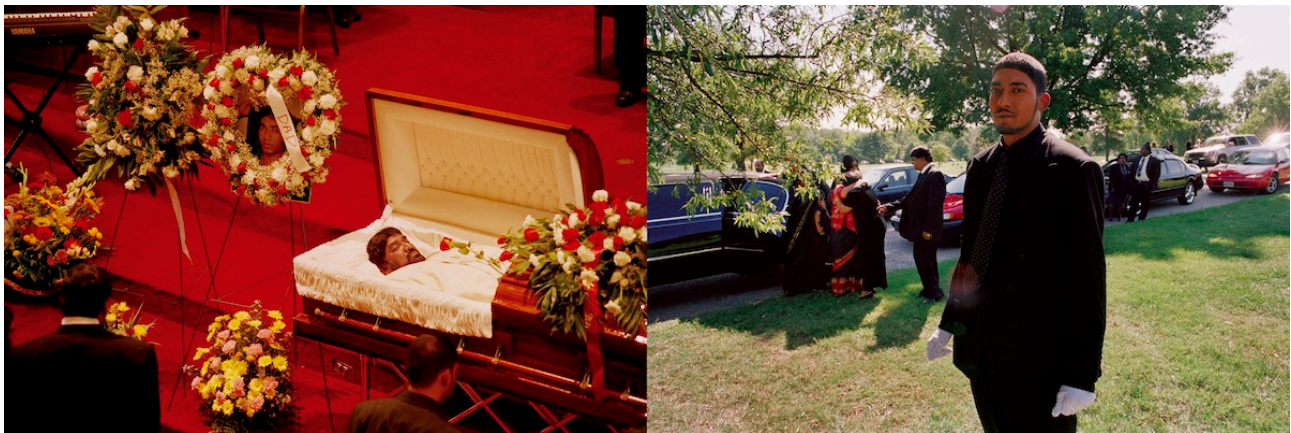


LOOKING FOR OURSELVES: GAURI GILL'S *THE AMERICANS*, 2000–2007

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Throughout her practice, New Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill (b. 1970) has followed individuals on the periphery—Indigenous people, subordinate castes, small farmers, nomads, and laborers. Her work defies the media's simplistic depictions of their plight by uncovering the intricacies of their daily lives, “things that are familiar and therefore not exotic, but never ordinary.”¹ As an international undergraduate student in the mid-'90s, Gill began to photograph her South Asian² family and friends in New York, recognizing their absences in classrooms and museum spaces. Before and after the sociopolitical shift of 9/11, as a graduate student at Stanford University, Gill pondered their situation closely and questioned what it meant to be American as a South Asian person. The result was *The Americans*. Traveling across the United States in a succession of trips over the course of seven years, Gill immersed herself in the world of her friends, family, and acquaintances, filling roughly 520 rolls of film. To claim a place for Brown people in the photographic canon, Gill's series takes the name of Swiss American photographer Robert Frank's canonical 1958 series for which he traveled the nation and documented its deep social fractures as an outsider. Gill's photographs, however, are markedly different. In offices, homes, and temples, she intimately documents the South Asian community's search for identity and belonging as Americans. As Gill has called the resulting photographs “a kind of family album”³ this study examines how the series works with and against its mechanisms.



Taxi driver Prem Kumar Walekar, 54, was shot dead at a gas station in Rockville, Montgomery by a sniper. Seen at right is his son at the funeral. Maryland 2002

The title of this exhibition comes from the powerful act of looking for ourselves within an intimate collection of photographs. The family photo album is a place where collective memory, personal histories, and visions of futurity come together through consciously curated photographs. From family portraits to accidental

¹ James Cohan, “Gauri Gill,” <https://www.jamescohan.com/news/james-cohan-now-represents-gauri-gill>, accessed December 15, 2023.

² “South Asian” is an externally imposed label that defines the nearly 5.4 million people originating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives in the United States. They are a linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse population. In their home countries, South Asians have been restricted by caste hierarchies, while in America, they dream of social mobility and the freedom to cultivate their own identities through work, family, and other means.

³ Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 19; Gauri Gill, email communication with author, September 11, 2015.

snapshots, these fragments exist as sites for “articulation and aspiration; as personal and social statements that express how ordinary individuals envision their sense of self, their subjectivity, and their social status,” writes visual studies scholar Tina Campt.⁴ For diasporic viewers, the stories that emerge from Gill’s work are dynamic, evoking the metamorphosis of hybrid identities, American dreams, and feelings of belonging in the United States. As many of her subjects fleetingly glance into the camera, as in Indian grocery store in Queens. New York 2004, Gill encourages spectators “to enter the frame”⁵ and actively engage in a dialogue with her subjects. As we look into her photographs, we see parts of ourselves, but our likeness is refracted — curiously murky and unfamiliar. Like the family album, Gill’s work presents material to be interrogated and explored for evolving meanings of viewers’ own existence in America. In provoking the cultivation of narratives for the so-called album, *The Americans* brings us to recognize how as Americans, we are constantly renegotiating our identity and experience. Gill disrupts the family album’s presentation of idyllic life. As cultural theorist Annette Kühn notes, stories from family albums are influenced by the repression of histories of struggle.⁶ They often perpetuate paradisaical imaginings of familial narratives. *The Americans* redefines the parameters of the family album to grapple with the realities of immigrant hardships, which are inherently tied to their stories. In the noise of America’s indeterminacy of South Asian identity after 9/11 — either insiders as “the model minority” or outsiders as transgressive “others,” — the series captures the sociopolitical instability of the South Asian community in America. Although they perform “the model minority,” hard at work across class lines, her subjects navigate the paradoxes of American dream pursuits — poverty, success, xenophobia, and acceptance. In images of work, reflection, routine, and exhaustion, the series refuses to look away from the precariousness of immigrant life. It invites viewers to investigate the subjects’ situations and unearth the hidden turbulences of their existence. Gill envisions the family album as a site for contemplation of the contradictions of immigrant experience.



Software engineer, Alok Pareek; business owner, Sumati Patel-Pareek. Silicon Valley, California 2001

⁴ Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

⁵ Cohan, “Gauri Gill.”

⁶ Annette Kühn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), 19.

The Americans evokes longer traditions of composing photographs for family albums. Captured on Kodak and Fujifilm 35 mm color negative film, which was purchased and developed in drugstores across the country, Gill's work speaks to vernacular photographs taken by immigrants to document their own histories. Combining the mechanisms of both staged and spontaneous images found in family albums, photographs in *The Americans* disrupt normative perception and render seemingly familiar moments uncanny. This is evident in *Software engineer, Alok Pareek; business owner, Sumati Patel-Pareek. Silicon Valley, California 2001*. In commemorative family snapshots saved in albums and sent back to motherlands, immigrants pose in front of their cars, looking directly into the camera before road trips, cross-country moves, and car pujas (prayers). For subjects, such photographs signify pride in their economic success in America. However, in Gill's photograph, this does not appear to be the case. Despite their two-car household and purse and wallet on the black car, which suggest their affluent life in America, Alok and Sumati do not happily pose with their vehicles. Instead, they are in the midst of opening the doors to their respective cars in different directions. Split by the intersecting car doors and different colored houses behind them, the photograph is geometrically precise, creating a vanishing point and thus, appearing consciously constructed. At the same time, the subjects' ongoing actions and diverted gazes suggest the image is happenstance, perhaps capturing the morning commute to work. In layering the perspectives and tropes of these distinctive types of vernacular photographs, Gill creates ambiguity, allowing for a multiplicity of readings of their success and experience in America. Some may read the photographs as the documentation of humdrum routine, while others may see the couple as having fulfilled all the material aspects of the American dream yet isolated from one another. The combination of the attributes of staged and spontaneous photographs throughout the series creates fluidity in the understanding of the immigrant experience represented.



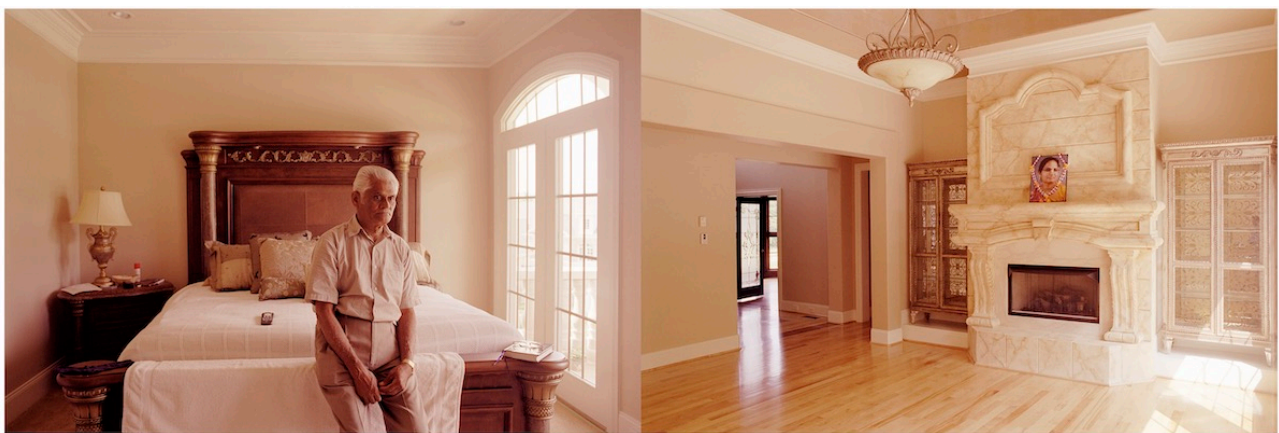
Motel owner's private quarters at the motel/ Lobby of a Gujarati run motel. San Francisco 2002

The Americans encourages viewers to refer to their own memories to mine the imaginings of diasporic life reflected within the photographs. For viewers, particularly those of immigrant backgrounds, the depiction of familiar spaces, experiences, and activities in the snapshot genre evokes vivid memories and strong feelings of nostalgia. Jeet Thayil's poem in the 2008 exhibition catalogue for the series echoes this sensation of seeing one's experience within the work: "It's me, barefoot in the ballroom of the dream / poised, posed, alone, almost American."⁷ *The Americans* transcends constructed ethnic boundaries, as viewers across minority groups in America can trace aspects of their experiences within Gill's photographs in distinctive ways. In *Motel owner's private quarters at the motel/Lobby of a Gujarati run motel. San Francisco 2002*, a motelier's home is decorated with images of Hindu icons and deceased elders. The

⁷ Jeet Thayil, "The Future Infinitives," in Gauri Gill: *The Americans* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2008), 3.

restaging of a common domestic site for prayer within the home provokes viewers to draw upon their personal feelings, memories, and experiences in relation to the scene depicted.

Some may recognize Jalaram Bapa, Krishna, or Lakshmi, while others may read these icons as representative of different deities and their elders. Drawing on memories, Annette Kühn writes, “helps practitioners move [...] towards a consideration of the photograph’s cultural and historical embeddedness, its broader meanings, and very importantly the response it generates.”⁸ In understanding the significance of the religious iconography and commemorative portraits, the viewer is asked to ponder Gill’s framing of the camera. The photographer’s focus on the decorative image of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and cropping of the deceased elder out on the right redirects the recollection of the past, as the photograph embodies distinct aspirations and visions for immigrant life—prosperity, success, and new beginnings. Shifting with viewers, understandings of the photograph transmit specific ways of seeing and knowing how distinctive diasporic subjects realize social and cultural values.



Motel owner Dhansukh Dan Patel's parents, in his new home. Nashville, Tennessee 2004

When there is no memory of moments documented within the family album, viewers create backstories, ascribe symbolic resonances, and integrate lore to understand photographs. Just as captions in the family album stimulate memories and create imaginative realms for subjects to return to, Gill provides narrative titles with contextual information: subjects’ names, occupations, places of residence, and dates. She mobilizes speculation, provoking viewers to develop stories to interpret subjects’ situations. In *Motel owner Dhansukh Dan Patel's parents, in his new home. Nashville, Tennessee 2004*, Dan Patel’s father stares off into the distance alone in his son’s new home, while a commemorative portrait of his deceased wife is on the right. The diptych allows viewers to witness the elder Patel’s ambivalence and take on his vantage point. Perhaps, they had spent their lives living in small, shared quarters of their motel, as many motel owners do. In examining the photographs together, the viewer is brought to consider the insignificance of the fulfillment of an immigrant dream without his wife, and his loneliness in the large home. Through speculation, Gill brings viewers to grapple with the narratives that belong to distinctive parts of the diaspora, which are embedded within her photographs. The multiple viewpoints of her diptychs as well as the presence of mirrors and glass in several images complicate singular perceptions of immigrant experience. Her work mobilizes a level of opacity that permeates understandings of each microhistory, compelling the recognition of one’s inability to fully understand another person’s realities and the ambiguity that remains with the viewer.⁹ The viewer is uncertain whether the father even lives in the home, and there is no indication if his wife passed away decades before the image was taken or more recently. The ambiguity and unknowability

⁸ Kühn, *Family Secrets*, 5.

⁹ Édouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 186.

of the narrative remains tied to one's perception of the photograph, as the viewer is unable to fully understand the complexity of another immigrant's experience.

Despite coming to America in pursuit of opportunities, the immigrants pictured in *The Americans*' encounter the complexities of life—intimacy, strife, belonging, and isolation. As a pseudo-family album, the series presents novel ways of understanding the struggles and successes of one of the fastest growing communities in America. Through Gill's depiction of a singular subgroup of America, *The Americans* invites the multitude of communities that make up the nation to deeply consider their own identity and experiences—questioning, imagining, and remaking their narratives. Exactly sixteen years after its original journey from India to America, *The Americans* continues to remind us that as Americans, we are constantly looking for ourselves.