

DOUBLE TAKE

Narrative Interventions in Photography

J. Paul Getty Museum

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"An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it."

—Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917)

Making strange, a term associated with Russian formalism, refers to the idea of seeing anew. Viktor Shklovsky coined the term, calling it defamiliarization, and describes it as "the technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar."¹ In "Narrative Interventions in Photography," Eileen Cowin, Simryn Gill, and Carrie Mae Weems create photographic interventions in received narratives so that images can be seen in a new way. An intervention into a narrative could be thought of as a disruption of its flow that changes the way it is read. All three artists employ language as part of their interventions, although the way they use it—integrated into the image or as caption—differs greatly. Cowin, Gill, and Weems intervene in received narratives to change perceptions of history, nature, and truth.

Weems's "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995–96) is a series of thirty-three photographic enlargements (seventeen of which are on view at the Getty) of African Americans throughout the history of photography. Weems levels the originals, which were made for different reasons and at different times, unifying their presentation by making them consistent. She tints the images red and vignettes them to reference a camera lens. Etched into the glass atop each photograph is a text that gives voice to a subject who historically was denied a voice. Her intention was to simultaneously speak to the image and have the subject of the image speak to the viewer. The series unfolds like a film and can be read linearly. The opening image is tinted blue rather than red and is a picture of an African woman gazing across the rest of the sequence. Weems's text begins with: "From Here I Saw What Happened." She makes this statement to ask what happened to Africans and African Americans historically and culturally as a way to undermine their stereotypical representation. And what happened? "You Became A Scientific Profile," "A Negroid Type," "An Anthropological Debate," "& A Photographic Subject," "You Became Playmate To The

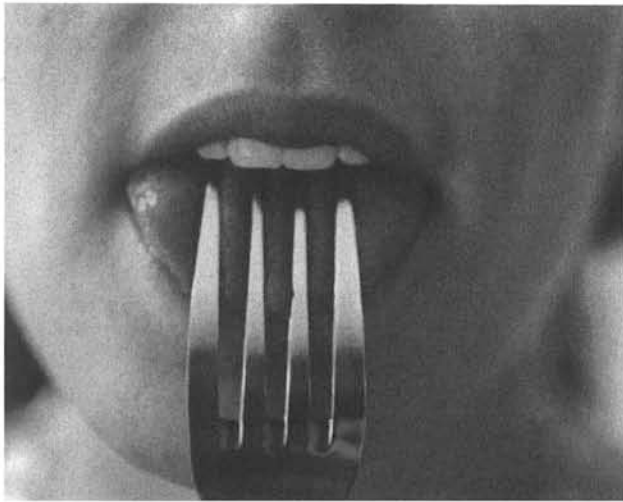


Patriarch," "And Their Daughter," "You Became Boots, Spades & Coons." The sequence concludes with a repetition of the first image, this time looking back with the words: "And I cried." Weems's textual intervention is poetic and, when read, has a rhythmic cadence. Weems speaks through the men and women depicted. Because of the sensitivity of her intervention, she gives them humanity. Weems speaks about "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" as one of her more painful works. She diverts the reading of this collection of images she has amassed from myriad sources and institutions, injecting the narrative with an emotional sensitivity and new purpose. Her intervention is meant to recontextualize these images, to rewrite history in order to change how images like these are interpreted.

Gill's "Forest" series (1996–98) is comprised of large black-and-white photographs taken in garden settings near where she grew up in Malaysia and Singapore. Gill looked for settings where "tamed nature" was becoming unruly. Roaming through these gardens with tubes of glue, Gill would remove leaves from trees and tendrils from flowers, replacing them with torn and crinkled pages from myriad books. Because of the construction of the images, the actual text is less important than the texture of the words on the page. Often these additions blend into the landscape and could be mistaken for natural elements. In one image, single lines of type parallel the splintering pattern of vein-like branches clinging to a concrete wall. In another, ripped sections of a book replace sections of bark, spiraling up a tree trunk. Confetti-like clusters of text hang from a roof alongside dangling vines. Gill's interventions into man-made landscapes that nature is reclaiming are simultaneously aggressive and subtle. The works affirm life as

Above

Untitled photograph from the series "Forest" (1996–98) by Simryn Gill;
© Simryn Gill



a process of decay, since Gill's additions will deteriorate as part of the natural process. The photographs function as documentation of a private performance—one that is labor-intensive and personal. Gill's interventions are meant to transform how one experiences a sense of place. Inherent in her works are unanswered questions about culture, memory, and language. What would happen if a book grew from the ground like a flower on a stem? If leaves were vehicles for textual communication? In Gill's work, unfortunately, words are just textures that reference storytelling, yet no story is actually being told. Her work would be strengthened if the choice of text augmented the image in a more purposeful way by being legible and specific.

Cowin evokes stories in her large-scale color photographs. In each of the four diptychs from the series "I See What You're Saying" (2005), a photograph of an altered book is juxtaposed with a close-up of a male or female face. The relationship between the images on the left and right begins with formal similarities that expand into more conceptual mappings. How do the folds in a tablecloth relate to the lines in a woman's forehead? Do the graphs in the book on the table somehow relate to the folds of eyelashes? An open book reveals cut and crumpled pages that parallel the shape of the fork pressed against the woman's tongue. Is the woman experiencing pleasure or pain? What was in the book that caused someone to damage its pages like that? A mustached man bites into a frosted cupcake. How is this gesture akin to the shapes of watermarks in an open book of fairy tales on a field of green grass? As the words on these pages bleed together, the book is rendered unreadable. In this particular work the language becomes a reference to the fictional world of fairy tales. Bits and pieces of words come off the page in ways that suggest the fluttering of a woman's eyelashes. Where is she looking? What is she thinking about? Cowin uses gestures and innuendo to construct a narrative that migrates from the concrete of printed pages and readable words to the ambiguity of human emotions. Her dream-like images are constructed truths that are simultaneously fantasy, fact, and fiction. The series' title, "I See What You're Saying" references these unknowns. She asks, Do you see what I am saying? Do you see what my picture says? Can you ever really know?

Cowin, Gill, and Weems employ language to alter the stories images tell. Weems rewrites the history of African and African American people in preserved photographic images taken for various reasons, but never allowed to speak for themselves. These images culled from archives and collections are presented as a revisionist text so that their subjects' plight can be seen in a new light. Gill's "Forest" is a forest of words, conflating the natural and the man-made and allowing words to become the shapes of nature. Her interventions into the landscape suggest that words have a fragility and impermanence on par with the natural cycle of growth and decay. Cowin fabricates modern fairy tales through the juxtaposition of images of books and faces. While images of eyes and mouths may suggest sight and taste, Cowin looks beyond the obvious. She explores the emotional implications of a common gesture and asserts that meaning lies beyond what is seen or even read. These three artists begin with a given and make it into something more. They create a special perception of these objects, defamiliarizing them by intervening into the narrative structures of history, nature, and fantasy.

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NOTE 1. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917). See www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Defamiliarization.

Above
Untitled photograph from the series "I See What You're Saying" (2005)
by Eileen Cowin; © Eileen Cowin