



**Gauri Gill.** *Geeta with her rooster, out on a dera, Bikaner.* Photograph.

## The Desert Mirror

The passion and compassion evident in Gauri Gill's photographic work make **Anita Dubere** reflect on the fragility and strength of human bonds.

"...I WANTED TO EXPLORE IT NOT AS A QUESTION (A THEME) BUT AS A WOUND: I SEE, I FEEL, HENCE I NOTICE, I observe, and I think"<sup>1</sup>

Hurran crouches on the diagonal edge of jagged rocks, impersonating a beast! She can devour us with her tender craziness, like many of the protagonists in Gauri Gill's *Notes from the Desert*, on view from March 27th to April 24th at Nature Morte, New Delhi. Printed at 50% grey, these notes – as if bleached by the blinding light of the desert and offset by its harsh terrain – function critically at the edges of an 'Incredible India'!

To set up a photographic project in rural Rajasthan over ten years, in black and white, goes against the grain of several stereotypes and signals the maturing of a 'voice' within the practice of Photography in India. Defrocked of its colour and touristy potential, Rajasthan is scoured at its nomadic margins to reveal lives in transition - affected deeply by epic cycles of birth, death, drought, flood, celebration and devastation. Extreme situations require no 'pictorialism' or 'illustration' - those vexed twins of the colonial legacy - especially from an insider, or by one who is led by the hand. Gauri's subjects take her into their world and she goes there like Alice. Her method embraces 'time', which does not 'naturally' exist inside a photograph beyond the epiphany and commemoration of a moment (photography's melancholy and limitation is precisely this) within a structure of intimacy and relationships that unravel their mysteries slowly.

Two projects pursued simultaneously over the last decade by Gauri, map her education within the history of photography, while clarifying her (nomadic) ambitions. *The Americans*, which documented the Indian diaspora in the United States, paid a tongue-in-cheek homage to Robert Frank's work of the same name (1959) and *Notes from the Desert*, crisscrossing Western Rajasthan, from Lunkaransar to Barmer to Osijan, recall Dorothea Lange's work with the FSA photography program (1935-44) that portrayed rural poverty during the Depression in the United States. The pendulum of homage and discovery swings between these polar opposites: urban night scenes in colour in the Big Apple and the impoverished desert in b/w and natural light! Indeed, these notes are a 'retreat' from the all too familiar. Donald Kuspit, writing on Bill Viola's 'Deserts', says, "The desert is a place of solitude, purification, and initiation. Paradoxical, it seems catastrophically lifeless, yet is a space of spiritual life, a mysterious arena of visual and emotional reversals - the ultimate uncanny".<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest that the desert offers Gauri a site for paradoxical hermeneutics - for exploring and testing the construction of 'Self' through the mirror of the 'Other' in a prolonged 'trial' that defies classification.

What is the necessary 'Other' of the desert? That absent quantity/quality, mirrored through the illusion of a mirage? To Bhana Nathji's family and others at the desert's fringe, this curious and compassionate girl with a camera, could just have been that! "I was interrupted by a person who told me what was wrong with her life, and with great conviction impressed upon me that I should (go) to Delhi and tell people of the troubles of the people in Barmer".<sup>3</sup> Let me risk a speculation here. The mirror inside a 35 mm analog viewfinder camera (2/3<sup>rd</sup> of this show is shot on this format) is this uncanny stand-in for 'water' through which the desert is seen and for which the desert longs! This surreal two-way mediation of desire through the invisible mirror/water is what binds the photographer and the photographed. I am reminded of lines from Paul Eluard which speak of the liquidity of the eye that make us dream.

There is something unhinged in the dire poverty and marginality of these people, in the wound of their gazes, in their mimetic excesses, in the inhospitable landscape and in the vicissitudes of survival that is in sync with what Barthes calls the 'madness' within photography.<sup>4</sup> Landscapes, animals and human beings - everything is in a huddle here, intertwined and interdependent, such that the spirit of survival shines through. The 63 photographs chosen from a corpus of a few thousands show the cycle of life, including a birth and a death, marriage and illness, highlighting themes of adolescence/innocence, mimetic play, performance and portraiture. Gauri approaches these unfolding dramas of life to privilege innocence, play and solidarity. This is a rare choice, indeed, for these are fragile qualities that keep hope alive, a site where rebellion and humane-ness possibly coexist.