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Photographer Gauri Gill uncovers the secret lives of graves in Rajasthan

What can a grave tell us about the person buried there?

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Installation view from the series, *Traces*, Kochi Biennale, 2016-'17

Tombstones are more for the living than the dead – they are the markers that friends and family return to over time, to grieve, remember and commemorate the departed. But what of the graves of peasants and nomads? Do they bear tombstones? If someone from a nomadic community dies on a journey, are they buried en route? Can those graves even be found again?

Eleven life-size images of graves by photographer Gauri Gill evoke such thoughts on death: our impact on the environment, even in our passing, and what a grave can tell us about the person buried there.



Untitled (17), from the series, *Traces*, 1999 - ongoing. Image courtesy Gauri Gill.

“If someone from the [nomadic] Jogi community dies during a long journey, the family may bury them on the way,” said Gill. “Usually, the communities themselves have an idea of where the sites are. But sand and other creatures act upon the graves, and in time they become a part of the landscape.”

These images are culled from an archive of thousands of photos that Gill has taken over the last 18 years in western Rajasthan – including in Lunkaransar in Bikaner, Barmer and in Osiyan in Jodhpur. Gill refers to the archive as Notes from the Desert. Periodically, she relooks at this archive in her home at Nizamuddin East in Delhi, to organise the photos according to a theme, like The Mark on the Wall, or the Birth Series, and now, Traces, or images of graves.



Untitled (3), from the series, Traces, 1999 - ongoing. Image courtesy Gauri Gill.

Gill studied art at the Delhi College of Art, photography at Parsons School of Design and then at Stanford University, where she was the only photographer in a class of five Master of Fine Arts students. Her work has been shown in India and the US, including a solo show last year, at the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Gill worked at a political weekly until 2000. In 1999 she made a trip to western Rajasthan and took the first photographs of her desert archive.

To Shetty, what was more important than her credentials however was that the works he chose for the 2016 Biennale did three things: generate conversations with the other works in the Biennale, trigger the imagination, and focus as much on the process of making and presenting art as on the final artwork.

At the Biennale, Gill's photos can be seen after works by Russian artists AES+F and theatre practitioner Anamika Haksar. AES+F have created a series of light boxes that show images of the dead in high-fashion clothes, and trigger an enquiry into death and our ways of dealing with mortality. Haksar's work is a theatre poem about the politics of water.



Waterwells. From the series, Places, Traces, 1999 - ongoing. Image courtesy Gauri Gill

Shetty has curated this edition of the Biennale around a theme informed by the Rig Veda – forming in the pupil of an eye. He was interested in works which are interpretative and become more than the sum of their parts, with greater engagement from the artists as well as the viewers.

“Gauri’s work is telling a story in a very different way from Anamika’s,” said Shetty. “Most of the graves are unknown, but there is a way of reading into them because of the objects that are there on top of the grave. These are like cues to what kind of person this could have been...”

For the Biennale, Shetty offered Gill space at Aspinwall House, a sea-facing heritage property in Kochi that used to be the headquarters of a trading company. "It's a huge abandoned warehouse," Gill said, describing the space where her images were housed. "The walls are painted white but you still see imprints and scars on them. In the space there were columns and recesses. I thought why not make the photographs life-size and display one in each recess? When you walk into the room, it's like walking into a room of graves."



Installation view from the series, *Traces*, Kochi Biennale, 2016-'17. Image courtesy Gauri Gill

To adapt the photos to the space, Gill traded in her usual – more expensive, and in some ways, more exacting – silver gelatin process for digital prints. "I wanted them to be large," she said. "Suddenly, you can see the infinite nature of the details in an ocean of sand."

Despite the subject, Gill does not find the images and their overall effect depressing. "The graves exist so lightly upon the earth – I find that very beautiful. Usually they are not big, heavy, structures, because they are hand-made," she said.

The graves belong to Muslims and Hindu communities such as the nomadic Jogis, Bishnois and subsects of Meghwals and Jats. Often, the families of the dead are resource-strapped and the graves are economical. But there is also an ecological imperative at work with some of them. "The Bishnois are such great environmentalists, they don't wish to cut any wood or use any resources to make the grave, except what is already there."

In the photographs, the graves can be seen almost submerging into the landscape. Very few have any permanent construction or structure to mark them. In some places, there are boulders with hand-written dates and names that serve as tombstones. Some of them have the personal belongings and important possessions of the deceased, such as teacups and medicines bottles. Often, animals and the elements destroy these quickly. "When a friend's aunt recently passed away, they laid a bottle of alcohol on the grave," said Gill.



Untitled (5), from the series, *Traces*, 1999 - ongoing. Image courtesy Gauri Gill.

As with many of the subjects Gill has shot over the past 18 years, the grave photographs became possible because of the relationships she has forged within these communities. Many of them, especially those who belong to nomadic communities, can be very private. “My experience and work is measured and marked by time,” Gill mused. “In terms of the photographs themselves, in the early years, I stayed for weeks on end, and documented everything obsessively. Now I go mainly to meet my friends, and photograph special occasions. Perhaps a friend has a baby, or another friend surprises me with five goat kids, or someone re-plasters the floor of her mud home immaculately.”

The first time Gill visited a grave was also with friends. “I didn’t plan to shoot the graves,” she said. “I went to visit my friend’s father’s grave with her. I would sometimes go with friends when they went to visit their relatives. Over time, I started to see the graves as these incredible sites, in and of themselves, and I began to revisit them.”



Untitled (11), from the series, Traces, 1999 - ongoing. Image courtesy Gauri Gill.

To Gill, her growing archive needs close attention and careful looking. From time to time, she draws new material from it. “Actually, I need to digitize and catalogue it,” she said. Gill isn’t sure how many photographs of graves she actually has, the eleven featured in the series are just a glimpse. “These photos started with the Muslim graves, but kept on growing,” she said. “People are surprised to see Hindu graves, but Hinduism is so heterogeneous, and complex.”

Can she tell the Hindu and Muslim graves apart?

“Yes, there are differences, but in time they become more subtle, and then disappear altogether,” she said. The number 786 is inscribed on some tombstones, to denote the phrase “Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim” from the Quran. Looking at Gill’s photos in life-size takes on greater import, when you realise all the details and narratives waiting to be found in the images. “Set in the recesses of the wall at the Kochi Biennale, they also look to me like windows,” Gill said.

Gauri Gill’s photographs are on display at the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale until March 29.

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