

## STEPHEN GILL

### *Buried flowers coexist with disappointed ants*

7 May – 27 June 2015

**The British photographer Stephen Gill (b.1971, UK) uses the medium of photography in an unconventional way, in order to not only document a place and its inhabitants but to also comprehend them affectively. For 14 years the Hackney borough in East London provided the object of his photographic research. With his experimental approach he has succeeded in capturing the genius loci in a manner that is touching and simultaneously startling. His playful handling of photography breaks with traditional concepts of mimetic precision and technical perfection: by burying his photographs in the ground or soaking them in a pond, he places them in touch with the essence of the elemental and thus invests them with a new credibility and a poetic dimension.**

In its retrospective, the Christophe Guye Galerie is showing highlights from the years 2004 to 2012, during which Stephen Gill created his sensational series "Hackney Wick", "Hackney Flowers", "Buried", "Coexistence", "Talking to Ants" and "A Series of Disappointments" and gained himself a secure place in contemporary photography.

In 2002 a Sunday outing happened to lead Stephen Gill to Hackney Wick, a poor area inhabited primarily by immigrants: as a diverse sociotope, it immediately fascinated him. At the local flea market on that same day, Stephen Gill purchased a cheap plastic camera with neither focus nor exposure controls, so that he could use it to document the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. He spent five years wandering through and exploring the urban area, which was not among the finest addresses in London and had no tourist attractions to offer but which represented a kind of urban niche, where people and also animals had found their habitat. The series "Hackney Wick" is the result of his initial and gentle acquainting of himself with a place whose restructuring with a view to the 2012 Olympic Games was already underway at that time.

Since the series "Hackney Flowers", a photo collage made up of documentary photos as well as flowers and plant seeds gathered on location, Stephen Gill has no longer limited himself exclusively to shooting photographs as a means of collecting evidence, instead, he combines traditional photography with found objects in order to reconnect the aseptic photograph with the nature of the place. The continued pursuit of this philosophical approach led to the series "Buried", where the place is no longer incorporated into the photograph through haptic reminiscences: on the contrary, the photograph comes into contact with the essence of the place by being buried in the earth. The technique of photography is thus expanded to comprise an uncontrollable, organically determined process of decay or, alternatively, of ripening. The series "Coexistence", which was created in 2010 in the town of Dudelange (Luxembourg), points in the same direction. There Stephen Gill found a remnant left behind by the abandoned steel industry in the form of a pond that had once been used to cool the blast furnaces. He resolved to link the organisms contained in the water together with the local populace that had previously worked in the steel industry in terms of two worlds that he considered comparable. To do so, he created portraits of the people in their homes with an underwater camera that he had previously bathed in water brought by him in pails from the cooling pond. Finally he soaked the prints in the pond itself in order to contaminate them with the microorganisms living in it, thus bringing about a coexistence of biotope and sociotope.

The most recent series shown in the Christophe Guye Galerie bears the title "Talking to Ants". These works were once again shot in East London and are disconcerting on account of their distorted proportions, which result from Stephen Gill's placing found objects and insects behind the lens. Here Stephen Gill integrates life directly into the camera, in order to not simply objectively "describe" a place but to render it "tangible". The central aim of his unorthodox methods is to communicate a sense of a place. To do so he uses random as well as deliberately induced elements of surprise to place viewers in a state of astonishment. Stephen Gill possesses a highly developed sense for the essential that often dwells within the unremarkable. He tracks down the vitality of a place and utilises unorthodox methods to vigorously communicate the "indescribable".

Lucia Angela Cavegn, art historian, MA, Winterthur ([www.kunstweise.ch](http://www.kunstweise.ch))

April 2015