






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Playing with Photographs

[Rashmi Viswanathan](#)

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Abstract

Two recent exhibitions in New York City invite thoughts about the meanings and possibilities of photography in art. Featuring the works of the artists Gauri Gill and Farideh Sakhaeifar, the exhibitions explore unconventional methods of photo-taking and making. Long known for her collaborative practice, Gill's work features multiple authors and subjects who play with photographic conventions and subject-object relations. Her subjects devise their presentation and mask their faces. Pointedly rejecting the ethnographic perspective, Gill's subjects exercise a level of freedom from the fixity of the camera. Sakhaeifar, from a markedly critical vantage point, draws attention to the ways that photography can obscure its subjects. Deeply sensitive to the histories of photography, both artists visualize the things that photography cannot contour—horror, pain, joy, and the unreal.

Keywords: [Gauri Gill](#), [Farideh Sakhaeifar](#), [photography](#)

The James Cohan Gallery recently held its first exhibition of the Delhi-based artist Gauri Gill's works, *A Time to Play: New Scenes from Acts of Appearance* (New York City, Oct 7–Nov 13, 2021), which features two series of images that have been met with considerable acclaim and commanded exhibition presence, *Fields of Sight* and *Acts of*

Appearance. Produced collaboratively, the former features the artist Rajesh Vangad's contemplative paintings of life in his native village of Ganjad in rural Maharashtra amid Gill's photographic scenes of the village and environs. The latter, joyful if not dreamlike, features figures in tableaux vivant of sorts.¹ They feature an unusual array of masks created by a large group of Adivasi papier-mâché artists from Jawhar, also in rural Maharashtra, led by master mask-makers and brothers Subhas Dharma Kadu and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, which, in the words of the writer and arts reviewer Hemant Sareen, offer “an invitation to play.”²

Not long ago, I viewed another exhibition by an artist who similarly plays with the photograph through surface inscriptions as well as digital image manipulation. Farideh Sakhaeifar's recent exhibition *You Are in the War Zone*, curated by Klaudia Ofwona Draber and featured at Trotter and Sholer (New York City, organized with KODA, March 18–April 17, 2021) is anything but joyful; it deploys the photograph as a means of soliciting horror. I briefly look at both exhibitions, the media, and methods they share and their points of departure as a means of thinking about the very different consequences of two not unsimilar methodologies.

Sakhaeifar has lived in Brooklyn for over a decade, emigrating from Tehran in 2009. Her photographic works iconographically reflect a geographically forked biography. Over mundane images of New York life, from leisure activities in the park to riding the subway, traced figures taken from photographs of the Syrian civil war enact violence and war in the eponymous title (see [fig. 1](#)). Two sets of riders occupy the car, one set that is of the moment and interchangeable and another that is omnipresent, spectral, and etched into the material of American life. The burden and costs of war, which are largely invisible to the average American yet to which we are bound through financial support, policy, and military intervention, are pulled out of the images as everyday ghosts. In [figure 1](#) a scene of daily life in New York City's subways provides the background for the traced images of the victims and perpetrators of war, lines and bodies entwined. In other works and in no uncertain terms, Sakhaeifar nods to American complicity in the ongoing Palestinian occupation. At nearly \$3.8 billion furnished for Israeli military assistance in 2020, US contributions render the taxpayer complicit in an ongoing human tragedy that continues to violate Palestinian human and land rights, narratives, and voices. Inverting Ariella Azoulay's conception of the photograph as a civil contract—as a means of enfranchisement and manifestation of participation and consent under repressive conditions—the photographic works by Sakhaeifar signal the hollowness of American claims to enfranchisement through military interventionism.³ In a sense, the artist asks the viewer to consider the

meaning of the photograph in the making of conceptions of conflict far from direct American view. The image of war is untethered from its origins, history, geography, and its real material consequences. Artfully, she geographically situates the viewer (the American consumer) rather than the genericized photographic subjects, a move that the use of the second-person pronoun in the exhibition title emphasizes.

Figure 1.



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Farideh Sakhaeifar, *You Are in the War Zone*, 2016–17. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. Street photography by Sadra Shahab.

Both Sakhaeifar's and Gill's projects invite the viewer to reckon with the histories of the meaning of the photograph. Gill uses collaboration as a foundational principle for art photography, either diffusing single authorship or altogether avoiding unilateral representations. Authorship and agency are diffused along more artistic lines in *Fields of Sight*, in which Vangad's lifeworlds are fused with Gill's visions. And they are diffused along more representational lines in *Acts of Appearance*, where Gill's photography captures the sitter—volunteers—acting out various scenes of their choosing and where the brothers' masks take center stage.

Fields of Sight plays with the special claim of photography on material representation, in which Vangad's psychic world climbs up and around Gill's photographs. Both the

drawings on the photographs and the figure of Vangad in the photographs lovingly foreground worlds that the viewer can view only from afar (see [fig. 2](#)). The viewer gazes upon Vangad gazing upon his private worlds. Our access is rich yet oblique.

Figure 2.



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, *Bohada*, from the series *Fields of Sight*, 2021. Acrylic paint on archival pigment print, 106.7 × 157.5 cm. Image courtesy of Gauri Gill, Rajesh Vangad, and James Cohan, New York. Copyright Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad.

In *Acts of Appearance*, papier-mâché masks typically used in the enactment of mythical and religious narratives for the Bohada festival of western Maharashtra, India, are redirected to the quotidian at the request of Gill and with the playful interventions of her collaborators. A reptilian form drives a clock-faced passenger to adventures unknown or perhaps just to work. Three masked women fetch water from a well in a surreal gesture. Typing away, a donkey-like figure invites us to celebrate the absurd ([fig. 3](#)). There is a mischief to the works that frame the unexpected subjects without drama or pomp and against sedate backdrops. I cannot help but imagine the process of collaboration and the joy of concocting masked subjects and scenarios. The staging invites the viewers to be collaborators in imagining the dynamics of the photographic moment.

Figure 3.



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Gauri Gill, *Untitled (67) from Acts of Appearance*, 2015–ongoing. Edition of seven plus one artist's proof. Archival pigment print, 61 x 40.6 cm. Image courtesy of Gauri Gill and James Cohan, New York. Copyright Gauri Gill.

Setting sights not on the rich, existing visual repertoire of mask-making associated with the Warli and Kokna traditions of Bohada but toward a different space of regenerative imagination, the Kadu brothers, collaborators, and Gill mine a terrain of

joyful minor subversion. There is a momentary abeyance of norms and expectations that permits a bubbling to the surface of a dynamism that need not be explained. The commonplace is lifted to enchantment, and the viewer is left unaccommodated with the expected social or ethnographic commentary. Altogether rejecting the all-too-common writing of irony or critical subject-object distance, this series makes the objects of the photographs the subjects and the meaning-makers. They provide neither commentary nor explanation.

Both artists explore things that are unpicturable, unphotographable, or unfixed, and both play with the surface of the photograph to release their subjects from their expected meanings/performances. Wonder is injected into the everyday. Sakhaeifar reminds us, however, that wonder need not produce joy. To the contrary, her drawn and digital manipulations foreground the horror of photography in the series *Pending*.

Pending takes stock photos of war that are easily found online using generic search terms. She digitally or manually alters these (see [figure 4](#)). Disembodied belongings in white sacks, oil cans, and blankets, with chunks missing, float through varying landscapes, perpetually in motion, either flying in the wind like so much rubbish or levitating via their own forces of antigravity. Recalling sci-fi imagery, the series features the trappings of forced human migration and militarism, making absent the bodies of the displaced peoples who are ostensibly the subject of such photographs—or so we can glean from the series' host of visual cues. Re-contextualizable yet bound to genre,⁴ the stock images must draw from a preexisting visual language that is sellable and self-confirming as a picture of war, regardless of its actual proximity to the keywords “Syrian refugees,” for example, or “refugees at the border.”⁵

Figure 4.



VIEW LARGE

Farideh Sakhaeifar, *Pending*, 2015. Digital inkjet print, 12 × 16 in. Photograph by Stringer/Getty Images (<https://www.gettyimages.se/detail/nyhetsfoto/newly-arrived-syrian-kurdish-refugees-walk-with-their-nyhetsfoto/456796980?adppopup=true>).

Sakhaeifar pointedly appropriates reproducible, generic images of war, drawing attention to their process of retrieval and commercial ubiquity and use, in which displacement, militarism, and human tragedy are abstracted to (often staged) generic referents for sale and mass viewing. Each image bears the stamp of its parent company, Getty Images, and some bear the name of the original rights holder, linking the production and circulation of the images to both of those parties as well as the artwork. Sakhaeifar's preservation of seemingly secondary information at the cost of key subjects ironizes a particular history and politics of warfare and global commerce and their paradoxical predicates of visibility and inattention in the digital age.⁶ Stock visual content forms the phenomenal ground of much of our digital lives. Her strategies are twofold: (1) drawing attention to the ways that military and visual engagements are increasingly reliant on digital communication and mediatization, she places pressure on the mechanics of image brokering; (2) using stock photography, tellingly also often termed “visual content,” the artist paradoxically draws attention to a politics of inattention and genericization significant to US military interventionism and the corralling of US popular consensus.⁷ In other words, Sakhaeifar's series explores stock photography of war in terms of their semantic fields and the phenomenological level at which these images can exert power. As Paul Frosh asserts, “Forming an overlooked but enveloping visual environment, stock

photographs are the wallpaper of consumer culture.”⁸ In a sense, Sakhaiefar's work exposes the edges of war photography as images that alternately numb and incite to attention. And, at the edges lie the horrors of the actualities of war and displacement.

The artists' differences lay bare some of their respective concerns. Gill's work amplifies the agency and play of the pictured subjects, thus diffusing practices of objectification. Sakhaiefar's works take a critical perspective on image-making, circulation, and consumption, thus drawing attention to the process of objectification. Her work critiques media as form as well as media as content. Gill, ensconced in the scene of the action with analog technology in hand, celebrates the uniqueness of the photographic event and its participants. Consequently, both implicate and make different kinds of collaborators of their viewers.

Notes

1. Hemant Sareen uses this term to describe the posing and interaction of the sitters in the series in the exhibition's accompanying essay; see [Sareen, “Time to Play.”](#)
2. [Sareen, “Time to Play.”](#)
3. [Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*](#).
4. Stock photography capitalizes on the set of expectations of prospective consumers and it provides maneuverability of posing, props, and visual conventions within parameters.
5. The keywords were provided by the artist. Farideh Sakhaiefar, email to author, November 23, 2021.
6. The visibility and findability of stock photography is, among other factors, determined by the photographer's use of metadata. Such secondary information plays a determinative role. In terms of producing and capitalizing on inattention, Paul Frosh attributes to stock photography “a powerful ideological advantage over other sectors producing contemporary visual culture: invisibility.” [Frosh, “Beyond the Image Bank,”](#) 134.
7. [Cox, “Visual Politics of Portraying Power.”](#)
8. [Frosh, “Beyond the Image Bank,”](#) 133.

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