

The Desert-Mirror- Reflections on the photographs of Gauri Gill.

“...I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think”(1).

Hura crouches on the diagonal edge of jagged rocks, impersonating a beast! She can devour us with her tender craziness, like many of the protagonists in Gauri Gill's 'Notes from the Desert'. Printed at 50% grey, these notes- as if bleached by the blinding light of the desert, and offset by its harsh terrain- function critically at the edges of an 'Incredible India'!

To set up a photographic project in rural Rajasthan, in black and white, stretching over a decade, goes against the grain of several stereotypes; and signals the maturing of a 'voice' within the corpus of Photography in India. Defrocked of its color and tourism potential, Rajasthan, is scoured at the nomadic margins; revealing lives in transition: epic cycles of birth, death, drought, flood, celebration and devastation, through which they pass. The extremity of the situation requires no illustration or pictorialism- those vexed twins of the colonial legacy- especially from an insider, or the one who is led by the hand. Her subjects take her into their world, and she goes there like Alice. Her method embraces 'Time'- which does not 'naturally' exist inside a photograph, beyond the epiphany and commemoration of a moment (photography's melancholy and limitation is precisely this)- within a structure of intimacy and relationships that unravel their mysteries slowly.

Two projects perused simultaneously over the last decade by Gauri, map her education within the history of photography, while clarifying her (nomadic) ambitions. 'The Americans', which documented the Indian diaspora in the United States, paid a tongue-in-cheek homage to Robert Frank's work of the same name (1959): and 'Notes from the Desert'- crisscrossing Western Rajasthan, from Lunkaransar to Barmer to Osijan, recall Dorothea Lange's work with the FSA photography program (1935-44) that portrayed rural poverty during the depression years in the United States. The pendulum of homage and discovery swings between these polar opposites: urban night scenes in color in the big apple and the

impoverished desert in b/w and in natural light! Indeed, these notes are a 'retreat' from the all too familiar.

Donald Kuspit writing on Bill Viola's 'Deserts' says: "The desert is a place of solitude, purification, and initiation. Paradoxical, it seems catastrophically lifeless yet is a space of spiritual life, a mysterious arena of visual and emotional reversals- the ultimate uncanny"(2). I would like to suggest that the desert for Gauri Gill is this paradoxical hermeneutics- a site for exploring and testing the construction of 'self' through the mirror of the 'other' in a prolonged 'trial'- defying classification.

What is the necessary 'other' of the desert? That absent quantity/ quality- mirrored through the illusion of a mirage? To Bhana Nath ji's family and the other's at the desert fringe, this curious and compassionate girl with a camera, could just have been that! " I was interrupted by one who told me what was wrong with her life, and with great conviction impressed upon me that I should (go) to Delhi and tell people of the troubles of people in Barmer"(3). Let me risk a speculation here. The mirror inside a 35 mm analog viewfinder camera (2/3rd of this show is shot on this format) is this uncanny stand in for 'water' through which the desert is seen and for which the desert longs! This surreal two-way mediation of desire through the invisible mirror/water is what binds the photographer and the photographed.... "...it is the liquidity of the eye that makes us dream". (Paul Eluard)

There is something unhinged in the dire poverty and marginality of these people; in the wound of their gaze; in their mimetic excesses; in the inhospitable landscape; in the vicissitudes of survival- that is in sync with what Barthes calls the 'madness' within photography, its unhinged character (4). Landscape, animals and human beings- everything is in a huddle here, intertwined and interdependent, such that their spirit of survival shines through.

Out of a corpus of many thousands, the 63 photographs exhibited show the cycle of life, including a birth and a death, marriage and illness, but highlight themes of adolescence/innocence, mimetic play, performed portraits. Gauri approaches these unfolding dramas of life, to privilege innocence, play and solidarity. This is a rare

choice, indeed, for fragile qualities that keep hope alive, and possibly where rebellion and humanity may coexist.

Geeta reclines like a queen with her rooster on a charpai that bisects the frame horizontally. In this two tier arrangement, she alone occupies the upper birth, the rest of her kin are banished to the lower region. Gauri has to crouch low too, to snap this sweet allegory of power! Karima is holding hands with her friend who wears a sehra. They stand in a broken down house with no roof. Its lime-plastered wall is engraved with two lines that graphically draw a swing. The swing is in motion! Nimli hangs upside down from a tree like a monkey. Her friend Urma stands beside her. They both gently cradle each other's heads, almost creating a figure of eight. This tree seems to grow from Nimli's sex like a phallus. We are in a mind-field of 'punctums'- (that disturbance within the narrative 'studium' of a photograph that uncannily shifts its meaning) (5)

To our profane imagination, there is a distinct repressed homoerotic subtext to these photographs. What we encounter is a threshold that is ambiguous. Wild young girls hold hands; hold each other with a fierceness and tenderness that is at once a survival instinct, a sign of emotional interdependence, more than an exchange of Eros. What is fascinating, even at this level, is its celebratory critique of the emotional constipation of patriarchal modalities, which nurture no tender bonding of the same or opposite sexes outside of the bed. The efflorescence of sisterhood within this conservative system, seemingly does

not preclude same sex love, but makes no case for it either. There is an absence of self-consciousness and categorization, where aberration is as yet only physiognomic (Balika Mela Portrait #15) and adult desire can be played out as subversive enactments, reminding me of the 'Naktora' tradition in U.P (6).

The Balika Mela portraits, shot in a makeshift photo stall at a fair for adolescent girls organized by the Urmul Setu Sansthan in Lunkaransar in 2003- are again double edged with mime. Basic props, organized by Gauri locally, are filled in by her young subjects, with a rich flourish of (Brechtian) devices and actions (7). In portrait no. 11, two girls declare their friendship through an ablution on a basket of paper flowers. A third hand intrudes into this

frame with an offering of its own! In portrait # 9 and 1, we stand paralyzed in front of the funereal constraint in the bodies of these girls: the dark well of their eyes (like their dreams) burn a hole in our heart. In portrait # 2, a girl sits on a chair beside a tacky flower stand, in a scene typical of studio portraiture. Her dark glasses, however, are the punctum- her site of resistance.

In several photographs the punctum is located near the center of the frame, as if in the hair of a crosspiece: Ismat mounts a tree; Sushila's teeth clench a framed family photo; the head of the scarecrow boy is covered with a plastic bag; Jannat, fragile from her disability, looks at herself in the mirror.

The birth scene, presented in a small room in a series of 8 photographs, is the most cataclysmic of the show. Kasumbi Dai, her face etched with a thousand lines, delivers her grandchild with her bare hands. The to-be-mother's face is veiled, as she pushes out the baby, grasping and straining with the help of Kasumbi's assistant. Nearby, a school going boy sleeps through it all. The sac bursts, the baby's head emerges, and lo she is out, her first gasp of life in the sand! Bearing witness to something as primal and magical as this, outside all bourgeois notions of privacy, is an honor only bestowed on the trusted. The wide angle mid shot, allows Gauri to bend and rise in participation. Not too close, not too far; dignity can still be affirmed!

"It is no mean feat to make an art technically sophisticated yet subtly humane and compassionate, turning an instrument of instrumental reason—to the soul's cure" (8).

Anita Dube, New Delhi, May 2010.

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg43.
2. Donald Kuspit...on Bill Viola, *Artforum*, June 1990.
3. Gauri Gill, *Artist Statement*.

4. "I then realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it the pangs of love." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg116.

5. “... the punctum shows no preference for morality or good taste: the punctum can be ill-bred” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg 43.

6. Naktora is a Hindu tradition in which women enact a wedding among themselves. A mock ceremony, with women playing all the male parts: the groom, the bride’s father etc, with a lot of bawdy humor. This takes place when all the men leave for the bride’s house during wedding celebrations.

7. “ Exaggeration, flourish, a certain kitsch extravagance within language, any language, is something specific to the 'sense' of living in an underdeveloped society under strain. It comes from dark continents of pain, and is much more than an anti-alienation technique; on which the human substance feeds and yields to dreams. In it life is closely interlocked with death”. Anita Dube, *A few Notes*, Desire Garden catalogue, 1992.

8. Donald Kuspit on Bill Viola, *Artforum*, June 1990.

Anita Dube: Notes on Gauri Gill’s Notes from the Desert, Art India Magazine, 2010