

SIMRYN GILL

Power Station
Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo

shiseido.co.jp/e/gallery
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AARON SEETO

Simryn Gill's *Power Station* at the Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo's shopping mecca Ginza, was an exhibition of a single and finely wrought work combining photography and objects, collected and developed from the artist's continuing investigation into the coastal Malaysian town of Port Dickson. Photographs of a house interior are presented alongside images of a cavernous power station and collected weatherworn objects from a beach, to create a quiet investigation into notions of belonging that is not didactic, yet critical of the ways in which identity discussions are classified and evidenced.

Opening in 1919, the Shiseido Gallery is the oldest existing gallery in Japan, forming part of the philanthropic activities of the cosmetics giant, which also includes other art and food-related cultural activities. The level of art philanthropy can be illustrated by the fact the building which houses the Shiseido Gallery is a prime piece of real estate sited on one of the world's most impressive and intimidating shopping strips, yet neither showcases nor sells any cosmetics. Setting aside floors to art and culture, staffing it with professional curatorial staff, developing continuous exhibition and publication programs with both local and international emphases, the curator Haruko Kohno suggests that support for art and culture, both now and historically, makes up a significant part of the Shiseido corporate philosophy – a corporate philanthropic culture that is almost non-existent in Australia.

On first encounter there is something deceptively simple about *Power Station*. On the gallery's five and a half metre high walls, the exhibition opens like a book. The hang is symmetrical; on adjacent walls are smallish photographs [19x42cm each], hung in a salon-like block. On one wall are thirteen colour photographs of the interior of a power plant, on the adjacent wall are thirteen black and white photographs of interior views of a home, mirroring the layout of the adjacent block of photographs. In a small gallery to the side is a pile of weather-beaten objects including plastics, bone, shards of ceramic, a large doll's head and other objects salvaged from the beach. These beach-worn objects were carefully arranged in an apparently orderless pile on the floor.

Power Station was developed in the coastal Malaysian town of Port Dickson and Gill's images have further significance when they



are revealed as photographs of her parent's home. Despite this, the work is unemotional in its cool and matter-of-fact documentation of aspects of occupational and domestic life within this town. On its surface, *Power Station* provides us with very little information about Port Dickson. The work has a slowness that allows for multiple readings of engagements – contemporary, historic, geographic, political, economic and cultural – that affect and are affected by specific locations. These are complex, particular and ultimately indefinable experiences of location and belonging that have critical impact upon the ways in which we imagine and locate ourselves.

In the catalogue essays curator Haruko Kohno and writer Rehman Rashid allude to some of the histories and contexts found within Port Dickson. Picturing it as a 'tidy town' with its seaside bungalows, Port Dickson figures nostalgically within the writers' imaginations. It also has an ongoing colonial and industrial legacy, with its colonial name and both a refinery and power station which overshadow the town with their architecture.

Collecting and displaying objects washed up on its beaches and photographing sites of domestic and everyday importance [to both the artist and town], Gill slowly uncovers aspects of this location's contexts. The photographs of the powerhouse and the home interior have been printed horizontally with a 19x42cm panoramic format. The relatively small size of each image has the effect of giving the appearance of both the powerhouse and the home an equal scale, allowing the viewer to trace similarities and connections across the symmetrical hang on the two adjacent walls.

Gill has made deliberate pairings that oscillate between seeming opposites. There is the scale of the powerhouse with its almost infinitely receding perspective and the hard, cold steel of machinery and cement floors, alongside a warm timber home interior. A disused warehouse is juxtaposed with an image of a garage; a battery room with a kitchen; a control room with a home office and so on. There are machines with tentacle-like tubing trailing from ceilings across the space of the plant, machinery and equipment painted in soft blues and greens alongside a kitchen on a patio, a pantry, a laundry and a bedroom with a poster of Charlie Chaplin.

The colour photographs have a cool tone, heightened by the combination of grey cement and steel with almost candy-coloured blues and greens of the machinery; this colouration makes a connection with the colours of the piles of plastic, bones and shells that litter the floor in the adjacent gallery.

What is immediately noticeable is the absence of people, though Gill has provided evidence of them through the documentation of their places of work and habitation. There are sometimes glimpses of their presence in the powerhouse's machinery and its control rooms, the books, computers, chairs and other objects within the house, as well as the collected, beach-combed material. Unlike documentary photography, Gill denies us the easy assumptions of who these people are by deflecting the reading of the evidence, demanding instead that the viewer read across the variety of objects. In the process, Gill heightens our awareness of how we read and understand other people's locations and the ways that they might belong.

We are also reminded of the ultimate absurdity of the classification or attempts to classify people according to abstract ideas of nation and place, through uncertain readings of where and how they live.

In *Power Station*, power relationships, contexts and pasts are slowly evinced, from the private and domestic, the colonial history of the location, its industrialisation, issues of waste and ecology, as well as the nostalgic fiction of the idyllic tropical paradise. What *Power Station* achieves is a subtle and critical exploration of transience and slippage in the ways in which we might imagine location and belonging. But the work is not didactic; there is no clear signposting of relationships and how connections are to be made, it reveals itself like an archaeology, or cross referencing within a book, layers of understanding may or may not appear. This slowness is the work's pleasure.

Like previous series of photographs Gill denies the audience the ability to identify fully with a place's inhabitants, or obscures, as in *A small town at the turn of the century*, the faces of her subjects. Gill's photography operates within a convention of documentation through the presentation of evidence of habitation, but confounds this convention through a denial of any singular opinion of the subject. Hers is not a photography that aims to define the ways in which people might belong to a location. Rather, *Power Station* presents – through allusion to Port Dickson's various contexts – opportunities and catalysts for imagining possible and potential narratives of belonging, which like sea-worn glass, plastic and shells, take on new importance within their collection and subsequent display within the gallery.

The absence of individuals, the conjuring up of contexts, pasts and histories, together with the collection of objects – both natural and man-made – reaffirms a position of knowledge and identification that is not necessarily fixed or self-evidenced, but a reminder [as Richard Grayson has written about Gill's work] that, "we are not only the subject of narratives, but we are the makers of narratives too".¹ The critical impact of *Power Station* is its ability to allude to the complexities of belonging and identification, through a process that provides surprises and intricacies, brought about by shifting contexts and shifting connections. Its impact is its denial of the generalisation, the disintegration of strict and coded meanings and an exploration of a specific location that has the potential to result in a variety of equally specific readings, or no readings at all.

Note

¹ Richard Grayson, Simryn Gill, *Views from the Islands*, OVA/Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1999. <http://ensemble.va.com.au/Grayson/texts/SimOVA>. accessed 6 January, 2005