

FEATURE

Image as Dwelling Gauri Gill's photography and collaborative approach

Gauri Gill's photographs sensitively approach the people she portrays. The works of the Indian artist are completely devoid of stereotypes and voyeurism. Instead, they show respect, empathy, and solidarity. Natasha Ginwala on Gill's photography and collaborative approach.

Natasha Ginwala



Gauri Gill. Photo: Anil Rane



Untitled, from Acts of Appearance, 2015—. Courtesy Gauri Gill.

The archive is a physical infrastructure but also circulates as field of citation. And personally assembled archives tend to be organic just as the soil under our feet—a terra firma of images that breathe porously, host life forms, and metamorphose over time. Gauri Gill has composed an itinerant archival record led by her travels, friendships, and collaborations across vast stretches of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan since 1999. She refers to this archive which presently consists of over 40,000 negatives and personal correspondence as Notes from the Desert. Periodically, different sub-series are released as a mode of re-editing and citation. Moreover, this practice is an unceasing and intimate documentation process observing the trials of nomadic living, desert graves, local festivals, and rural schools, while it is simultaneously invested in a slowed form of storytelling echoing a gradient of lifetimes.

Gill's photographic corpus articulates micro-histories of dispossession and an agential spirit around memory-keeping. As Gill reflects: "Collective memory works through all of us when we are able to listen. I feel my job is only to listen, closer and keener, especially to the wordless, shy, or those lacking the self-confidence—which usually derives from privilege—to express themselves freely." In her photographs, we witness time and again how the parched landscape of the desert acts a place of resilient imagination, daily invention, and survival techniques. In treating the desert-as-studio, Gill captures ephemeral moments, familial relationships, and communal experiments in portraiture. The textural grain and spectral light of the desert (1) provide her silver gelatin prints with a unique depth and corporeality. Inevitably, the archive is not an abstraction in the way that a map is, rather it is determined by a sense of place and the tapestry of kinship.

Roland Barthes notes in Camera Lucida: "I want a History of Looking. For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. Even odder: it was before Photography that men had the most to say about the vision of the double."⁽²⁾ A critique on observation and image making as a figure of double consciousness—of seeing one's self through many eyes—are seminal to Gill's approach.



Untitled, from Acts of Appearance, 2015—. Courtesy Gauri Gill.



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In her most recent work, *Acts of Appearance* (2015–ongoing), she initiates a collaborative process among an intergenerational group of Adivasi papiermâché artists, including Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, Subhas Dharma Kadu, and several others from the Kokana tribe in Maharashtra’s Jawhar district. The creation and donning of masks is constituted here as a collective practice, deploying show-and-tell, coaction, and improvisational scripting with the entire village: from the water pump, public hospital, and shopping stalls, to private homes and the bus stop, all of which function as animated backdrops. In virtually re-writing the rules of masquerade in accordance with local festivity, newly imagined mythological role-play, kinship with the animal kingdom, and daily conundrums performed as a civic dramaturgy, the protagonists in *Acts of Appearance* confront us head on, while embedded within their own communal ties. Gill cautiously manoeuvres her return to color within this expressively charged and life-like series of performative photographs while still delving into the realm of the absurd.(3)

The series *The Mark on the Wall* (1999–ongoing), titled after Virginia Woolf’s short story of the same name, records scenes from visual pedagogy and didactic exercises composed onto the outer and inner walls of rural desert schools. These are coproduced by teachers and locally commissioned artists, and lead school children to encounter lessons in human physiology, emblems of the nation state, the solar system, and simple arithmetic, but also foreground aspects such as socially prescribed family roles via lists, diagrams, and maps on classroom walls. While Woolf’s narrative follows “an aesthetics of juxtaposition” (4) these drawings as teaching tools convey a layered worldview that is both prescriptive and wildly imaginative, tracing animated processes of learning in village schools across Rajasthan under the now-lapsed government policy known as *Leher Kaksha*. In close-up views of wall drawings and the simultaneous tracking of the desert terrain outside, Gill’s photographs reveal the daily experiences of remote schooling and how restricted access to education impacts individual lives. In relating *The Mark on the Wall* to other works, Gill states: “To me they are connected to the later series in different ways—the human hand and what it makes and reveals about the individual and larger culture, but also how even in the starkest of landscapes and in places with scarce economic resources, local artists continue to express themselves with power, beauty, and elegance; how they carry on finding ways to exert agency and voice”.

Gill initiated *Fields of Sight* (2013–ongoing) through extensive discussions and walks around the coastal Maharashtra village of Ganjad, its neighboring town Dahanu, the sea, river, and forest with third-generation Warli artist Rajesh Vangad. In drawings executed upon photographs shot by Gill, Vangad uses the Warli lexicon as a template to delve into botanical life, community rituals, and oral legends, mingling these with stories of urban development and industrialisation. In this mode, where the drawn line interacts with and interrupts the photographic plane, Vangad and Gill conjoin visible and invisible worlds, bestowing a sublime poetry to the technical life of photography.

In this series, works such as *The Drought*, the Flood collapse temporality as ecological futures come to the foreground, sounding a warning call in a rapidly changing constructed environment. Gill stresses: “Both the drought and the flood can co-exist across landscapes, including in Rajasthan and Maharashtra—one year Lunkaransar—where I had grown accustomed to photographing continual drought-like conditions—got so much rain that the saline soil could no longer absorb it. The waters overflowed and destroyed people’s homes ... and then look at Vidarbha alongside the floods in Bombay and Dahanu, even this year they were exceedingly worried because the rain would not stop and kept coming down hard, leading to sickness and the destruction of property.” Vangad notes: “Through overflowing rivers and the sea, there is disruption of electricity, vehicular traffic and destroyed homes ... life is impacted and disturbed in many ways”.

In certain works divine traditions, origin myths, and ancestral relations are invoked in correspondence to their role within contemporary Adivasi life. Highlighting the life of objects and inspired by Vangad's Dussehra Puja (a Hindu religious ritual during the annual festival) in Gill's Delhi home, *Sacred Gods, Revered Things* reveals how tools, including contemporary appliances and the artist's tool kit, "need to 'breathe' and 'feel free' while being attributed sentience as part of the festivities. With the equation of mythical, divine form and daily objects such as a broom, a mobile phone, and a gas cylinder, such quotidian objects are re-codified as according to an animist worldview. As Vangad explains, "Implements such as the sickles used to cut rice during the harvest, the hal (a plow pulled by a bull), baskets, or the jhadu (a broom) are afforded more respect than humans, they become god-like, as they always stay with us and are used by us daily. We keep them with care and pray to them as our life itself is dependent upon them."

Speaking of *Gods of the Home and Village*, Vangad says, "In the beginning were Shiva and Parvati, who created the world. In this work we have shown two gods—Palghat Devi, who, like Mahalaxmi, is auspicious in every way, and Paanchsira, the male god with five heads seated on his horse. Both of them have shakti, or power, and can remove all our troubles and grant us all we need. Both should be together, the way both Ranjana (my wife) and I exist in our home."

When standing before Gill's photographs of desert graves—handmade mounds surrounded by the shards of clay vessels, a medicine bottle, and pieces of cloth—one is intensely aware that if death is a passage rather than an end, we are all travelers within a cycle of life and afterlife. Throughout *Traces* (1999–ongoing), the artist traverses the edges of villages and on occasion visits such graves with a local friend. Some are unmarked, while others have a date or name inscribed by hand onto stone. This act of commemoration is realized in an elemental way, with the burial site coming undone and eroding over time. In particular, nomadic communities such as the Jogis and the Meghwals face social discrimination that carries over into the rites of death and determine where a body may be laid to rest. In cases such as that of the Bishnoi community, Gill remarks, "there is also an ecological imperative at work. The Bishnois are such great environmentalists they don't even cut any wood or use extraneous resources to make their graves. They only use what is already there."⁽⁵⁾

At documenta 14, the series *Traces, The Mark on the Wall, Proof of Residence, and Birth Series* were installed at the Epigraphic Museum in Athens—one of the largest and oldest museums of its kind in the world. Gill's works were interspersed among several rows of shelves full of Greek and Roman marbles bearing inscriptions of land titles, birth announcements, and legal codes. By placing the works in that archeological context Gill brings alive debates around authorship and anonymity; corporeality and embalmed materiality; and civilizational narrative and systemic violence. Upon this stage, we are reminded that the photograph's primary raw materials are light and time ⁽⁶⁾; it wrestles with representative truth and renders the process of observation self-conscious, once more emerging, deathless.

(1) Anita Dube, *The Desert-Mirror: Reflections on the Photographs of Gauri Gill*, 2010. gaurigill.com

(2) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York 1981, p. 12.

(3) Natasha Ginwala, *A Multitudinous Cast*, January 2018. naturemorte.com/exhibitions/actsofappearance/

(4) Jennifer Julia Sorensen, *Modernist Experiments in Genre, Media, and Transatlantic Print Culture*, Oxford, 2016.

(5) scroll.in/magazine/830031/photographer-gauri-gill-uncovers-the-secret-lives-of-graves-in-rajasthan

(6) John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, London 2013.

Natasha Ginwala is a curator, researcher, and writer. In 2017 she was the curatorial advisor for documenta 14 as well as curator of *Contour Biennale 8*. Since spring 2018, she joins as curator at Gropius Bau, Berlin.

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All images by Gauri Gill

<https://db-artmag.com/en/102/feature/image-as-dwelling-gauri-gills-photography-and-collaborative-appr/>