

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Harnessing the Revelatory Power of Masks

For almost 20 years, Gauri Gill has documented the lives of nomads, peasants, tribals, migrants, and other marginalized communities of rural India.

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21/JULY/2018



Gauri Gill. "Jogiyon ka Dera, Lunkaransar" from "Notes from the Desert" (1999-ongoing), © Gauri Gill (all images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted)

“Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” – Oscar Wilde

Joy, and small ironies, abound. The Housefly gazes down lovingly at a Young Man asleep in the field. A Farmer and his Dog huddle together against the haystacks. Parrot and Owl stride hand-in-hand. Three Gossipy Ladies share a front stoop and catch up on the day’s news. Water Buffalo looks on as Two Women, young and old, pump water from a well. A svelte Madame Cobra curls up like an odalisque. A Water Bottle stands ankle-deep in a shallow pond. Sun and Moon take a casual stroll, gazing up at the sky. These are a few of the quirky masked warriors that populate Gauri Gill’s world in a new body of work, *Acts of Appearance* (2015-ongoing).

It’s only on closer inspection that we notice other niggling bits. Owl’s t-shirt announces that he has no girlfriend, and no job, and wants to go to Delhi. Plastic waste gathers about Water Bottle’s ankles, and Moon is missing a hand. A bundle of contradictions portending that in this world, as in all others, joy cannot exist without sorrow.

Project 108: Gauri Gill, organized by Lucy Gallun and currently on view at MoMA PS1, presents different periods of Gauri Gill’s examination of Indian subcultures existing on the fringes of the modern nation. The color photographs that comprise *Acts of Appearance* doubly expand on Gill’s collaborative engagement with indigenous artists, and extend the possibilities of the photograph in manufacturing a social document.

While spending time in rural Maharashtra, India, at work on her collaborative series, *Fields of Sight* (2013-ongoing), with the Adivasi (indigenous) artist Rajesh Vangad, Gill heard of a yearly festival held in the spring called the Bahoda, celebrated by Adivasis in the region. During the festival, a procession is held in which local villagers wear colorful, lacquered papier-mâché masks of iconic gods and demons from Hindu scriptures as well as local myths, and enact codified performances over several days and nights.



Gauri Gill, "Untitled" from "Acts of Appearance" (2015-ongoing), © Gauri Gill

Gill, who had long been interested in masks and the performance of identity later sought out a pair of sibling artists, Bhagvan Dharma Kadu and Subhas Dharma Kadu, sons of a legendary craftsman, along with their extended families and other local villagers, a growing group that became more than 30 people as the project took shape, and to whom she proposed a new project involving the community and their mask-making traditions.

The indigenous artists, from the Kokna community in Jawhar District, were accustomed to making both canonical, sacred masks for community festivals and decorative objects for the marketplace. Everyone in the village navigates complex and uncertain lives, juggling crafts, farming, family, and other demands, which may include migrating to the cities for work, in order to survive. Creative freedom and imaginative play are unaffordable luxuries for these skilled craftsmen. When Gill approached them to make unique, secular masks that would reflect contemporary figures in the village, and which would then be used to improvise a story they would tell together about daily life, the artists were naturally flummoxed.

“Despite the talent, there was a lack of confidence. As there was no precedent, they asked for samples, and of course there were none. I was interested in what was to come from them and had no predetermined idea or script myself,” Gill writes in an email. Instead, she suggested ways to think about real people in the village, to include babies, the old, or the sick, facial expressions that might include the subtler emotions, and to observe distinctive personal features like spectacles, a moustache, large nose, or mole. “Once they began work they kept asking if the masks were ‘good’ or ‘bad’. But I thought they were all quite wonderful and would not interfere. Every single mask has been used in the photographs.”

Together, Gill and the artists created a rough blueprint for the project, which evolved constantly in the course of the three years they have spent on it so far. Animals, an important presence in village life that had never been represented before, were included from the start, like the housefly, goat, frog, donkey, fish, cat, and eagle. Objects too, like the TV, mobile phone, and water bottle. According to Gill, ordinary objects like a *jharu* (floor sweeper) are revered, and even prayed to as worthy tools in Adivasi culture. The nine emotions of *rasa* (an Indian branch of aesthetics) were to form the base for the facial expressions of the masks, alternating between awe, laughter, compassion, and sorrow, among others. “Tribal artists are often expected to perform their culture, rather than having the freedom to explore individual ideas or expressions, be it interiority or abstraction, the way art-school trained artists are. I wanted them to be able to think about their own lives and experiences for a change, to have the space for creative play, and to use the traditions to reflect current realities.”



Gauri Gill, “Acts of Appearance” (2018): installation view (image courtesy MoMA PS1)

Notes from the Desert (1999-ongoing) and The Mark on the Wall (1999-ongoing), earlier continuing series by Gill, are paired with Acts of Appearance to create multivalent narratives. For almost 20 years, Gill, who is from New Delhi, has documented the lives of marginalized, rural communities in the Thar Desert in Western Rajasthan, including nomads, peasants, tribals, and migrants. The black and white photographs of these series, composed of delicate silvery tones, recall sand trickling through the valve of an hourglass: a marker for the passage of time in a place sealed in stillness, where nary a thing moves in the midday sun.

In “Jogiyon ka Dera” from Notes from the Desert, a young, barefoot boy with arms outstretched, stands on the hot, baked earth. A dusty plastic bag covers his head, the expression on his face a grin or a grimace, rendering him a living corpse. The assertion of vulnerability, and Christ-like stance, are reminiscent of a diabolical, Brueghelian caricature. He’s fooling around (and undoubtedly, posing for the camera), but it’s clear that the games children play in such places are darker than elsewhere, a reflection of their grim lives, but also a welcome reminder that even within bleakness, there are moments of spiritedness and play.

Similarly, in the wonderful portrait “Urma, after the flood” from Notes from the Desert, we meet an audacious young Jogi (nomadic) woman, who strikes a hilarious pose as a drunken bridegroom. Her face, as all the faces in this exhibition, is partially concealed — this time with a flower-decked sehra (the veil worn by bridegrooms). In her left hand, she brandishes an eagle-like statuette that, it turns out, is actually an empty, limited-edition bottle of Old Monk rum. The impossibility of flight from this place is uncannily underscored.

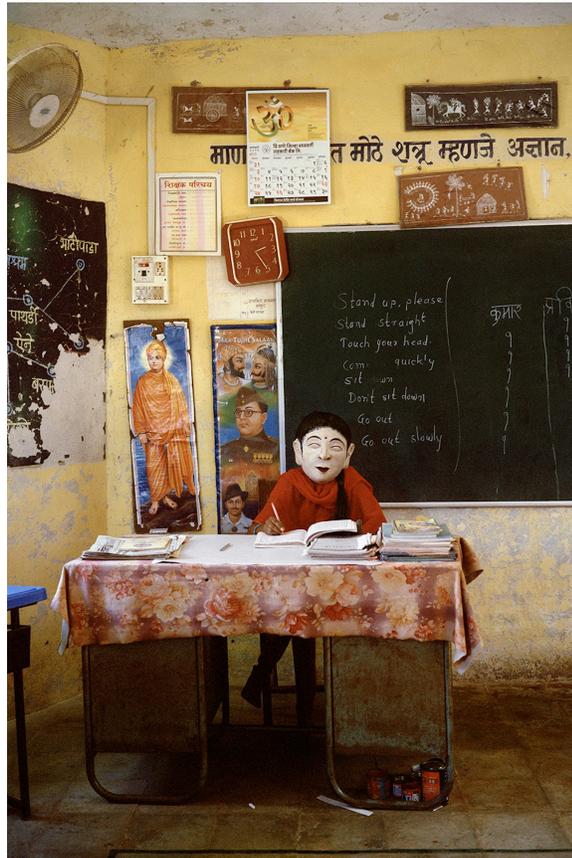
The act of concealing one’s face, or shrouding it in some way, confers anonymity, enabling a kind of inversion of normality and reason that still has the potential, as Oscar Wilde suggested, to reveal the truth. In Acts of Appearance, masks play a dramatic role, at times harnessing the revelatory power of allegory as a device to evidence social tensions and systemic failure. In a striking photograph, a Bespectacled Woman perches on the makeshift step of her hut, reading a newspaper. Her sandaled left foot protrudes from under the cloth of her sari. A splash of green pigment frames her upturned foot, reflecting the forest behind her. In the backdrop, slightly off to the right, a Bear Man prowls in the shadows. We instantly recognize this domestic tableau as a make-believe world, but the subtext of gender violence indicates a darker reality lurking behind the façade.



Gauri Gill, "Untitled" from "Acts of Appearance" (2015-ongoing), © Gauri Gill

Another photograph nearby depicts four masked characters. A Donkey Man leans against a dirt mound, his left arm outstretched, angling up his left shoulder, while another masked figure with an inscrutable expression squats on top of the mound, a hand gesturing towards a pair of women below. This apparently anecdotal scene is an implication of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, a government scheme intended to provide wages for work to the rural poor. In this context, we read the actor seeming to hover on high as a contractor or government agent, a symbol of class exploitation — an interpretation corroborated by the presence of the Donkey Man. In practice, in Indian society, those on the lowest social rung, like the Adivasis, are accorded less value than beasts. It's a sharp critique of a system that has been built on the edifice of economic slavery.

Jawhar, home to these Adivasis, has the highest rates of malnutrition in the state of Maharashtra. They, like other tribal and indigenous people, have been persistently depleted by drought, deforestation and illegal land grabs. Access to basic resources like food and clean water have been short-circuited, along with their fundamental human rights. Gill's photographs detail a community with substandard living facilities, hospitals and schools, ill-equipped to protect them from natural calamities, heal the sick, and educate their children. "Often, in a portrait, our attention goes mainly to the face. When access to the face is denied, our attention is heightened and we see everything else more clearly — the landscape, which is a character in itself, the body which absorbs and expresses the landscape and every circumstance, each gesture reflecting the antecedents and playing out histories. Most of the time we are conditioned to see things a certain way," writes Gill in an email.



Gauri Gill, "Untitled" from "Acts of Appearance" (2015-ongoing), © Gauri Gill

Power, and its corollary, corruption in all forms, thrive on powerlessness. In a photograph from *Acts of Appearance* depicting a classroom, a teacher looks up from her desk, her face a blank stare devoid of pupils. Behind her sit an assortment of informational, instructional, and utilitarian objects, including a pair of faded and torn posters of India's iconic Hindu warrior kings, mystics, and freedom fighters. Among them, Swami Vivekananda, who revived Hinduism in the 19th century and developed the concept of nationalism in British India, and Subhas Chandra Bose, the subversive nationalist who campaigned for Indian sovereignty during WWII.

A patriotic slogan on one of the classroom posters reads in Hindi, "Maa tujhe salaam" ("Motherland, salute to you"). Rules of personal conduct, written in English on a blackboard, serve as a chilling metaphor for the brainwashing of the hereditary caste system in Hinduism, which disables autonomy and critical thinking. What is the value of patriotism to a community if the modern nation has failed to protect it? Blind faith in religion and country manifests in the guise of a teacher without adequate vision or tools to instruct properly. Existing epistemologies are rendered ineffectual, stifling further progress.



Gauri Gill. "Bhalmati walking home from school, a distance of more than six kilometres, Osijan" from "Notes from the Desert" (1999-ongoing), © Gauri Gill

The photograph, "Bhalmati walking home from school, a distance of more than six kilometres, Osijan" from *Notes from the Desert*, of a young schoolgirl, hung alongside the color photograph of the classroom teacher from *Acts of Appearance*, echoes this reality. The camera lens is positioned so we are standing behind Bhalmati, looking down along a hot, dusty stretch. It's a journey she must make every day in order to attend school. Schools, as documented in Gill's series *The Mark on the Wall*, are stark, rudimentary structures, adorned nonetheless with brilliantly kaleidoscopic maps, charts, illustrations, anatomical drawings, and diagrams rendered by local artists, teachers and schoolchildren, as required by *Leher Kaksha*, a now-lapsed state scheme employing such visual tools for education.

Gill, who also studied painting and applied arts before studying photography in India and America, views these murals as worthy artifacts of India's cultural history. She told me, "I am interested in the human hand and how it might express itself, in acts of self-expression as a kind of resistance. *The Mark on the Wall* is absolutely about that, the voices that continue to emerge even from remote places where the circumstances are difficult, the often, anonymous artists who express themselves through these marks. The pinnacle of that is artists like Rajesh Vangad or the Kadu brothers, those who are masters of their forms. But it all begins with the desire to draw a line, and tell a story, to express a point of view."

For far too many people, like the schoolgirl Bhalmati and the Adivasis, the fruits of the modern nation are a long way off, especially now, as the right-wing, quasi-authoritarian government of Narendra Modi threatens communal stability by stoking the flames of religion; violent fringe mobs seek justice on their own terms with impunity; multivalent cultural histories are erased and supplanted with puritanical dogmas; and journalists fear for their lives if they pursue the truth. Against this turmoil, Gill's close allegiance with the diverse, and variegated, cultures, traditions and people on the peripheries, and her stalwart commitment to photography as an agent for social reformation, serve as necessary acts of citizen protest.

Project 108: Gauri Gill continues at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City) through September 3.