

Simryn Gill: Inland

# Education Resource



# Simryn Gill: Inland

A **NETS VICTORIA** TOURING EXHIBITION DEVELOPED  
BY **CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

Presented in association with Melbourne International Arts Festival

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## INTRODUCTION



Simryn Gill *Dalam 2001*, 260 type C photographs, Installation view, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

*Simryn Gill: Inland* is curated by Naomi Cass, the Director at the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) – one of Australia’s premier venues for the exhibition of contemporary photo-based arts, providing a context for the enjoyment, education, understanding and appraisal of contemporary practice. This exhibition is the second biennial survey at CCP, following *Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka Portraits 1987-2007*.

These two exhibitions have been brought to audiences outside of metropolitan Melbourne by National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria, this state’s peak body for contemporary art, craft and design touring exhibitions. The tour of *Simryn Gill: Inland* includes the major Victorian galleries Mildura Arts Centre; Latrobe Regional Gallery; Shepparton Art Gallery; Horsham Regional Art Gallery; and McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park.

### **About this education resource**

This education resource is intended as a starting point for generating ideas and classroom activities before, during and after a visit to *Simryn Gill: Inland* and is intended to complement and be used in addition to information provided in the exhibition catalogue, gallery wall text and on the NETS website <[www.netsvictoria.org.au](http://www.netsvictoria.org.au)>. The resource includes an introduction to the exhibition, suggested points for discussion and practical activities for secondary school students. It is suggested that teachers select relevant sections of this resource to compile their own exhibition response sheet for students prior to their planned visit.

## Pre-visit planning

Before visiting *Simryn Gill: Inland* it is recommended that you:

- Contact gallery staff at the venue you plan to visit, to determine the staff availability to give introductory talks and run workshops and to discuss the suitability for the year level
- Confirm the opening hours, transport and parking options, cloakroom facilities and whether admission fees apply.
- Familiarise yourself with this resource available at:  
<http://www.netsvictoria.org.au/assets/publications/learning-guides/PDF/Inland.pdf>
- Purchase the room brochure which features the essay written by Naomi Cass *How We Are in the World: The Photography of Simryn Gill*, which can be used in conjunction with this resource, from the NETS Victoria website: <http://www.netsvictoria.org.au>
- Ensure that students have a visual diary for their visit – it could be an A4 or A5 notebook (lined or unlined)
- Seek recommendations from the gallery staff as to suitable works in their permanent collection that engage with themes of place, the environment, immigration, cultural identity and colonialism. Arrange with gallery staff for students to view these works and possibly obtain reproductions of them. These works can then be used as a starting point for discussion and practical activities in the classroom that explore these issues in reference to Simryn Gill's work.

## Curriculum links

The starting points for students to consider Simryn Gill's work are multifaceted, and within the visual arts include photography, media, sculpture and inter-media approaches. This resource reflects the focus of the exhibition on the artist's photographic works, considering them in context with her practice more broadly.

Given the strong sense of narrative throughout her work, its connection to books, literature and words, English is a strong link. Through investigating Gill's strong interest in colonial history, politics, culture and the environment as seen in the exhibition, Humanities is also relevant.

This resource provides suggested ways that teachers can incorporate the Arts; *exploring and responding* and *creating and making* dimensions with particular reference to Years 7 - 10 VELS levels 5 & 6 and integrates other learning domains including English, Humanities, Personal Learning and Thinking Processes. At VCE where greater specialisation occurs, connections to theoretical components of Units 1 - 4 Art and Studio Arts are the major focus.

## Biography

Simryn Gill was born in Singapore in 1959. She was raised in Port Dickson, Malaysia and educated in Jaipur, India and the United Kingdom.

Gill moved to Adelaide from Kuala Lumpur in 1987. She now lives and works in Sydney and currently divides her time between Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia.

Gill has exhibited widely throughout Australia and internationally since 1991 including the Venice Biennale (1995), the Istanbul Biennale (1997), the Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (1999), the Biennale of Sydney (2002 and 2008), the São Paulo Biennial (2004), the Singapore Biennale (2006), the Liverpool Biennial (2006), *documenta 12* (Kassel, 2007).

Recent Australian solo exhibitions include those presented by Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (2001), the Art Gallery of New South Wales (2002), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2008), the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2006 and 2009).

International solo exhibitions include Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2001), Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (2006), Berkeley Art Museum, University of California (2004), Tate Modern, London (2006).

Simryn Gill is represented in private collections in Australia and abroad and public collections, including Queensland Art Gallery, Singapore Art Museum, Art Gallery of South Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art.

Gill received an Australia Council Fellowship in 2003. Simryn Gill is represented by BREENSPACE, Sydney and Tracy Williams Ltd, New York.



Simryn GILL  
*A small town at the turn of the century #5* 1999–2000  
type C photograph from a series of 40  
Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

## Background

Gill's photography takes place within a broader practice that curator Russell Storer describes as "...subjecting found objects, books, local materials and sites—each of which carry specific meanings and histories—to a range of processes including photographing, collecting, erasing, casting, tearing, arranging, stitching, rubbing, wrapping and engraving".<sup>1</sup>

Gill works with a huge range of materials and techniques, making exhibitions in major public galleries (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney), in commercial galleries (BREENSPACE, Sydney, Tracy Williams Ltd New York) and installations in non-traditional venues (such as *Guide to Murals at Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, Singapore*, Singapore Biennale 2006). It seems Gill is keenly attuned to the world around her, and uses materials and techniques as the need arises, to express her interests and concerns, often using humour as a mischievous and effective device, for example in *A small town at the turn of the century #5* (1999 – 2000), which is included in this exhibition.

Gill elevates humble materials to the status of museum objects: her materials often being gathered from local opportunity shops or from the roadside. In *Garland* (2006 - ), Gill exhibited glass and other objects washed up on beaches in Malaysia and Singapore, which she has collected since 1993. Gill is also asking us to regard the world around us in a more rigorous way. In *Roadkill* (2000), Gill collected objects run over and flattened on which she crafted toy wheels, of which hundreds were let loose in the gallery forming a floor installation. Gill has also used photography in the same way, gathering random images as she walks around the streets of her suburb, such as in *May* (2006).

Gill takes both discarded man made and natural objects, such as seeds and stones, and shifts them; rearranges them with seemingly endless patience, craft and grace, to communicate something about how the object has come into being. This is not a matter of changing context to appreciate formal qualities, as might a connoisseur, but rather a quest for understanding place.

Always evident in the found object is some kind of story that, as Gill gathers the item, is folded into the meaning of her work. The constituent parts of her installations—be they items found on the shore or collected from around her studio in Port Dickson or Sydney, or indeed a particular site Gill photographs—are gathered for their ability to evoke a history. "Movement across the globe, migration of people and vegetation, both enforced and deliberate, if not the subject of her work is certainly a link"<sup>2</sup>. While not a unique story, resettlement is part of Gill's individual and familial history. Her parents originally moved from India to Malaya prompted by the range of human predicaments, from political and economic upheaval, through to adventure and marriage. The displacement of objects within her work echoes the journeys of people.

Books have been a particularly important aspect of Gill's practice: as objects to be manipulated, they are subjects of her work and when included in her work, books embody knowledge, histories and narrative. Gill is both respectful and violent with books. In presenting five different approaches to books (of many more approaches to books in Gill's oeuvre), you will gather some understanding of Gill's overall practice, and how photography plays a part in her work. It is also relevant to see how in manipulating and changing something as mundane and common as a book, Gill can communicate deep and complex ideas, as well as giving pleasure to the viewer through her cunning and skilful work.

### **Books as sculpture *Pooja/Loot* (1992)**

In this work Gill carves small niches into the covers and pages of sixty books, in which some contain small toys collected from local junk shops. Installed on the wall, like small shrines, Gill also includes a colloquial Anglo-Indian dictionary open to the pages that discuss the two Hindi words of the title, meaning 'worship' and 'plunder'.

**Books in photographs: *Forest* (1996) (selections included in *Simryn Gill:Inland*, illustrated p.10)**

In this series Gill tears up pages from books, imitating plant parts and inserting the still readable but torn pages into local natural environments. The leaves of books thus imitate aspects of nature. These fragile installations in the environment are subject of her large black and white photographs, the series *Forest*. In this instance, photographs record Gill's interventions in the landscape, bringing an ephemeral site-specific installation into the gallery.



Simryn GILL *Distance* 2003 artist's book. Installation view, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

**Photographs as Books: *Distance* (2003) (included in *Simryn Gill:Inland* and illustrated above)**

At a loss to *really* describe her Sydney home to her sister abroad; Gill photographed her home in minute detail. In this instance, photography becomes the work, when Gill makes the 130 photographs into a small, long and wordless, concertina fold book. The question arises; can such a thorough photographic record actually communicate the overall, lived experience of a home?

**Books as installation: *32 Volumes* (2006)**

In this series, Gill and her assistants rubbed every word from 32 volumes of the *Life World Library* series. With painted covers, the books are placed on a table in the gallery for visitors to explore. In separating the image from the text, Gill invites us to read the images alone and to appreciate the interdependence of language and documentary photography in *summing up* the world in these totalising volumes.

**Books as exchange: *Pearls* (1999- )**

In this project Gill engages in an exchange, a novel form of distribution for art in which no money is exchanged. Gill invites people to give her a book that they value, and which she tears up, making beads or pearls from its leaves, returning the book as a necklace, on the understanding that she may, from time to time ask to exhibit the necklace. Occasionally the text is still readable, but the book has been completely transformed into necklaces made with consummate skill and understanding of traditional beading practices.

## Introduction to the exhibition



Installation view, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

*Simryn Gill: Inland* is a survey of photography by Malaysian/Australian artist Simryn Gill. It is important to declare at the outset, that while photography forms a significant and wondrous part of her practice, Simryn Gill does not consider herself a photographer; “For me, the taking of photographs is another tool in my bag of strategies, in that awkward pursuit of coherence we sometimes call art”<sup>3</sup>. *Simryn Gill: Inland* embraces this conundrum as an entry point for considering Gill’s photography, and how photography might function more broadly as a way of engaging with the world.

Simryn Gill’s photography takes place within a broader practice where she takes found objects, books, local materials and sites, and subjects these to a range of processes such as collecting, erasing, casting, tearing, arranging, stitching, rubbing, wrapping and engraving. In her photography, Gill chooses to use painstaking and laborious analogue processes, slow exposures and handmade prints. “I haven’t used a digital camera. I really like the constraints of film...I am attracted to the discipline that the limitations of film demands.”<sup>4</sup> Slow exposure Gill explains, “is like taking time into your negative”.<sup>5</sup>

*Simryn Gill: Inland* draws on work selected from seven major series produced since 1996. Seven major series wind almost chronologically through the gallery – in this first survey of Gill’s photography – following a path, quite literally, from outside to inside, from found in nature to found in culture and back. In some of her work Gill responds to what is seen, gathering images like pieces of information, as in the exhaustive series *Dalam* (2001) and *Distance* (2003–2009) and the paired observations of her family home in Port Dickson, Malaysia and the adjacent utility, in *Power station* (2004). Whereas in other series such as *Forest* (1996–1998), *Rampant* (1999) and *Vegetation* (1999), Gill uses photography to record performative interventions in the landscape.

Gill’s most recent work *Inland* (2009), commissioned for this survey and photographed during a road trip from northern New South Wales to South Australia and across the bight to Western Australia, is at the heart of the exhibition. Seeking an understanding of the politics of place *Inland* confounds what is normally expected from photographs of Australia’s interior and eschews decorous landscapes, vast horizons or smiling rugged people—for modest interiors of homes, studio photographs of objects collected on her journey and random landscape images. Indeed there are no people present, only the houses they have inhabited as evidence of their subjectivity. *Inland* consists in informal piles of small jewel-like Cibachrome and black and white prints sitting on a table for viewers to peruse, heightening the provisional nature of its description of inland Australia, leaving open-ended the question of what can be known through photographic representation and placing the viewer at the centre of the experience.

Naomi Cass, Exhibition Curator, 2009



## Themes

### OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

Simryn Gill has spent time living and working in Singapore, Malaysia, England, India and Australia. Her exhibition history includes major public galleries, contemporary art spaces and biennales across the world. As exhibition curator Naomi Cass describes in the catalogue essay, "Movement across the globe, of people and vegetation, both enforced and deliberate, if not the subject of her work is certainly a link".<sup>6</sup>

#### *Forest (1996-98)*

Upon close inspection, this series of large-scale black and white photographs of lush tropical plants reveal strips of paper and fragments of text which are embedded into tree trunks, covering leaf surfaces, transforming into aerial mangrove roots, weaving their way up walls and mimicking banana flowers.

The artist states: "I decided I needed to echo my situation in my art activities, and started making small interventions in the very rare wild places around where we lived, like gardens of unoccupied houses, roadside growths of tapioca and yam".<sup>7</sup>

Returning from Australia to Singapore with her family, Gill went into overgrown gardens and open spaces she was familiar with to construct these site interventions, armed with glue and a range of books – some given to her by friends, others sourced from garage sales – including the colonial texts of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and an Indonesian version of the Hindu tale *Ramayana*. These works were explorations by Gill into her personal sense of place and history, as an outsider in Singapore. Works in the same series were created in other similar environments in countries such as Malaysia. Although they originate from specific locations, they can be read as anywhere in the tropics.

The process of entering these 'little bits of jungle' to construct these works was referred to by Gill as her 'guerrilla activities',<sup>8</sup> and were temporary site specific interventions which she sought to document.



Simryn GILL from *Forest* 1996–1998  
16 silver gelatine photographs,  
Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

Her friend and fashion photographer Nicholas Leong, chose the camera and film which required long exposure, suiting Gill's requirements to create large, dense flat tonal images. Together they documented the works before the paper was to rot away and return nature. This introduced Gill to analogue photography and its slow processing, which she values and continues to use.

### ***Vegetation (1999)***

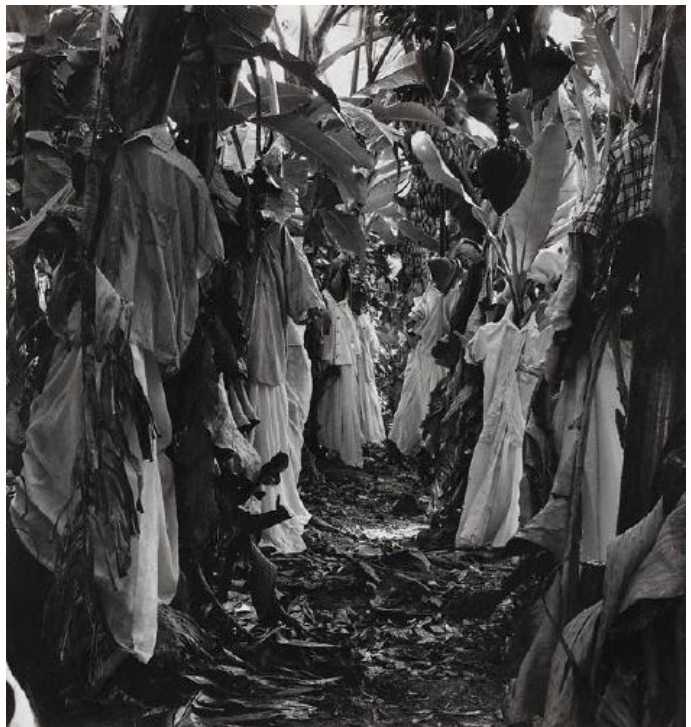
"Nature becomes just another clichéd signifier of place and of localness, which one may adopt while passing through a 'strange' place, or migrating to a new place, or indeed as a cover for invasion."<sup>9</sup>

In these small framed photographs, Gill is now the subject within the natural environment. The series was started in San Antonio, Texas in 1999 and was part of a two-month residency during which time she produced a new body of work. Gill was wondering if – in this mimicry of nature – she actually could 'disappear into the landscape'. On field trips she collected a range of desert plant matter, including aloe and tumble weed and took this back to the studio to construct headdresses. Again, using Nicholas Leong as the photographer, Gill then went back to the location to shoot the series. She continued to work on the series in Singapore using the mangrove and in Australia, the grass tree occasionally referred to as a 'black boy'. The series is closely related to *A small town at the turn of the century* in its playfulness and parody of ethnographic portraits.

### ***Rampant (1999)***

*"Both populating and haunting the patches of now feral vegetation evoking a sense of foreign/alien source that has been strained, even lost in the act of translocation. It also parodies the fear of rampant occupation that historically imbues aspects of Australian to Northern neighbours."*<sup>10</sup>

In *Rampant* Gill photographed outbursts of introduced plant species in the Australian landscape such as bamboo and sugar cane, which now grow wild and uncontrolled in subtropical northern New South Wales. Again Gill incorporates performative elements, interacting with nature through 'dressing' the plants in garments such as lungis and sarongs which were worn by immigrant workers who harvested these crops. Gill explores of the connections between botany, geography and the idea of plants as 'humanised' entities – seen in these strange single or groups of 'figures' appearing displaced within the Australian landscape.



Simryn GILL  
from the series Rampant 1995  
7 gelatin silver photographs 28.0 x 26.0cm  
Courtesy the artist and Greenspace, Sydney

## THE INTERIOR AND THE IDEA OF 'HOME'

Gill's work reflects an ongoing interest in the interior and home as a geographic place of residence, of refuge and comfort and how this space reflects the self and our collective identity.

### *Dalam* (2001),

*Dalam* (Malay for deep; inside; interior), is a series of two hundred and sixty colour photographs arranged in grid formation on the gallery walls.

"Gill deliberately began *Dalam* with the intention to document the living rooms of residents of the Malay peninsula, and her focus in each photograph is to capture the sense of place conveyed by the living room of the occupants."<sup>11</sup>

Accompanied by a close friend, Gill took these over an eight-week period as they travelled across the Malaysian Peninsula. In towns mainly outside the city regions she knocked on the doors of strangers and asked if she could enter their houses to photograph their living rooms. Surprisingly, almost everyone agreed, and the resulting series gives a fascinating insight into the character of the Malaysian Peninsula, made up of a broad mix of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Gill was again exploring her conflicting experience of being both insider and outsider; raised in Malaysia but also having lived outside for a very long time.\* Please note, due to space restrictions, unfortunately *Dalam* may not be installed at all galleries.

### *Distance* (2003 – 2008)

*Distance*, an artist's book of small colour photographs is produced as a hand-sized concertina work in an edition of just five. This beautiful work is "like a medieval Book of Hours"<sup>12</sup> and is displayed in an elegant museum-like cabinet with a protective perspex covering.

*Distance* was produced after many conversations Gill had with friends and family overseas and is an attempt to show them what her home is like. She took one hundred and thirty photographs,

using a medium format camera, of everything in the interior of her home in Marrickville, Sydney; however the results seemed to fail in producing a truthful representation of her home, as Gill says, "the final result is almost like an incoherence, it's too close, there is too much information".<sup>13</sup> Naomi Cass wrote with reference to this, 'While *Distance* fails to communicate the gestalt of home, it is remarkable in its details and beauty'.<sup>14</sup>



TOP: Simryn GILL from *Dalam* 2001 260 type C photographs, Courtesy the artist and Greenspace, Sydney.

ABOVE: Simryn GILL *Distance* 2003 – 08, Installation view, Centre for Contemporary Photography

*Power station (2004)*



Simryn GILL from *Power station 2004*, 13 type C photographs and 13 silver gelatine photographs  
Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

In *Powerstation (2004)*, a series of comparative photographs, Gill has recorded the interiors of two buildings – her family home in Port Dickson, Malaysia and the adjacent power station. The series comprises thirteen pairs of images in panoramic-format; the industrial interior in colour photography on one wall mirrored by the domestic interior in black and white on the other. Built in the 1960s, the power station was decommissioned at the time the series was taken and is currently being converted from oil to a less polluting gas-fuelled powered plant using Japanese technology. Again, what is noticeable is the absence of people, though evidence of their habitation is provided through the documentation of work places and objects within the living space.

## *Inland* (2009)

*"Through an extraordinary ability to engage with strangers, Gill and her fellow traveller Mary Maguire photographed the living rooms of eighty homes ranging in geographical location, socio-economic and cultural background."*<sup>15</sup>

*Inland* (2009) is a new series, which was commissioned for this exhibition. Using the same process to produce *Dalam*, Gill photographed this series on a road trip; however this time in Australia, from northern New South Wales to South Australia and across the bight to Western Australia. The photographs include views of the horizon, skylscapes, interior still life compositions and close ups of stones collected by Gill during her travels. *Inland* is at the heart of the exhibition and the mode of presentation differs to all other series in the exhibition, as these precious handmade small scale colour and black and white images are assembled on a table in piles for the visitor to examine, with white gloves.



Simryn GILL from *Inland* 2009  
cibachrome and gelatine photographs  
Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

## Years 7 - 10 VELS levels 5 & 6

### Questions, discussion and research topics

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The following questions and discussion topics related primarily to The Arts – *exploring and responding* and English – *reading, writing, speaking and listening*.

The Personal Learning domain – *the individual learner* and *managing personal learning*, together with Thinking Processes – *reasoning, processing and inquiry, creativity* and *reflection, evaluation and metacognition* are also important curriculum links to be considered when planning a visit to the exhibition.

#### The Arts – exploring and responding

Find the series *Forest*

- What do the images remind you of at first? Choose one image from this series and observe it closely - at first from a distance and then close up. What do you notice?
- Consider the title of the work – what do you think the artist is suggesting?
- Choose another work from the series and sketch it in your visual diary. Discuss design elements focusing on – line, tone, focus and space. What are the two main design elements? What effect does this create in the photograph?

Look at *Vegetation*.

- Discuss how design elements have been used, focusing on – quality of line, shape, space, texture and tone. How has the composition of the image been structured? What effect does this create?
- What is the relationship of the figure to the background? From what position do you think these photographs were taken? Does this influence the mood or intensity of the photograph?

Move on to the series *Rampant*.

- Choose one photograph to investigate closer. What does the image remind you of? Discuss and write down some of your first impressions.
- Describe the use of tone, shape and texture in the composition.

Compare the three outdoor series *Forest*, *Vegetation* and *Rampant*. Consider aesthetics, photographic techniques used and themes explored by the artist. Is there a unifying link? How do they differ?

Find the series *Dalam*.

- Discuss the quality of colour, the use of design elements, style and compositional format of the whole work as a series. What are the most obvious design elements and principles? What do you think the artist is intending to communicate in this series?

Look closely at the works in the series *Power station*.

- Why do you think the artist has chosen to pair these two places? What is she suggesting in titling the work in this way?
- Compare the coloured and black and white images. Discuss and write down your first impressions.
- Why do you think Gill chose colour for the industrial interior and black and white for the domestic space? Describe the quality of colour. How does the panoramic format of the photographs affect the mood of the work?

Explore *Inland* for a few minutes. If you have the opportunity to arrange with the gallery staff or participate in one of the public programs, sit down, put on the white gloves and quietly look through the little stacks of photographs.

- What does this process remind you of? How do you usually look at photographs?
- Compare the different images in terms of their use of colour, black and white and compositional structure.
- Notice the different locations and objects in the images. What do they reveal to you about inland Australia? How do these images compare with other more documentary style of photographs you have seen of inland Australia?

## English – reading, writing, speaking and listening

Find the series ***Forest***

- Look at the photograph of the coconut tree and spend a few minutes reading the text embedded in its trunk. Select some random words, write them down in no particular order. Use what you have written as the basis to do a short piece of writing. It could be a Haiku or Concrete Poem.
- The bamboo and sugar cane in the photographs were introduced species of plants and have now become noxious weeds in the artist's home state New South Wales. Discuss this 'invasion' of introduced species and the effect it has had on the environment. Name plants in your local region that have become environmental weeds.
- By 'dressing' the bamboo and sugar cane, what do you think Gill is trying to communicate?

Spend a few minutes looking at ***Dalam***.

- What is the most noticeable thing about this series?
- Think about and discuss the way Gill has chosen to represent the interiors of people's homes and the meaning of this series. Choose one of the photographs to analyse in more detail. Describe the room; its furnishings and any interesting features. Describe the quality of colour? Even though people are absent, what does the image tell you about the occupants?

Find the works titled ***Power station***.

- What do you understand about the inhabitants of these interiors? Think about any old abandoned buildings you have seen on your way to school or in your local community. Is there any chance they will be saved and given a new life or will they be let go, and gradually decay? What does this tell you about the history, society and culture in which you live? Complete a written response in the form of an article, prose or creative writing.



Simryn GILL from *Dalam* 2001 260 type C photographs, Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney.

Discuss and write about the differences you can see between the ways Gill has photographed ***Dalam*** and ***Inland***. What does each series tell you about the social and cultural identity of the groups of people photographed – as seen through the evidence of the way they live?

## Years 7 - 10 VELS levels 5 & 6

### Creative activities

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#### The Arts – Creating And Making

##### Where you are in your school

As a class project complete a 'documentary style' series of photographs around your school community. Discuss and brainstorm the interesting and unique characteristics of your school environment.

Try to depart from the way in which your school has been photographed in the past and tell a different story. You could indicate human presence in the way Gill does obscuring faces – you might consider a performative element by obscuring the faces with masks. Bring the photographs together as a book or assemblage.

##### Art from the 'detritus' of our world

**detritus** [deetrɪtəs] *n* **1.** (Earth Sciences / Geological Science) a loose mass of stones, silt, etc., worn away from rocks **2.** an accumulation of disintegrated material or debris **3.** (Life Sciences & Allied Applications / Biology) the organic debris formed from the decay of organisms [from French *détritus*, from Latin *dētrītus* a rubbing away; see detriment] - [www.thefreedictionary.com/detritus](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/detritus).

Discuss the above definitions and research the word *detritus* and its origins. Create an artwork using one or a combination of the definitions above as a starting point. Use different processes such as collecting, rubbings, tearing, casting, sculpting from natural and found objects. Consider integrating, text, sound and moving image. You may wish to include your own body as part of the artwork.

##### My own private space

Chose a partner to work on with this project. Describe your bedroom – or any other space in your home - in conversation or writing. Give as much detail as possible – colours, objects, furniture, lighting, decorations such as posters or artworks. Create an image, through drawing, painting or computer based illustration of your how you imagine your partner's bedroom might look.

As a homework exercise, photograph this room. Take as many shots as possible of the room without people in it. Edit the series, download the images onto your computer, use Photoshop to enhance the image and print out each image, using good quality paper. Construct an artist's book for the final presentation using a concertina format.

Share this book with your partner and discuss the outcomes. How successful were your descriptions? Consider how successful your own photographs are? Do they really give an accurate picture of your room?

##### References for extended visual art projects

Look at and discuss some of Simryn Gill other works such as installations *Forking tongues* (1992), *Heart of the matter* (1994), *Roadkill* (2000), *Garland* (2006-) and *Caress* (2007-). Research the work of Australian artists who work across a range of media including:

**Ash Keating** is a visual artist who in recent years has predominantly integrated ecological issues into a hybrid visual arts practice. [www.ashkeating.com/](http://www.ashkeating.com/).

**Jill Orr**'s work centres on issues of the psycho-social and environmental where she draws on land and identities as they are shaped in, on and with the environment be it country or urban locales.

[www.jillorr.com.au/](http://www.jillorr.com.au/)

**The Avoca Project**, initiated by artist Lyndal Jones, explores the impact and influence of a variety of art based practices arising from Watford House in the town of Avoca in central Victoria. It involves experts in historical, ecological and social sustainability as well as artists of international repute. [www.avocaproject.org/](http://www.avocaproject.org/)



## VCE Art

### Questions and research topics

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#### Unit 1 - Area of Study 1 Art and Meaning Outcome 1

Students analyse and interpret Simryn Gill's photographs using the Formal and the Personal Framework.

- What are the predominant formal elements used in *Forest*?
- Where is the focal point and what is the effect of space in the work?
- What is the photographic technique Gill has used to produce *Forest*, *Vegetation* and *Rampan?* How does this technique affect the meaning and interpretation of the work?
- What relationship do you think these first three series have to Simryn Gill's life and experiences?
- Choose one of these three series. Describe the specific process Gill has used in creating the series, both setting up the scenes and taking the photographs. How is this series linked to people, places or experiences of personal significance to Gill?
- How does your experience and background affect the interpretation of the series?
- What are the symbols or metaphors explored by Gill in the series?

#### Unit 2 - Area of Study 1: Art and culture Outcome 1

- Interpret, compare and contrast selected works from this exhibition to photographs by other artists from different cultures using the Formal and the Cultural Framework.
- Research the work of Christian Thompson, particularly the series *Australian Graffiti*. Are there any parallels with Simryn Gill's photographs? Compare and contrast the two artist's works.
- Choose one of the seven major series in the exhibition to research and analyse. Complete the following:
  1. Where did Gill conceive and first create the series? Over what time frame was it made?
  2. What was the social, political or cultural context that influenced Gill when she made the series? How does this contribute to its meaning?
  3. How have historical or contemporary events shaped the intention of Gill or our understanding of the artwork's meaning?
  4. How does the physical placement of artworks in the gallery affect their interpretation? (For example, *Distance* is displayed in cabinet and *Inland* is arranged on a table.)
  5. How does your cultural background influence your interpretation?
  6. Use the above questions to analyse the work of photo-based art produced by artists from different cultural backgrounds.
  7. Research other works by Simryn Gill using the above questions as a guide for your analysis. *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (1999 – 2000), *Run* (2006), *Standing still* (2002 – 2003) and *Guide to the murals of Tanjong Pagar railway station, Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Biennale 2006 and Simryn Gill, 2006)

#### Unit 3 - Area of Study 1: Interpreting Art

In a conversation with Naomi Cass 'from a mobile phone somewhere in the outback', Simryn Gill said "I am not a documentary photographer"; however her objective approach in terms of subject matter and use of traditional photographic techniques, references the conventions of documentary photography.

Compare Gill's photography with German documentary photographer August Sander (1876 – 1964) or French Eugène Atget (1857 – 1927). Select reproductions of photographs by Sander or Atget from books or websites. Complete the following:

1. What are the predominant design elements and principles used? Where is the focal point and what is the effect of space in the work? What do you think the photographers source of inspiration? Discuss the photographers approach setting the scene to shoot the series.
2. How is this series linked to people, places or experiences of personal significance to the photographers?
3. What were the social, political or cultural contexts that influenced the photographers? How does this contribute to its meaning?
4. How does the choice or presentation of subject matter, materials and techniques reflect or challenge artistic or social traditions of the time?
5. How do these photographs differ from traditional ideas of viewing and experiencing photography at the time in which they were produced?
6. How do you think photographs of the past take on new or different meanings, in the context of contemporary ideas and issues?

#### Unit 4 - Area of Study 1: Discussing and debating art

Simryn Gill has stated that she is not a documentary photographer however she uses its conventions to record human life, other cultures and peoples sense of place in the world; although what is obvious in Gill's photographs is human absence, or if people are included their individuality is masked.

- Is her work successful, as artist and blogger Dr Marcus Buynan describes, in its investigation of "the concepts of presence and absence, space, place and identity and the cultural inhabitation of nature?" <[http://www.thevine.com.au/entertainment/articles/simryn-gill-\\_-exposing-the-kindness-of-strangers.aspx](http://www.thevine.com.au/entertainment/articles/simryn-gill-_-exposing-the-kindness-of-strangers.aspx)>
- Is Simryn Gill exploring something else in these photographic series?
- How does this work relate to postcolonial theory?
- What is Gill exploring or exposing about people?

A range of commentaries and reviews were published during the exhibition of *Simryn Gill: Inland* at the Centre for Contemporary Photography:

1. "*Simryn Gill - Exposing the kindness of strangers*" *The Age*, Saturday 31 October 2009 <[http://www.thevine.com.au/entertainment/articles/simryn-gill-\\_-exposing-the-kindness-of-strangers.aspx](http://www.thevine.com.au/entertainment/articles/simryn-gill-_-exposing-the-kindness-of-strangers.aspx)>  
A strange road trip inspires contemporary happy-snaps, writes Andrew Stephens.
  2. *Review: 'Simryn Gill: Inland' at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Fitzroy* <<http://artblart.wordpress.com/2009/12/06/review-simryn-gill-inland-at-the-centre-for-contemporary-photography-fitzroy/>>  
Australian artist Dr Marcus Bunyan has published a review of the exhibition on the blog Artblart:
  3. "*A picture is just that. Naomi Cass interviews Simryn Gill*" *FLASH*, issue 3, 2009. Published by the Centre for Contemporary Photography <[www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill/](http://www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill/)>
- Discuss and debate one or more of these issues relating to Gill's work selecting at least two photographic series from *Simryn Gill: Inland*. Use the commentaries above and other articles you find, using the relevant aspects of the Analytical Frameworks to inform and support the discussion.

## VCE Studio Arts

### Questions and research topics

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#### Unit 1: Artistic inspiration and techniques Outcome 3

An investigation into selected artworks in *Simryn Gill: Inland* can inform students' art practice as well as provide opportunity for researching this artists' work – both her sources of inspiration and techniques used in the production of her photographs.

1. What was Gill influence or inspired by to produce the first three series of black and white photographs – *Forest* (1996-1998), *Vegetation* (1999) and *Rampant* (1999).
2. Select one series to analyse. What are the predominant design elements and principles used? What do you think is Gill's source of inspiration? (For example in *Rampant* (1999) it has been interpreted that Gill considered plants as a metaphor for migration).
3. Discuss the materials and techniques the artist used to set the scene to shoot this series. (For example in *Forest* (1996-1998) the artist used strips of paper torn from books).
4. Did Gill take the photographs herself or work in collaboration with another photographer?
5. Did she choose to use black and white or colour photography for the series?
6. Research other photographers from different times and cultures who have worked in black and white documentary style photography, such as August Sanders 1876 – 1964 and Eugene Atget 1857-1927.

#### Unit 2: Design exploration and concepts Outcome 2

Explore the seven major series in the exhibition, then view the screen-based work *Vessel* (2004) online at <<http://www.acmi.net.au/vessel.aspx>>. Select one of these to analyse.

1. What are the key art elements art elements used in the series? Make reference to line, tone, shape, colour, texture and principles such as repetition, scale and space (for example, the quality of line and tonal values in *Forest* or the scale and repetition of *Dalam*).
2. Discuss the layers of meaning in these photographs and the use of metaphor (for example, the use of books in *Forest*).
3. Museum of Contemporary Art Curator Russell Storer wrote in reference to *Forest* that 'Plants are a central metaphor for human connection to place'<sup>16</sup>. Discuss in reference to *Forest*, *Rampant* and *Vegetation*.
4. Compare Gill's style of photography to that of other photographers from different times and cultures.

#### Unit 3: Studio production and professional art practices Outcome 3

Analyse the photography if Simryn Gill using this exhibition. Compare her work to at least one other photo-based artist.

1. What are some of the underlying themes that link the series from *Forest* 1996 through to her Gill's most recent series *Inland* completed in 2009?
2. The process of making *Inland* is similar to *Dalam*. What are the differences, particularly in

reference to cultural and historical context? Compare the different processes used by Gill in the production of these two series.

3. What techniques do you think she used to 'capture' the interiors of peoples homes in *Dalam* compared with her process used in *Inland*?
4. What are some of the ethical considerations involved in photographing 'aspects of peoples lives' that Gill would have to consider in the production of *Dalam* and *Inland*?
5. Appropriation of other artists work does not apply to Gill photography's however the use of books – and at times the destruction of – in the making of new work is part of her practice. What is your opinion of this?

#### Unit 4: Studio production and art industry contexts Outcome 3

##### CASE STUDY: Public Galleries, Contemporary Art Spaces and Touring Exhibitions

Arrange to visit *Simryn Gill: Inland* when it is in a public gallery near your school. Arrange with the Education Officer or other gallery personnel for a guided tour of the exhibition with a focus on the preparation and presentation of this exhibition. It may be possible to also arrange a behind the scenes tour where the Education Officer, and/or the gallery curator, will discuss how the works have been crated for travel, storage systems and methods used in the conservation of artworks.

Consider the following when you visit the *Simryn Gill: Inland* exhibition.

- What is the role of a public gallery?
- What is the focus of the gallery's collection? i.e. Is it general or does it have a particular media that it collects e.g. photography?
- Does the gallery have a full time curator? If so what is their role at this gallery? How do you think this might compare to the role of a curator at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Centre for Contemporary Photography?
- Who does the exhibition design? Is the plan for displaying *Simryn Gill: Inland* at the venue predetermined? Is it a similar design to when it was at CCP? Who does the installing at the venue?
- What methods and considerations are involved in preparing and presenting photography at this venue?
- How is the gallery promoting this exhibition?

Read the interview with Naomi Cass in this education resource relating to Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) and it's reference to the *Simryn Gill: Inland*.

- Do regional galleries and contemporary art spaces such as the Centre for Contemporary Photography operate differently? Discuss the similarities and differences in their role, their gallery spaces and programs.

Research the role of NETS Victoria in this exhibition.

- What does this organisation do? What is their role in the arts sector? How have they contributed to this exhibition?

## **INTERVIEW WITH NAOMI CASS, DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY AND CURATOR OF *SIMRYN GILL: INLAND***

**Can you briefly describe the role of Centre for Contemporary Photography? How does CCP differ from other Contemporary Art Spaces?**

CCP exists within the ecology of contemporary art production and exhibition. On the ground, as it were, are the artists and students who are either making a commitment to being artists, studying to be so, or putting together a life of part time work and making their art. Then there are Artist-Run-Initiatives (ARI's), small galleries run by participating artists, such as Kings ARI: <http://www.kingsartistrun.com.au/pmwiki.php>; Conical: <http://www.conical.org.au/index.html> and Platform: <http://www.creativespaces.net.au/case-studies/platform-art-gallery> to name a few.

CCP, along with Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, <http://www.gertrude.org.au/> is a contemporary art space, a not for profit organisation for the exhibition, support, development and public engagement with contemporary arts. CCP is dedicated to photography and photo-based arts and exhibits emerging artists those who may have previously exhibited in an ARI in the past; mid career artists; and on occasion well-established artists such as Simryn Gill. CCP is a key gallery where larger cultural institutions, such as the National Gallery of Victoria can see the latest contemporary photography and then invite artists to exhibit. CCP is not a collecting organisation, public and private collections often purchase work from CCP.

**What about the actual gallery. Some country students may not have been to CCP. Can you please describe the physical space?**

CCP is housed in a renovated factory, a very ordinary cream brick space with a concrete floor. However CCP has been renovated by Sean Godsell Architects <http://www.seangodsell.com/> into a unique photography specific gallery [http://www.ccp.org.au/gallery\\_images.php](http://www.ccp.org.au/gallery_images.php) with an intriguing nautilus floor plan <http://www.ccp.org.au/floorplan.php> If you inspect the floor plan you will see the space consists in discreet galleries that lead inwards to a small central gallery, passing long corridor galleries (One and Two); a large open space in Gallery Three, as well as a projection window to the street, the Night Projection Window. This spatial arrangement makes wonderful opportunity to slowly reveal the 'story' of an artist work leading through one series to another, as one is lead from one space to the other. Usually when entering one large gallery, the visitor sees the entire exhibition in one go. At CCP we can 'curate' the visitor experience more effectively. For example in the Gill exhibition, Galleries One and Two exhibit black and white work and when the visitor enters Gallery Three, there is an unexpected and glorious splash, a mosaic of colour with the installation of *Dalam*.

**When did you first become interested in the art of Simryn Gill and consider curating a survey of her photography for CCP?**

In 2006 CCP exhibited a new work of Gill's 32 Volumes [http://www.ccp.org.au/exhibitions.php?f=20061216\\_Gallery\\_4](http://www.ccp.org.au/exhibitions.php?f=20061216_Gallery_4) and I became interested in how Simryn uses photography within a broader context of art making. Simryn's photography is both a strong and magnificent aspect of her work but she is not limited to photography as her only form of making. I was interested in how photography 'performs' in the overall practice of this highly accomplished and intellectual artist.

**What was the original concept for the exhibition?**

Inland is designed to bring together work not yet seen in Victoria by this highly regarded Australian artist with an international reputation, and to present her work in a photo-specific space for the first time. My objective was twofold: I hoped to bring a new perspective on Gill's work and a greater understanding of her approach to photography, and on the other hand, to bring this unusual approach, which is perhaps novel, to a broader photographic audience. I have hoped to mix the audience for contemporary art and the audience for photography.

### **What were some of the major considerations at first in preparing this exhibition?**

Clearly the meaning or idea of the exhibition is important and must be weighed up with financial and logistical considerations. However, when working with an artist the first issue is to establish a good working relationship. As curators we are asking the artist to put themselves on the line and this should be done in the context of a robust and good relationship.

Timing is always a consideration for a very busy and sought after artist. Availability of the works is a critical issue if the artist's work is in demand. When commissioning new work for an exhibition a further range of issues arise concerning meaning, logistics and financial considerations.

In this instance as Simryn Gill is also subject of an exhibition curated by the MCA in Sydney [http://www.mca.com.au/default.asp?page\\_id=15&content\\_id=5172](http://www.mca.com.au/default.asp?page_id=15&content_id=5172) it was important that we distinguish this exhibition at the CCP and the subsequent tour. While some of the same work is exhibited in both exhibitions, the premises of these exhibitions are quite different as are the places to which they will tour. I would say the exhibitions are complimentary.

### **What were some of the challenges you experienced in presenting *Simryn Gill: Inland*. Can you also mention the highlights you experienced?**

As Simryn lives in Sydney, it was difficult to get together to discuss the exhibition and view her work, in anything other than quite formal visits to Sydney. Working with Simryn has been a rewarding and important experience.

### **How did the concept for the newly commissioned work *Inland 2009* evolve?**

Simryn Gill proposed this work as a development of her approach to the work *Dalam*, which she photographed in Malaysia in 2001. Simryn and I spent many hours discussing the work. Installation of the work as small photographs on a table was evolved after the works were photographed.

### **Can you comment on the exhibition design and display at CCP for *Inland*. What role did Simryn Gill play in this?**

Simryn was present for the installation and was consulted on all aspects. However, as curator I had a strong idea of how the exhibition would be organised spatially. The exhibition at CCP begins with black and white work and moves to colour; it begins with photographs in the outside world (*Forest, Vegetation and Rampant*) and moves to photographs of interiors (*Distance, Dalam, Power station and Inland*). The works are hung in strict grids or formal groupings until *Power station* when the installation is less rational. In the final work commissioned for CCP, *Inland*, the photographs are placed unframed and un-mounted on a table with gloves for the viewer to use in exploring the works. This is a very unusual approach to exhibiting precious and delicate photographs, particularly cibachromes, which are prone to scratching. On the long north wall of Gallery Three I painted the entire wall a deep blue/green drawing the viewer from outside to interior. There is much empty space in this exhibition.

### **What methods did CCP use to promote *Simryn Gill: Inland*?**

We used the CCP invitation which goes to 1,200 people, we used the CCP website, social networking, media release and direct contact with various media. As we do not have much of an advertising budget, we place only a few advertisements in specialist magazines. As the exhibition was part of the Melbourne Festival, we received considerable publicity through the Festival.

### **What are some of the major considerations with regard to installation and de-installation of *Simryn Gill: Inland*, both at CCP and for the tour of the exhibition?**

When considering an installation there are technical issues to be addressed, concerning the safe handling and hanging of works. On another level there is the meaning of the exhibition and how this meaning is to be

developed as the visitor walks through the show.

Simryn is very particular about the installation of her work, as most artists are. We take care in maintaining the optimum exhibiting conditions for each series taking into account the visitor's journey through the exhibition space. For this exhibition, empty space is important, giving each work plenty of 'breathing space'. In an exhibition the relationship between works is important and how they interact must be taken into account.

On a purely technical level, unframed photographs are very delicate and easily damaged, which is usually not repairable. Simryn Gill's major work *Dalam*, which consists in 260 photographs works, is very difficult to install. The entire series is to be installed as a grid, which is a challenge because each work is a slightly different size which when the work is installed this shouldn't be apparent. Further, these works are not framed and small dressmaking pins must be hammered directly through the print and into the wall. This is a difficult procedure.

## LINKS

### **The Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP)**

404 George St, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia

CCP is one of Australia's premier venues for the exhibition of contemporary photo-based arts, providing a context for the enjoyment, education, understanding and appraisal of contemporary practice.

[www.ccp.org.au](http://www.ccp.org.au)

### **National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria**

C/ The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia

PO Box 7259

Melbourne, Victoria, 8000

NETS Victoria is the peak body for visual arts touring in the state of Victoria. We are dedicated to connecting people with the best contemporary art, craft and design.

[www.netsvictoria.org.au](http://www.netsvictoria.org.au)

## FURTHER READING

Wayne Tunnicliffe (curator), *Simryn Gill: Selected Work* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2002.

Jessica Morgan, "Simryn Gill", *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, Phaidon Press, London, 2006.

Daniel Palmer, *Simryn Gill: 32 Volumes* (exhibition catalogue), Maitland Regional Art Gallery, Maitland, New South Wales and Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2006.

"Simryn Gill in conversation with Natasha Bullock and Lily Hibberd", *Photofile*, no. 76, Summer 2006, pp. 16 – 21.

Philip Brophy, "Singapore Biennale 2006: Simryn Gill's *Station*", *Flash*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, no 3, October 2006 – February 2007, pp.4 – 6.

Russell Storer, "Simryn Gill" *documenta 12* (exhibition catalogue), Taschen, Cologne, 2007.

Simryn Gill, "May 2006", *Off the Edge*, Merdeka 50 Years issue no. 33, September 2007.

Simryn Gill, *Pearls* (artist book), Raking Leaves, London, Colombo, 2008.

Russell Storer (curator), *Simryn Gill: Gathering* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2008.

Blair French and Daniel Palmer, *Twelve Australian Photo Artists*, Piper Press, Sydney, 2009.

Naomi Cass (curator), *Simryn Gill: Inland* (exhibition catalogue), Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2009.

Naomi Cass "A picture is just that: interview with Simryn Gill" *Flash*, Centre for Contemporary Photography on line journal, Issue 3, 2009 <http://www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill/>

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Storer, "Simryn Gill: *Gathering*" *Simryn Gill: Gathering* (exhibition catalogue) Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 20 November 2008 – 22 March 2009, by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2008, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Cass (curator), *Simryn Gill: Inland* (exhibition catalogue), Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Simryn Gill "May 2006", *Off the Edge*, Merdeka 50 years issue no. 33, September 2007, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Simryn Gill "A Picture is Just That: Interview with Simryn Gill and Naomi Cass", *Flash*, Issue 3 2009, <http://www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill/>

<sup>5</sup> Simryn Gill in telephone conversation with curator, May 2009, *Simryn Gill: Inland* exhibition catalogue CCP 2009, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Simryn Gill "May 2006", *Off the Edge*, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Simryn Gill at Artists Talk, CCP, Saturday 10 October, 2009

<sup>9</sup> Blair French and Daniel Palmer, *Twelve Australian Photo Artists*, Piper Press, Sydney, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Morgan, "Simryn Gill", *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, Phaidon Press, London, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Cass (curator), *Simryn Gill: Inland* (exhibition catalogue), *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Naomi Cass (curator), *Simryn Gill: Inland* (exhibition catalogue), *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Russell Storer, "Simryn Gill: *Gathering*" *Simryn Gill: Gathering* (exhibition catalogue) *op. cit.*



# Simryn Gill: Inland

A **NETS VICTORIA** TOURING EXHIBITION DEVELOPED BY **CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

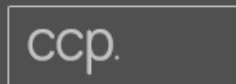
Presented in association with Melbourne International Arts Festival

This educational resource was written by Michael Nicholls with contributions from exhibition curator and Director of Centre for Contemporary Photography Naomi Cass and the NETS Victoria team.

## EXHIBITION AND TOUR PARTNERS



National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria and the Community Support Fund, by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and through the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments. NETS Victoria also receives significant in-kind support from the National Gallery of Victoria.



## EXHIBITION AND TOUR SUPPORTERS



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## NETS VICTORIA SUPPORTERS

