

FREE EXHIBITION GUIDE

SARDUL GILL

# DARK MATTER

  
new art exchange



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MEZZANINE GALLERY

17 SEPTEMBER - 2 NOVEMBER

Sardul Gill was born in rural India. As a teenager he moved to Nairobi, Kenya before coming to the UK in the 1960s, where he has lived, studied and taught ever since. Working in a broad range of media including painting, installation, printmaking, collage and photography, Gill's practice is stimulated by his fascination with nature and theories related to energy and chaos.

Gill won the New Art Exchange Award at the Nottingham Castle Open in 2012, and this exhibition emerged as part of that prize. *Dark Matter* intends to encapsulate Gill's core interests developed over his 30 year practice and brings together a collection of new monochrome Abstract Expressionist paintings, prints, collages and a installation.

To create his large-scale paintings, Gill uses unconventional tools and materials such as printing rollers,

palette knives, sticks, house paints, adhesives, solvents, sand and sawdust. He describes the act of painting as a form of self-discovery, and 'of finding ones' place in the wider context of the universe and within the natural order of things.'<sup>1</sup>

For Gill, the canvas becomes an arena where he unites art, spirituality and modern science. Reflecting on the connection between these subjects, Gill refers to the ways in which British Landscape artists have historically used the landscape as a vehicle for reflecting and exploring spirituality. He suggests that this connects Samuel Palmer and William Turner with contemporary artists working in the area of landscape such as Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy.

1. Sardul Gill in conversation with Armindokht Shooshtari at the Artist Studio, Nottingham, May 2014.



Gill has an interest in modern cosmology, the big bang theory and the notion that the universe was once a melting pot of freely moving matter before it cooled and became shaped by gravity. Gill introduces these principles into his practice by relinquishing some of his artistic control to the power of gravity, often allowing paint to stream down the surface of an artwork or to drip freely onto a canvas lying below.

The latter technique references the ritual of sand painting practiced by Tibetan and Buddhist monks, Native Americans and indigenous Australians.

Such methods were also adopted by American Expressionist artists of the mid-twentieth century, such as Jackson Pollock. Drip painting techniques trigger comparisons with the processes of nature such as the falling of leaves, the trail mapped out by a free-running raindrop, or the formation of a snowflake.

Gill's large and dramatic paintings are crafted from small collages and studies that are accumulated in his various sketch books and scattered around his studio. Using these as a starting point, he allows accident and

**‘From debris of collapsing stars,  
from gas and dust,  
where nothing is wasted,  
a stream of images emerge.’<sup>2</sup>**

2. Jeremy Hooker, 2005, *Free Poetry - Reflections on Ground & Seventeen Poems*, Vol.1. No.1, Free Poetry



artistic intuition to lead him during the process of creating his works. Adopting the behaviour of nature, Gill's paintings are spontaneous, energetic and at times chaotic. At first glance the imagery appears purely abstract, however these canvases are in fact filled with icons and direct references to nature such as the sun and horizon lines.

Characteristic of Gill's practice, the large-scale paintings comprise of several individual canvases in various sizes. He particularly enjoys playing and reshuffling these pieces to create

a narrative between the smaller single elements and their collective reading. It is through this process of making and reordering that Gill completes his creation of his works.

Another distinctive quality of Gill's work lies in this method of gradually accumulating many layers of expression. His studio is cluttered with found objects in various stages of completion. Gill keeps a number of paintings 'open' at any one time, frequently revisiting them by hand, or leaving the piece outside for days so nature can leave its mark.

*Dark Matter* has been curated by  
**Armindokht Shooshtari**

Please note that the artworks displayed in this exhibition are available for sale. Please ask for a price list at reception if interested.



# SARDUL GILL Q&A

## WITH FRANÇOIS MATARASSO

François Matarasso is a writer, researcher and consultant in community development based in Nottingham.

### **FM: What was your starting point for this exhibition?**

SD: My works has always been about the land and the horizon line, which is a very intimate spatial connection between sky and land. Here on Earth we are grounded, upright, by gravity. We have only one viewpoint, which is looking at the edge where land meets sky, because we are so relatively small. One can be overwhelmed when it rains sharp and heavy, when the wind blows from a particular direction: these things profoundly affect life on earth.

But if we detach ourselves and look at Earth from a spacecraft, the horizon line can be found almost in any direction, upside-down, sideways, straight ahead... Here, energy from different elements collide or combine, explosions take place, chemical matter flows, debris is thrown aside and order seems to emerge from chaos. This flux of change in nature appears to go on forever.

I use all this metaphorically, as an equivalent visual language, when painting: artists and scientists both use metaphor to understand complex situations. These black and white paintings go beyond Earth, to the cosmic landscape where there are no horizon lines, just events taking place.

They were partly inspired by Leonard Susskind's book, *The Cosmic Landscape*. It started me thinking about the cosmos and physicists' dreams of perfect theories that they never achieve because someone always comes up with something new – and then that's rejected and they make a fresh start in trying to interpret the evidence. I read one physicist who described the universe as spiritual. I don't know whether he meant it literally, or just that we can't ever really know what is there, but that idea started me trying to look at the cosmic landscape. For me its very much an area ripe for further exploration.

### **FM: What connections do you see between art, physics and the spiritual?**

SD: It might seem remote, but actually British landscape artists have always used the landscape as a vehicle for spiritual revelation. This has sometimes been seen as parochial, set against modernist trends from Paris and New York, but in recent years it's seemed to me that this is really the nature of British art. It connects Samuel Palmer and William Turner with Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy and all the artists who extend the boundaries. There is a solid tradition of the spiritual in the landscape and it's worth taking notice of.

I was reading an essay by an American mathematician, exploring the idea of fractal geometry. In a nutshell, it means that although we see trees, mountains, landscape, people, stones – beneath all that is a geometric structure. He includes illustrations of seashells and other species with patterns that repeat: snowflakes, beeswax, bird feathers and things with a geometric structure of basic shapes, in nature and the human imagination. So, from both art history and scientific works, I've found a kind of geometric language that I can make use of in my painting, that connects art and nature in thinking about the origin of things.

You may be looking at a drop of rain and you see the universe in it, with all its molecules and patterns: the vast in the invisibly small.

**FM: How did your approach to abstraction develop?**

SD: When I came to study art in this country in the early 1960s, I became more aware of the potential in Western art's shift from the figurative to abstraction. Studying History of Art at Newcastle Polytechnic, and through talks by the visiting lecturer Victor Passmore from the Newcastle University, I began to explore that mental process. Passmore's approach was based on the German Art School, Bauhaus and totally abstract at that time: rectangles, squares, lines and circles and so on.

My work developed in a semi-abstract form, maybe because my training there was both abstract and figurative, and both came naturally to me. My painting

relies on both the world of reality and that of imagination. That combination is evident also, for example, in Aboriginal marks and lines on stone, which make visible the process of imagining, thereby giving thoughts a concrete recognition of the reality they experienced.

**FM: Why do you describe it as semi-abstraction?**

SD: A lot of work that appears to be abstract is not truly abstract, because it starts with something concrete. For me, it's usually ideas and visual material I observe in the environment. From that I extract the thought that goes into my abstract work. This approach also allows the viewer to find a way into the piece, so that they can make links about what's going on, and understand for themselves what it's all about.

But the work is also abstract in the sense that, once a painting is finished, you are concerned with its surface, purity, colour and texture – the painting is what's in front of you. It has no reference to anything outside, and you respond to its *existential* nature. It is there in front of you. You look at a painting as you would look at a tree. A tree doesn't have any reference outside itself. It has water content, structure, a pattern, but it doesn't signify anything else. It is itself.

So although I take some starting point from reality, my intention is always to move it towards abstraction, without losing its essence.

**FM: How do you begin turning an idea into a painting?**

SD: I work simultaneously on drawings and collage, alongside large, finished paintings. Working at scale on different formats and surfaces can be unsettling, but I see that as a positive test of who I am, and how I deal with the mental challenge. I use ideas, experiments and materials to move from one to another, which in turn encourages interaction between the visible and the hidden matter.

I never fully resolve a piece on the worksheet or the sketchbook. Normally, I start putting things together in collage, because it's easier to take things away and put them back. Almost instinctively it helps me to arrive quickly at ideas I can take further. If I find a seed in some collage, then I leave it there and start on larger pieces, because what takes place from there on is to do with how things happen as I work. The whole dialogue with the painting is followed through intuitively, whether it is to do with subject matter or the materials that I use. Nature does it for me; I don't do anything: I only make choices.

**FM: What role does chance play in your work?**

SD: Instinct, accident and coincidence all play their full part there. Chance may have tangible influence in making a painting go in the direction it takes. You respond, assessing such occurrences as to whether they reinforce the concept and also resist becoming lost in the seductive nature of the incident confronted: ultimately the painting's strength lies in the nature of its central idea.

It's very difficult when you're trying something new and you wonder what you're doing. I feel so precarious about it. I put something there, take it away, and put it back in. I have an idea that something's not working so I get rid of it, or put new things over the top. Or I put the painting on one side for a few days, and come back to it with a fresh mind, and see if I can see it with a renewed spirit. One day you do something and it feels right, the work comes to life.

**FM: How does the idea change with the act of painting?**

SD: I work from my starting point very freely, and use my materials freely too. In this series, I've used bitumastic adhesive, acrylic paint, Indian ink, printing inks and solvents, sometimes virtually thrown in and worked on with unconventional implements: printing rollers, fingers, palate knives, sponges and sticks and actually only rarely with brushes.

In all that, I want to ensure that the basic concept is not lost, so that my marks make it more *concrete*, not more abstract. And yet I'm not using materials to *recreate* a figurative point I began from. I'm thinking about equivalents in spirit, rather than in reality. How I choose, use and control the materials enables me to make an adjustment between abstraction and a figurative idea. During the process of making work, I always keep in mind that the existential nature of materials and surface throw up pertinent ideas, and, with an open mind, you can find yourself painting a picture you did not know was in you.

**FM: Why are you using only black and white in this work?**

SD: Some of the small, collage work started with bits of card I use for wiping the etching plate when I'm printing. I saved those as potential pieces for collage and when I started to work with them, the idea of working purely in black and white, was prompted.

Colour can very temperamental, very demanding. I have done colour work in the past, very much in the same manner, but I wanted a change and as I was reading about dark matter and the cosmic landscape, I felt the approach suited my ideas about it.

**FM: What does the idea of beauty mean to you?**

SD: The idea that a painting is beautiful is meaningful only in the sense that it works. If it doesn't work, beauty - meaning prettiness - doesn't appeal to me. I find beauty in the way nature works, through its physical, chemical and biological processes, beyond mere formal visual observation only. The basis of beauty is a combination of some elements of orderliness, and some element of unpredictability. In painting. There is no beauty if everything is predictable; nor is there beauty in total chaos. On the surface nature looks asymmetrical, but if you look in depth, you see a geometric order that is often symmetrical.

**FM: Why is ambiguity important in your painting?**

SD: I don't want my mark-making activity to undermine the ideas or the engagement in a painting. It should

articulate the conceptual base while introducing a degree of ambiguity for individual response or interpretation. Ambiguity is often not easy to achieve.

Painting is capable of carrying messages at many levels that mean different things to different people, whatever the artist's own ideas. So it's always risky to talk about the work because it can limit a viewer's freedom of interpretation. That is why talking about the process of thinking and making the work is more truthful than explaining.

**FM: What would you like viewers to get from the work?**

SD: I hope viewers get the sense of what I'm trying to do, so I have some things in it, like the horizon lines, which they can find for themselves and relate to. That horizon line in my painting may suggest the experience of being out in space or grounded on earth. Different segments of art work connect with each other while the awareness of picture space spreads infinitely outwards in all directions, beyond the boundaries of the whole picture plane. I like to think that the viewer may consciously or subconsciously experience this.

There is also the behaviour of the material they see, such as the way the fluid runs down, the way it spreads, and the way it is thrown in. They're all traces of human gestures, which a viewer can relate to. As long as they can connect with just one thing, out of all these, I'm quite happy.



## **SARDUL GILL: CV**

### **Education**

**1983-1985** MA Fine Art, Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham

### **Professional Experience**

**1973-2001** Lecturer in Art & Design, South Nottingham College

**1970-1973** Art Teacher, Rushcliffe Comprehensive School

### **Awards**

**2012** Winner of New Art Exchange Award at the Nottingham Castle Open

### **Exhibitions (selected)**

**2012** Nottingham Castle Open

**2005** *Recycled Conceptions*, Arts Exchange, Nottingham

**2005** *Summer Exhibition*, Djanogly Gallery, University of Nottingham

**2004** *Influences*, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester

**2004** *Open 15*, City Arts, Leicester

**2002** Lady Bay Studio Open, Nottingham

**1998** *Drawing Show*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park

**1998** *Cultural Connections*, Touring Exhibition, Libraries of Nottinghamshire

**1987** *Elements within*, Nottingham Trent Polytechnic

**1985** *New Horizons*, Ikon, Birmingham

**1985** *Contemporary Art Work by three local artists*, Commonwealth Institute London

**1985** *Contemporary Art Work by three local artists*, Central Library, Nottingham

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