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LUCRECIA MARTEL
PAUL MAHEKE
BARBARA HAMMER

ARTFORUM

APRIL 2015

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

\$15.00



NEW DELHI

Gauri Gill

NATURE MORTE

"Who does the indigenous turn belong to?" asked keynote speaker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak at the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh this past February. The postcolonial theorist posed this question in response to the recent focus on so-called indigenous practices—a focus made manifest, in particular, in a critical-writing program at the summit. Prodding us to question the very term *indigenous* and its historical origins, Spivak recalled the distinction between work that acts as an extension of the colonial project and work that subverts it.

The same month, Gauri Gill held her exhibition "Acts of Appearance" in New Delhi. At the entrance, in place of a curatorial wall text, the artist displayed the names of thirty-three people from an *adivasi*, or indigenous community, in the Indian city of Jawhar in Maharashtra. Over the course of three years, Gill worked with artists there—makers of papier-mâché objects for sale in government shops and masks for village festival processions—and proposed that they consider producing masks that also reflect on and reimagine their own contemporary experience. In Gill's ongoing series of color photographs begun in 2015 from which the show took its title, we see a cast of artists and actors, otherwise normally dressed, performing mundane acts while wearing masks representing animals, objects, planets, or people. A sun- and moon-headed couple walk down a village path; a rabbit, owl, and monkey stare back at us from their school desks; and a young woman and a gray



Gauri Gill, *Untitled* (13), 2015–, ink-jet print, 24 × 16". From the series "Acts of Appearance," 2015–.

mouse attend to an elderly patient in a hospital. The fictional is worn against a backdrop of reality, and the everyday becomes a locus for play. In the media, India's *adivasi* communities are mostly pictured as impoverished and oppressed, struggling with education, health care, water, and land issues. Gill's work, by contrast, foregrounds small acts of daily resilience and expression. An eagle-headed woman sweeps the ground in front of her home; a snake-faced man weighs onions on a scale at a local shop; and a person with a mobile phone for a visage casually eats a snack below two traditional-style paintings from the Warli community of Maharashtra, which today also has many contemporary manifestations.

The juxtaposition of these recent images with "The Mark on the Wall," 1999–, a series of black-and-white photographs depicting imaginatively painted anatomical, geographical, and instructional diagrams from rural Rajasthan,

created echoes and openings. Just as the protagonists are choreographed and choreograph themselves in "Acts of Appearance," the photographed drawings in "The Mark on the Wall" showed culture as a site for reinvention, and subjectivity as a space of agency. Similarly, selected black-and-white images from "Notes from the Desert," 1999–, pointed to Gill's long-standing investigation into the interplay between obscurity and power.

Taken together, these multiple series illuminated Gill's thoughtful engagement with marginalized communities, wherein nothing is sensationalized, nothing is exoticized, and nothing is explicitly said—yet so much is conveyed. This sensitive balance was clearest in an image of a man in a deer mask posing against an array of papier-mâché deer; the artist's mask, the artisanal objects, and the fine-art photograph occupy the same plane, challenging a simplified reading of such practices, interventions, and lives. Gill's heterogeneous casts and scenarios suggest nuance over reduction and immersion over distant observation. At the same time, Gill acknowledges the limits to such agency, and questions terms such as *collaboration* and *participation*.

Significantly, the profits from this series are to be shared with the community, and an exhibition is to be staged within the space in which it was produced. These measures may be steps toward returning to, or even upsetting, the question to whom the indigenous turn belongs, giving it back to the communities themselves.

—Jyoti Dhar