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Gauri Gill's best photograph: a rat nursing an elderly woman

Interview by Dale Berning Sawa

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At the Bahoda mask festival in India, people dress up as characters from myth. But I wanted to have real people in real situations – as well as a rat



'This wasn't about making a comment on hygiene in hospitals' ... Untitled (9) by Gauri Gill, from the series Acts of Appearance, 2015.

In 2014, I was working in rural Maharashtra, in western India, when I heard about the Bahoda festival, in which papier-mache artists create masks of characters from Hindu and tribal myth. People are chosen to wear them and are consecrated by a priest, after which they “become” their characters and parade through their village over several nights.

The masks are spectacular. But I began to wonder why what is represented in rituals is often so idealised. Why are there no people with grey hair or big noses? Why is no one wearing spectacles? Why can't routine gestures, such as sweeping the floor, be enacted too, as opposed to the drama of slaying a demon?

I heard about a famous artist, Dharma Kadu, whose children are continuing the mask-making tradition. I went to meet them, their families and other artists in Jawhar, their home. I proposed they make masks depicting familiar characters, life stages, emotions and everyday occurrences. They said: “Well, we can make anything, but could you give us a sample?” I said: “There's no sample. It doesn't even exist in my mind!”

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They agreed to try and, over three years, made about 45 masks. I worked with 30 or so people to create scenes, deciding which characters to feature and where: school, hospital, bus stop, sweet shop. My actors were the villagers and there were no storyboards. It was all improvised.

Jawhar has one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the country, as well as infant mortality. There's a huge water crisis and very

little food – what they do have is very low quality. We heard a new health centre had opened nearby, so we went along to do a shoot one lunchtime, about 14 of us, all holding these masks. It was a working environment, so we had to be sensitive. The furniture still had its protective wrapping on, it was that new.

For this shot, we decided to portray an old lady being tended by a nurse. Then somebody suggested there should be a rat. Rats are common in hospitals across India, not just in rural areas. But this wasn't about making a comment about hygiene. As you can see, the rat is the most concerned character in the shot. He's really watching over the woman, as a friend.

The actors would all wear their own clothes, although sometimes they'd switch them around if we felt a character needed something different. But apart from the masks, nothing was fabricated for the shoots. It's all “real”. That said, there are so many potential versions of any event I've ever depicted. This shot is just

one idiosyncratic interpretation of that particular moment: the midday sunlight, the wind suddenly lifting the pages of the calendar, the way the rat has one toe curling up.

Bahoda masks are formal. Beautifully lacquered and finished, they take a long time to make. Ours were rougher, more experimental. That sense of freedom was also important. With outdoor shots in particular, a crowd would gather. People would have a million suggestions and children would want to join in. Once, two guys on a scooter rode past, screeched to a halt and immediately started filming on their phones. People would make jokes, drink tea, fool around. We would constantly be cracking up, then someone would call out for everyone to get serious again. You can't see any of it in the photographs, because they are only little fictions of what really happened – masks of a kind.



'Making the work is my high point' ... Gauri Gill.

Gauri Gill

Born: Chandigarh, India, 1970.

Training: Delhi College of Art; Parsons School of Design/The New School; MFA, Stanford University.

Influences: “Life and relationships.”

High point: “Making the actual work.”

Low point: “All the admin and other drudge work.”

Top tip: “Pay attention.”