

Stitched in Time

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3/MAY/2016



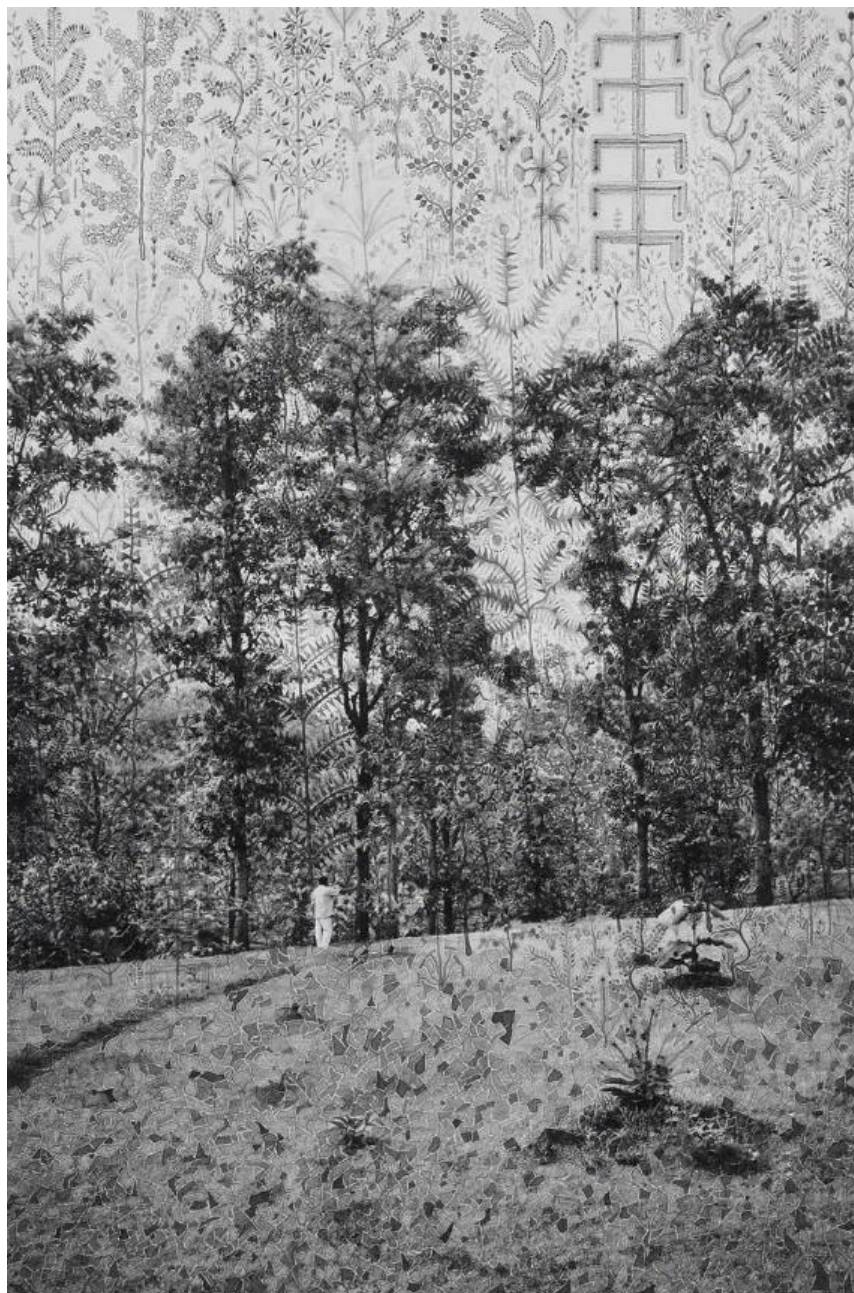
Gauri Gill making portraits in Ganjad, July 2015. (Photo credit: Vyankesh Harkya)

In 2013, when Gauri Gill went to the little hamlet of Ganjad, in Maharashtra's Dahanu district, her immediate instinct was to take out her camera and capture the lush, verdant beauty of the landscape. The photographer had been invited to the village to create a series of portraits in the local primary school. There, she stayed at the house of Rajesh Vangad, a well-known Warli artist. As Vangad gave her a tour of the area, he told her stories about the forests, mountains and rivers, and landmark events in local history, such as the raid by a political party that led to stampede and violence.

Gill photographed her host as he took her from river to forest to field, deciding to place the man in the landscape that he knew and loved so well. "But when the contact sheets came in, I realized that all the stories that he had shared with me were somehow missing from the photographs themselves. I didn't want the photographs to just be portraits of him in these places that are of great personal significance to him. I wanted to show why exactly they are significant," she says, "So I proposed to Rajesh that perhaps he should meet my text with his own. It would be like two different set of eyes looking at the same landscape."

The collaboration has resulted in an exquisite series of works, called Fields of Sight, that brings together the photographs made by Gill when she was in Ganjad, and the Warli art executed by Vangad when he went to stay with her in Delhi. Landscapes teem with the memories and lived experience, which would be absent from photographs, if not for the Warli artist's collaboration. So, in River while we see him standing at the edge of the water and looking in, we are at the same time also looking at life as it unfolds in and around it – women bending over nets, as a variety of fish swim about and insects hover and skim on the water's surface.

Gill says, "In the course of working, we developed a formal language together. For example, the works are black and white, because we wanted to meet each other on equal ground. In fact, Warli art is traditionally monochromatic, since it is made using rice paste on mud walls. In these works, Rajesh has used paint, and he has started thinking in tones." It was almost, she says, like two musicians playing different instruments but working on the same piece.



A Forest of Trees. From the series 'Fields of Sight', 2014/2016. (Photo credit: Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad)

At Gill's on-going solo show "The Mark on the Wall" at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, these works are displayed along with those in two other series. Places, Traces features previously unseen works from Notes from the Desert, the photographer's ongoing archive of images from Rajasthan, a place that she has been returning to since she first began photographing rural life there in 1999. The third series, The Mark on the Wall, also features photographs from Rajasthan, with Gill documenting the drawings made by children, teachers and local artists in government schools in western Rajasthan. These drawings were made as part of Leher Kaksha, a now-lapsed government scheme, which was designed to help children learn visually.



River. From the series 'Fields of Sight', 2014/2016 (Photo credit: Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad)

While each series is distinct in terms of subject matter, one can discern a few ideas that run through all three. One of these is the idea of the "mark making", be it in terms of the marks made by Vangad on Gill's work or those that children and teachers make on the walls of their classrooms, as they learn grammar, or about the human anatomy. There's ofcourse, also the idea of collaboration. In the other two series, where one can imagine Gill collaborating with people who have already done their bit and left the scene.



Rajesh Vangad with legendary Warli painter Jivya Soma Mashe in Ganjad, July 2015
(photo credit: Gauri Gill)

This sense of commonality is emphasised in the way Gill has chosen to display the photographs. The photographer has refrained from segregating the works according to series. She says, "I didn't want the show to be pedantic, and I'm hoping that whoever sees the works can sense the conversation that is going on between them."

The exhibition is at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, till June 30

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