

# Gauri Gill's photographs of indigenous Indian artists reimagines the power of mask-making traditions

In her ongoing series, now published as a book, Gauri explores the human condition through previously mythical masks.

Words [Daniel Milroy Maher](#)

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Delhi-based artist Gauri Gill has spent the past two decades making work on marginalised communities in her native India. Drawn to these rural groups that exist on the fringes of society, her various bodies of work seek to understand their position within a country that has undergone rapid modernisation. In her recent book *Acts of Appearance*, the Kokna and Warli tribes in Jawhar, Maharashtra, are the focus of her study, alongside their age-old mask-making traditions.

Having discovered the fantastical masks of these Adivasi artists back in 2015, after learning about the Bohada festival for which they are made, Gauri set about finding a way in which she could collaborate with these artistic communities. She eventually made contact with brothers Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, the sons of a local legendary craftsman, and pitched the idea of a photo series using new masks, that she discussed with them. The brothers agreed and in turn enlisted the help of nearly 40 other villagers and papier-mache artists to create a new, experimental set for the purposes of the project. Members of this group would eventually also become some of the models wearing the masks, showcasing their beautiful craftsmanship.



Above  
Gauri Gill: Acts of Appearance (Copyright © Gauri Gill, 2023)

However, beyond the aesthetic appeal of the masks, which were traditionally created to represent various gods and deities during the historic annual festival, but now reflected ordinary humans, animals and common objects, Gauri was also interested in their potential for socio-political explorations of class and wealth disparity. Writing in the book, she says “When I first heard of the Bohada masks and festival, I began to wonder about the incongruity between these idealised mythic masks and the reality I saw around me. For instance, Jawhar, in Palghar district, is one of the most impoverished areas in Maharashtra... Surrounded by this precarity, I wondered why it was that the ritual masks were so extraordinary, and if the exaggerated tropes of representation were in fact inversely proportional to the routine landscape of everyday life.”

As such, Gauri became interested in the idea of using these newly created masks as a tool by which to empower this mundanity. She asked the Adivasi artists to create masks that, rather than symbolising deities, actually captured the people, animals and objects that surrounded them, as well as the emotions they experience on a day-to-day basis. And rather than performing such acts as the epic slaying of a demon — as would be the custom during the Bohada festival — asked them to reenact quotidian rituals familiar to them such as sweeping the floor, washing dishes or reading a book. Gauri guided this process of creation as a kind of catalyst but, importantly, the artists were given agency over their final interpretations, crafting life as they see it, and offering suggestions while staging the improvisatory *mise en scenes*.



Above  
Gauri Gill: Acts of Appearance (Copyright © Gauri Gill, 2023)

The resulting photo series is the product of this intimate exchange between the group and Gauri, who photographed the artists playing out these scenes in various locations around the villages. The featured masks include ‘often overlooked’ animals and insects such as frogs, mosquitoes and ants, as well as ubiquitous objects including a TV, a water bottle and a radio. Their enlarged size and expressionistically vivid colouring juxtapose with the everyday settings in which they are photographed, and yet at the same time embrace them. In doing so, they serve “to create distance from the self, and to reflect upon it as a possible means to explore life and circumstances in the lived present rather than the remote past of historical memory”.

Reflecting on the subtle power of these masks, and the collaborative process involved in making them, Gauri writes that they become vessels for our ever-changing selves, and symbols of a less fantastical but ultimately more human reality: “We are all heterogeneous beings, constituted of as many different selves as moments in time, inhabiting varying contexts, and others read us in their own subjective ways, often different from how we imagine ourselves to be... Although these enactments were mediated by the camera (and me behind it), the viewer is denied access to the physical likenesses of the subjects, and to their ever changing expressions. Concealed by the masks, these might be as freely revealed and unselfconscious as they will ever be.”

*Acts of Appearance* is published by [Edition Patrick Frey](#) and available to purchase through its website.









