

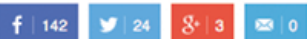


FEATURED

REVIEW: Stephen Gill's "Best Before End" at FOAM (2013)

ASX Editors
June 5, 2013

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Talking to Ants 2 © Stephen Gill courtesy of the artist

Fanny Landstrom reviews Stephen Gill's exhibition, Best Before End, at the Foam Museum, Amsterdam (17th May – 14th July, 2013) for ASX, May 2013

"Stephen Gill has learnt this: to haunt the places that haunt him. His photo-accumulations demonstrate a tender vision factored out of experience; alert, watchful, not overeager, wary of that mendacious conceit, 'closure'. There is always flow, momentum, the sense of a man passing through a place that delights him. A sense of stepping down, immediate engagement, politic exchange. Then he remounts the bicycle and away. Loving retrievals, like a letter to a friend, never possession... What I like about Stephen Gill is that he has learnt to give us only as much as we need, the bones of the bones..." (Sinclair, 2007)

As a major force in British photography Stephen Gill has become known for his innovative, original, and quite quirky photobooks. Since his first book, *A Book of Field Studies*, was published 2004 he has produced and published over 25 photographic projects up until today (2013).

In this retrospective exhibition, *Best Before End*, more than 13 projects, made over a period of 14 years, are included and exhibited. The choice of theme and technique vary widely from the different series – but as a common nominee, they are all exploring the multifaceted area in and around Hackney, East London.

When entering the exhibition you walk straight in to his series *Talking to Ants* (2009-2013) which consists of a dozen or so large format square photographs with an undefinable subject matter – partly bleak documentary landscapes, partly imaginative, sometimes colourful, patterns and shapes. Environments and inhabitants from his beloved Hackney are functioning as background canvases to a top layer of objects, taken from the area, and positioned inside the camera in order to make the two layers intervene with each other.

"My aim was to evoke the feeling of the area the same time as describing its appearance as the subjects was both in front of the camera and behind the camera at the same moment".

Objects, dust, and crap, are positioned in front of everyday landscapes, city-scenes, and portraits. Grey reality mixed with the quirky colourful objects, "This technique meant I was grappling at the point where intention collided with chance"

This approach to photography, where intention is allowed to work alongside co-incidence, can be seen in many of his more recent bodies of work, such as *Hackney Wick* (2001), *Hackney Flowers* (2004-2007), and his most recent *Best Before End* (2012-2013) which all are featured in the exhibition.

More descriptive and literal works are hung besides the more mind-tripping abstracts. The deadpan, straight, relatively formal attributes that these works carry are just as much a characteristic for Stephen Gill as the later works – what binds them together is the eclectic mixture of Gill's signature unapologetic curiosity and obsessive aim to make sense of various phenomena and occurrences noticed in his everyday life. His attention is given to what most people don't give a second glance or thought.

After the *Talking to Ants* series *Off Ground* (2011) are hung. They were made in a response to the riots that took place in Hackney 2011, as a reflection of how the media's portrayal through film and photography can "add fuel to problems" rather than merely record the happening. Gill collected stones and rocks that had been thrown and brought them to his studio where he photographed them in a detailed and almost scientific way without colour. The objects are centered and neatly hung in A3 frames besides each other – this series is made with concern rather than mere curiosity, and it adds another dynamic to Gill's versatility as a photographer and life reporter. "I see such studies as a starting point for reflection that are pinpointed to a certain time and place" This is a project that implies social- and political concerns. But opposed to traditional documentary photography Stephen Gill is not aiming to represent an objective 'truth' – he is instead taking his objects out of their contexts as to emphasize and make visible what his exploration of the initial idea has come to point at. He is raising questions and hinting at possible answers by conceptually constructing a final body full of discreet implications.



Talking to Ants 3 © Stephen Gill courtesy of the artist

Working yourself through the first hall you will pass *Trolley Portraits* (2000-2003), *Covered and removed* (2006-2008), *Day Return* (2001), and *Billboards* (2002-2004). They all are the results of Gill's fascination and interest for a certain occurrence in the borough, "During this period my approach involved making photographic studies of individual singled out objects and exploring them in depth until I felt that I had exhausted the subject - or the subject matter". Gill's execution of an idea or obsession of something banal, simple, and for most part unnoticeable turns into visual poetry of a more universal scale, "As well as replying their messages, billboards naturally becomes a curtain for whatever lies behind".

Next room begins with, *A Series of Disappointments* (2008), which are exhibited as a concertina type of book hanging from the ceiling to the floor depicting black and white images of "betting slips" that have been thrown away. The slips have been taken from the ground and photographed in Gill's studio - all centered in exactly the same manner. Formally, this series is much similar to, *Off Ground*, and they are also a result of Gill's innovative conceptual documentary style and eye for the subtlest of details, "Each of these papers begun as hope, was shaped by loss or defeat, and then cast aside. These new forms perhaps now possess a state of mind, shaped by nervous tension and grief"