

Retellings

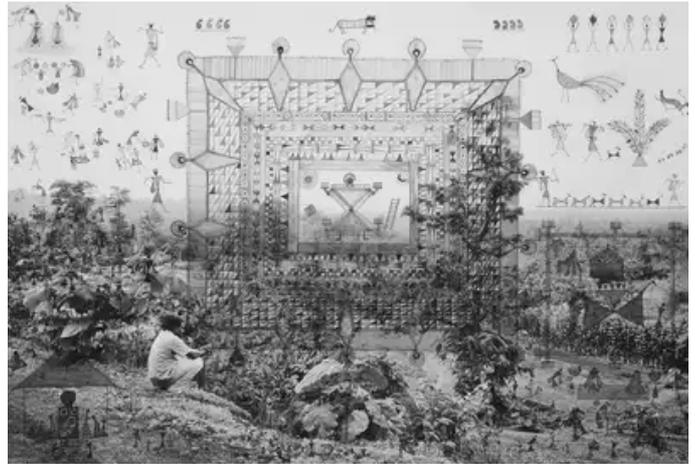
Reema Gehi
20/APRIL/2016

For her city show, photographer Gauri Gill collaborates with a Warli artist, returns to her desired muse Rajasthan, and finds traces of people in spaces they aren't physically present in.

In some of Gauri Gill's most telling images — as one has seen in the Birth Series (2006), or Balika Mela(2003/2010) — the human form has been at the centre of her work. "I love people and they have been present in almost all my work, but this is a departure," says the Delhi-based photographer, hours before her opening at Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke in Colaba last week. But you wouldn't entirely agree with the 45-year-old who is exhibiting in the city independently after a gap of six years.

Traces and remnants of people are omnipresent in the three bodies of work — Fields of Sight; Places, Traces and The Mark on the Wall — which make up Gill's recent exhibition, also titled, The Mark on the Wall. "The human hand is perhaps what ties these works together," she ponders, drawing our attention to a work titled, Gods of Home and Village, from the Fields of Sight series, for which Gill has collaborated with well-known Warli artist Rajesh Chaitya Vangad based in Ganjad (Dahanu). Gill was invited to live in Vangad's home, and to create work in and for the local primary school located in the adivasi village in coastal Maharashtra in 2013. "In conversations with Rajesh, whose family has lived for generations in Vangad Pada, working as artists, we began to discuss his village," she recalls.

Gill learnt of stories concerning the village such as tales of the river, the factory that changed the village, and defining moments such as the infamous raid that led to a bloodbath and a stampede. In a pursuit to explore these narratives further, Gill tentatively decided to photograph places significant to Vangad — often with him present in the frame. "He would take me to these special places, and I would decide where and how to construct the image, what to include within it, how to work with or against the light, how best to frame him within the landscape and so on," she explains. "It was a set of pictures about his place, a map determined by Rajeshji, and formally constructed by me — photographer as cartographer."



But later, when Gill went through her contact sheets, she realised that “so much of the narrative that I had received from Rajeshji – the great stories, which had made it come alive for me – was missing,” she says “I realised they were essentially still portraits of him in the present moment. Photography captures the now, but it also erases everything that came before.” The photographer then invited Vangad to draw over her pictures, to meet her text with his own. Gill speaks a contemporary language immersed in technology; Vangad’s work is more ancient, passed down by generations. “Rajeshji’s language, constructed with stick and brush, unfolds entirely from an encyclopedia of forms in the mind, which emerge to reflect the world, memory and myth: wind, disease, apocalypse – anything is summoned forth at will,” she says. To which Vangad, present at the show’s opening, responds, “I am a creation of the stories which live in my work. There are at least 60 stories I know. They concern gods, kings, man, the earth, Mahadeva, Parvati and the gods of the hills.”

In Places, Traces, Gill has on display unseen images from her ongoing series, Notes from the Desert. As her exhibition note reads, “This set of pictures from Bikaner and Barmer districts considers signs or marks impressed onto the landscape, in frames marked by corporal absence of human themselves.” In this series – showing among other images, the barbed wire boundary between India and Pakistan, a row of shoes in a school courtyard and waterwells in the desert – “the mortal imprints are often photographed from a distance, rendering them in relief against the vastness of the desert.” Harking back to the relationship with Fields of Sight, Gill was keen to present a different view of landscape in the exhibition. In this case it was her preoccupation with rural Rajasthan, which first began in 1999. “The landscape,” she says, “which we imbue with meaning depending upon our own relationship with it, and which does not exist in a pristine and self-contained isolation.”

For the third part of the exhibition, The Mark on the Wall – the title is borrowed from a Virginia Woolf short story, where the writer talks about getting obsessed with one little mark on the wall – the photographer returns to another ongoing series. Gill has been documenting drawings created by local artists, children and teachers in government schools in western Rajasthan that was part of the Leher Kaksha scheme since 2002. “The drawings were created for learning,” she says, pointing to an image of a mural that shows what to feed children suffering from diarrhoea. “There’s also a drawing of the alphabets on the wall that juxtaposes a yacht (spelt incorrectly as yachth) with a baingan; it made me wonder what a yacht has to do with a place that doesn’t even have any water, just because it is Y for Yacht in all the books from America or Europe,” she smiles. “Or the Salma and Saleem that have been discreetly placed into the image of a clock flanked by flags. Who are Salma and Saleem, and why is the clock paused at ten minutes to two?”

It is these little nuances that reflect in the immersive body of 76 images, which make it so moving. “To my mind, all three series are connected. Ranjit (Hoskote, cultural theorist) in his essay uses collaboration as one way to relate them,” she points out. “It is certainly intrinsic to my process – as with Balika Mela which were collaborative portraits, or then the 1984 notebooks where artists responded via written texts to my photographs to suggest alternative ways of addressing the unspeakable.”

At its heart, the show, she says, “is about ‘mark making’ whether by people onto the landscape, or a great artist like Rajeshji onto my photographs (or mediated landscapes), or of artists, children and teachers in village schools, who make marks of assertion in which there is not only fragility, but also agency. I find, therefore, grounds for optimism.”

There are layers and layers in the conversation that the three series speak with each other, and that urge the viewer to listen to Gill’s work carefully.

All images by Gauri Gill

<https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/others/sunday-read/Retellings/articleshow/51858210.cms>