Chris Pinney's Remarks

Gauri Gill's "The Americans" on display in the Michigan Avenue Galleries is a remarkable body of work. To fully grasp what it is that Gill attempts in this project we need to understand something about an earlier project – the Jewish, Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank's work of the same name published in 1958. It is to this earlier work that Gill explicitly refers, and it is within this broader history of photography that her work needs to be placed.

Gill, who was born in Chandigarh in 1970, studied Applied Art at Delhi College of Art, and subsequently Photography at the Parsons School of Design in New York (where she interned with Mary Ellen Mark), and following that an MFA in Photography at Stanford. She is, as a consequence, a photographer with an astute sense of photographic history. It is perhaps also worth noting that she works in a variety of quite different styles. Her current projects include one concerned with life in rural Rajasthan over the last ten years. Another, "Nizamuddin at Night" presents stark, and carefully composed, black and white images of the Delhi neighborhood in which she currently lives.

The present show – "The Americans" – stands in strong contrast to that body of work. They have what the critic Gayatri Sinha perceptively describes as a "vivid chromatic snap shot quality" which directly engages a technicolor consumerism and those who are winning, and those who are losing, within this system. Hr pictures are unforced, intimate, fleeting: too casual and immediate, perhaps, for some tastes.

It is here that a positioning within photographic history can help tease out Gill's intentions and the power and complexity of the project she presents. Robert Frank made many journeys across the US during the 1950s, exposing a total of 28,000 images of an America in the grip of the Cold War and the amnesia of difference that the illusion of affluence encouraged. Frank worked with a compact Leica camera, often pre-focused in a 5-6 foot range so that he could capture that fleeting America of disenfranchisement and prejudice that he wanted to critique. Nationalistic patriotism, the arms race, and racial segregation were all objects of his attack. It was in America's sub-cultures that he found vitality and hope, and it is no coincidence that the Beat Writer Jack Kerouac would contribute the foreword to the first US edition of Frank's publication of 83 images from his vast archive.

Frank's photographic style was intimately linked to the sociological and political dimensions of his project. He wanted, as he wrote "to speak of things that are there, anywhere and everywhere, easily found [but] not easily selected and interpreted".

Whereas Robert Frank drove across the US with his wife and two small children, Gauri Gill thanks Rahul Gill, "bohemian banker" (who in this show is pictured in Graceland's, admiring Elvis memorabilia) for "driving her through five Southern States". Other journeys from New York and New Jersey through the Midwest and to California also leave their traces in the current show, including the five years she lived in the States, on both coasts.

Like Frank, Gill seeks the candid and revealing moment. This work has little of the highly formalized composition and stasis of much of the output of another Indian photographer who also studied with Mary Ellen Mark – Dayanita Singh.

When Frank's work first appeared it was largely condemned for its informality – its low lighting, unusual cropping and imprecise focus. So it is to this politicized aesthetic of the everyday that Gauri Gill pays homage. She too wants to "get beyond" the surface narrative of the American dream. But here we need to confront a paradox: both Frank's and Gill's work seem to present informal slices of the real, using the camera to record what Walter Benjamin called the "tiny spark of contingency" which photography uniquely seems able to capture.

But cutting through this highly uncontrived style is an intensity of highly mannered symbolism and allegory: a density of signs and signification (in Frank it was flags, jukeboxes and cars – symptoms of the military-entertainment-industrial complex; for Gill it is the presence of images of a mobile nostalgia and identity - Hindi film videos, a framed picture of Nargis, devotional chromolithographs, a small Santa Claus placed in the window of a jeweler's shop).

Let us briefly amplify this concern with allegory, which I think lies at the heart of Gill's work. Take what appear to be three opening images in the show. If you enter from the north we see two embodiments of the American dream – Alok and Sumati – in Silicon Valley, each opening the doors of their individual cars. But look again and we see alienation and disjuncture – their car doors unite at the very moment that the husband and wife face in different directions, the trajectories of the information economy pulling them apart.

Or, take a fascinating pair of images that greet you if you enter from the south. First, a party for Indian entrepreneurs at Washington D.C. – an embodiment of apparent success which is mirrored in an adjacent photograph of the elderly Kundan Singh of Yuba City who sits in considerable domestic splendor. He occupies an elegant chair, a huge potted plant to his left beneath which (and here allegory makes its appearance) a brass antelope sits. Brass antelope, or golden deer, we might ask, for this image is bound to evoke in many South Asian viewers an echo of the deer of maya or illusion after which Sita sends Ram and Lakshman during their exile from Ayodhya. It is while they chase the illusory animal, of course, that Ravan appears and manages to trick his way across the protective Lakshman rekha.

To these allegorical images we can add those that implode conventional stereotypes and explore disjuncture and alienation: a rath or chariot makes its way through the streets of Nashville; we see a puja shrine but also adoration at the shrine of Elvis; and a Gujarati employee is depicted in a Tennessee branch of Dunkin against a patterned backdrop seemingly substituting for the banyan tree backdrops so beloved of nineteenth-century colonial photographers in India.

In conclusion, let us return to Gill's similarity to, and perhaps difference from, Robert Frank. Frank's "Americans" was an explicit critique of the dominance and ideology of "corporate, political, religious, consumerist and family" values in Cold War America.

Given Gill's explicit invocation of Frank (apparent, as I've suggested at so many different levels), how should we understand the object of her critique? Does she intend to present Indo-Americans as part of a liberating counter-culture? Is she mounting a critique in part of a US consumerist dream that fails to deliver for most Indian-Americans? This seems implicit in a number of powerful images which take the viewer very close to the quotidian routines of low-paid manual work (for instance the moving diptych showing Laljibhai and Pushpa Patel cleaning the Days Inn West in Mississippi). But is she also mounting a critique from within of aspects of the Indic tradition, of targets such as religious orthodoxy, Bollywood and patriarchy? The display of cut-out victims from a benefit function for the subjects of domestic violence suggests this quite clearly. The serried ranks of Bollywood videos with peeling labels set alongside racks of salwar kameez may be intended to communicate the routinized repetitive actions of diaspora nostalgia. Or it may be intended to record its tenacity – its steadfastness, and endurance, in this new context. Such ambivalence, of course – and the power it gives the viewer to come to their own conclusions - is a considerable part of the power that Gauri Gill's project offers. Like Robert Frank's work, her images are not easily "selected and interpreted", but they speak of things that are there: "anywhere and everywhere".