

GALLERY GUIDE

Coming up for Air: Stephen Gill - A Retrospective

Coming up for Air celebrates over thirty years of photographic practice from Bristol born photographer Stephen Gill (b. 1971), encompassing both the everyday and moments of insight, illuminating the often too

elusive aspects of the lives we lead.



Gill invites us into his microscopic worlds, through the labyrinthine underbelly of London's railway bridges, and the dark undergrowth of a Swedish forest at nightfall. With each new obsession we are drawn deeper within Gill's own exploratory journey to share in his deep-rooted sense of curiosity.

It is a curiosity that begins in Gill's childhood garden in Bristol, studying the visiting birds and wildlife, before moving aboard buses and trains (and on foot) crisscrossing the capital; clambering behind dilapidated advertising boards; visiting and revisiting the bustling life of London's multicultural markets; covertly burying prints beneath the ground; scooping up thousands of paper dreams, discarded cigarettes and flightless rocks; driving a pillar into frozen farmland, and making an epic ten-week voyage through the lunar landscape of a slowly decaying fish.

Running throughout Gill's practice are the experimental technical forays that transform Gill's work beyond the boundaries of photography. This has included inserting found objects inside the camera; strapping a camera onto a window cleaning pole and hoisting it 25-feet in the air; submerging prints within buckets of pond water; saturating film within

sugar-laden energy drinks; overlaying images with flora and fauna and inlaying them with vegetal matter, and relying on lo-fi cameras with motion-sensors to capture an instinct.

The resulting photographs bring each of these image ingredients to life, provoking numerous words and responses such as 'blurred, blinked, skewed, slight, incidental, unreadable, and obtuse'. Words not often associated with photography. Yet within these descriptions lies what we might consider the essence of Gill's work. An attempt to dial down photography's technical mastery – and a gradual process of pulling back – giving his images the space to breathe.

After more than thirty years of this stepping back, here Gill comes up for air, drawing together the seemingly disparate worlds that have absorbed and exhausted him in equal measure. Photographic prints, archival material and image contents, sit side by side with his lovingly made library of self-published books.

Coming up for Air... highlights Gill's extraordinary photographic alchemy in which people and place collaborate in a form of exchange which informs almost every image.

Coming up for Air: Stephen Gill – A Retrospective is curated by Stephen Gill and Gary Topp, and forms part of Arnolfini's 60th anniversary programme, celebrating its past, present, and future, as well as the inaugural Bristol Photo Festival.

SERIES INCLUDED IN COMING UP FOR AIR:

A Series of Disappointments, 2007

Audio Portraits, 1999 - 2000

Best Before End, 2013

Billboards, 2002 - 2004

Birds, 2005 - 2010

Buried, 2005 - 2006

Cash Points, 1999 - 2001

Coexistence, 2011

Coming up for Air, 2008 - 2009

Day Return, 2001

Hackney Flowers, 2004 - 2007

Hackney Wick, 2003 - 2005
Invisible, 2002 - 2005
Night Procession, 2014 - 2017
Off Ground, August 2011
Pigeons, 2012
Please Notify the Sun, 2020
Poland, 1996 - 1998
Russian Women Smokers, 2002
Talking to Ants, 2009 - 2013
The Pillar, 2015 - 2019
Trolley Portraits, 2000 - 2003

Additional Material:

Early self-portraits (various), 1980 - 1985; Audio Walks, 2008; Audio Pictures, 2008; Night Procession (film), 2019; Archive material including image ingredients, sketches, letters, working book maquettes, early photographs, and the Nobody Library (selected books).

ABOUT NOBODY BOOKS

In 2005 Gill founded Nobody, his own imprint, through which he has published almost all of his photographic work in book form since. These collaborative creations include hand-made and bespoke elements (conceived especially for each book by Gill), such as covers that were silk-screened, hand-painted, marbled or letterpress, and endpapers made from etchings, sketches, paintings, mono prints or linocuts.

Several early working books or maquettes can be seen in the exhibition, revealing Gill's meticulous process as each photobook becomes a work of art in itself. They are conceived as an 'expression of the work', rather than a 'shell in which to house them'. Gill has won numerous awards for his photobooks including the prestigious 2019 Les Rencontres de la Photographie author book award for *The Pillar*.

A number of Gill's publications (including the exhibition's accompanying book *Coming up for Air: Stephen Gill – A Retrospective*) are included here for audiences to read within the gallery. You can also purchase a select number of titles from the Arnolfini bookshop, found on the ground floor.

ABOUT STEPHEN GILL

Stephen Gill (b. 1971) in Bristol, UK, became interested in photography in early childhood – thanks to encouragement from his father – alongside an interest in insects and an initial obsession with collecting bits of pond life to inspect under his microscope. As a child he enrolled on his first photography course at Bristol's Watershed, photographing the streets and cityscapes around him, and was further inspired by the exhibition *Graffiti Art in Bristol* at Arnolfini in 1985.

Gill's photographs are held in various private and public collections around the world and have also been exhibited at many international galleries and museums including the National Portrait Gallery, the V&A, The Museum of London, Agnes B, Victoria Miro Gallery, Christophe Guye Gallery, Sprengel Museum, Tate, Centre National de l'audiovisuel, Galerie Zur Stockeregg, Archive of Modern Conflict, Gun Gallery, The Photographers' Gallery, Palais des Beaux Arts, Leighton House Museum and Haus Der Kunst. Gill has had solo shows in festivals including Recontres d'Arles, the Toronto photography festival, Festival Images Vevey, and PHotoEspaña. www.stephengill.co.uk

FIND OUT MORE

You can listen to audio descriptions about some of the series of works in the show, as well as listening to *Audio Pictures* and *Audio Walks*, and a series of audio stories collated from a variety of writers, curators and artists who have worked with Gill over the years by using the QR code on the right.



Get curious and pick up a copy of our free Eye Spy Guide when exploring the exhibition, and purchase a copy of the exhibition's accompanying publication in the Arnolfini Bookshop for the special exhibition price of £25.

Visit the website at www.arnolfini.org.uk to find out more about associated events and workshops and join the conversation at @arnolfiniarts @stephen_gill_ @brsphotofest #ArnolfiniArts #StephenGill #Comingupforair

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