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Gauri Gill: A Profile

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With a career that seems to have been spent on the highway, with incursions into villages and life lived in slow time, Gauri Gill reveals an ingenious and empathetic photographic eye. Working from within largely unknown and unsung communities, Gill shifts the focus from a palpable material poverty to a richly nuanced relationship with her subjects and their environment. The consequence is an altered way of viewing, one that explores a visual intimacy, tinged with a sense of wonderment.

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On September 28, 2023, Gill was awarded the esteemed 10th Annual Prix Pictet Photography and Sustainability Award for her series *Notes from the Desert*. The prestigious award comes with an impressive prize of 100,000 Swiss francs, the largest sum given for a photography award. [1] The previous recipients of this award have been Sally Mann, Benoit Aquin, Nadav Kander, Mitch Epstein, Luc Delhaye and Michael Schmidt, among others. Highlighting the severity of environmental crises, this year's award with its theme of 'Human' focused on the role of communities – their resilience and ingenuity – in traversing these issues. The award is a recognition of the ongoing themes in Gill's work – namely, a collaborative ethic in uncovering the daily life and culture of communities on the margins of society, and an emphasis on ingenuous strategies for survival.

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Born in Chandigarh in 1970, Gill has described her parents as "arts-inclined Nehruvian idealists". [2] With her father holding a government job, the artist grew up in different places, including Chandigarh, Delhi, Dehradun and Kasauli in India, and Sokoto in Nigeria. Gill's first art instruction was at a boarding school, where, dissatisfied with the conventional landscape and portrait painting expected of students, she staged what she jokingly refers to as a critical intervention, mounting an abstract painting of an 'Egghead Thinker' on a six-foot plank of plywood reminiscent of both Giacometti and Rodin's *The Thinker* alongside the school's official exhibition. [3] Subsequently, Gill went on to study Painting and Applied Art at the Delhi College of Art, graduating in 1992. [4] Her entry into the field of photography was through evening classes with the pictorialist practitioner, O.P. Sharma, at Triveni Kala Sangam, which she observes was one of the few avenues of training in the medium available in Delhi at that time. She later won a scholarship to the Parsons School of Design/The New School, where she obtained a second BFA in Photography in 1994. While studying, she also interned with documentary photographer Mary Ellen Mark. She later did a Masters in Fine Art from Stanford in 2004. [5] While in art school in India, Gill lamented the lack of attention to pluralistic history and cross-disciplinary theory. When in the United States, she criticized the lack of non-Western viewpoints. [6] Her own practice and pedagogical experiments have sought to bridge these gaps between theory and practice, while placing her works within larger photographic histories.

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Returning to India in 1994, Gill worked as a photographer for *First City*, a Delhi-based arts magazine. She then joined *Outlook* magazine as a photojournalist, and took on various freelance and self-initiated projects on the side. Gill recounts that when she pitched a photo series on what it meant to be a girl child studying in a village school to the political weekly, her idea was shot down. As a result, she chose to take a sabbatical from work and travel to different parts of Rajasthan in order to begin the project herself. [7] This was the start of the artist's long-standing engagement with marginalized communities in rural Rajasthan, presented in the extended archive *Notes from the Desert* (1999-ongoing). This project includes the sub-series *The Mark on the Wall*, *Traces*, *Birth Series*, *Jannat*, *Balika Mela* and *Ruined Rainbow*. Her experience in journalism pushed her to consistently engage with social and political issues. Photojournalism, however, was eschewed because it did not allow for, in Gill's words, "slow think". In a further commitment to this ideology of slowness, Gill continues to work with analogue cameras and uses the more expensive silver gelatin printing process. Describing Gill's long-term project in Rajasthan, curator Natasha Ginwala who reviewed the work in *Art Mag* by Deutsche Bank writes: "The archive is a physical infrastructure but also circulates as a field of citation. And personally assembled archives tend to be organic just as the soil under our feet – a terra firma of images that breathe porously, host life forms, and metamorphose

over time.... Periodically, different sub-series are released as a mode of re-editing and citation. Moreover, this practice is an unceasing and intimate documentation process observing the trials of nomadic living, desert graves, local festivals and rural schools, while it is simultaneously invested in a slowed form of storytelling echoing a gradient of lifetimes." [8]

Spending extended periods in a remote hamlet near Barmer with Jannat, her sister Hoorah and their mother Ismat, Gill developed the series *Jannat* (2000-2007). The name derived from the young girl of the Muslim community for whom this was the first encounter with photography, and who later passed away in 2007, at the age of 23. Speaking about the series, Gill says: "In the form that I have struggled to create, as much as it is a story about growing up in a village – one thing I wish to tell city-dwelling children (like my niece) is – it is also a story about love." [9] As artist Anita Dube argues, *Notes from the Desert* departs from the colourful tourist image of the state routinely peddled in advertising campaigns. Gill goes against the grain to uncover a different Rajasthan "at the nomadic margins" as it reveals "lives in transition: epic cycles of birth, death, drought, flood, celebration and devastation, through which they pass." [10] Delving into popular image-making practices, Gill's work has taken on a form of visual anthropology, as individual sub-series from *Notes from the Desert* incorporate the different idioms of studio and passport photography, religious calendar art and Bollywood visual culture.

Balika Mela (2003/2010), made collaboratively, recalls an approach adopted by Sheba Chhachhi in *Seven Lives and a Dream*, where female subjects determine the manner in which they are photographed, selecting props, poses and compositional arrangements. Produced as a photobook, *Balika Mela* demonstrates how Gill is able to transform what might have been merely a record of an event – the fair for girls organized by the NGO Urmul Setu Sansthan in Lunkaransar town – into an act of staking and articulating identity. This collaborative aspect in Gill's work consciously seeks to subvert the power imbalance between the photographer and the photographed. In *Ruined Rainbow*, the artist presents photographs taken on rolls of film by children in the villages she visited, giving new life to images which were discarded by the children because they were considered "kharaab/ruined". [11] Compiled together, *Notes from the Desert* comprises roughly 40,000 negatives and personal correspondences built gradually and steadily over the years.

The documentary drive of *Notes from the Desert* is mirrored in *The Americans* (2000-2007). Released as a catalogue by Nature Morte, New Delhi, and displayed as part of Gill's first major show at the Bose Pacia gallery in New York in 2009, it announced her position as a photographer caught at the intersection of photo-historical traditions. In dialogue with American photographer Robert Frank's magisterial visual document of Cold-War-era America, Gill's series captures the zeitgeist of a contemporary transnational age, tracked through the figure of the Indian immigrant across the length and breadth of the United States. Gayatri Sinha encapsulates the theme of the work in her essay for the catalogue: "that Gill addresses her subjects with the transnational gaze of the traveling photographer brings her subject within the potent discourse of migration and diaspora, post-coloniality and the new world. Set in the chromatic intimacy of the candid photograph, it is inscribed by the material residue of two cultures, of the glittering flecks of Bollywood and Hollywood, the Indian and the American dream." [12]

What Remains (2007-2011) captures a different, more precarious diaspora, that of the Hindu and Sikh refugees displaced by the conflict in Afghanistan. With their lives caught between Kabul and Delhi, Gill's lens brings visibility to a forgotten minority who have difficulty staking claim to rightful citizenship. Another project that looks at human survivors of pogroms is the *1984* series on the anti-Sikh riots. [13] Accompanied by textual interventions by numerous famous writers and artists from Delhi, this act of image-making is driven by an awareness of restoring to the historical record an event which seemingly left no trace.

Addressing other asymmetries of representation, *Fields of Sight* (2013-ongoing) and *Acts of Appearance* (2015-ongoing) draw on processes of collaboration, in defiance of the "documentary photographer's sovereign gaze". [14] In *Fields of Sight*, Gill's photographs are overlaid with paintings by Warli artist Rajesh Vangad, enabling a mixed media mode that refuses the historical salvage of colonial photography and instead asserts the continued material presence of the pre-modern community. [15] *Acts of Appearance* enacts a similar negotiation between modernity and long-standing customs through the form of masquerade. A collaboration on a larger scale, the project draws on the tradition of papier-mâché masks, made by Adivasi tribes from Kokna and Warli, that are used in the Bohada procession in Maharashtra. [16] Gill recruited artist brothers Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu from the Jawhar district, along with their families and associated community of craftsmen and women to fashion new masks reflecting contemporary realities and familiar figures, thereby

incorporating identity-making into the performance of masquerade. These were then inserted in creative tableaux that played with the idea of phantasmic creations inhabiting the centres of our everyday worlds.

Another of Gill's ongoing projects, *Nizamuddin at Night* (2005-ongoing), is devoted to documenting the historical neighbourhood of Delhi in which the artist lives. As a nocturnal flaneuse, Gill noticed things that she had not seen in the daytime: "It was as if I had passed into another world." [17] In her record of largely unpeopled parts of Delhi, the dystopic view of demolished buildings, the detritus of uneven city planning or the remains of a celebration, now silent, the viewer discovers a memorable record of aspiration and its frequently failed outcome. While the series was initially shot in black and white on her large-format film camera, the artist also experimented with using her digital phone camera (and colour images) when she revisited the project in 2020, during the lockdown brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Like most of her other work, this series is also "ongoing", reflective of the artist's long-term investments in her practice as an exploration of deep time.

In 2021, Gill showed up to the farmers' protest organized on the Delhi-Haryana border to challenge legal reforms aimed at emboldening the power of global corporations at the cost of Indian farmers. Working with her film camera, she captured the creativity, resourcefulness and strength of farmers who built working living spaces within a protest site. In her series, *The Village on the Highway*, Gill followed the oft-neglected aspect of how the participants sustained the protest through the repurposing of equipment and vehicles for different activities and the building of kitchens, temporary toilets and rooms out of spaces between trucks and tractors. [18]

Apart from her practice, Gill has been active in the pedagogy of lens-based practices, teaching at several institutions and conducting workshops on photography. In 2006, she teamed up with Radhika Singh and Sunil Gupta to launch *Camerawork Delhi*, a journal that had a five-year run as it sought to situate Indian photography within a larger international discourse. [19] She has also curated photography exhibitions, including *Transportraits: Women and Mobility in the City* (2010) and *Nobody's Children* (2005). [20] Her first survey exhibition, titled *Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair*, was held in 2022-2023 at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany, travelling after that to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. It was a solo showcase of her oeuvre from the past 25 years, focusing on her work in rural India, and the collaborative nature of her endeavour with its deep interest in how people create networks of exchange, care and solidarity. [21]

The artist's works have been exhibited in India and internationally, including at MoMA PS1, New York; Documenta 14, Athens and Kassel; Kochi Biennale; 7th Moscow Biennale; Freer and Sackler Galleries at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C.; Wiener Library, London; Art Gallery in Ontario and Toronto; and Whitechapel Gallery, London. Her work is in the collections of prominent institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Museum, London; the Smithsonian, Washington, and Fotomuseum, Winterthur. In 2011, she was awarded the Grange Prize, Canada's foremost award for photography. [22]

Notes

[1] Jaron Schneider, "Photographer Wins a Gargantuan \$109,00 in 10thPrixPictetAwards," *PetaPixel*, September 28, 2023.

[2] Ravi Agarwal, Interview with Gauri Gill, in *KHOJ – Ten Years of Khoj Artists* (New Delhi: Khoj International Artists' Association, 2010).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Gauri Gill, Biography, from the artist's website (<http://www.gaurigill.com/works.html>).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Agarwal, Interview in *KHOJ*.

[7] Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), "Gauri Gill ON SEEING," video uploaded on YouTube on August 28, 2020.

[8] Natasha Ginwala, "Image as Dwelling: Gauri Gill's Photography and Collaborative Approach," *Art Mag* by *Deutsche Bank* (2018).

[9] BAMPFA, "Gauri Gill ON SEEING."

[10] Anita Dube, "The Desert-Mirror: Reflections of the Photographs of Gauri Gill," *Art India Magazine* (2010).

[11] Gauri Gill, "Works: *Ruined Rainbow*," from the artist's website.

[12] Gayatri Sinha, "Introduction," in catalogue for *The Americans*, New Delhi, 2008. Cited in *The Archival Gaze: A Timeline of Photography in India, 1840-2020*, edited by Gayatri Sinha (New Delhi: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 2022), 340.

[13] Gauri Gill, "Works: *1984*," from the artist's website.

[14] Nancy Adajania, "Bearing Witness: Creations of the 'Human Hand' in Gauri Gill's Photography," *The Wire*, May 4, 2016.

[15] Inderpal Grewal, "Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: *Fields of Sight*," *Trans Asia Photography Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

[16] Natasha Ginwala, "A Multitudinous Cast," Critical Collective.

[17] Gauri Gill, "Works: *Nizamuddin at Night*," from the artist's website.

[18] Ravi Ghosh, "Vehicles for Change: Gauri Gill on Capturing the Indian Farmers' Protests," *British Journal of Photography*, June 8, 2023.

[19] Sinha, *The Archival Gaze*, 322.

[20] Gauri Gill, "Curating," from the artist's website.

[21] Shraddha Nair, "Gauri Gill's 'Acts of Resistance and Repair' Presents Over 20 years of Her Work," *Stir World*, December 21, 2022.

[22] "Delhi Artist Gets Grange Prize," *Hindustan Times*, November 11, 2011.

All online links were accessed on October 19, 2023.