Gauri Gill
A Time to Play: New Scenes from Acts of Appearance

Oct 8th — Nov 14th
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James Cohan
52 Walker Street
2nd Floor

New York
Tribeca

Gauri Gill's photography is populated with masked hybrid figures, presenting scenes of rural life in the Jawhar district of India's Maharashtra state. A horse-headed woman sits impassively at her computer. A beetle- and spider-headed duo squat on the ground, preparing a meal. A camera-woman rests on a threshold, a single eye visible through the viewfinder. Masterfully toggling between the sacred and the mundane, these tableaux vivant—collaboratively staged by the artist and sitters—are imbued with deadpan charm that subtly refutes the camera's authority.

"A Time to Play" is Gill's first solo show with James Cohan and the gallery's inaugural exhibition at its new Tribeca space. Consisting of more than 30 works from two ongoing series, "Acts of Appearance" (2015–) and "Fields of Sight" (2013–), it provides a sense of immersion in a world of curious creatures undertaking ordinary

tasks. These are not the slickly packaged fantasies of National Geographic; rather, Gill's photographs are portals to a wry and richly realized alternate reality composed through a radical form of communal authorship.

Gill conceived of "Acts" in 2014, when she approached Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu— acclaimed papier-mâché artists from two of India's indigenous Adivasi tribes, the Kokna and Warli—to design a series of head coverings. They were inspired by the annual Bohada procession, a days-long performance in which entire villages enact mythological scenes. Unlike traditional Bohada masks, which are elaborately stylized works of religious art, Gill's commissions embody secular motifs: people, animals and household objects. Together, Gill and her masked volunteers co-create a sweeping, improvisatory fiction that collapses the distance between artist and subject.

The British Raj wielded photography to categorize and suppress India's scheduled tribes, whereas Gill consciously restores privacy and agency to these communities while providing a venue for self-expression. The camera—no longer an ethnographic instrument bent on fixing its subjects as exotic morsels—instead facilitates and occasions a pageant of everyday life. In a short essay accompanying the exhibition, Hemant Sareen writes that Gill's method of anonymous but cooperative play "[enlarges] the citizenry of photography," proposing a new temporality that liberates photographer and subject from the burdens of representation, scientific truth and public exposure.

Alongside the new works from "Acts" are entries from a parallel series, "Fields of Sight." Two massive, black-and-white photographs of lone figures in empty landscapes offer austere counterpoints to the brilliant colors of "Acts." Here, Gill invited the celebrated Warli painter Rajesh Vangad to inscribe intricate cosmologies and scenes of village life over each image in rich black ink. One of these exceptional works, The Great Pandemic (2021), tracks the catastrophic spread of COVID-19 across urban and rural settings, illustrating its global transit. In the composition's upper third, a city roils under a flock of infected airplanes. Doctors and nurses administer to rows of patients in hospital beds, hooked up to ventilators. Down below, village life proceeds seemingly unperturbed, though the future looms. A wriggling viral orb anchors this unsettled universe.

Gill has said that the photographs comprising "Acts" are less important than the process of their making. But the images are powerful records of the artist's relationship with a network of individuals, traces of the creative spark Gill kindled in the community and has nurtured over years. The mundanity of the tasks each sitter performs—loitering at a grocery, drawing water from a well—only underscores the project's remarkable depth. She has probed the normalizing effect of accumulation

and created a robust visual language of the subaltern, supplying the first entries of a promising counter-archive. By the time I left the show, it felt almost eerie to walk the streets of Manhattan and encounter regular humans with regular heads, talking on their phones or bickering, masked only in KN95s. —Christopher Alessandrini

Gauri Gill, Untitled (76) from Acts of Appearance, 2015-ongoing. Archival pigment print, 16 x 24 inches.