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‘Part of My Job Is Just to Listen’: Photographer Gauri Gill on Her Peripatetic Art

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 07/24/18 4:32 PM



Gauri Gill, *Untitled* from “Traces,” 1999–ongoing.
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One night in August of 1986, lightning hit a 180-year-old farm not far from artist Jean Tinguely's studio in Neyruz, a rural town in Switzerland situated between Bern and Lausanne. Tinguely awoke and watched the ensuing destruction. "It was a fearsome, all-consuming fire, a dramatic, erotic, hellish experience," he recalled later. The blaze continued for days. "The source of the fire was so hot that not even a bulldozer would have been able to churn it up and disperse it," he said. "It was hell, it was diabolical."

After the flames were extinguished, Tinguely ventured inside. "I began to pull out pieces of iron from the tepid refuse, without knowing why," he said. There were scraps of metal and equipment, the scene caked with smoke and the flesh of cattle that had died in the inferno. It reminded him of a German concentration camp, and he used what he found there to make one of his most impressive and frightening works. Titled *Mengele – danse macabre* (1986), it is made up of ferocious-looking motorized creatures—one with a large hippopotamus skull—that screech painfully when they come to life in the dimly lit gallery that is their permanent home in the Museum Tinguely in Basel. One room over from that display is "Traces," a solo show by the Indian photographer Gauri Gill that is a redoubt of serene stillness. The walls are lined with huge black-and-white prints that each present a grave in West Rajasthan, India, near the border with Pakistan. One is a low mound of small rocks sprawled across the ground, a few pots sitting atop it. Another little hill is scattered with shattered crockery. The photos evince a potent sense of silence, of memories and identities embodied through objects and the natural world—all set down, just so, as a form of remembrance.



Gauri Gill, *Untitled* from “Traces,” 1999–ongoing.
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“I was interested in the human hand,” Gill told me last month, standing inside her exhibition and speaking of those graves, which are constructed by both Hindus and Muslims. “These are not rich people or people with a lot of resources. Where there’s carving, they’re sometimes writing it themselves. They may bring objects from the house, like tea cups or medicine jars.” Incense and pieces of cloth owned by the person are also frequently left at the graves. “There’s an intimacy,” the artist said.

Gill is 48, with shoulder-length black hair and a serious but warm charisma. She spoke quietly, as if we were in front of the graves themselves. When visiting cemeteries, she said, “I started to observe each grave itself and how in a way to me they’re quite—I don’t know whether to use the word ‘beautiful,’ but there’s a kind of”—she cut herself off. “In Delhi, the crematorium, or even the graveyards, I find quite depressing. [In West Rajasthan] there’s so much space—there is

the sky, there is often no one, there is the wind, and you almost sense that the body in a way becomes part of the landscape.”

Some burial markers are so subtle that one needs a guide to recognize them, as in the case of a dense circle of tangled branches captured in one photo in the show, which was organized by the museum’s director, Roland Wetzels, for an exhibition series that puts work by contemporary artists in dialogue with Tinguely’s *Mengele*. (It runs through November 1.) Those in the Bishnoi sect of Hinduism are responsible for some of the most minimal graves. “They are very ecologically sensitive and don’t wish to cut even firewood for a pyre,” Gill said, “so they only gather what is around the site to place on the grave and protect it from wild animals.”



Gauri Gill, *Urma and Nimli, Lunkaransar*, from “Notes from the Desert,” 1999–ongoing.
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Based in Delhi, Gill has been traveling to West Rajasthan to shoot photos for nearly 20 years—since 1999, when she first visited. “I saw a

girl being beaten in a village school. I was actually on holiday,” she said. “I was disturbed and wanted to do something.”

At that time she was working for *Outlook*, an English-language weekly news magazine. But, she remembered of her interest in the village schools, “There didn’t seem to be a space for it, because of course they said, ‘What’s the news peg?’ I said I wanted to photograph what it’s like being a girl in a village school. I then decided to take a sabbatical and I just started traveling around schools in Rajasthan. And then I had a series of encounters with people and quickly realized that this is not about school—this is a whole world.”

Though her parents had spent part of their own childhood years in villages, Gill said that people living in cities in India “are quite divorced, and somehow I wasn’t really aware. Suddenly I met all these people who just kind of blew open this other world. I started to think, Actually, I don’t know anything.”

One of the first people that Gill met in the area, a woman named Izmat who would become a friend and a subject in her work, introduced her to the graveyards. Izmat, at the time, was going to visit her father, and later her sister and her daughter passed away, Gill said. “People are lost quite easily. Things keep happening. There is a lot of loss in all of these communities.”

Over the two decades she has been visiting the region, Gill has assembled an expansive series called “Notes from the Desert,” made from the tens of thousands of images she has shot of life there. “It’s a big archive, it just keeps growing,” she said. “The harder part, or the less enjoyable part for me—but I feel the necessary part—is to sit down and pull out those threads, which is essentially a solitary activity.”



Gauri Gill, *Untitled* from the series “Acts of Appearance,” 2015–ongoing.
© GAURI GILL

Her photos suggest that the most enjoyable part might be when her camera is serving as a source of connection—a chance to meet new people and to understand the places they live and work. There is a rare kind of intensity—tender, even adoring—to many of her images, which catch children or women up close, looking directly at the camera with a little smile or a determined gaze. There are men, too, but they tend to leave the area to find work to support their families, Gill said, and women predominate in her photos.

Even when people are absent, her work can still radiate frenetic human activity, as in the sub-series “The Mark on the Wall,” which documents the walls of government schools, covered all over with paintings and writing. At Documenta 14 in Athens, some of these pieces, along with smaller prints of her “Traces” and “Proof of Residence” series, were shown at the Epigraphic Museum, among scores of ancient tombstones and other stone carvings. The display evinced the sense of centuries and centuries of disparate traditions flowing alongside one another—different means of preserving history coexisting, shored up against the power of time.

When photographers train their lenses on others, some form of give and take is always involved, but Gill seems especially attuned to the collaborative potential of that dynamic. She is curious about how other people work, and her art regularly

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affords a generous space for the creations and activities of those that she meets.

For the series “Fields of Sight,” which was shown at Prospect 4 in New Orleans, the Warli artist Rajesh Vangad adorned Gill’s images with intricate shapes, symbols, and figures in pen, building a whole new world within and atop them. And for the series “Acts of Appearance,” which is on view at MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York, through September 3, Gill asked more than 30 residents of Maharashtra, India, who are renowned for making papier-mâché masks for use in carnivals, to create new face coverings that she could photograph. The resulting works include indelible sculptures of a giant cobra, a television screen, a bird, and a variety of other animals. The mask-makers pose in them while performing quotidian tasks—weighing vegetables, sweeping the ground—in photographs that feel utterly one-of-a-kind: funny, strange, and discomfiting all at once. They are concealing their identities at the same time that they are putting their art boldly on view, through Gill’s eyes.



Gauri Gill, *Untitled* from “Traces,” 1999–ongoing.

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In Basel, Gill's tranquil graveyard photographs are separated from Tinguely's fearsome mechanical monsters by a wall displaying eight small photographs that Gill shot in 2005. They're hung on the side that faces out from her show, so it's possible to miss them if you don't look behind the partition—they're presented "like a secret," she told me. In the pictures, a birth is taking place on a dirt floor, guided by an elderly woman named Kasumbi Dai—"this wonderful feminist midwife who had lost her husband as a young woman and fell into this profession, which her mother practiced," Gill said.

Dai delivered many of the women in the neighboring villages and approached Gill about photographing the scene when her granddaughter was born. "She wanted me to document her work because she had learned to use modern techniques," Gill said. At one point during the birth, the photographer was conscripted into the action, asked to boil some water, working alongside the mother-to-be's 12-year-old niece and sister-in-law. "To be honest, my hands are shaking," Gill said as she looked at the photos, explaining that she couldn't use a flash in the dark room and that she doesn't remember some of what happened. In one photo, shot from above, three sets of women's hands are visible, reaching out and holding each, providing comfort as new life comes into the world.

The myriad forms of collaboration that structure Gill's work never seem forced. "It feels very natural. It is instinctive but also self-conscious," she said, when I asked if she had made a point of pushing her practice in that direction, "I think these are powerful voices, and I feel like part of my job as a photographer is just to listen."

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