blank space, the glow, extending beyond and around the frame. This is the space of accidents, 'failures', social movement, contemplation. It is in the peripheral space that images turn into language...⁶

Taking this cue, the essay now threads into the peripheral glowing space beyond the photographs, to tease out, untangle and understand the

intricate spatial armatures behind *Dalam* and *Kerabat*.

Decorating...

Evidently, both collections, though different in terms of subject matter and aesthetics, rely on our shared understanding of the physical spaces of, and/or the imaginative notions of 'home'. There is a sense of futility in pinning down this slippery ideal, as testified through the 258 images produced by Gill and the 32 portraits selected for exhibition by Djumini.⁷ I suggest that Gill's and Tjumini's subjects are grounded in a common space from which you and I, as outsiders to these intimate scenes, can begin to locate our mutual engagement, rapport and entry. I am referring here to the space of domesticity, a familiar terrain which gives these works an immediate contextual reference yet also furnishes a site of resistance and agency, which in my reading, both *Dalam* and *Kerabat* strive to articulate in their own terms. In particular, how is the domestic as 'home' invoked in these two works, and further, how is domesticity either reinforced and/or challenged by these photographs?



Domesticity is a cultural, social and political construct defined by specific expectations of tradition, continuity, privacy, gender and class, which has to a certain extent, been suppressed by modern art and architectural discourse. Modern art and architecture have unequivocally privileged the dynamic progress, emancipation and self-imposed homelessness of the modern avant-garde over the static and staid domestic. Domesticity as a field of study refers to a whole set of ideas, developed in the course of nineteenth-century Western intellectual tradition, in reaction to the division of separate spheres between work and home. More significantly,

these ideas emphasized, as architectural theorist Hilde Heynen reminds us, 'the growing separation between male and female spheres, which was justified by assumptions regarding the differences in "nature" between the genders...', an assumption which ultimately supported the modernist script of the wandering male hero whose exploits were enabled by 'modernity's "other"' embedded in the figure of the mother or wife who safeguarded tradition, continuity and home'.⁸

Thus, the domestic with 'its mundane details of home life and housekeeping' was, art historian Christopher Reed argues, 'the antithesis of art', and especially opposed to the sensibilities of the avant-garde by its 'kitsch' and 'turbid' aesthetics.⁹ Not coincidentally, prominent modernist art critic Clement Greenberg defined the avant-garde 'through its opposition to "kitsch", a term identified with the knick-knacks of the middle class home'.¹⁰ Until the late 1980s when the eclecticism of postmodernism assaulted the art and architecture world with its full force, domesticity was modernism's 'specter' and was 'perpetually invoked in order to be denied, (remaining) throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion'.¹¹

In both *Dalam* and *Kerabat*, the domestic sphere is revived as modernism's anxious and subversive phantom. While they re-occupy familiar conventions – the architectural interior image and the family portrait – these bittersweet perspectives shatter any nostalgic or essentialized perceptions of home and kin. In them, modernism's pristine spaces are stained by domesticities cramped with Technicolor kitsch objects, broken families and single mothers, poverty, sentimentality, the cult of ornamentation, 'bad' taste and the grittiness of everyday life and labour. The albums of 'found' interiors and families resound with a Surrealist 'fondness for trash, eyesores, rejects, peeling surfaces, odd stuff, kitsch', a mandate 'directed to finding beautiful what other people found ugly or without interest and relevance'.¹² In saying this, I do not mean that these two projects are easily explained through,

or summarily congruent with, the dilettante politics of the Surrealist bourgeoisie. Instead, these domestic subjects are critical insofar as they project an alternative stance to the binary opposition between the avant-garde and the domestic, arguing that the existence of art (and its subjects) necessarily develops more or less relationally to the unwieldy networks of everyday life.¹³

And just as the link between domesticity and kitsch has been established, the relationship between photography and kitsch is not unprecedented. 'The lure of photographs', as literary theorist Susan Sontag observes:

... their hold on us, is that they offer at one and the same time, a connoisseur's relation to the world and a promiscuous acceptance of the world. For this connoisseur's relation to the world is, through the evolution of the modernist revolt against traditional aesthetic norms, deeply implicated in the promotion of kitsch standards of taste. ... Photography's ultra-mobile gaze flatters the viewer, creates a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience. ... Photographers, operating within the terms of the Surrealist sensibility, suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it.¹⁴

Gill herself admits to an obsession for collecting, assembling and juxtaposing, 'I love that resonance, the tension, that movement between the form (thingness) and content. They seem to undermine each other as much as the opposite'.¹⁵ Using seriality as a key strategy, Gill's works such as *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (2001), *Roadkill* (2000), *Vegetation* (1999), *Forest* (1996-8), and more recently, *Untitled* (2006) and *32 Volumes* (2007) skillfully manipulate and stretch the viewer's expectations of repetitive relationships and patterns.¹⁶ In the same vein, the recurring frames of Gill's and Djumini's domestic scenes paradoxically

dissuade rather than enable an authoritative grasp of the domestic contract, which is enacted again and again through myriad possessions, shifting spatial patterns and intricate family ties. Instead of consolidating through likeness, homogeneity or a sampling definitive of groups of homes and families, the serialized collection reasserts multiplicity, diversity, difference and disarray, which confound simple categorization and typology. These images work only insofar as they are read as fragments of a much larger, interconnected and complex whole, such as how the making of *Dalam* over 8 weeks served to answer Gill's question: 'Do lots of people held together by geography add up to the idea of a nation or single unified group?'¹⁷ Peering into these interiors, my short answer would have to be 'no'.



Perhaps not accidentally, the photograph as an object is also 'at home' in the cult of the domestic as evidenced by our propensity to collect, consume, display and re-produce images of model homes and happy families on readily available household surfaces – walls, tables, shelves, ledges, furniture insets, doors, and even mirrors. Yet, as much as they appeal to popular viewing such as when Gill's images were enthusiastically consumed by bored shoppers flitting between the Galeri Petronas in Malaysia's capital city of Kuala Lumpur (where the photographs were first exhibited) and the adjacent Suria shopping mall,¹⁸ the photographic medium lends doubly to the consumption and critique of domesticity, ironically allowing us perceive a 'reality' whose overt familiarity makes the subjects opaque and recalcitrant to our knowledge. This peripheral perception may align with photographer Richard Avedon's declaration that, 'the pictures have a reality for me that the people don't. It is through

the photographs that I know them'.¹⁹ In these two sets of photographs, the placid scenes of domesticity and family are ruffled by telling traces of the occupant(s) whose cultural taste, social and economic class, and gender, are inevitably betrayed by the soft and impressionable surfaces of home. Through these photographs we reacquaint with how and where we live, love, and perish.

Housekeeping...

Historically, modernist architecture was bent on effacing the inhabitant's traces from his/her home. In his 1923 anthology, *Towards a New Architecture*, modernist architect Le Corbusier denounced decorative home furnishing as 'absurd bric-a-brac' amounting to 'sentimental hysteria' which 'distracted architects' from purposeful design that could serve and support 'healthy and virile, active and useful' people namely, 'business men, bankers and merchants'.²⁰ Corbusier's Viennese contemporary, architect Adolf Loos whose infamous 1908 manifesto *Ornament and Crime* decried the cult of the ornament and demanded a clear separation between the functional and the ornamental, promptly declared the functional envelope of the house as decoratively out-of-bounds compared to the more fluidly staged interior.²¹

Interestingly, the modernist diatribe against decoration implicitly engenders the domestic as frilly and feminine. This terrain represents what media theorist David Morley describes as the 'symbolic battle ... between the figures of the housewife and the modernist architect'.²² While Gill and Djumini do not make claims towards gendered motivations, I am intrigued by how this battle is inherently engaged in their domestic scenes. Particularly in Djumini's portraits, the patriarchal figure as authority threatens to overwhelm the album. However, out of the 32 photographs, almost a third of these images show families without the father figure. In these scenes, for example, 'a mother and her two daughters who run a "warung" (shop) near Pasar Gablok' and 'single mother with her

disabled child', the portraits shift the locus of agency and mobility to the mother figure, endowing her not just with the task of homemaker but also breadwinner.



Undoubtedly, the ideologies of home and family are structured around the institution of marriage, and contingent upon the presence of a wife, who is ideally also a mother.²³ A mother embodies security, safety and permanence, and 'is always at home'.²⁴ Thus, she personifies 'a place which did not change',²⁵ and symbolically embodies the values of home, hearth, identity, heritage and nation. Cultural theorist Marina Warner claims that the interdependency of home and nation with the mother figure relies upon the mother's willingness to shed her 'personal history, of claiming timelessness and unchangingness'.²⁶ In *Kerabat*, the idealism of family is fractured. In at least a third of the families portrayed, the mother figure represents a site of impermanence, fragility and risk as she cradles a household variously marked by migration, disability, poverty and death, but balances these challenges by the promise of industry, self-sufficiency and independence from the family status quo. Thus, here at least, the encoding of the domestic as feminine begins to shrug off its passive and static undertones with mother figure and domesticity defining, equally, sites of influence, agency and resistance.

Is 'home' bound to national aspirations? As the interiors of *Dalam* intimate, 'home' is neither a given nor an essence of geography or nationality. 'There is a line from one of Blake's poems in his Songs for Innocence "... and

we are put on earth in a little space"', Gill reminds us, 'That little space is not a bit of geography any more, but it seems to be literally the physical room we occupy with our bodies as we carry ourselves around trying to make sense of how to stake our claims on constantly shifting ground'.²⁷ Set against shifting narratives, identities and spatialities of the domestic, too often seamlessly conflated with an unproblematic, unified and stable notion of 'home' and 'nation', Gill's photographs draw out alternative interpretations of 'home' as a deeply ambiguous and closely contested location – simultaneously cradling empowerment and change as well as imposing repression and stasis depending on one's access to economic and cultural capital.²⁸

Moving out...

In the opening quote to this essay, we find the modernist architect Loos waxing lyrical about his childhood interior, a description which 'cannot be pictured as the interior' but is an embodied memory prompted by 'a photograph of an interior, in its unrecognizability, in its inadequacy'.²⁹ Gill's and Djumini's photographs also take us 'home'. *Dalam* and *Kerabat* appeal to us because they reinforce two notions of home: one, as a 'public' concept and imaginative shared space which is 'by definition collective. It cannot belong to us as individuals', and the other, as something 'essentially private ... [and] belongs to me and mine and no one else'.³⁰

The ambiguous perception of 'home' is bolstered by the title of each work. 'Dalam' means variously 'inside', 'within', 'interior', 'deep', 'profound', and by extension, 'intimate' and 'rooted'. It draws on the boundaries between not just inside and outside but emphasizes relationality and separation. 'Kerabat' on the other hand denotes 'relatives', and may be associated with 'roots', 'bloodlines', 'kinship' and 'community'. Both titles reveal an understanding of 'home' and 'family' as relational and open-ended constructs, and perhaps concur with the two seemingly conflicting, yet inherently integral, conceptions of 'home' as both private and public entities.

Although these serial images focus on two nations where nationalist self-definition is an imperative, I suggest that domesticity is nevertheless sketched out as a complex and ambiguous terrain, contingent upon one's agency rather than a requisite formation of region and nation. What emerges from my reading of these photographs is a particular impression of domesticity, one that is essentially mobile, contingent and relational to the occupant's shifting contexts, histories and futures. This 'mobile domesticity' is tied to patterns of occupation, use, habits and rituals.³¹ It is tracked through the occupant's traces.

In this sense, I agree with art critic Lee Weng Choy that we should not simply conflate the postcolonial or postnational individual (descriptions equally applicable to Gill and Djumini) with the overdetermined agenda of asserting an Asian identity.³² Rather, a more nuanced approach to one's identity struggle may be enacted, as Lee suggests, through questioning, disavowal, and critical flirtation thereby coaxing rather than closing innumerable possibilities of 'stak(ing) our claims on constantly shifting ground'. In place of an idealized 'home', staking out a 'mobile domesticity' holds up one such possibility.

Lilian Chee is an architectural designer, writer and architectural theorist. She was trained at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London and at the National University of Singapore, where she currently holds a teaching position. A recipient of numerous awards and fellowships from UK, US and Singapore, Lilian has researched and published on architectural subjectivity, gendered spatial relations and questions of domesticity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Adolf Loos, 'The Interiors in the Rotunda', in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 1998), p.58.
- 2 Ashley Carruthers, 'Simryn Gill, Dalam', in *Forum on Contemporary Art and Society (FOCAS)*, v.4, 2002, pp.242-55; here p.247.
- 3 Carla Bianpoen, 'Tino's "Relatives": Deconstructing Families', in *The Jakarta Post*, 9 July 2006.
- 4 Carruthers, 'Simryn Gill, Dalam', p.252.
- 5 Charles Rice, 'Photography's Veil: Reading Gender and Loos' Interiors', in Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.281-95; here p.292.
- 6 Murat Nemet-Nejat, *The Peripheral Space of Photography* (Kobenhavn: Green Integer, 2003), p.37.
- 7 Without further cropping or editing, Gill used all the photographs taken together with an assistant on their Malaysian journey. Djumini made a selection of the images he shot with the assistance of Henk Schulte Nordholt of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Arts and Sciences (KITLV).
- 8 Hilde Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions', in Heynen and Baydar, *Negotiating Domesticity*, pp.1-29; here, p.2, p.7.
- 9 Christopher Reed, 'Introduction', in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp.7-17; here, p.15.
- 10 Clement Greenberg, 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture*, 1939, pp.3-21, cited by Reed, 'Introduction', p.15.
- 11 Reed, 'Introduction', p.15, p.16.
- 12 Susan Sontag, 'Melancholy Objects', in *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1990), pp.49-82; here, p.78, p.79.
- 13 For an argument of an alternative notion of the avant-garde which subverts the neat oppositional binary between modernist ambitions and domestic realities, see Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity', pp.4-5.
- 14 Sontag, 'Melancholy Objects', pp.81-2.
- 15 Simryn Gill in personal correspondence with Kevin Chua, 25 May 2001, cited by Kevin Chua, 'Simryn Gill and Migration's Capital', in *Art Journal*, Winter, 2002. (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_4_61/ai_96134608 accessed on 15 February 2007).
- 16 For an archive of Gill's work, see http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/16/Simryn_Gill/profile/ accessed on 9 April 2007.
- 17 See the online archives the Art Gallery of New South Wales, http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/archives_2002/simryn_gill, accessed on 9 April 2007.
- 18 'While they glided silently past the exhibitions of sculpture and painting that were showing concurrently with Gill's – perhaps unable to get a "hold" on their modernist visual grammars – *Dalam* drew these erstwhile patrons like a magnet. It seemed that, rather than approaching the images as art or even as representations, they engaged "directly" with the interiors – not least by pointing and touching, shouting with delight at the recognition of some familiar object, cooing with admiration at something "beautiful", laughing scornfully at something deemed kitsch or lamenting someone's wretched poverty'. See Carruthers, 'Simryn Gill, Dalam', p.249.
- 19 Richard Avedon cited by Susan Sontag, 'Photographic Evangels', in *On Photography*, pp.113-49; here, p.121.

- 20 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: Architectural Press, 1927), pp.18-23, p.210. See also Reed, 'Introduction', pp.9-10.
- 21 See Loos, *Ornament and Crime*; Reed, 'Introduction', pp.8-9; Rice, 'Photography's Veil', pp.284-7.
- 22 David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.61. See also Frances Stark, *The Architect and the Housewife* (London: Book Works, 1999).
- 23 See Morley, *Home Territories*, p.71.
- 24 See Morley, *Home Territories*, p.64.
- 25 Doreen Massey, 'A Place called Home', in *New Formations*, v.11, 1992, p.11, cited by Morley, *Home Territories*, p.64.
- 26 Marina Warner, 'Home: Our Famous Island Race', in *Independent*, 3 March 1994, cited by Morley, *Home Territories*, p.65.
- 27 Simryn Gill, *Catalogue OVA Touring Exhibition of Simryn Gill* (Liverpool: The Organization of Visual Arts, 1999), cited by Shanaz Mohd. Said, 'Presence: The Photographic in Contemporary Art', in Simryn Gill *Dalam*, Catalogue (Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas, 2001), pp.3-30; here p.12.
- 28 Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed, 'Coming Home: A Postscript on Postmodernism', in Reed, *Not At Home*, pp.253-73; here p.253.
- 29 Rice, 'Reading Gender and Loos' Interiors', p.292.
- 30 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Exile', *Social Research*, 1991, v.58, n.1, pp.67-8, cited by Morley, *Home*, p.4.
- 31 I thank Barbara Penner for suggesting this concept.
- 32 Lee Weng Choy, 'Local Coconuts: Simryn Gill and the Politics of Identity', in *Art Asia Pacific*, n.16, 1997, pp.56-61; here p.59.