Standing Still, a series of 114 photographs shot in Malaysia between 2000 and 2003, explores the idea that a group of photographers can capture a place in time.1 The pictures record buildings in varying states of decay and dereliction. Yet, in spite of their state of abandonment, these are not all old buildings. Many were never completed or occupied and rise as stand-ins of a future that never arrived. Some were large developments that came upon hard times, in particular during the regional economic crash of the late nineties: shopping centers, apartment blocks, private homes, even entire housing estates, simply left in an unfinished state. In this photographic suse, the "new" and the "old" stand side by side with the truly old—shells of crumbling mansions and more humble homes, shuttered, vacant, and stained with time; abandoned warehouses, and shops where human presence now is a ghostly absence.

I started looking at these strange decaying giants [of uncompleted large buildings] in relation to the older abandoned buildings that seem to punctuate the towns and the countryside in Malaysia," says Gill. "It's hard to know why they have been left to rot. Sometimes it's because they have a bad history, like being used during the war for the kinds of activities that can make places incomparably haunted; sometimes it's because of family disputes about inheritance and who-owns-what, but often they are left and allowed to fall apart simply because they are old.2

The two groups of derelict structures, the old and the new, make a stark pairing. They bring together the remnant of an abandoned past and the projections of an arrested future to reveal an uncertain, stumbling present. Standing Still combines the peculiarities of location captured in the record of a passing moment.

Over the past decade, in collections of photographs, objects, and texts, Gill has undertaken what can be seen as a continuous project of making a documentary record of a place over time, focusing almost exclusively on Malaysia. The meanings, references, materiality, and imagery of various works layer upon each other, adding, subsuming, and making fragile any possibility of a coherent archive. Each separate work holds its own questions about place, and yet, in spite of their state of abandonment, these are not all old buildings. Many were never completed or occupied and now stand as ruins. In this photo-into the gaze of the viewer, who is thus free to stare at length at intimate details exposed in the photographs. What role, then, does the viewer have? What can a viewer see in such a set? Gill has noted that when Dalam was exhibited in Malaysia, the images were accompanied by captions detailing specific locations. But for non-Malaysian viewers, the specifics are irrelevant and even meaningless. Each of the 260 images really exists only as a part of the whole, a personalised, albeit randomly selected, survey of the Malaysian vernacular, an invisible yet imperceptibly real presence of living images. Gill says of Dalam: "Perhaps I conceived the project as a way to see ‘my’ country, as a way to travel through its inner landscape." Locating herself as both insider and outsider, she probes the place, and her relationship to it, with both wry and sometimes melancholy interventions, absurd in their seeming trivial or banal, but also bringing to mind the early-twentieth-century documentary project of August Sander, who set himself the task of making a photographic record of all the trades in Germany. Standing Still, too, is attentive to issues in photography. In the seeming familiarity of the compositions, these photographs—which are closer to snapshot shots than their square format initially suggests—sit somewhere between the apparent modernist objectivity of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the more repetitive, ongoing project of incomparable return.

Standing Still documents a hollow moment—now merely in the past—in the life of a place. It presents itself as an authentic record of a time, made by an exile who harbors a gentle yet unmistakable longing, expressed in a repetitive, ongoing project of incomparable return. In its presentation at the UC Berkeley Art Museum, Standing Still is a documentary project for a distant audience. What may we know from these pictures—memories of a haunted nostalgia? photographic record of all the trades in Germany.

Discussion of local race politics. For viewers abroad, the images are a caricature of an exotic, foreign place with some of the familiar signs of modern life. One reviewer lampers the photographs to ‘the very surrealism of Höfijg’s faces. Gill’s confidence (constant) with the scrutinizing intensity of Thomas Struth’s portraits.3’ A small town also brings to mind the early-twentieth-century documentary project of August Sander, who set himself the task of making a photographic record of all the trades in Germany. Standing Still, too, is attentive to issues in photography. In the seeming familiarity of the compositions, these photographs—which are closer to snapshot shots than their square format initially suggests—sit somewhere between the apparent modernist objectivity of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the more repetitive, ongoing project of incomparable return.
The strange beauty of mysterious ruins caught on an exuberant film stock that was made available by the manufacturer at the very time the artist was taking the photographs.  

Heidi Duckwirth

Gallery Prints

Phyllis Wattis HARRIS Center

Barbara Flynn, Sydney and New York.

Standing Still #30, 2000–2003; C-print, series of 11

The author is grateful to Simryn Gill for her contributions to this essay.

6 The film stock was readily available in Southeast Asia and a widely used commercial stock at the time Gill began her series.

Simryn Gill was born in Singapore and educated in India and the United Kingdom. This is the artist’s first prominent exhibition in the United States. She has lived and worked in Sydney since 1996.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2000

“2nd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art,” Berlin, Germany

1999

“Vegetation,” ArtPace, San Antonio, TX

1998

“Rampant,” Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia

1997

“Au-Delà,” Galerie Klosterfelde, Berlin, Germany

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