

artist as privileged observer



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Situated within the dichotomies of form and formlessness, specific histories and general social conditions, Tim Silver manipulates the complex relationship between process, location and object. Silver's exploration of specialist genres of film and art, as well as his position of distant observer and interventionist creates a variety of necessary discomforts for his audiences. By working within the realms of both high art principles and general cultural references viewers are led into various art historical and social contradictions. On one level, Silver's dedication to production and flair for spectacle present technically sophisticated artworks that sit comfortably within conceptual post-modern principles. However, added to this polished finish is a seductive psychoanalytic underbelly of voyeurism, exploitation, anxiety and alienation. This implosion of styles and meanings are at times purposefully inferred by the artist and at others the result of complex cultural boundaries left unresolved by the rhetoric of globalisation.

Silver's practice to date has incorporated two distinct approaches to his conceptual preoccupations. One area of interest investigates the possibilities of medium and materiality through carefully remade modern ephemera. Cast from moulds, after lengthy experimentation, in equally ubiquitous substances such as crayon wax, blu-tack, rubber and confectionery, they create a fetishised site for visual pleasure and tactile desires. During the increasingly pre-meditated process of their destruction seen in works such as *Untitled (burning up)* (2004) and *Untitled (adrift)* (2004), instigated by a selection of controlled and natural factors the artist began to include photographic/video documentation as a necessary part of his presentation alongside the objects themselves. However, far from being extensive, the documented deterioration and eventual collapse is punctuated by silent gaps. The viewer has to resolve these voids for themselves whilst considering the relationship between the cloned versions installed in the gallery space and the documented entropic decline of earlier models.

Another area of study involves meticulous re-imagined photo-narratives—influenced by film genres such as Japanese horror, zombie movies and exploitative, primitive cannibalist narratives, through a series of restaged tableau scenes. Therefore, this process of remaking is not reserved for objects alone, but also in the selection of real human protagonists—often including the alienated figure of the artist himself—to re-enact scenes from film genres in atmospheric pastiche. Recently, the production of these photo-narrative series has meant a period of relocation, through international residencies in both remote and mainstream locations—from the South Pacific islands of Tuvalu (*The Tuvaluan Project*, 2007) to megatropolitan Tokyo in mid-2008 (hosted by Tokyo Wonder Site), in order to engage in a series of observations and exchanges with his host society and/or organisation.

The last of these self-enforced displacements was an Asialink residency in Malaysia at the end of 2008. Here Silver returned to his more hermetic practice of creating simulated versions of everyday objects in order to document their performative

destruction. For three months the artist based himself in the relatively obscure coastal town of Port Dickson, 90km south of Kuala Lumpur. Inspired by the historical spice trade and to some extent trade in general, of the Strait of Malacca which the Port Dickson coastline faces, Silver chose the physical properties of spice itself as his medium. By selecting discarded items of rubbish washed on the shoreline, the artist began yet another lengthy process of experimentation, production and staged deaths by sea, similar to the process of the dystopic and grisly *Killing Me Softly* project from 2006. Through a series of photographic documentation he presents the viewer with the dissolution, by the rising tides, of individual objects cast in ground spice. This continued engagement in contested histories and interpretations also strikes a chord with the earlier *Tuvaluan Project* that subverted the exotic through an ironic Western lens. Once again, purposeful gaps in the narrative of process and subject produce an interesting series of tensions. However, on this occasion, the lack of human presence, or specific reference to historical narrative or location create a certain amount of frustration; not so much in the work itself, but in the purpose of cultural trade through international residencies.

The history of the spice trade is wrapped in layers of historical legends, power struggles and the spirit of trade, travel and progress. Exoticised medieval accounts by Middle Eastern and then European traders eager to reap the rewards of the East speak of lands whose resources gave the possibility of enormous fortune and power. Maritime routes were the key to this flourishing trade that would soon govern the world economy and cross-pollinate cultures. The increasing desire for Indian spices such as cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, pepper, cloves and nutmeg spurred fifteenth- and sixteenth-century voyages to Southeast Asia by the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and British to the Spice Islands of Northern Indonesia and South Philippines, for both trading within the region and its export to Europe.

The port of Malacca (located in the Malaysian state of the same name), was a thriving cosmopolitan city filled with traders from Egypt, Rome, Arabia, Africa, Turkey and Persia. By the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-centuries it was the most important trade centre in Southeast Asia. As a major hub for the spice trade, Malacca through the Strait of Malacca—the 805km channel of water between Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra—became the maritime gateway between the Spice Islands and the Eurasian markets, because of its link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Today, the Strait of Malacca is still one of the most important shipping lanes in the world, which sees a quarter of the world's traded goods such as oil, coffee and manufactured products travelling to India, China, Japan and South Korea.

Port Dickson, the location of Silver's residency and 90km north of Malacca, was in comparison a small British port developed in the nineteenth-century during the Strait Settlement period by the British East India Company. As a producer of tin and charcoal it too became a busy trading centre. However, this was superseded by plans to turn Port Dickson into a tourist destination, which led to rapid expansion during the late twentieth-century. Unfortunately, speculative construction floundered and was mostly then abandoned during the Asian Economic Crisis in the late 1990s, with many architectural skeletons corrupting the charm of this once pleasant beach destination. However, Silver purposefully chose not to engage too closely with the specific histories of either Port Dickson or Malacca and infers, rather than explicitly presents the narrative of the spice trade as an element of his project. The introduction of sandalwood and tin, while distorting the narrative to a certain extent, alludes to the duality of products as both imports and exports. This is not reportage or informed exploitation of 'exoticism', rather a fine art investigation into whether objects, the generality of location and the record of their destruction have the potential to communicate historical legacies.

Silver's practice is a mixture of conceptualism and craftsmanship. His remaking of the readymade, in order to stage its slow retreat into the sea or earth is an interesting fusion of Duchampian and Land Art tactics. His subjects are everyday found objects; a watch, light bulb, binoculars and a tin can that imply a modern human presence. Each has its associative commodity values of mass production, practical need or brand desire that finally ends in rejection. Unemotionally discarded they have been washed onto the shore line as part of the slow process of decomposition. However, rather than using the objects actually found on the beach, Silver purchases new versions and creates a rubber mould into which ground spices are poured, suspended in a binding agent that sets and hardens to create dense, highly textural objects. In this way he doubly fulfills Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality as a theoretical response to postmodernism; the state in which reality itself, as something separable from signs of it, had vanished into the information-saturated, media-dominated contemporary world. Through reproduction and simulation, from medium to medium, Baudrillard comments that;





“the real is volatilised (and becomes) an allegory for death.”¹ Their dual artificiality as manufactured objects, whose duplicate is repurchased only to be remade, its original function is rendered obsolete seems to chime with this never ending and hallucinogenic resemblance of the real to itself.² The photographic documentation –the structure, in which viewers come into contact with the project–of the object’s ultimate collapse, and destruction both literally and allegorically echo this aspect of Baudrillard’s theory.

However, Baudrillard was commenting on surrealism, Warhol’s Pop art and photography itself that was more prescriptive in its manifestos and contained within a controlled gallery context. Silver goes beyond these distinctions and creates an even more complex identity crisis for his work. Viewers firstly consider meanings behind the use of recognisable everyday objects and then the parody of these distorted forgeries. However, these conscious meanings imposed by the artist are in constant dialogue with Silver’s intuitive and practical processes. The artist uses conceptual strategies to manipulate signs of reality,³ but is still involved in the actual production of aesthetically beautiful objects made of seductively potent materials such as cloves, chilli flakes, ginger powder and ground nutmeg. In this way, and despite the manufactured quality of the casting process, the artificiality of conceptual practice and the readymade, is muted. The poetic nature of the object’s transience, combined with an alluring physicality, creates an unconscious ‘ache’ in the viewer—through powerful sensory desires of touch and smell—for what has been lost. This is reinforced by unfulfilled encounters with secondary source material through its documentation in the final gallery presentation. In addition, physical aspects such as form, density and specific details of the object determine what spices are suitable for each object. Through a series of experiments, the artist becomes aware that ground ginger holds the shape of a Croc shoe better than cinnamon; sandalwood has the best properties for a remote control; cloves for a light bulb. There is some humour as well. Mace—more well known as a deterrent sprayed in the eyes of assailants than a spice for cooking—is used to cast a pair of sunglasses. Binoculars made out of chilli flakes transform into an object that is blinding to the eyes (rather than an agent to assist sight). Therefore, it is through this intuitive pairings of object and location, aesthetically framed photography and the artist’s alchemy of form and texture, that viewers are able to gain pleasure in the spectacle, while at the same time interpreting messages of a more conceptual nature.

As with land artists from the 1960s and 1970s, Silver’s interaction with his chosen landscape is a city dweller’s assimilation of the non-urban. However, the artist rejects the monumental scale associated with land artists, such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, in favour of compact objects and small details that don’t alter the natural environment, similar to the intimacy of Andy Goldsworthy. Up close and personal, Silver combines natural materials and locations with man-made objects to reflect on notions of time and timelessness, with the landscape as an agent for destruction. Although there are elements that link the work with Silver’s chosen socio-political history and location, they are secondary to process and documentation. He seems more interested in the visual exploration of the natural geography of his sites and the properties of his medium, rather than the actual history of the spice trade itself. Silver roots his specificity of locale in the detail—a bed of oyster shells, or hint of mangrove root—and illustrates the various sites used by the artist along the Strait’s coastline. The artist’s experimentation process also remains hidden, but is no less important to the work. For each object there are their predecessors, abandoned and discarded, as well as an extensive body of research. What the audience does see is the distillation of these processes, the intensely concentrated result of his thought processes in the gallery context.

Crucial to the reading of the work is that the artwork (a combination of objects and their decline) exists only in situ as a process-based performance. During days of optimal natural lighting when the tide is coming in, an object or a small group of objects are taken to a specific location on the Port Dickson coastline. They are placed on the shore to be carried back and forth, until they eventually disintegrate as the tide comes in, or simply dissolve and sink with the rising tide. The staged performance of their slow consumption by the sea is photographed in tight frames over a two hour period. This magnifies the sense of time, through the slow observation of the way, in which the objects break down, its finite existence inextricable to the work’s reading. Conversely, by examining their destruction, viewers also gain an insight into the objects’ production. Different spices break down in different ways; some dissolve in an even manner, others break off into crumbling pieces. In this way, it also challenges Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. As a man-made artwork, it rejects the static perfection of mass manufactured industry through its overt acknowledgement of history and time. Once again Silver’s process and pragmatism fuse with the idea to create a mixture of history and fantasy that points out the frailty of human endeavour and the inevitability that human achievements turn to ruin, returning to the earth.

However, the distraction and stumbling block to Silver’s poetry and artistic philosophy is the overarching structure of this particular artistic residency. In choosing to base himself outside the capital of Kuala Lumpur and host institution Galeri Petronas, Silver worked in almost pure isolation. The project’s presentation at his commercial dealer’s gallery in Sydney isolates its Malaysian audience, since there are no plans as yet to display the work in his host country. Silver is acutely aware of his part in this type of flawed cultural trade (which ironically reflects his subject matter), but the dangers of artists parachuting in and out of locations and local communities as part of international residencies are largely left unresolved in terms of sustainable engagement. This then, potentially corrupts the notion of Smithson’s site/non-site principle that runs throughout Silver’s practice. If the project is not discussed and seen in Malaysia, then much of its potency is obstructed. The non-site of the Australian gallery context will no doubt act as a successful organisation device for Silver’s presentational strategies. Audiences will be able to engage with Silver’s technically and theoretically robust project, due to his seductive mixture of documentation, performative processes, formalist interpretations and philosophy. However, the true sense of loss, which resonates most strongly with this author, is not in the reproduction/destruction cycle, but in its cultural dislocation. The mirroring of crumbling objects with the slow crumbling of Port Dickson itself or the decline of Malacca as a centre of trade will not resonate as strongly with Australian audiences as it would in Malaysia or indeed many other centres, where the spice trade historically played a crucial part in the economies of India or China, for example.

Furthermore, this locational difference creates a covert feeling of imperialism at work. Although Silver chooses not to comment on the history of colonial conquests that greatly altered the history of the spice trade in Malacca, the arrival of an Australian in Malaysia supported by public funding to come and experiment with Asian culture does create its own discomfort. The wane in popularity in Malaysia of postcolonial theory and indeed much of the world, seems to indicate that artist and viewer bring a certain set of assumptions and opinions. This personal baggage often distorts the intentions of the work, which then becomes a vehicle for criticism despite any attempts by the artist to distance themselves or respond to this paradox. However, although Silver’s choice of objects is transcultural or global its appeal there does seem to be a sort of cabinet-of-curiosities element in the residues of its existence returning to Australia. It suggests the nineteenth-century world as exhibition model referred to by Heidegger, where the world is organised and grasped as if it were an exhibition that needs to be documented and shipped back to other places. This repackaging of history is not something that Silver seems to be actively engaging in but nevertheless this author’s personal baggage can’t help but be aware of this separation and distance. By experiencing the project in Silver’s studio in Port Dickson, and not through the final presentation, there is a limitation to the critique on the perceived structural flaws of this international residency. However, one would hope the results of Silver’s residency contribute to diluting difference and othering, not just as a playful spectacle or conceptual exploration, but as a much needed two way dialogue, exchange and interference that helps to reformulate and reactivate discourses on international cultural engagement and the artist as privileged observer.

Notes

¹ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Hyper-Realism of Simulation’ in Harrison, C., and Wood, P., (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1992: 1049 (taken from Poster, M., (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Stanford, 1998: 143-47)

² *ibid*: 1049-1050

³ Hal Foster, ‘Subversive Signs’, in Harrison, C., and Wood, P., (eds.), *ibid*: 1066 (taken from Foster, H., *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, 1985)