From *A small town at the turn of the century*, 2000

# *Picturing the Tropics Within*

LILIAN CHEE

124 Here is a picture: A woman (middle aged) is dressed in dark Victorian garb, her hair neatly tied back, a lace cap atop her head, her bespectacled face seriously surveying the scene in front of her. In her right hand she holds a paintbrush, in her left, a palette. An easel is propped in front of her. She is drawing outdoors. There is something extraordinary in this woman's garden. Behind her is an enormous cactus plant, almost three times her size. It makes the woman look very small.

123 Here is another picture: A woman (age undecipherable) wearing a Punjabi garment is seated on a rattan chair in her garden. On her head is an exotic headgear made up of what looks like fruit. The headgear hides her face. The lawn has just been mown. Behind her, in a brick flowerbed, are magenta bougainvilleas, and an oversized bird's nest fern. Beyond the garden is a chain link fence. And behind that fence is an enormous building with huge chimneys boldly painted in red and white stripes. They make the woman look very small.

The first picture shows Marianne North, a Victorian amateur artist and explorer, at work in the 'field'. North started travelling to all corners of the tropical world when she was forty years old, and in the course of thirteen years, completed some 848 paintings of tropical flora and fauna found in the locations she toured including Jamaica, Brazil, Tenerife, Singapore, Sarawak, India, Australia, South Africa, the Seychelles and Chile.

The second picture, taken in 2000 by the artist Simryn Gill, is also set in the tropics. We are in a garden where tropical nature has been domesticated. Gill took this image at her family home, in Port Dickson on the west coast of Peninsula Malaysia, which stands adjacent to a defunct power station whose huge chimneys overshadow the 'fruit headed woman'. The complex caricature makes us uncomfortable, as though we tend to see people as crude extensions of where they come from.

I will examine Gill's artistic output in relation to the tropics and tropical nature, a physical and mental geography connected to the places where she grew up, about which she remains curious, and to which she still returns each year. The tropics as a field of knowledge came to the fore only in the nineteenth-century. The word 'tropical' 'signified a place of radical otherness to the temperate world, with which it contrasted and which it helped constitute'.[1] It is an enduring, if also problematic, historical construction. In fact, the tropics' narrow and biased conception still applies, particularly after recent outbreaks of infectious epidemics like avian flu and SARS were linked to several countries in the tropical belt.

The work of North—a Victorian woman, amateur artist and self-styled naturalist with an interest in the artistic representation of the tropical world—is an important foil to understanding how the historical narrative of the tropics was played out in art. If there are resonances between North's and Gill's activities, these will be found in how the two women frame what they do: theirs are neither scientific nor strictly artistic practices. For both, the fascination with nature, in particular tropical nature, furnishes a site of practice which remains critically indeterminate, that is, an alternative 'other' landscape,

[1] Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001, p. 17

124

Unknown photographer, *Marianne North at her Easel*, no date

which offers an alibi for self expression and personal experience, but at the same time reveals something about societal biases and sentiments. North's tropical flower paintings straddle between botanical art and drawing-room hobby art. Gill's photographs and collected objects from tropical locations veer between anthropological documentation and artistic intervention. 126, 127 In each instance, what pulls the viewer into the works of both women is the investment of the self as an essential part of this strange and unknown terrain. We are drawn into such conversations, which defy boundaries, completely entwined, as it were, with the minutiae of art, science, myth, history, life and decay.

### *Picturing the Tropics from Without*

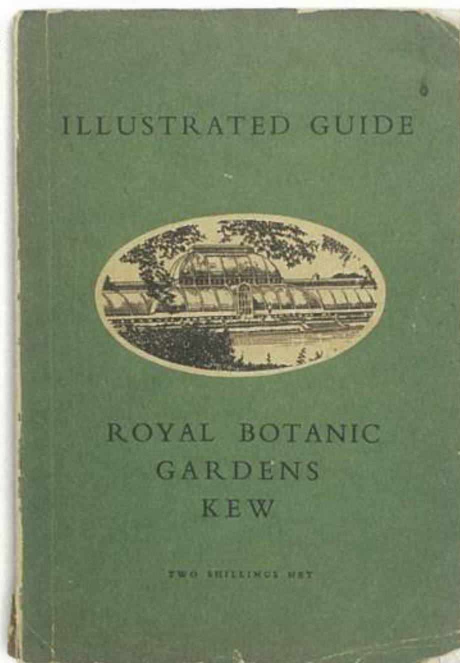
> *Looked from the outside, tropical nature seemed to be quite a different order from the kind of nature we are familiar with; it displayed a higher degree of presence and permanence. As in Douanier Rousseau's paintings of exotic landscapes, living entities attained the dignity of objects.*
> —Claude Lévi-Strauss[2]

In traditional cartography, the tropics are bounded by latitudes 12 degrees north and south of the Equator, located between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. The cartographic definition of the tropics as a 'torrid zone' was formulated as early as in Aristotle's *Meteorology*, which also demarcated four other relative climatic zones—two frigid and two temperate.[3] However, the tropics gained widespread currency, as an epistemological category primarily in the nineteenth-century, when the redrawing of the world in maps became a necessary task as a consequence of aggressive colonisation. Subsequently, the ontology of the tropics was largely conceived, developed and disseminated through a European perspective when parts of Africa, India, the Malay archipelago, Indo-China and the new 'worlds' of America and Oceania gradually fell to colonial conquest.

The idea of the tropics was a 'genuinely European artifact' enacted equally through cartographic, physical and/or ethnographical space, as much as through a set of visualisations, which were imagined, pictured or written.[4] Thus geographical and navigational maps, charts, botanical and field drawings, scientific drawings, medical charts and diagrams—captured diversely as copper engravings, woodcuts, drawings, lithographs and photographs—became the most conventional means by which the tropics were encountered, often secondhand, by many Europeans and North Americans.[5]

Linguistically, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, the phrase 'tropical' was annexed to a host of colonial pursuits, for instance, 'tropical medicine', 'tropical geography', 'tropical ecology', 'tropical agriculture', 'tropical economics' and 'tropical hydrology'.[6] So widespread and precarious, 'the tropical' existed as a fertile hermeneutic construct, suitable for scientific domestication and slippery enough to exist as the 'other'.[7] Indeed, tropical nature stood for a plethora of values:

125




Studio materials, Port Dickson, 2012

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, Johan and Doreen Weightman (trans.), Atheneum, New York, 1973, p. 55.
[3] Denis Cosgrove, 'Tropic and Tropicality' in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, Felix Driver and Luciana Martins (eds.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, pp. 199–200.
[4] Cosgrove, *op. cit.*, p. 198.
[5] Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 18.





> *... for heat and warmth but also for a dangerous and diseased environment; for superabundant fertility but also for fatal excess; for species novelty but also for the bizarre and deadly; for lazy sensuality and sexuality but also for impermissible racial mixings and degeneration.*[8]

Such excess and waste were intentionally mapped against 'Europe's identity as a place of temperateness, control, hard work and thriftiness', thus reinforcing European superiority and sovereignty.[9] These characteristics consolidated the tropical world's inferior and secondary natural landscape, which was found wanting, and produced, according to the memoirs of a German traveller: 'a painful impression on account of the vegetation displaying a spirit of selfishness, eager emulation, and craftiness'.[10] The environmental determinism also suggested that the tropics posed a threat to those who intending to stay. English parents were advised that their:

> *... child must be sent to England, or it will deteriorate physically and morally—physically because it will grow up slight, weedy, and delicate, over-precocious it may be, and with what feebleness ... Morally, because he learns from his surroundings much that is undesirable, and has a tendency to become deceitful and vain, indisposed to study, and to a great extent unfit to do so.*[11]

It was precisely through the emergent fields of botany, zoology, ethnology, geography, meteorology and medicine, that the pestilential language of tropicality was installed and instituted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century.[12] And while the tropical regions were considered a weaker 'other' to countries in the temperate zone, the former continued to 'provide a powerful imaginative foundation for a variety of scientific, aesthetic, and political projects, and one, moreover, on which careers could be built'.[13] The persistence of such views ultimately justified vast imperial projects.[14]

126

127

ABOVE Marianne North, *343: Foliage and Flowers of a Madagascar tree at Singapore*, 1869–81
BELOW Marianne North, *676: Leaf-Insects and Stick-Insects*, 1869–81

[6] David N. Livingstone, 'Tropical Hermeneutics: Fragments for a Historical Narrative, An Afterword' in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 2000, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 92–8
[7] Livingstone, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[8] Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
[9] Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[10] Henry Walter Bates quoted in Nicolette Scourse, *The Victorian and their flowers*, Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 1983, p.60. Cited by Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
[11] A. Davidson, *Hygiene and Diseases of Warm Climates*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, London, 1841, pp. 43–44. Cited by James S. Duncan, *In the Shadows of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth-century Ceylon*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2007, p. 12.
[12] David Arnold, 'Envisioning the Tropics: Joseph Hooker in India and the Himalayas, 1848–1850' in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 149. The term 'tropical disease' was introduced for the first time in 1787 in an English medical work to indicate special illnesses associated with hot and humid climates.
[13] Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, 'Views and Visions of the Tropical World' in *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[14] David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p.174. Cited by Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Marianne North Gallery, *781: Poison Tree strangled by a Fig*, Queensland, 1869–81



Not titled, 2004

130

Restored Marianne North Gallery interior, 2011

If the phrase 'tropical' was adaptable, its visual iconography was conversely much more immutable. In his reference to Henri Rousseau's paintings, Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that there was a certain measure of permanence and objectification attributed to the natural constitution of hot and humid landscapes. The palm tree, for example, was a signifier par excellence of tropical flora 'responsible for much of the aesthetic impact that tropical landscapes had on the human imagination' and constituted 'less a botanical species than an imaginative submersion in hot places'.[15] It stood in as a stable cultural signifier for what was essentially an unknown landscape, thus complementing a discourse, which relied more on 'typification than generalization'.[16]

Congruent with the historical narratives of the tropical world—which combined science and metaphor, precision and exaggeration—its iconographic and rhetorical representations reflected a complex hybrid of exchange between vastly different tropical sites and cultures including the jungles of India, the foothills of the Himalayas, the biogeographically diverse Malay Archipelago, the arid and vast plains of Africa, and the paradisiacal islands of the Caribbean.[17] Consequently, the conceptual apparatus of tropicality, which was in fact multifarious and complex, was ultimately reduced to a single meaning that could adequately serve the political ambitions of colonisation. It is this deterministic 'natural' terrain, shaped by culture, politics, economics and society, which acted as the backdrop for North's nineteenth-century travels to the tropics.

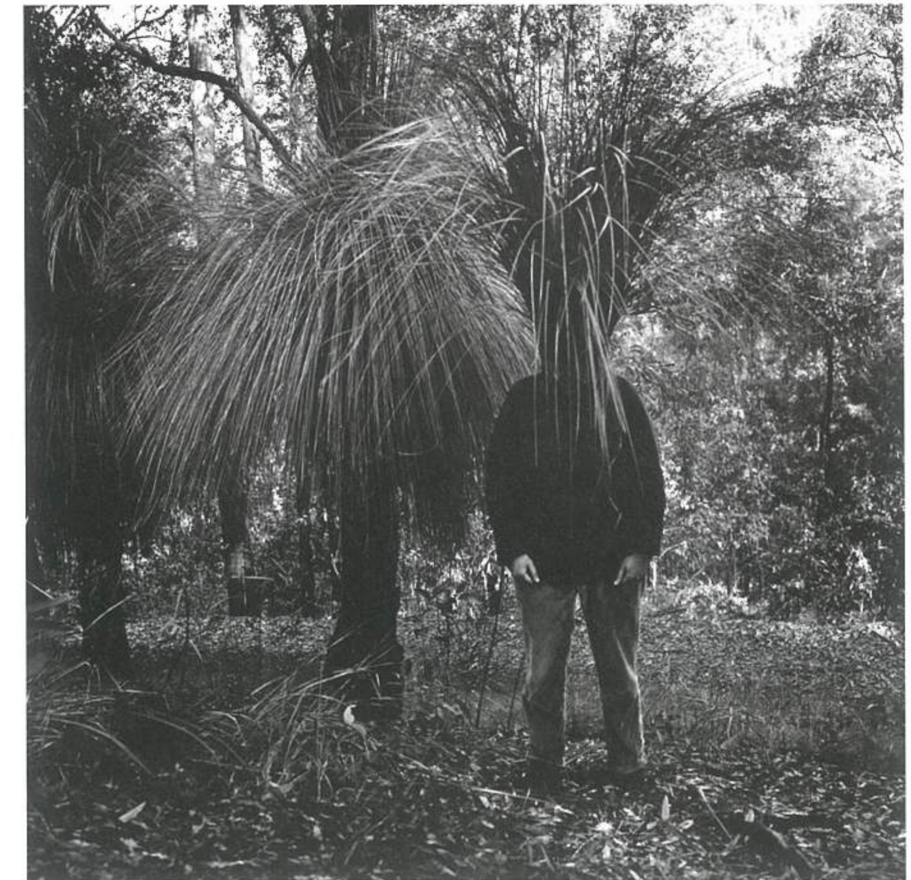
In a far-flung corner of Kew Gardens in London, a modest self-funded building resembling a miniaturised Greek temple was completed in 1882. In it are hung some 627

[15] Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
[16] Driver and Martins, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[17] Driver and Martins, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17. For a discussion on the role of metaphor in science, see: Nancy Leys Stepan, 'Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science' in Sandra Harding (ed.), *The 'Racial' Economy of Science: Towards a Democratic Future*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1993, pp. 359–76.

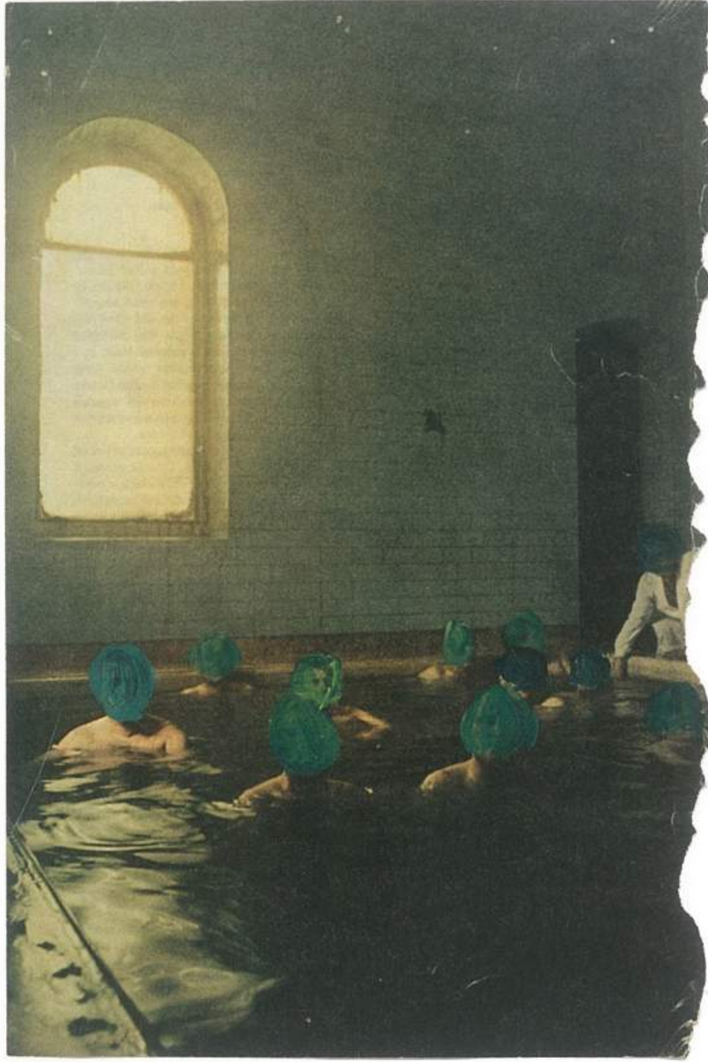


131

132



ABOVE Marianne North, *741: Scene in a West Australian Forest*, 1869–81
BELOW From *Vegetation* archive, 1999, 2013



135

136

ABOVE Marianne North Gallery, *577. Flowers and Fruit of the Mangosteen, and Singapore Monkey*, 1869–81
BELOW Studio materials, Port Dickson, 2012

botanical drawings of tropical flora and fauna captured by North from every continent. These are composed of 'almost hallucinatory colours', sensual in their scale and form, painted boldly in oils with a seemingly naïve, if not careless, abandonment for the conventions of botanic art which habitually observed restraint in scale, detail and expression.[18] As the artist confessed in her frequent attempts to slip away from her Victorian hosts in each new place she visited: 'I am a very wild bird and like liberty.'[19]

North employed established architect James Fergusson to design her pavilion-gallery in the gardens and, unusually for that time, she was involved in setting it up, 'patching, sorting, framing and fitting the paintings', arranging a dado of 246 different types of woods collected during her travels, and decorating all the walls and their surrounds by hand.[20] At the time of the Marianne North Gallery's opening, the artist notably lobbied Joseph Hooker, erstwhile director of the Botanic Gardens, to allow her to serve coffee, tea and biscuits to visitors. Hooker was adamant that such frivolity would be out of place in Kew. In response to Hooker's refusal, North slyly painted tea and coffee plants at the entranceway into the gallery.

There is no doubt that North's paintings are an important historical record of the natural world, as Hooker himself acknowledged. However, botanical illustration was widely considered a domestic pastime taken up by women who were chiefly self-taught. Thus, botanic drawings easily crossed 'the boundaries between art and craft, drawing and reproduction, science and leisure activities'.[21] The overall result at the gallery seemed more suited to being displayed in a Victorian drawing room, and more consistent with the handicraft of a woman of leisure than a scholar of science. This was exacerbated further by North's eagerness to install and arrange the paintings herself, and to participate in the decoration of a space, which veered dangerously close to appearing as domestic quarters, complete with refreshments. Yet although North's bold and sensual paintings went against the grain of conventional botanic art of its time, her vision of the tropical world was still subject to the Victorian distance and prejudices towards this region. Consequently, the paintings often depict a single aesthetic and a fixed point of view, controlled by the all-seeing gaze of the artist.

Indeed, how does one revisit the notion of the tropics today? How can active 'artificers' of these environments have their own say?[22]

Perhaps there is an attempt to tackle these difficult questions in the Australian Pavilion, also tucked coincidentally in a far-flung corner of Venice's Giardini della Biennale within a heavily wooded garden by the canal. It is an appropriate site for Gill's latest forays into her fragile tropical

[18] Kathryn Hughes, 'Marianne North: The Flower Huntress' in *The Telegraph*, 20 March 2009, online edition (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/5012141/Marianne-North-The-flower-huntress.html) viewed 2 January 2013.
[19] Hughes, *op cit*.
[20] Laura Ponsonby, *Marianne North and Kew Gardens*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London, 2002, p. 118.
[21] Catherine de Zegher, 'Ocean Flowers and their Drawings' in *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature*, Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (eds.), The Drawing Center and Princeton University Press, New York, 2004, p.79.
[22] Cosgrove, *op. cit.*, p.198.





130

roots. This temporary pavilion, designed in 1988 by Philip Cox, has at times been compared to an Australian beach house, or even a garden shed, and is approaching its expiry, soon to be replaced with a more fittingly grand and less domestic structure. The pavilion sits off the main track of the Giardini—beside a small canal, which functions as something of a service access to the site—amidst the dappled shade of matured trees, its architecture distinctively tenuous amongst the more formalised pavilions representing France and Britain. These material circumstances make Gill's time- and process-conscious interventions fitting, if also uncanny. It feels as if the complex politics of deterritorialisation, ruination, and rejuvenation are revivified here, acting like critical counterpoints for Gill's current artistic experiments.

## *Nature Morte, or Picturing the Tropics as Still Life*

> *Nature has very different logic in different places and where I grew up nature is very fast. You just have to take your eyes off the ball and you're underneath it again! I lived in a landscape that was said to not hold much history because human traces there rot quickly.*
> —Simryn Gill[23]

5–12
132
142–147

Plants populate Gill's work. They feature rampantly in *Forest* (1996, 1998) and *Vegetation* (1999), two photographic collections revolving around the portraits of tropical flora. The choice of subject matter is personal to the artist: 'I grew up in Malaysia. My sense of myself was formed very much in the presence of the lushness and decay of its equatorial climate. Who I was then could be described through the supporting plants'.[24] Gill's photographic output of her native country's plants seems, at first glance, subdued and unremarkable, but also unsettling in their over-familiarity and ordinariness.

137

Not titled, 2011

In *Forest*, we are confronted with nature writ large—the sculptural trunk of a coconut tree, a branch heavy with ripening bananas, and shoots emerging from parched mudflats—every leaf, skin, twig and root shown in excruciatingly sharp detail. The absence of colour disciplines the eye to read such familiar plant anatomy as an abstraction of lines, creases and gaps. Camouflaged in each frame are strips of printed texts emerging as contiguous with roots, fruit and leaves. 'They have something of the claustrophobic closeness and rank fecundity of tropical vegetation, which taxed the romantic imaginations of the nineteenth-century'.[25] In some, because of the size of the print, the words are readable but remain incomprehensible. The work probes the relationship between reading what we recognise, and reading what is unfamiliar. What are we to make of these plants when paired with iconic lines from *Lord Jim*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Origin of Species* and a translation of the *Ramayana*, as well as mundane household guides to Chinese cooking and toddler-taming?

[23] 'Simryn Gill, in conversation with Natasha Bullock and Lily Hibberd' in *Photofile*, No. 76, 2006, p. 18.
[24] Simryn Gill, 'Self Seeding' in *Simryn Gill: Self-seeds*, exhibition catalogue, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, 1998, p. 15.
[25] Wayne Tunnicliffe, 'Self Selection' in *Simryn Gill: Selected Work*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2002, p. 10.

138

Marcel Broodthaers, *Tapis de sable*, 1974

In contrast, the latter series, *Vegetation*, features photographs measuring a mere 26.5 cm x 26.5 cm. Its diminutive size forces the viewer to scan across a few different frames at once, taking the whole picture at one glance. The images, as the title tells us, feature natural vegetation, but with a twist. Each frame contains a person whose face is covered by a plant species native to the space photographed. Our attention switches from plant to person, and back again. In some cases, the implantation of the person in the frame transforms the native plant into some kind of artifice. We are tempted to read nature differently.

132, 142–147

This 'unnatural' reading of tropical nature is further hyperbolised in *A small town at the turn of the century* (2000). Here, residents of the Malaysian coastal town of Port Dickson, where Gill still spends half her time, were photographed in their 'natural' environments—relaxing in the garden, drinking beer at the coffee shop, hauling up a catch on the seashore, and lounging around the living room at home. In these colour photographs, the persons are indistinguishable apart from the distinctive local tropical fruit headdresses, which each were given to wear. The effect is humorous, surreal and disconcerting. These 'fruit heads' are incongruous to the environments featured, although each headdress ultimately represents a species local to the tropics and easily found in the markets of the town. 'We seem to be left on the outside unless we are prepared to "go native" and replace our own heads with something more fruitful'.[26] What is nature? What is natural?

123, 134

Roland Barthes, in a discussion about photographic images, introduces two elements in a photograph through which meaning is invested. The first element, 'studium', connotes a

[26] Wayne Tunnicliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 5.



139

Not titled, 2011

cultural and/or political field.[27] It captures the photographer's intentions and derives from established themes within social, historical, and ethical areas of knowledge. In contrast, the 'punctum' is an unintentional detail, one in excess of the 'studium'. The 'punctum' disrupts our interpretation of the image because it 'punctuates' the 'studium'.[28] It makes the reader doubt; it provokes thinking.[29]

One could argue that in *A small town at the turn of the century* and *Vegetation*, the cultural message or 'studium' is one of the tropical world and its native plants. Yet, these plant subjects are poignant. They are reminiscent of a place emptied of any known reference, other than that which the reader is free to conjure in relation to the natural world—a forgotten childhood, an abandoned home, an exiled homeland, an imagined, extinct or longed-for tropical idyll encountered in pictures, postcards, travelogues, fiction and dreams. Thus, both 'punctum' and 'studium' are contained in them.

123, 134
132, 142–147

However, in these two works, Gill further complicates Barthes' division of 'studium' and 'punctum'. The insertion of an 'other' into this composition—the texts and the human heads covered with vegetation or fruit—disrupts this equation. The reader is not just drawn into the image, but co-opted as an active producer of his or her reading of it. One must, as Russell Storer suggests, oscillate 'between looking and reading' as the artist 'disrupts our processes and habits of reception'.[30] What is our relationship to these colonial, domestic and mythical texts? What is our relationship to these persons whose identities are masked by their native vegetation? Where are we located in relation to these new coordinates? The insertions problematise the relationship between the cultural 'studium' with the personal 'punctum' by surfacing questions of identity, belonging and alienation.

For someone born and raised in the tropics, and by her own admission having never properly left, it is not surprising that Gill is conscious of the constructed 'natural' landscape, and especially how these landscapes still define who she is. Her take on 'nature' is sceptical, but also not without a sense of wonderment in its surprises. Her version of the tropics is no longer untainted but double-edged—of the natural world and the man-made melded together. But unlike the tropical narratives of the nineteenth-century, Gill's version is no longer a static referent that may be simply described, drawn and mapped. This nature is akin to the agency it supports. It is temporal, contested and emergent:

> *... the natural world is always historically constituted by human material and perceptual interactions, so that our understanding of it is always a form of social knowledge ... nature is not just 'natural' but is created as natural by human desires and intentions.*[31]

*Forest*, *Vegetation* and *A small town at the turn of the century* reproduce, even to the extent of romanticising, the nineteenth-century botanic and ethnographic portraits of exotic places with their flora and peoples. Yet they also raise an uneasiness about our preoccupations over these forms of knowledge. The doubling of the tropical discourse, here by re-appropriating its familiar representations, triggers recognition and alienation at the same time. We want to look, and then we only want to look away.

[27] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, 2000, pp. 26–28. Schor says that the 'studium' 'participates in the economy of meaning', that is, it works in the service of the message. See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 91.
[28] Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
[29] Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
[30] Russell Storer, 'Simryn Gill: Gathering' in *Simryn Gill*, MCA, Sydney and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2008, p. 52.
[31] Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 15.





## *Picturing the Tropics Within*

> *'I don't think I ever left ... I am not looking at it. I am always inside it.'*
> —Simryn Gill[32]

Gill's personal history reads like an enviable travelogue, yet she attests that she 'never left PD'.[33] This modest Malaysian coastal town, named after a British official Frederick Dickson who founded a port here in the 1880s, was once rich in coal and tin ore. In its heydays in the 1980s, it served as a popular beach and holiday destination for Kuala Lumpur residents. Gill recalls 'dumping (her) schoolbag and rushing to the beach' near her family's sprawling bungalow, where 'the mangrove merged with the power station, and the district hospital morgue was literally at the bottom of our garden'.[34] This is the 'flawed' landscape, which follows her and consequently her art.

53–60
28–30
83–90

The act of homecoming is bittersweet. Absence, loss and an attraction for what has failed, or is inevitably falling into ruins, are recurrent themes in Gill's *Standing Still* (2000–03), *Power Station* (2004), *Looking for Marcel* (2005) and, most recently, *My own private Angkor* (2007). In these photographs, the convergence of nature with architecture, the latter already in a partial state of entropy, is tangible. In *Standing Still*—a series which captures the failed utopian dreams of ambitious development schemes and sprawling mansions of old all over the Malaysian peninsular—Gill documents abandoned or half-completed housing estates, shopping malls, individual houses of the wealthy and the not-so-rich, schools, hotels, apartments and theatres. If the first impulse to development is to clear the land, the images here show architecture crumbling back into the land, consumed by weeds, detritus, mould, algae, roots, damp, rain, heat and overgrowth. In time, we imagine these buildings will completely disappear, their rigid and upright geometries dissolving into the hot and humid landscape.

*Power Station*, *Looking for Marcel* and *My own private Angkor* revolve around the spaces of Gill's Port Dickson. The first series, *Power Station*, consist of 13 sets of photographs. It examines the passing of time through inhabitation of two paired sites—Gill's childhood home by the sea, and its neighbouring thermal power station. Funded by the British in 1969, and built with French and Indian technology, the power station lay dormant at the time the photographs were taken, waiting to be upgraded and powered by natural gas. In contrast to the power station, the bungalow built in 1928 was photographed without colour. There are unexpected resemblances in these paired images, as though the still-occupied bungalow and its functional objects feature as an inevitable prehistory to the deserted power station and its now useless apparatus. Gill renders what is intimate to her—the rooms of the house and its objects—distant and curious. As time catches up, it seems that these rooms too, like those of the empty power station, will ultimately expire. Though the outside is hardly pictured in these interior shots, the impending fury of nature's effect towards these spaces feels immanent.

In *Looking for Marcel* and *My own private Angkor*, the artist shows us the irony of the tropics, where spaces and objects wilt before our eyes when left alone, but conversely in their destruction also become strangely compelling. In both these works, Gill plays with language as a means to galvanise our imagination, as if to filter and disturb what we choose to see, or ignore. *Looking for Marcel* is a playful reference to Marcel Broodthaers, the Belgian conceptual artist,

[32] Skype conversation with Simryn Gill, 31 July 2012.
[33] *Ibid.*, 'PD' is short for Port Dickson.
[34] *Ibid.*

filmmaker and poet who worked regularly with found objects and language. Gill transports one of Broodthaers' iconic film scenes to the tropics, where he was seated at a lace-covered table with a cream cake and a pipe—behind him a potted palm—seeming to read a newspaper while wearing a pair of spectacles smeared in cream. In Gill's rendition, a delicate, English silver tea service replaces the cake and pipe, a folded newspaper and reading glasses (now smeared with papaya pulp) are set on a rustic table weathered by the tropic's natural elements. Marcel is missing, his chair littered instead by debris from the lush palm-filled garden where this ensemble is re-enacted. Soon, the table too will be littered with leaves. Soon the tea set will be engulfed by birds, ants, spiders, flies, rain, mould, aerial roots, fallen twigs and leaves. Soon the reading glasses will also be rendered useless, consumed by rain and heat.

83–90

A similar spectre of impending ruination is present in *My own private Angkor*. The title refers to the Cambodian temple complex built in the tenth-century and 'found'—almost as a perfect fit for the European imagination for the exotic—in the nineteenth-century by French explorers. The structure was in a state of ruin, and partially returned to the landscape by encroaching nature. Amidst a jungle of ficus and other trees—which inhabited not just the surroundings but the temples themselves—statues of gods and deities stood as if standing in wait for their impending dismemberment and plunder in the century ahead. Gill reveals a modern day Angkor of her own finding in the more mundane environment of Port Dickson's housing estates, which have fallen prey to the boom-and-bust cycles of the Malaysia's volatile economic fortunes. Her images show panes of tinted glass leaning against walls and balconies of empty, half-finished buildings. The systematic dismantling of the building fabric by looters—who have taken the aluminium window frames to sell as metal prices rose—further augments and hastens the degradation of these proud architectural forms by nature. Gill photographed the smoky glass panes as she found them, neatly placed against those walls, which were slowly being covered by shoots, roots and algae. There is a minimalist beauty in these pristine pieces of glass, although we cannot appreciate them without turning away from what is happening around them. The contrast is compelling. It is not unlike the knowledge of past civilisation and present ruination unfolding before our eyes in Angkor Wat as a consequence of mass tourism, economic and conservation policies, and environmental degradation.

In these works, Gill enacts the doubling of spaces and processes, which may have taken place elsewhere, but become markedly prominent in a tropical environment equally ravaged by historical, economic, social, and material forces. In these photographs, we see ruination as process, the palpable result of these man-made effects, and perhaps more destructive than the punishing force of the tropics.

Walter Benjamin perceived the ruin as 'de-mystifying' and 'anti-aesthetic'—'a means of approaching historical truth through reduction'.[35] Adopting an allegorical view of history, Benjamin contrasts the allegory with the symbol, the former emphasising transience and specificity, the latter working towards permanence and completion. In this sense, 'allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things' with ruination existing both conceptually as well as physically.[36] Benjamin's understanding of the ruin as a subversive figure of transience is further developed in his valorisation of society's 'detritus' wherein such faded items, once emblematic of commercial and consumptive desires, are key to understanding our complex histories, both personal and collective.

[35] Walter Benjamin, cited by Naomi Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories of destruction in Benjamin and Speer', (http://naomistead.files.wordpress.com/2008/0/stead_value_of_ruins_2003.pdf), viewed 24 December 2012. Printed in *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, No. 6, October 2003, pp. 51–64.
[36] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1939), John Osborne (trans.), Verso, London, 1977, p. 166.

140

Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, 1969–72

Correlating with Benjamin's proposition, Robert Smithson extrapolates ruination as antithetical to the monument. In its place, the anti-monument is necessarily constructed from 'the flat surface, the banal, the empty, the cool, blank after blank; in other words, that infinitesimal condition'.[37] For Smithson, it is only within the banal and utilitarian that we can locate these 'new monuments', which he advocates are made of 'artificial materials, plastic, chrome ...'[38]

35, 141

This statement resonates with Gill's collection and transformation of found objects salvaged from sites around Port Dickson and its surrounds. In *Garland* (1993–2008) and *Mine* (2007–08), Gill works through the serendipitous fortunes of the intrepid collector-as-artist, scavenging through detritus for objects and fragments in which

[37] Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 13.
[38] Smithson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

141

*Mine*, 2007–08

Benjamin explains: 'history has merged sensuously into the setting'.[39] The collector congeals, according to Benjamin, the sensibilities of both ragpicker and child, whose appreciation for recycled waste raises the act of collecting to an action that is redemptive and renewing.[40]

The new connections, metonymical or metaphorical in character, galvanise these visually still-in-formation collections, which are usually laid out flat on a low table or directly on the gallery floor, thus inviting one to touch, hold and rearrange them. The floor is used as a utilitarian platform to re-enact as it were, the personal action of beachcombing or ragpicking which requires one to squat, bend forward, squint, look again, sort, decide, toss away or keep.[41] Ravaged by time and nature, the objects have an ambiguous quality. They are essentially transitional forms, nothing more then the sum of their substance—glass shards, metal pieces, shells, rocks, discarded toys, household objects, mechanical parts of heavy vehicles, scraps of paper, stalks of plants, tree bark, fruit skins, hairbands and shoelaces, plant roots, rubber casings from looted copper wires, and discarded bits of electrical wires—which were either already misshapen by nature, or pre-empted to such disfiguration by the artist.

In *Mine*, the almost perfect spherical forms visually unite disparate materials—natural and man-made—found in the immediate vicinity of the artist's home studios in Port Dickson and Sydney. Some of the objects were naturally round (the pomegranates taken from a friend's fruit bowl), others willfully shaped by hand (the ficus aerial roots and the mangosteen 141

[39] Walter Benjamin, 'The Ruin' in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Michael W. Jennings (et. al.), Edmund Jephcott (trans.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008, p. 184.
[40] Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, Wiley, Cambridge, pp. 88–89.
[41] For a discussion on Gill's re-appropriation of the gallery floor as a visible base onto which the marginalised subjective feminine Other may be projected and given prominence, see: Lilian Chee, 'The domestic residue: feminist mobility and space in Simryn Gill's art' in *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, Vol. 19, No. 6, December 2012, pp. 750–70.





skins), and still others transformed by the power of nature (a brick tumbled into roundness by the sea). The homogeneity of the rounded forms on the clean gallery floor belies their diversity and origins from different locales. They narrate divergences between climate, culture and nature, intrinsic to two seaside towns of vastly dissimilar scale and profile. More than that, *Mine* rehearses the problematics of difference and sameness as we are conditioned to understand the world through what we have been trained to see and recognise. Here, there is uniformity of form but heterogeneity of substance. Everything is shaped into what we can fathom at a glance, but something escapes us if we fixate on the apparent form. Thus, each collection initiates questions not only about the provenance of the objects themselves, but also about the collector's location and personal history, and also about the observer's affinity or abhorrence towards these lost pieces.

Gill's tropics, unlike North's exotic landscapes, are firmly grounded in her own sense of inhabitation or sense of loss. The work she produces of the tropics is not exclusively biographical, abstract or external, but operates through the 'metaphor of the self as geographical terrain'.[42] This self is materially grounded in the world and formed from the context in which one finds oneself:

> *A self, a conversation, a book, on this model can be seen as a configuration of random and aleatory elements converging to form one location with its own peculiar topology, strata and atmosphere. The contours of this self suggest a rich sense of connectedness, a kind of inevitable and mutually informing contact with surrounding terrain and the arbitrariness of staking out one's boundaries... A self that becomes part of the terrain rather than acting upon it.*[43]

When asked why she thinks nature constantly makes its presence felt in her work, Gill says: 'it's where I grew up'. The self that is part of the terrain.

It is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about Gill's approach towards the tropics. Certainly her elusive and often ephemeral works defy such neat categorisations. But perhaps her practice does tell us something about the yearning to hold nature in focus in time and space, and the absolute futility of this inclination in the tropical world. The only recourse is to embrace ruination and expiration, or better, to understand its material circumstances as not inevitably linked to what we cannot control.

The impulse for the viewer of these lost objects is to find some kind of plausible narration for them. We want to get behind the picture. Unlike the monumental narratives fashioned by medical science and natural history, which have locked tropical discourse, its representations and knowledge-as-experience, in a repetitious and negative cycle of lack and inferiority, Gill's personal, lived and material circumstances in the tropics, have engendered multiple representations and readings. They capitalise on the fecundity of the tropics as a space of excess. They tell about its contradictions. The process of ruination, which Gill so often gravitates towards, is melancholic and beautiful, and simultaneously instigated by man and nature. We are attracted to these stunning images and these lost objects because we can identify something in them, a visceral connection which brings us back to our own personal histories and spaces.

[42] Tamsin Lorraine, 'Becoming Imperceptible as a Mode of Self-Presentation' in Dorothea Olkowski (ed.), *Resistance, Flight, Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2000, p. 185
[43] Lorraine, *op. cit.*, p. 181. Emphasis mine.