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## Gauri Gill's 'Acts of Resistance and Repair' presents over 20 years of her work

Indian artist and photographer Gauri Gill shares deep insight into her collaborative processes, evident in her oeuvre on view at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in Germany.

by [Shraddha Nair](#) | Published on : Dec 21, 2022



Schirn Kunsthalle **Frankfurt** was founded in 1986, and is an **exhibition** venue of significant influence in the European art landscape. Recently, they opened an **art exhibition** titled *Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair*, a solo showcase of Indian **photographer** Gauri Gill's oeuvre from the past 25 years. **Curator** Esther Schlicht and Gill bring together around 240 works from different projects. The impressive and substantial body of work on view, is in itself a gargantuan task to curate. Schlicht says, "Presenting an artist's work so extensively for the first time after more than 20 years of production is a challenge, especially for the artist herself. Gill's work is multifaceted, she pursues a variety of pictorial strategies. What unites the works beyond formal and conceptual differences is the artist's profound interest in people, their resistance and creativity, and her collaborative approach, based on dialogue and exchange." Gill's singularly dexterous practice explores **documentary** photography through **community**-engaging methods. Schlicht comments on the expansive nature of Gill's practice saying, "I am sure that (through Gill's work) visitors will also realise how photography can operate as an artistic means of emancipation and empowerment, even in times flooded by ceaselessly

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circulating digital images, and how empathic engagement can produce new forms of knowledge and understanding.” The exhibition that opened in October, is on view until January 8, 2023. We spoke to the [visual artist](#) to learn more about her practice.

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Installation view of *Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair*  
Image: Courtesy of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Gauri Gill

**Shraddha Nair:** Your work is fueled by observation and examination of daily culture. Can you tell us what active observation looks like for you, in your practice?

**Gauri Gill:** Let me talk about an ongoing project that has fundamentally changed my life and informs much of my practice. I first visited rural [Rajasthan](#) in 1999. I found a complex world that I knew nothing about, having grown up mainly in Indian cities. The everyday culture of life in the desert became a fundamental part of my photographic practice through personal encounters with remarkable human beings who are still a part of my life today. They belong to different communities living at the periphery—nomadic *jogis*, Muslim peasants and migrants, and small farmers from the Bishnois. I have written about some of what I observed over the years, and tried to honour through my [photographs](#).

I have witnessed the seasons: drought years and the year of a great monsoon (when Barmer became [Kashmir](#)), dust storms that can give you a fever, and a flood that wrecked enough havoc to require the rebuilding of Urma's home. I have followed the farming cycle, [migration](#), men travelling to work as labour in [Gujarat](#) and [Maharashtra](#). Food for Work programs, NREGA and other government schemes, nomadic journeys, illness and epidemics, cerebral malaria, tuberculosis, overwhelmed hospitals and understaffed schools, death from snakebite, from accidents, from being burned alive, from growing old in the desert, the death of a camel in a year that is remembered as the year of the death of the camel, births, marriages, child marriages, moneylenders, civil society interventions, *dharnas* and rallies, people fighting for change, national and panchayat elections, festivals, feuds passed down over generations, celebrations, prayers ...and through it all my friends.

**Shraddha:** A vital element of your work is the collaborative process. Can you tell us about how you include local artists in your process and where does it show up in the final output?

**Gauri:** Through collaborations with other artists, I try to overcome the limitations of a solitary viewpoint. I was first drawn to the work of local artists in rural areas when I began to document [drawings](#) in village schools in Rajasthan in the very early 2000s. *The Mark on the Wall* depicts drawings made by local artists, teachers, and children primarily for the purpose of pedagogy, but that also offer rich surprises and insights into the minds of local communities.

In 2013, I met the Warli artist, Rajesh Chaitya Vangad, when I was visiting his village for an art project in the primary school. I lived in his home in Ganjad, Maharashtra, and he began to tell me about his ancestral village. When I later tried to photograph the same landscape, I felt it was missing the depth and feeling of those stories. So over time I began



*Untitled (77)* from the series *Acts of Appearance*  
Image: Courtesy of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Gauri Gill

to portray him in his landscape in the present moment, and he overlaid my black and white photographs with intricate painting to reflect his own experience. In this way, the photographs became a kind of stage which he could inhabit to tell his story, or as someone put it—"as though one were photographing an old home and the resident came out and began to speak." This became the series, *Fields of Sight*—if you stand here you see it one way; over there, another way.

Theatre is also an active referent in the series *Acts of Appearance*, a collaboration since 2015 with a community of Warli and Kokna papier mâché artists led by the Kadu brothers in Jawhar, Maharashtra, [India](#). In this series, a large group of [Indian artists](#) made a special set of new masks to depict familiar people, animals and objects, and then in a series of improvisatory movements

through the village landscape we told a story of everyday, contemporary life together. In a sense the photographs are simply the by-products of a process of dialogue, and sometimes they visually embody that sharing of knowledge. The images can become a projection surface for other attributions and open questions around the tricky terrains of identity, visibility and representation.



*Untitled (9)* from the series *Acts of Appearance*, 2015 - ongoing, archival pigment print  
Image: Courtesy of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Gauri Gill

**Shraddha:** In your more than decades of experience, you have engaged with narratives around womanhood and patriarchy in rural India. Can you speak to any changes/progress in this span of time?

**Gauri:** I think the biggest change has been increased exposure to the world through technology since cellphones are widely prevalent now. However, the disparity between women in rural and urban areas remains vast, and cases of violence against women across [India](#) are on the rise. I think the rape cases reported in India in 2021 were higher than in 2005. Inhabiting public areas, the street or public transport is still far from a matter of ease. Women are married far too early and usually below the age of 21, and everything changes at that point. In fact, cruelty by the husband or relatives remains the highest crime against women. So, women are not safe at home or outside the

home. Literacy rates are higher, but very incrementally so. Numbers of women in the workforce—outside the home and burden of domestic chores, that is— have dropped in the last few years—female labour participation rate in India fell to around 20 per cent in 2019 - from more than 26 per cent in 2005 and roughly 32 per cent in 1983. And even then, women are largely in supporting roles rather than leading ones. It is a question of one step forward and two steps back, especially since even the very minute positive changes are not keeping up with the rate of change in the world at large.



*Untitled (50)* from the series *Jannat*, 1999 - 2007, silver gelatin print  
Image: Courtesy of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Gauri Gill

**Shraddha:** In *Jal, Jungal, Jameen*, you reference Warli culture and heritage. What are the challenges faced by this community in the present day?

**Gauri:** *Jal Jungal Jameen (Water Forest Land)* is the great slogan of the Adivasi people, which emphasises the profound connections that Indigenous people have to the land, environment, and local cultural practices. It reflects their concern for stable livelihoods, which are currently under grave threat. Farmers whose forebears have worked the land for thousands of years now find themselves bereft of resources and property. Their lives used to run based on the river, forests and fields. Now all three sources of sustenance are imperilled.

So called civilisation has created concrete cities through the relentless construction of cement buildings. Scattered across these cities are insoluble trash and plastic, which cannot dissolve into the earth. The water of the cities is equally foul, as every day factories release polluted and chemical-laden water into rivers and seas. Large oil tankers and container ships journey across the seas, and sometimes they catch fires, and at other times there are explosions. Sometimes the ships even sink, because of which the water gets polluted and innocent fishes are killed. Modern humans have emphasised rampant development and indiscriminate building which is fast destroying the trees, plants, and rocks of precious forests everywhere. Big companies have levelled the forests to make cemented roads, train tracks, airports, godowns, factories and stadiums. This has led to the decimation of land, including fields, trees, plants, rivers, streams, and mountains. The powerful are able to use old and new laws to their benefit, including through lying to poor peasants, or using outright force to buy their land at low rates, and on that land to lay down highways, bullet trains and houses for rich people in the name of development. But those who pay the actual cost are not served.



The artist at her show *Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair*  
Image: Esra Klein; Courtesy of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Gauri Gill

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## About Author



### Shraddha Nair

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Shraddha is a writer and curator based in Bengaluru, India. Her curatorial practice is a method by which she negotiates with and navigates the complexities of human behaviour, an interest which flows into her writing as well. She believes that art and collective experience hold immense capacity in the...

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