

## COVER STORY

### Gauri Gill is only the label put on a whole set of processes and people who express themselves through me, says the 2023 Prix Pictet-winning photographer



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By Sukant Deepak

**October 09, 2023 (IANSlife)** Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill, recently adjudged the winner of the prestigious 2023 Prix Pictet, the global award for photography and sustainability, was selected from a shortlist of 12 photographers by an independent and highly regarded jury for her series 'Notes from the Desert' which began in 1999.

As she returns to Delhi from London where she received the honour on September 28, she tells IANS, "I am kind of a slow person, so have been somewhat stunned with the events of the last days which I am yet to fully process--I had my weepy moment over breakfast 36 hours post the actual ceremony! The love and deluge of messages from friends and strangers has been utterly and deeply and overwhelmingly kind, beginning with the unstinting and unselfish acknowledgment I have received from my peers in the shortlist--a truly stellar group that includes Alessandro Cinque, Federico Ríos Escobar, Gera Artemova, Hoda Afshar,

Michal Luczak, Ragnar Axelsson, Richard Renaldi, Sian Davey Vanessa Winship, Vasantha Yoganathan and Yael Martínez."

Talking about 'Notes from the Desert', which has the indisputable quality of being 'still' in the true sense of the word, she says, "The desert is really a metaphor, representing not only the substrate of wilful exclusion and enforced invisibilisation of some humans but also gravely denuded resources for their survival. Capital today is concentrated in the hands of a few, be they individuals, the global North, or the cities--including the one I live in, New Delhi--I am part of the problem. If anything I hope this prize, the word 'Human', stands for inclusion and empathy, for recognising the profound interdependence between rural and urban, poor and rich, South and North, and a recognition of which must only lead us to compassion. There is work to be done. For now, am deeply humbled."

One of India's most respected photographers who won the Grange Prize, Canada's prestigious contemporary photography award in 2011, Gill's work emphasises her belief in working with and through community, in what she calls "active listening".

For more than two decades, she has been closely engaged with marginalised communities in the desert of western Rajasthan, northern India, and for the last decade with indigenous artists in Maharashtra.

About 'Notes from the Desert', she has written: "In April 1999, I set out to photograph village schools in Rajasthan. Having grown up mainly in cities, I soon realised that school was simply a microcosm of a complex reality I knew nothing about. Since then, in the Thar desert of western Rajasthan, visiting the same people and places over decades, I have witnessed the whole spectrum of life: drought years and the year of a great monsoon -- when Barmer became Kashmir; dust storms that can give you a fever and a flood bad enough to cause the rebuilding of homes. I have followed the farming cycle, migration, men travelling to work in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Food for Work programmes, rural employment and other government schemes, nomadic journeys, epidemics, cerebral malaria, tuberculosis, overwhelmed hospitals, and understaffed schools, death from snakebite, from accidents, from being burned alive for providing an inadequate dowry, from growing old, the death of a camel in a year remembered as the year of the death of the camel, births, marriages, child marriages, moneylenders, dharnas, national and panchayat elections, festivals, feuds passed down over generations, celebrations, prayers... and, through it all, my valiant friends, by whom I was led."

Isabelle von Ribbentrop, Executive Director of Prix Pictet, said at the prize ceremony, "In a world facing unprecedented challenges, from social inequality to environmental crises, it was crucial to turn the lens towards humanity itself. The theme 'Human' provides a platform to explore the complexities, vulnerabilities, and strengths of the human condition. It allows the artists to capture and communicate the stories, struggles, and triumphs of individuals and communities around the globe. Through this theme, Prix Pictet aims to foster a deeper understanding of our shared humanity and inspire meaningful conversations about the issues that impact us all."

The artist, who feels that collaborations are fundamental to her practice, adds, "Life itself is a series of collaborations -- implicit and explicit. Gauri Gill is only the label put on a whole set of processes and people that express themselves through me."

Talk to the artist about her process and she says that it is all about starting with a question, quite often driven by a human interaction.

"Then I keep taking micro-steps, for as long as it takes, perhaps forever. One thing usually leads to another, and I never know where I will be led. I find it very hard to let go."

This Delhi-based photographer, who completed her MFA in photography at Stanford University, feels that it might be the interplay between so-called reality, and our inherent subjectivity that keeps her fascinated with the medium.

"Everything seemingly 'out there' is in fact coming from me, despite the play of appearances," she adds.

As for what's next, there are multi-year projects already in motion, and new ones evolving all the time that grow organically out of earlier ones.

"I am also still trying to disseminate the two books that came out this year, called 'Fields of Sight' and 'Acts of Appearance', both about multi-year artistic collaborations with Adivasi friends in Maharashtra. I was not expecting to receive this huge honour so there is quite a lot of travel coming up too. There is always so much to do!"

She concludes, "Finally, this work belongs to all those outside the world of English, who have led me with so much trust and love into their lived experience, and from whom I continue to learn."