GAURI GILL BY RAVI AGARWAL

COPY STARTS

You trained as a painter and later took up photography as your medium. They have quite different histories and engagements. Why did you make this transition?

What I love about photography is that it takes you out into the world. I like to work with specific realities, and being physically put in certain places that I might not go to without a camera. I like the idea of bearing witness, of making a history. I think of painting as more internal, and I do sometimes miss that inward retreat, although you have it with the darkroom, or when you are editing, to an extent. Perhaps that's why I've been photographing at night.

Where did you grow up? What kind of environment was it?

I grew up in Chandigarh, Delhi, Dehradun, Kasauli and Sokoto, Nigeria. My father worked in the Indian government. My parents also lived for five years in Africa, during which time we were put in boarding school. We had to move a lot so we were exposed to a range of influences, including some quite astonishing individuals. Both my parents are arts-inclined Nehruvian idealists, with a pretty liberal worldview, but there was also a kind of down-to-earth get-on-with-it robustness. Both come from farming families with a lot of members in the army. I was the middle of three sisters. We were all

readers. At home we also talked politics incessantly. In boarding school I formed deep bonds with people I lived with for nine months of the year.

What made you want to be an artist, and how did you train to be one?

The first artistic thing I probably did seriously was write lots of bad poetry – I was miserable in my first boarding school. In the next one, where I was considerably happier, I also enrolled in art class. The art teacher would have us sit outside looking at the Himalayas and ask us to paint ‘the seven layers of hills’. Although the view was amazing, I wasn’t very inspired. I wanted to make art about people, expressed in an abstract figurative way. My teacher wouldn’t allow this. I decided to have my own exhibition concurrent with the official one. Mine was a 6ft plank of plywood with a seated man, egg-headed and sunk in thought. He was my thinker!

I don’t think I thought about being an ‘artist’ as such, but all through school I studied art, was involved in theatre and wrote quite consistently. After, I joined Delhi College of Art where I studied painting and applied art. In the last year I became very interested in photography so I joined evening classes at Triveni Kala Sangam, with a pictorialist teacher. That’s all there was by way of learning photography in Delhi. Then I won a scholarship to Parsons/The New School in New York. There I got a second BFA, this time in

photography. Five years later I went back to Stanford to do a masters in fine art.

But I would say *Outlook* magazine, where I worked for five years, was also a kind of training. I was part of the starting team, and it was a fantastic group of writers, photographers and designers, all very committed and enthusiastic. My job took me all over India and made me engage with a whole cross section of social issues and political events. Journalism in this country is a serious thing: people really look to it to change things. I could use my camera to talk to all kinds of people and enter many different worlds. I had to articulate concerns and frame them coherently in a very short period of time. Then a wide audience reacted to the work, from Kanpur to Kochi. In my own projects I work in series that go on for ever, so this immediacy and learning to react quickly was new. However, I also later left photojournalism for those reasons. It didn't allow for the slow think.

What was your experience in the art schools?

My time at Delhi College of Art was too long – we spent four years learning what we could have in two. We spent a lot of time sitting on the lawns studying arcane theory, or trying to get colour to sit completely flat on mounting board. There was very little conceptual thinking. I enjoyed Parsons – and New York City – and, later, Stanford tremendously. I finally had some knowledge of the history of my medium, particularly photography. When I first got to the States I was sometimes overwhelmed by how little I knew, and how much

work there was out there. All we had learned about in art history here was Ajanta/Ellora and Picasso. Literally! The rasas, etc. There was little talk of the contemporary.

One can perhaps do without history, just as one can do without craft, if one is some kind of idiot savant. But for the rest of us it is useful to know what has come before, whether it be from East or West. Although now the net is changing everything.

At Stanford I was one of ten artists – I was the only 'straight' photographer actually, everyone came from different media, most were interdisciplinary – and every two weeks we had to present work and have the others take it apart. So there were lots of conversations. I could finally study things like gender and anthropology and relate it to the work. It opened things up.

The thing that was really missing, however, was that one saw few non-Western artists. And the context was missing for the work I was making. So it was lonely in that sense, but still there was a lot to learn.

How would you describe your photography practice and its key concerns?

My work is about the world I live in and reacting to it, sometimes immediately for a specific purpose, at others in a more drawn-out

way. I photograph for long periods on projects. The longest is nine years old and ongoing – this is my work with rural communities in Rajasthan. I have also made work about the Indian diaspora in America (*The Americans*), the changing Indian city, and my neighbourhood, (*Nizamuddin at Night*). So in some ways it's about place. It's about engaging with the society that we live in. It is about relationships between individuals and communities. I like to keep adding or uncovering layers and histories, over time.

How has it evolved and changed over time?

There are things I'm still looking at today that I was looking at ten years ago. Others are new. I've been changed by the work as much as anything else. Working in rural Rajasthan, for example, has been a transformative experience. I went beyond the world I knew, and all my experiences as an urban person, to another reality in which I was able to forge deep connections. A woman living in a tiny *dhani* in the desert, whose husband works as a migrant labourer somewhere, who herself has never left the village she grew up in except for forays into the closest small town, whose home has no water or electricity … becoming friends with people like her shifted my own perspective utterly. As much as my time in America, the time I spent in Rajasthan gave me new eyes with which to view my city existence.

Sometimes formal aspects dictate changes. For example, I started looking at buildings and the landscape much more closely after I got a larger-format camera in 2000. It made me slow down and record

very specific information. I was starting to be drawn to these things and was dissatisfied with how a 35mm camera rendered them. Finally I had a tool to express myself. Your tools are also your eyes.

What is your relationship to your audience?

It’s a nebulous thing. My audience is often a very few people or no one at all. I’ve had long periods of not showing work to anyone, and then suddenly it’s out there and everyone can come look at it.

What are your major influences and why?

There are all kinds. I love reading so that’s a big one. There are writers I am indebted to for ever. I am addicted to newspapers and politics. Over the past decade I have been really enthralled by Bollywood. I am deeply influenced by all my relationships. I am drawn to the work of activist friends, many of them women. I often think of their work and how they deal with the world.

Is the relatively recent acceptance of photography in the gallery space impacting your practice?

It's one more avenue open for us to show work, which is good, and it’s also refreshing to exhibit alongside artists who work in other media, speak other languages. The interface can be engaging if it is well thought out. And one can think of showing work in different sizes in a gallery or installing in different ways. It’s yet another form.

How do you think photography in India is shaping up in relation to an international context, and where do you locate your practice within that (or any other context)?

It is great that there is some interest now, when earlier there was none. Documentary photography or personal work was an alternative fringe activity. Now people are looking at it. But we do need a whole culture around it, more visual literacy. *Camerawork Delhi*, a newsletter about independent photography that I am a co-editor of, which is supported by Khoj, is an attempt to start a dialogue. Teaching photography – which I do at a local school – is another. To me, community and conversations are critical.

We really need educated curators, fine writers and critics, contemporary photography museums, public grants, and publishers who are willing to take a risk, because without books and monographs there is no history or archive. Most importantly, we need schools and colleges that offer photography courses if it is really to enter the mainstream and be accepted in its own right, rather than continuing to be seen as the poor man's art. This has happened all over the world already. My practice is part of that context.

What do you feel about an experimental space such as Khoj and your relationship to it?

I believe spaces like Khoj are key. There have to be spaces where one can experiment freely, that support the young and the new and

thereby contribute to critical discourse. I've only done one residency in my life, which was at Khoj, and it was a very good experience for me. I like the physical space and I trust the people who work there, the fact that they are willing to simply get up and do.

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