

Professional and amateur pictures of war-ravaged Kabul on show in London

Gauri Gill's illuminating Kabul photographs share an exhibition in London with pictures taken by the ordinary people who live there



A silver gelatin print of a new building complex in Shahrak-e-Aria, Kabul, in 2009. The photographs that document the artist Gauri Gill's visit to Kabul in 2007 suggest a city that has been left for dead. In black and white, her shots are almost devoid of people: we see an illustrious library greying with dust, a bombed-in palace and a line of cattle seeming to approach its once-grand entrance. Anonymous hands grasp at the cages of the city's Ka Furushi bird market, as groups of tiny canaries whirr in a startled flapping of wings.

Yet among these sombre images, which form part of her current solo show at London's Green Cardamom gallery, Gill has exhibited a number of found photographs taken by a community of Afghans who offer a quite different - perhaps unlikely - vision of their homeland. In pairing these together, this latest collection, titled *What Remains*, reflects on the distance between observation and experience, and the unquenchable longing that comes with displacement. In 1992, Afghanistan had a 50,000-strong community of Hindus and Sikhs. They were business owners, money-lenders and owned houses with white-leafed orchards. But with the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979 and the

subsequent Taliban regime, this number has dwindled. There are around 2,000 left. Those with money have fled to Europe; those without go to Delhi.

The Afghan Sikhs displaced to India now exist without citizenship in the Tilak Nagar neighbourhood in the west of India's capital city.

"I first came to Kabul for a workshop with Afghan photographers who were looking for other ways to document their city beyond war and destruction," says Gill, when we meet in the London gallery representing her work. "On the way back to India, I landed in Delhi and took an autorickshaw. The driver was Punjabi Sikh - as am I - but his Punjabi was very different from mine. It was mixed with Persian words and phrases, and he explained that he was Afghan.

"He had left in the 1970s when Kabul was quite different from what I'd seen. He described a halcyon, idyllic Afghanistan - a place of blossoms and waterfalls."

The rickshaw driver introduced Gill to west Delhi's Afghan Sikh community - referred to as the "Kabulis" by the rest of the neighbourhood - via the Khalsa Diwan Hindu-Sikh Refugee Society. Incorporating a Gurdwara, the Sikh temple, the society runs classes in English, sewing and typing, and the artist began to photograph the day-to-day life of the centre. On a floor laden with thick Afghan carpets and glasses of green tea, Gill listened to the memories of several generations of refugees who remain on visit visas in India and often unable to work.

The Kabulis handed Gill a stack of their photographs, each one bordered with a kitsch, psychedelic pattern (clearly the handiwork of one print shop somewhere in Kabul). In these photographs, she noticed, the city seems warmed by familiar eyes. The children, old people, smiling unknown

turbaned men who pose in front of the remnants of Kabul's romantic past seem deeply entrenched in a city that appears to be collapsing around them and which they would very soon after be forced to leave.

"As they were talking about Afghanistan, this old man came and sat next to me: 'Even now when I sleep,' he said, 'my dreams are of Jalalabad.'"

Gill noted down this line and other recollections that she heard in the Gurdwara, and has inserted them - in fittingly kitsch italics - into the found photographs given to her. In *What Remains*, she exhibits these alongside her own shots from Kabul, and so presents a fascinating disparity between her impressions and the memories and dreams of a people displaced.

"These are two quite different versions of a place, and show that photographs become fictions if we try to find an authentic representation of a place," she said.

Some of the statements that Gill collected from the Gurdwara are curious: One anonymous person ponders that someone "must have put the evil eye" on Afghanistan, "like in Kashmir". Another talks about how Hindus and Sikhs were referred to as "big brother[s]" by the Afghan Muslims, who would trust them to take care of their money.

But most interestingly, a reference is made to the community's refugee status as "going back to India". While some Hindus and Sikhs went to Afghanistan from India during British rule of India and post-partition, the community's presence has been there since the 1500s. Does Gill think that when the Hindus and Sikhs were in Afghanistan, their dreams were of India? "I think it was probably hard for them to let go," she says. "Now it's going to be pretty hard for them to let go of Kabul and Afghanistan."

"One of my previous series was called The Americans, which was looking at several generations of south Asian-Americans. Even when there isn't a longing for a place, there are pulls, distant bonds that tie you to a place."

So much of What Remains gravitates around this notion of longing. How does our relationship with a place change when we're forced out of it rather than by our own choosing?

"People are taken from one place and placed somewhere else. Then, in this case, there's a double jump of history and they're brought back - often against their own choosing. I think this element of choosing is key. Some of them didn't choose to go to India, and feel quite bitter about the way they've been treated there."

Gill hosted a series of writing workshops for the children of Khalsa Diwan Hindu-Sikh Refugee Society: "I was very interested to see the raw response of the kids when asked about Afghanistan and see how they would filter this experience."

Some of these texts are included in the show, and range from rapturous adoration for an unknown Afghanistan, probably drilled into them by their parents (including a strange tale of the Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan strolling through Kabul), through to bewilderment about the state of their country today.

"In some ways, I wanted all these versions to come in and contradict each other," says Gill, referring equally to the haphazard, scattered placement of the images and texts on the gallery wall. "History is hard to hold on to solidly. But these are all little fragments, and not representative of the entire Kabuli-Sikh experience.

"It's a case of how ordinary people get swept along in massive changes and how that translates through generations."

What Remains marks the return of a series of exhibitions begun by Green Cardamom's founder Hammad Nasar in 2009. Titled Lines of Control, these shows - which took place in Dubai, London and Karachi - explored notions of both the chaos and creative kiln found in countries that undergo various different forms of partition.

Gill's solo show is part of the latest Lines of Control series, which will culminate in a huge group show of works at Cornell University in New York state in 2012.

"The people of this community had to pack up and leave their shops, their homes, and yet still hope to go back," says Gill. "But now they have to face the fact that they have to be in this new place, and in that sense there's a sort of partition: people are picked up and thrown into some other country somewhere."

The artist continues: "Part of this is really about the modern world. There are two levels to globalisation, those with agency are free to move around on their own will and means. But then there's another side in which people are forced to move to big cities." This economic migrancy, Gill observes, is as much about internal partitions as the changing ideologies that have shredded Afghanistan's multifarious cultural fabric. She talks about this constant beating drum of people moving in search of economic or social stability.

"The world in a way is all connected but there are also people who have to pay the price," says Gill. "I envy those who have lived in the same house for 20 years."

Updated: May 29, 2011 04:00 AM

Christopher Lord: Professional and amateur pictures of war-ravaged Kabul on show in London, Review of What Remains, The National new Dhab 2011