

Looking into the Distance Becomes Difficult

**A Solo Exhibition by
Surya Gied**

Facilitated by
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They came by sea,
Innumerable like the surfs they came,
Dressed in sea-green robes
And cloaks of frothy white lace.
They came and went, and yet more came,
By night they came
On their fateful journey nowhere,
Weaving eternal patterns on the golden sand.

»Reincarnation«, S.D. Cudjoe

In her epic experimental, documentary-like and poetic film »Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen« (1983) Trinh T. Minh-ha realizes her seminal concept of »speaking nearby« as a possibility of circumventing the objectifying act of »speaking about«. When Nancy N. Chen asked Minh-ha about the concept of »speaking nearby« in relation to her technique of »making visible the invisible« and indirect language, she replied:

»(...) a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, howe-

ver, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition — these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language.«¹

This context is crucial to make sense of Surya Gied's recent paintings, especially the ongoing series »Looking into the Distance Becomes Difficult« (2015 -). One of the points of departure for the series is the hypervisibility of situations of crisis, the construction of crisis in the media, the power of showing people in a way that objectifies them. In 2015, when the plight of those struggling to cross the Mediterranean Sea finally hit prime time, as we saw boats literally overflowing with bodies, sinking boats, rescue ships struggling to save lives in a humanitarian crisis of refugeeness, inanimate bodies washed to the shores, Gied was crushed by the reality and weight of representation. The issues at stake, for Gied, were how to work around such realities without reproducing the violence of the circulating images, how to thematise them without objectifying the people involved, how to make an imagery of such dire moments while keeping the dignity of those involved, and how to make visible the invisible through abstraction. In this particular context of refugeeness, but also in the context of migration itself, there is almost always a spotlight and an erasure. In reference to Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of »speaking nearby«, I will like to understand Gied's recent paintings as »a painting that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A painting in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition«.

Gied chooses to speak or paint nearby by appropriating the languages of fragmentation and abstraction to deal with photo-journalistic material found on the internet, most of it features witnesses or evidences of people fleeing war, persecution, torture, rape and hopelessness.²

¹ Nancy N. Chen, *Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha*, published in *Visual Anthropology Review* in 1992 (Vol. 8, No. 1), available at: <https://docfilmhist.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/chen.pdf> (retrieved 28.07.2017).

² Surya Gied in *Picture Berlin Lecture*, 2017

Fragmenting and Speaking Nearby

In »Reassemblage«, - alluding to »rassamblage« - loose fragments are conjoined. There is a décalage on many levels, as the narration lags off the imagery, the montages are displaced, faces are split, the non-linearity of the narration – repetitions and periodic intervals of silence – is omnipresent. According to Andie E. Shabbar:

»*Reassemblage* is affective not as a whole, but through its fragmentation. Indeed, spaces and people in *Reassemblage* are never wholly represented; just as they come together they move apart (...) For Trinh these fragmented images or scenes are not in opposition to a whole but rather they are >a way of living with difference<.³ The fragments exist on their own as pieces of difference. For instance, the film's fragmented non-diegetic sound interrupts passive, yet interested, spectatorship by unsaying and momentarily freeing images from their meaning.«⁴

Gied, in her paintings, abstains from any literal or unilateral narration of representation. Hers is an effort to unpack that which lies underneath the image. It is an effort to reveal that which is in-between. In-between fragments. It is about exploring the spaces between forms, colours, ideas, relations, ideologies, politics, geographies and histories through acts of fragmentation. For Gied, fragmentation and abstraction are means to achieve a more universal, but not universalizing comprehension of deep and fundamental emotions embedded in the images she uses as source material. The paintings in the series »Looking into the Distance Becomes Difficult« are, in a way, a culmination of several areas of Gied's practice in the last decade. According to her, the works function »with flat colour grading backgrounds, the fragmented shapes give a tension to the spaces in between and the depth of the surface appears in different shades.«⁵ But it is far away from a reduction to form language. The practice and exploration

³ Trinh, T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*, published in New York in 1992.

⁴ Andie E. Shabbar, *Oscillations of Otherness: Disinterestedness and the Capacity of Affect*, published in *Reassemblage. Studies in Visual Arts and Communication: an international journal* in 2015 (Vol 2, No 1).

⁵ Surya Gied in *Picture Berlin Lecture*, 2017.

of fragments is also a possibility of understanding Gied's own biography, her being in between sentiments and spaces, as much as the fragmentation of the world we live in today.

By abstracting, by distancing herself from figuration through patches of colours and forms that invoke beings and spirits, Gied has found a way to deliberate on socio-political issues that touch the nerves of time, but also personal issues, without putting the finger directly into the wound. The act of blurring contours and zooming out triggers reflections on what we know and what we think we know, as well as what we see and what we think we see. Gied's practice of speaking and painting nearby is based on a double-edged attempt, to escape representation or an external reality, but achieving an effect through shapes, colours, and textures on the one hand, and on the other hand to extract, deduce or remove to achieve abstraction. Her subjects of departure are not objectified by acts of speaking »about«, rather she creates new subjects on canvas, which acquire new meaning upon the encounter with an audience. The fragments do not only exist within the space of the canvas, but also between the canvas and the beholder, insinuating an in-between space that needs to be mended or healed, cognitively and spiritually.

The Pendulum between Hypervisibility and Invisibility

The paradox of visibility accounts for the fact that while some people and things enjoy the normativity of just being visible, others exist within or are rendered into a pendulum of invisibility and hypervisibility - the space between not being seen and being watched.

The series »Looking into the Distance Becomes Difficult« must also be savoured as a proposal to deliberate on the privilege of seeing - on who can be seen or who can afford to pass by unseen - reflecting on the privilege of normativity in respect to class, race, gender etc. Gied's work triggers deliberations on cultures, philosophies and politics that carve out and relinquish people, objects and knowledge systems into these oscillating extremes, spaces, states and situations between invisibility and hypervisibility.

Social cognition studies^{6, 7} have demonstrated that certain groups of people draw more visual attention (i.e. are hypervisible) than others, particularly those affected by racial, gender, sexual orientation or class stereotypes. Conversely, studies have proven a sort of inattentional blindness⁸ - a psychological lack of attention that is not associated with any vision defects or deficits - towards affected groups as well as objects and epistemological systems.

»Den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht sehen« - Finding the Appropriate Distance

Gied's series »Looking into the Distance Becomes Difficult« also reflects on the appropriate distance to pass judgement and avoid prejudices. Looking into the distance or up close might become problematic if one is hyperopic –farsighted - or myopic - nearsighted. Where does one need to stand to see all ranges optimally? When should one compromise the far for the near, and what escapes our ability to perceive and judge appropriately in the process?

Zooming in – Conjugating from the Plural to the Singular

After starting off in an effort to comprehend, treat and deal with that which is and makes society, that which is of the plural's socio-political and economic interest, Surya Gied has, in 2017, slowly but surely channelled her exploration towards the personal and immediate family. Most works that go deeper than the comfort of the surface tend to navigate towards the singular and its premises, especially when dealing with the subject of fragmentation and issues of seeing and being seen. In a conversation with Pratibha Parmar on fragmentation and the self,⁹ Minh-ha points out that:

»Fragmentation is here a useful term because it always points to one's limits.
Since the self, like the work you produce, is not so much a core as a process,

⁶ Bean; Slaten; Horton; Murphy; Todd; Richeson, Prejudice concerns and race-based attentional bias: New evidence from eyetracking, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* in 2012 (Vol. 3).

⁷ Donders; Correll; Wittenbrink, Danger stereotypes predict racially biased attentional allocation, published in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in 2008 (Vol. 44).

⁸ Mack; Rock, Inattentional blindness, published in Cambridge in 1998.

⁹ Parmar; Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other, Published in *Feminist Review* in 1990 (No. 36).

one finds oneself, in the context of cultural hybridity, always pushing one's questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not. When am I Vietnamese? When am I American? When am I Asian and when am I Asian-American or Asia-European? Which language should I speak, which is closest to myself and when is that language more adequate than another? By working on one's limits, one has the potential to modify them. Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders. «

In other words, fragmentation is the destiny of those dispersed peoples, i.e. the diaspora. And these questions of language, national or continental identity, the border-being, and the syncretic being one tends to be, as part of a diaspora, are questions that have slowly resurfaced and taken grip of Surya Gied's work.

While earlier works in the series like »Blocked« (2015), »Cutoff« (2015), »In Our Midst« (2015), »Arrival Gate« (2015), »To Turn Turtle« (2015) and »Trying to Sleep« (2015) in their efforts of »speaking nearby« dealt with the anonymous mass that fluxed, or at least tried to flux into Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, current works look at the same narrative of migration from 30 to 40 years back and often from her mother's vantage point. The destiny of a migrant is most often at the edge. Standing or staggering on the threshold. In a recent lecture in Berlin¹⁰ Gied shared stories about her mum Choon-ok Lee, who migrated from South Korea to Germany as a guest worker to work as a nurse when she was 20 years old in 1972. Her mother eventually overstayed her three year contract, met her German dad and Surya Gied was born in Cologne, then moved to South Korea aged one. Growing up in South Korea, cut off from other Westerners, she only spoke Korean and never understood why other children called her »American« or made her feel different. Upon her return to Germany in 1988, she learned German from scratch, but completely forgot or negated the Korean language, and only returned to Korea after 21 years.

¹⁰ Surya Gied in Picture Berlin Lecture, 2017

This excursion is in no way insignificant in the context of the fragmented, as Mihn-ha pointed out. Using pictures from the family album as source material, pictures of her mother at the artist's kindergarten festival in 1985, or a picture of her mother and friends in Korea in the 70s, Gied delves into that personal and intimate familial space, as if to understand the complexities of the plural (like police officers in Manchester after the terror attack, or protesters against Trump at the Reichstag) from that space of the singular. Gied seems to point out to us that if looking at the distance becomes more and more difficult, then one must look into or at the near, while not forgetting to »speak nearby«.

Text: Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung