

Photographer Gauri Gill takes her desert journeys

Talking about perspective and how different views of the same thing can shape personal narratives, Photographer Gauri Gill says, “The truth reveals itself differently to each of us.

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The Drought, the Flood, from the series Fields of Sight, (2013 — ongoing) by Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad.

Gauri Gill has always managed to accurately depict the realities of our time, and also raise questions about it, especially through her photographs of individuals and communities. The 48-year-old contemporary photographer still challenges established norms like she did in high school, when she defied her art teacher and created an abstract painted installation instead of a required figurative portrait.

The urge to uproot convention is apparent in her latest project, too. It was in 2013 that Gill first started to work in rural Maharashtra — she spent time in Dahanu, at Warli artist Rajesh Vangad's home, to create work in and for the local primary school. She learnt about the sacred Bahora masks — brightly painted and lacquered — produced by papier-mâché artists across Maharashtra, and the annual procession where Adivasi villagers don them to tell tales from mythology and folklore. Almost a year later, she approached a community in Jawhar district, asking them to deviate from classical representations to create masks that depict contemporary realities. “I wondered if we could work together to speak about the present moment, what was around us, rather than a mythological, imagined past,” says the Delhi-based photographer.

The collaboration resulted in a set of masks inspired by people and animals, objects and technology, realities and dreams. The villagers are both creators and “performers” who wear the headgears in photographs that comprise the series “Acts of Appearance”. Currently on display at MoMA PS1 — one of the largest US-based contemporary art institutions — the series features, among others, a doctor with an elephant head examining an elderly woman in a hospital; a cobra weighing onions at a kirana store; and masked men and women looking out from a bus. “We are not telling a scripted story about any particular issue. We just improvised different scenarios inspired by real life in and around the village, across dreaming and waking states. The papier-mâché artists brought their own imagination to the performance, as did I. The landscape, too, is an important character. The aim, if any, was to have a dialogue between our respective mediums, and thereby create manifold and collective visual identities to tell a kaleidoscopic story about an unfolding world,” says Gill.

A recipient of the 2011 Grange Prize, Gill has attempted, earlier as well, to eliminate the distinction between artists, subjects and artisans. For her series “Balika Mela” (2003-2010), she had set up a makeshift space at a local fair for teenage girls in Lunkaransar, Rajasthan, where the protagonists were invited to choose their own props, poses, co-participants and backgrounds. Her project, “Fields of Sight” (ongoing since 2013) is an equal collaboration, in which Vangad paints over Gill's photographs of the landscapes of Dahanu.

A graduate from Delhi College of Art (1992), Gill made her first trip to western Rajasthan in 1999. Little did she know that her quest to photograph India's hinterlands would take her the world over. Her works have travelled to the prestigious Centre Pompidou in the exhibition “Memories from the Futures: Indian Modernities”, the seventh Moscow Biennale, as well as the Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, among others.

Gill vividly remembers the incident that prompted her to embark on her ongoing desert archive “Notes from the Desert”. On a holiday to a village near Jodhpur in 1999, she had seen a young girl student being beaten violently with a stick by a school teacher. Back in Delhi, she proposed an essay to a prominent news publication on “what it is like being a girl in a village school”, only to be dismissed due to the lack of a specific news peg. In the following years, Gill travelled across Rajasthan with a self-made map of government schools, including projects such as marushalas (desert schools), and other experimental schools. Some of her early photographs of drawings on school walls feature in the series “The Mark on the Wall”. As this desert archive has expanded, photographs from it feature in numerous other series conceived by Gill — in “Birth Series”, a midwife is seen delivering her granddaughter, in “Traces”, Gill documents burial sites in the desert. The world now knows Izmat, a single mother of two in Barmer, whom Gill has photographed many times since 1999, when she grabbed her by the arms and began to tell her about everything that was wrong with the place. “When I said I was from Delhi, she urged me to return and tell all of it to Sonia Gandhi — she believed every citizen of Delhi was in contact with Gandhi. She took my address and started to write me letters,” says Gill. The correspondence continues to this day, now in the form of texts and phone calls.

True exposure to contemporary art and art history, for Gill, came during her years of a second graduation (1994) and post-graduation (2002), from Parsons School of Design/The New School and Stanford University, respectively. “At Stanford, the programme was not medium specific, but driven instead by ideas. I was a photographer, the rest of my class came from a fairly interdisciplinary background. One friend was painting murals as well as graffiti on the streets of San Francisco, for instance, another was working out farming and ecology concerns using intelligent design. Our peers were critical of who we were, and we would have long conversations about our work, essentially create our own programme. I studied gender, psychology and anthropology,” recalls Gill. When she returned from the US, she was already working on a series that documented Indian immigrants in the US, starting with her own friends and family and extending outwards into the community. These were later exhibited under the title “The Americans” — first displayed at Bose Pacia in Kolkata in 2008. “I decided to position it as a conversation with Robert Frank’s seminal work “The Americans”. He had his version of who was American, and this was mine,” Gill says.

Talking about perspective and how different views of the same thing can shape personal narratives, Gill says, “The truth reveals itself differently to each of us. There is no one version of events. Even so-called realistic documentary photography is n ally a subjective interpretation of the world. There are choices you make at every step that determine how you will express your experience, and make it your own. My desire to collaborate with others arises in order to extend the limits of my own understanding” says Gill.

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