

Gauri Gill

BY MAYA KÓVSKAYA | APRIL 23, 2010



Two girls pose in front of a crumbling wall with their outstretched hands clasped together, each carefully balancing a precious egg that echoes the small oval shelves cut into the sandy backdrop behind them. Those shelves appear as the eyes in an abstract face of tenuous life in the impoverished rural Rajasthani desert where these nomadic peoples live. *Karima and Nimli, in a Home Destroyed by Flooding*, like the other photographs in Indian photographic artist **Gauri Gill's** expansive ten-year study in Rajasthan, is displayed without a numeric date in her solo exhibition — "Notes from the Desert" — at the New Delhi gallery **Nature Morte**.

"This was taken the year the floods came," Gill offers in a caption. This sort of notation, rather than calendar date, is how the people she has been documenting since 1999 measure the passage of their lives. It was "the year of a great monsoon — when Barmer became Kashmir." Time, in this place of harsh extremes, human struggles, and great uncertainties, is measured by the significant events that have shaped the lives of the communities she has returned to again and again for over a decade: the death of a camel, the loss of a woman to a snakebite, Panchayat elections, marriages, and births.

The array of 63 photographs of varying sizes were selected out of more than 40,000 images taken by Gill during her repeated sojourns in the desert. Far from replicating the objectifying, disciplinary gaze of traditional colonial photography — or offering up her subjects as curious ethnographic specimens of cultural difference or subaltern subjugation — Gill's own integration into the community has shaped a

language of intimacy. She avoids larger narratives of backwardness and deprivation, creating instead a visual diary of her engagements with these people. Her investment in their lives makes her gaze compassionate but never condescending.

In the “Balika Mela” series, Gill set up a rural photo studio as part of a desert bazaar being held to entertain young girls and invited the children to learn about photography and have their photographs taken. The girls participated with gleeful seriousness and charming ingenuity, bringing simple props from home — a paper peacock, veils and shawls and newsprint hats — and striking poses, using their *mehandi henna*-painted hands to create images that were as much authored by them as the photographer. The artist’s desire to engage her subjects in creative dialogue pervades the whole body of images, and Gill deftly opens up spaces in her own visual language to allow the people in her images to become genuine interlocutors rather than simply subjects.

In *Urma and Nimli*, we see little Urma, watching the camera with fierce intensity, while she holds the face of her friend who hangs upside down with her legs wrapped around a tree branch. Through Gill’s series, we follow Urma from adolescence into adulthood and see how this bold little girl’s intense, penetrating stare never softens as she grows into a woman with a child of her own. In another, a lovely, frail girl named Janat watches herself in a hand mirror with a lost expression on her face, as if she is staring at herself across the divide between childhood and womanhood and is bewildered by what she sees.

Gill handles her subjects with the lightest possible touch, rather than manipulating them for affective impact. The works are displayed far apart from each other and without wall labels. You might never notice the continuities and ruptures in these lives if you are not paying close attention. But these subtle vicissitudes are, in fact, the ballast of the show.

One room in the gallery contains a series of small photographs in which the elderly midwife Kasumbi is delivering her granddaughter on the sandy floor of their desert hut. The veiled mother-to-be, arms clad to the shoulders in ivory bangles, strains and pushes. The midwife helps by pressing the soles of her feet against the laboring woman’s and grasps her hands to create resistance. We see the infant’s emerging head and the outstretched hands guiding it into the world, and then the newborn gasping its first breaths in the sand.

The great dramas of life and death, love and longing, growth and change, captured in these images are presented with the same matter-of-factness that accompanies these great life passages in this place — with unadorned humanity rather than maudlin sentimentality.

“To live out in the desert as a poor, landless person without a regular job amounts to an inescapable reliance on one’s self, on each other and on nature,” Gill writes. “The stakes are high, the elements close and life is as cheap as jokes are rampant. To sleep out on the icy cold sand dunes at night, in the winter, with only some tarpaulin and heavy old quilts, means that everyone must huddle in together along with the dogs, and breathe into the quilt. One isn’t quite sure what is what or who is who, in the huddle.”

While border skirmishes exist between so-called “documentary” photography and “contemporary art” photography — and cultural capital, market value, and access to the exhibition system often ride on conforming to the norms of one genre or the other — Gill gracefully spans this unnecessary, constructed divide. Her work allows us to feel that we could join these people in their huddle beneath those quilts; and breathing together to ward off the bitter cold of desert nights, we might find our common humanity together.