

Projects 108: Gauri Gill

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Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from *Acts of Appearance*, 2015 – ongoing. © Gauri Gill.

“We were living within nature, which, chameleon-like, had so many faces—changing even as one took a turn.”
—Gauri Gill¹

The scenes have the indelible presence of parable or myth: There was a sick woman who sought out a healer. There was a man building his house. There were two friends, sun and moon, who set out one day on the road. Each scene offers the premise of a story—the situation suspended somehow between the still image and rolling action; we don’t know if the sick woman was healed. But the vivid photographs of Gauri Gill are animated by the self-determination of their subjects. In her new series “Acts of Appearance” (2015 – ongoing), these figures address the viewer in various guises—animal, human, or thing—the uncanny gaze of their masks both inscrutable and frank.

Currently on view as part of *Projects 108: Gauri Gill*, organized by Lucy Gallun for MoMA PS1, “Acts of Appearance” documents the photographer’s ongoing collaboration with an Adivasi or indigenous community in the city of Jawhar, district of Maharashtra, India. Gill, who lives in New Delhi, has been photographing marginalized communities in rural India for twenty years. In Jawhar—a three-hour drive from the coastal city of Mumbai, where access to water, food, and jobs is scarce—members of the Kokna tribe are known for their papier-mâché objects made in bulk for the market, and their masks representing Hindu deities and local lore made for the annual Bahoda festival.

In 2014, Gill invited a small Kokna community to fashion papier-mâché masks representing contemporary life in their village—not just the celebrated tigers and elephants that appear in the Bahoda ritual, but also commonplace animals such as flies, frogs, or donkeys, and even emotions such as anger or love (called *rasas* in classical Indian theory). She asked her artists, “What about fat people, people with moles, big teeth, or hair growing out of their ears? What about spectacles, sickness, and aging?” Working with volunteers from among the mask artists and villagers, Gill and her collaborators devised scenes of leisure and work, exploring the dramatic and allegorical possibilities of the masks. Her commitment to knowledge that is cocreated, evident across her body of work, is not only an ethic but also an epistemology that makes a term like “relational practice” quaintly redundant. Working together to stage tableaux of everyday life, she hoped to “mythologize the routine things we do repeatedly, be it washing the dishes or sweeping the floor, flattening the hierarchy of more or less important actions,” Gill told me in an email. Documenting the mundane and asserting its status as art, the project straddles two zones.

Something of this dual awareness materializes in the installation of *Projects 108*, which pairs large-scale color photographs from “Acts of Appearance” with smaller black-and-white images from “Notes from the Desert” (1999 – 2010) and “The Mark on the Wall” (1999 – ongoing), earlier series that document the years Gill has spent visiting friends in the arid region of Western Rajasthan. This wonderful curatorial choice highlights Gill’s long-term engagement in the region and gives us a glimpse into the world and its grammar: the dry earth and the steel water pots; the lexicon of Hindi and colonial English printed on schoolhouse chalkboards or walls. We see the rhythms of rural life, structured by systems of plant, animal, and planetary bodies, alongside the rationalizing taxonomies of colonial rule—from anatomical illustrations displayed in a classroom to a grammar tree conjugating past, present, and future tenses. This tree of knowledge, printed in black and white, hangs beside a large color print of a child wearing the mask of a boy’s face, seated in the limbs of a mahua tree. Moving from black and white to vivid red, yellow, ochre, or teal—and from abstract to experiential ways of knowing—Gill reveals the multivalent landscape of “life today in the village, across dreaming and waking states,” she says. “Because how does one separate the dream from the waking?”

“Acts of Appearance” does more than activate a tribal imagination. “I do think of the artists as contemporary artists of their form,” Gill told me. “Not craftspeople burdened only to represent or perform their Adivasi identity, fundamental as it is.” I wonder how her collaborators have responded to seeing the work. “When I showed them the images, all the artists and actors seemed unreservedly to love them,” said Gill. “Perhaps it’s because they see the pictures as a kind of mask, too—entirely subjective and singular versions from me of what we shared—the chaos, laughter, jokes, chat, talk, and time wasting—just as the masks are only fictitious interpretations of real people. Perhaps they like them in the way of artists appreciating another artist’s work, appreciating the simultaneous verisimilitude and the distance from lived reality.”



Gauri Gill, Untitled, from Acts of Appearance, 2015 – ongoing. © Gauri Gill.

Gill's art reflects systems of modern globalization that point beyond the village—including her own art-school training in the United States. In one photograph, a group gathered in the bus depot sits facing the camera or road, each in their own world while they wait for a bus or something else to appear. Beyond the depot is a post-colonial world where transient labor and human migration imperil traditional forms of life, where commodity goods cross borders freely though people have a harder time. On the adjacent wall of the gallery, a man sits on a ledge wearing the smiling face of a Tata Indicom mobile phone. Two Warli drawings hang inside the frame on the wall above him. Warli folk art relies on geometric forms to create a tableau of village life. Here, traditional spatial history meets the informational abstractions of cellular technology—the no-place of the wireless network.

In the United States, a mask is often an emblem of privacy or protest—a protective measure against the government and corporate surveillance that erodes civil liberties. Indeed, across town, in MoMA's *Being: New Photography*, also organized by Lucy Gallun, images of masks by Stephanie Syjuco and Matthew Connors allude to the risks of identification for immigrants or political dissidents. "Acts of Appearance" suggests that a mask deployed for purposes other than obfuscation might trouble the very markers of identity it aims to protect. In one untitled image, four masked passengers look out the windows of a city bus. Like Robert Frank's iconic *Trolley—New Orleans*, taken by the Swiss-American photographer in 1955, the window frame isolates each figure. But while Frank's image indelibly depicts the social stratifications of the American South, Gill's image is more enigmatic. Calling into question fixed forms of identity, the masks remind us that the demarcations of gender or race are not properties of a specific individual, but belong to the performative space of the culture.

Notes

1. Quoted in Michael Collins, "Another Way of Seeing: Gauri Gill & Rajesh Vangad," *Granta*, 7 Mar. 2015, accessed 19 May 2018 <https://granta.com/another-way-of-seeing/>.

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All images by Gauri Gill

<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/06/artseen/Projects-108-Gauri-Gill>