

Circles Performing Circles

As ephemeral creatures, humans are driven to create objects of permanence, relics that reflect a span of existence. Permanence remains a particular obsession of architects and public sculptors, who need to address the chaotic elements of nature, and its attempt to accelerate the entropic state of man-made things. In the 1960s and 1980s, however, art began to melt, rot, mould, ooze, dissipate, happen and combust. Performances, installations, sounds, and ideas found their way into private collections through an elaborate system of documentation. The temporal became tangible, and an artwork's "aura" was catalogued, demonstrating human nature's desire to wield power over phenomenological forces. Artist Gill Gatfield embraces these forces. Her practice carves space between the eternal and momentary; the works come into being, recede, and swell in unpredictable cycles.

Reluctant to let go and eager to tame, our nostalgic and controlling behaviours tend to push art into a static phase of existence, once it has been viewed and collected. A possible solution to this dilemma is an art that engages in an internal critique, one that is not driven to a final argument or to a point of oblivion. What form could best represent the struggle between eternal ambitions and a corporeal state of being? A line is infinitesimal; a square too rigid and limiting. Circles, as Gill Gatfield demonstrates, hold much more potential. Addressing the properties and materiality of objects, and their relationships to our bodies, Gatfield uses circles as a recurring theme, literally and metaphorically. Her paradoxical method of making the work extends into the collector's circular method of keeping the work.

At first glance, an installation view of Gill Gatfield's sculptural and wall pieces seems to expound on the experience of minimalist forms. A proportional repetition of near perfect circles in positive and negative space alludes to timeless dualities of before and after, creation and destruction, on and off, yes and no. In one series, titled *Discs*, pairs of black circles abut gently, like eternal partners absorbed in dialogue. Highly reflective surfaces, envelope and flatten all who stand before them, thus adding a surprising figurative element to the work by imprinting the viewer onto the surface. They bring to mind Felix

Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*: a pair of synchronised clocks. Here, in Gatfield's *Discs*, time is not kept, it is expanded.

Gonzales-Torres' work occupies liminal space at the edges of life and death, demonstrated by his numerous 'giveaway' pieces, which ebb and flow as items are taken, prompting gallery attendants to replenish stocks of candy and paper. Similarly, Gatfield addresses fluctuation through bodies of work that give and take; reflect and absorb. In her practice, the 're-stocking' is generated by the work itself.

What you cannot see, *can* harm you.

One feels overcome by a deadpan humour and irony, as his neck and torso are conspicuously missing in the central void of a group of Gatfield's 'non-functional' *Mirrors*. The viewer must scramble to the edges of the circle to catch a satisfying glance. Mirrors are a visual device, affirming our physical existence and monitoring the unique state of sporadic bodies. In Gatfield's *Mirrors*, however, this instinctual pleasure becomes problematic, leaving us to confront our existence through psychic and intellectual senses instead.

Reflection is a reciprocal exchange, requiring the object and the subject. The latter is absorbed and thrown back as a reversal image onto the retina. A transformation occurs, and identities are reformed based on perceptions supplied by the object. Through the dislocation of a reflection in Gatfield's *Mirrors*, the unfamiliar two-dimensional image challenges our three-dimensional reality.

In works entitled, *Muses*, Gatfield again pulls the portrait of the viewer onto an obsidian reflective plane. Dark orbs perched upon antiquarian pedestals with curved wooden feet, the pieces bring to mind a clairvoyant's crystal ball, whose powers navigate beyond time and distance. They are a source of carnal inspiration, neutral and blank until activated by a user. Seductive in appearance, the free-standing *Muse* sculptures bear anthropomorphic qualities due to their human scale and composition of head, torso, and feet. The modest,

child-like height coerces our eyes downward as we encircle the work, cautiously approaching the dense blackness.

The *Muses* bring to mind illustrations collected by 19th century philosopher, Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished *Arcades Projects*, where domestic objects resemble their owners. Satirising the modernist idea of an aura (the feeling that an object can return your gaze), the illustrations depict objects with unabashed eyes. In arcades throughout 19th century Europe, dazzling luxury goods beckoned consumers, and strategies of display groomed fine jewellery, clocks, and cutlery like never before. Lighting and reflection were critical in creating a palpable, almost sexual energy that imbued objects with power. Gill Gatfield's pieces channel this power; the severe beauty of the *Muses* makes you sweat.

Walter Benjamin favoured art that revealed its makers, primarily achieved through the acknowledgment of an object's manufacturing process. This demystified the object and allowed for a dialectical reading of a work. Gatfield's process and selection of materials does just that – revealing and concealing properties simultaneously. In her discs and orbs, reflective glass and acrylic is paired with the sheen of soft bird feathers, giving pieces an illusory, opaque surface from afar. The precise circles and man-made materials appear cool and ambivalent. However, as one draws closer, the flatness is replaced by dark silky depths and delicate fringes whirring slightly in the air.

Birds moult in order to regenerate damaged feathers, diminish vulnerability to predators, and prepare for breeding (in a process known as 'eclipse'). Gatfield collected these cyclical moments of adaptation and flux from blackbirds, nesting around her studio, swooping in to pick worms from the growing *Grass Works*. The collection and containment of these discarded moments creates a hybrid, where natural and mechanical materials co-exist, reflecting nostalgic desires in contemporary materials.

Ashes to Ashes, Grass to Grass

With grass, its erratic habits force the artist to adjust to its inherent qualities and growth

cycles. Once uprooted from the earth, the grass is killed and held in suspended animation. It is deprived of light and once ready, it is woven onto a support, replenished with water, food and exposed to sun. The dormant seeds begin to sprout again. From life to death, and rebirth, the work needs constant attention, not only during the making, but also in the keeping.

If, according to the gastronomist, “you are what you eat”, for the collector, you are what you own. Gatfield’s *Grass Works* ups the ante on this statement; the works’ appearance reflects the levels of devotion provided by the caretaker. As the turf accumulates pests and unkempt tendrils, the artwork must be manicured to stay vibrant. A flowing rhythm is built into the work, its ephemerality running parallel to the lifespan of its owner. It at once refuses stability but actively resists decay. This is another dialectical situation that questions the lifespan of works and the cord binding an object to its keeper, grounded in a human compulsion to preserve. Gatfield’s grass, brought into internal spaces, directly references the taming of nature and ownership of land - a parallel that can be drawn to the ownership of art.

Circles performing circles, Gatfield’s artwork navigates an amorphous plane of existing and subsisting, questioning our want for immortality and proposing a solution to death. The Duchampian idea of ready-mades refers to the construction of context and framing found materials into the realm of art. Gill Gatfield calls her process of harnessing the inherent properties of materials a “being-made.” The focus here is not so much on re-contextualising, but rather on subverting expected behaviours by shifting objects in pivotal ways, then allowing their properties to function normally (mirrors sans centres hung at eye-level; grass sewn onto a support then allowed to grow as if in nature). “Being-made” truly occurs as the objects are situated and allowed to perform over and over and over, ad infinitum.

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Essay, Being-Made Catalogue 2007