

TANIA BRUGUERA IN CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE BISHOP

“ Art is a way to think, a space of dissent, and it has an urgency that goes beyond the self-referential [because] there is a de facto social responsibility involved in being an artist. ”

—Tania Bruguera



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Staging Images: Gauri Gill Interviewed by Will Fenstermaker

Photographing homemade masks of quotidian life.



Gauri Gill, *Untitled (76)*, from *Acts of Appearance*, 2015–ongoing, archival pigment print, 16 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Gauri Gill and James Cohan, New York. © Gauri Gill 2021.

In one photograph, a couple kneels outside. The ground in front of the house is tile or hard-packed earth. The woman chops greens on a low cutting board, and the man lifts a tomato from a platter of vegetables. Her face is obscured by the black carapace of a gigantic beetle, his by an oversized insect with a long proboscis—perhaps a flea or a mosquito.

The Kokna and Warli communities in Jawhar, India, are known for their papier-mâché masks depicting Hindu and Indigenous deities. The masks are used to stage religious tableaux vivant during the yearly Bohada festival, but the figures depicted in Gauri Gill's *Acts of Appearance* series instead wear masks of earthly creatures. As Hemant Sareen writes in an essay on the series to accompany Gill's first exhibition at James Cohan, these images of Indigenous artists applying their craft to represent ordinary humans, common animals, and household objects "rearrange time to redress [the] sins of misrepresentation and exclusion" perpetuated by colonial photographers in India.

—Will Fenstermaker

Will Fenstermaker

What was the genesis of *Acts of Appearance*? How did you arrive at photographing people wearing masks?

Gauri Gill

Since 2013, I have been collaborating with a Warli artist, Rajesh Chaitya Vangad. He belongs to an Adivasi or Indigenous community living along the coast in Maharashtra. While spending time in the area, I heard about the Bohada procession which occurs once a year in most of the villages in the area. In it, members of the village wear sacred, consecrated masks of gods, demons, and other figures, including those from nature, to enact a mythological tale familiar to all the villagers.

Hearing about this, I began to wonder why the masks in this much-loved festival were so idealized and why they did not reflect the people and reality I saw around me. So I sought out the artists who create the masks and went to them with a somewhat mad proposal: Would they consider making new masks of people, animals, and life as seen around us in the village today—document their own reality, as it were?

WF

The West is filled with exoticizing photographs of festivals in India. What is the significance of photographing people in these masks you've asked them to make? What do your photographs reveal about the relationship between quotidian and religious life?

GG

This was exactly the point. The photographs were made as a kind of reflection on the traditional masks which are so extraordinarily beautiful but also visibly different from how ordinary people are. This is obviously intentional, perhaps in order to transcend the mundane reality of life in the village. But our collective endeavor was to create archetypes of the quotidian, recognizable self. For instance, I am sitting here writing to you on this laptop, the most unphotogenic of tasks; but if I had to represent myself sitting here writing to you, how would I do it? And would the act of paying attention collapse the human-made distinctions between what is valorized and what is ignored?

पशुधन सेवा
 कृषि विभाग
 राज्य सरकार

मुन्हा व जाफरावादी म्हैस



प्रकार	वर्ण	उत्पत्ती	उत्पादन
मुन्हा	शुद्ध श्वेत	मध्य प्रदेश, गुजरात, राजस्थान	दूध, मांस
जाफरावादी	शुद्ध कृष्ण	मध्य प्रदेश, गुजरात, राजस्थान	दूध, मांस

डांगी व गीर गाय



प्रकार	वर्ण	उत्पत्ती	उत्पादन
गीर	शुद्ध लाल	गुजरात, राजस्थान	दूध, मांस
डांगी	शुद्ध श्वेत	मध्य प्रदेश, गुजरात, राजस्थान	दूध, मांस

जर्सी व होल्स्टीयन फ्रिजीयन गाय



प्रकार	वर्ण	उत्पत्ती	उत्पादन
होल्स्टीयन	शुद्ध कृष्ण	अमेरिका	दूध, मांस
जर्सी	शुद्ध लाल	अमेरिका	दूध, मांस



WF

Can you tell me about the process of selecting the masks' subject and making them? How involved are you?

GG

When I first met the artists Bhagvan Dharma Kadu and Subhas Dharma Kadu—along with their families and other local volunteers—to discuss the masks, I suggested only that they keep in mind people they knew. I also asked them that the masks embody the nine *rasas*, or emotional states of mind from classical Indian aesthetic theory, such as sadness, fear, or anger. Then we spoke of sickness, aging, and other common human experiences that reflected the body. They suggested incorporating animals, as animals are integral to Adivasi life. I responded that we include not only the more celebrated ones like the tiger and elephant but also the ant, lizard, mosquito, or others that we had close contact with. Later, objects entered the project, as they are believed to have sentience too. A book, for instance, or a water bottle, or a television.

There was no hierarchy of masks; we used every single one that they made. And there was no further criteria except that they did not need to be as formal and finished as the Bohada masks. In the end, each one was somehow special, despite the artists' initial lack of confidence. I guess the offer to create new masks was a kind of invitation to play, to experiment, and to have fun. I hope that reflects in the images you see.

WF

Once the masks are made, how do you decide how to stage the images? Many have sociopolitical and narrative significance or subtext.

GG

The staging is definitely collaborative too. I was the conduit, as I held the camera, but there were so many participants. It was a bit like improvisatory theater in which the environment played a starring role. For instance, in *Untitled 61*, we were looking for another location when we stumbled across a veterinary clinic. It was empty because the doctor was out. We took permission from the assistant on the premises, and all we did was have someone sit in the doctor's chair with a mosquito on the facing chair across the table. The old furniture, the color of the walls, the local flooring, the very evocative government posters of the varieties of cows, and most of all the mysterious briefcase—these were all elements that appeared as if in a dream.



WF

How has the series evolved since your 2018 exhibition at MoMA PS1? You exhibited the first three years of the project then.

GG

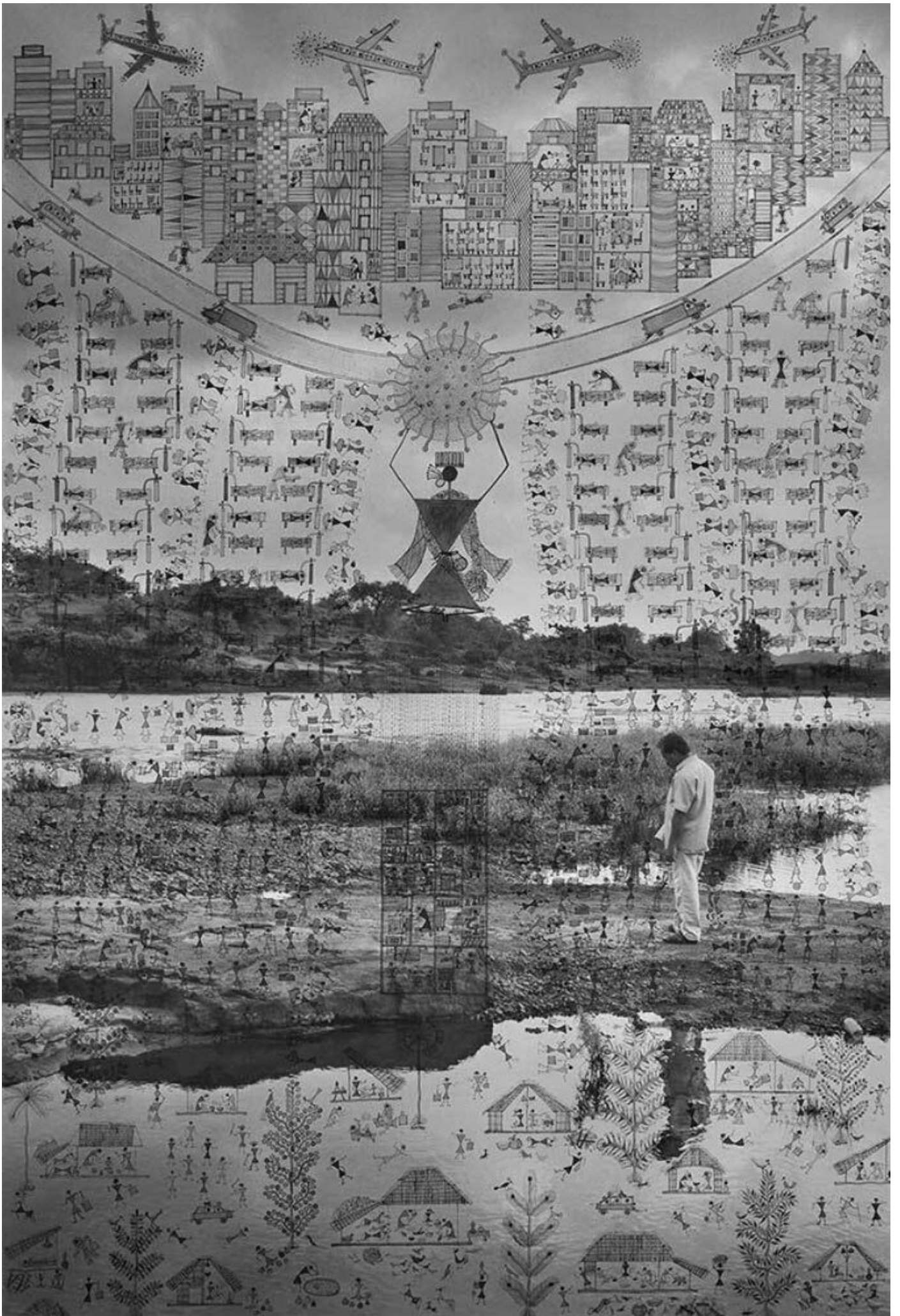
With all collaborative work, it takes time to get really comfortable with each other and to get under the skin of what you're trying to do. You don't see it in year one, but in year five you can look back and tell the difference. In any case, the project is really about the process and not the photographic byproducts. There has been a mutual attempt to extend and deepen the conversation, and, as a result of that, increasingly to make it more and more specific. There are so many local references: for instance the Nataraj pencil in *Untitled 58*, which is now being replaced by fancier versions in rapidly globalizing Indian cities but is still a mainstay in many rural areas, including Jawhar.

WF

Do you see any relationship between the anonymity afforded by a mask and the anonymity afforded by a camera?

GG

I think so. I like having this filter between myself and the world. There is also a very complicated relationship in photography between the author and the subject. I like the fact that in this case what the audience receives is the artist-subjects' interpretations in the form of the masks, a kind of talking back to that consuming, curious gaze, or taking back some of the power.



WF

Thinking about the collaborative aspects of your practice, I'm also curious to hear about your working relationship with Rajesh Chaitya Vangad. Can you talk about his Warli embellishments on your photographs? How does your photograph and his painting come together in *The Great Pandemic* (2021)? What do they reveal that the other artform would not by itself?

GG

Rajeshji and I have worked together for eight years now. This last year was an immensely difficult one. We could not meet or make new works last year, but kept speaking on the phone. Rajeshji was with me in Delhi in February and March of this year when we made *The Great Pandemic*. We wished to show various aspects from this crisis that had affected us both, me in the city and him in the village. The ground is a photograph of a dispirited Rajeshji in a landscape with an overcast sky over water and land. At the top we show planes bringing the virus into cities, which look desolate and deserted. From the city, you can see people fleeing to return to their villages. Rows of migrant workers alternate with rows of hospital beds depicting patients, including those on ventilators, and the heroic doctors and nurses taking care of them. At the very bottom is the village, and here you see villagers going about their activities, even as among them are those who helped bring food or material resources. Right in the center of the image is the virus held aloft by Mother Earth, from whom fall blessings—like rain onto scientists making vaccines in the lab.

We finished the work, Rajeshji returned to his village, and at the end of April he lost his youngest brother to COVID. This work is dedicated to all those who have known the great sorrow of personal loss and heartbreak in a year like no other.

Gauri Gill's [A Time to Play: New Scenes from Acts of Appearance](#) is on view at James Cohan in New York City until November 13.

Will Fenstermaker is an art critic based in New York City and the exhibitions editor of [TheGuide.art](#).

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