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GAURI GILL

Looking for Ourselves: Gauri Gill on Active Listening, Memory, & Immigrant Belonging

An adaptation of an interview by curator Roma Patel in conjunction with the exhibition Looking for Ourselves, which was on view at the Wallach Art Gallery from March 23 - April 7, 2024.

Gauri Gill, 'Cooks in the kitchen at an Indian restaurant. All four men who work there are from neighboring villages in Punjab, India, and all share a small apartment. Bay Area, California 2002' from the series 'The Americans', 2000-2007. Copyright Gauri Gill.

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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, or as she puts it, "things that are familiar and therefore not exotic, but never ordinary." This exhibition focuses on an early body

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of work from Gill's oeuvre called *The Americans*. *The Americans* predominantly follows the South Asian community in the aftermath of a tense sociopolitical moment in the United States, 9/11, a time in which the community's presence and belonging in America was increasingly questioned. South Asians experienced unparalleled surveillance and a heightened questioning of their claims to their own American identity at the time. From 2000-2007, Gauri traveled around

the United States documenting her community, considering how they themselves were looking for their own place in the US as South Asian people.

The exhibition titled *Looking for Ourselves* examines this body of work after a significant period of time—17 odd years—to consider how the South Asian community, and the broader immigrant community, is looking back at these photographs like a pseudo-family album. Gill's work engages with family photographs as sites for "articulation and aspiration," a framework proposed by visual studies scholar Tina Campt. In the thirty-four works from the extensive series on view in this exhibition, Gill encourages viewers "to enter the frame" and actively engage in a dialogue with her subjects. And so this exhibition is really thinking of these photographs as a living archive; an ongoing narrative; as sites for questions of belonging, understanding hybrid identities, and considering feelings

of one's own subjectivity. It prompts the consideration of the constant mining and renegotiation of dreams and realities of American life. In what Gill herself has called "a kind of family album," she sparks thoughtful questioning of what it means to be South Asian in America as well as what immigrant claims to Americanness entail. I'm thrilled to be in conversation with the artist Gauri Gill to think about some of these questions, which are so central to her work.

Roma Patel: Hi, Gauri!

Gauri Gill: Hello, Roma. Thanks so much for this. I'm thrilled to be here; it's a privilege for me to have someone from inside the community, like you, actually take the work, which was made from 2000 to 2007, steward it, look at it with great attention, and place it in a new time, a new context and a new audience. So all of that is really heartwarming. Thank you Roma, and thank you for your assiduousness and your scholarship.

RP: No, thank you for your work, which continues to open up critical realizations and understandings for our community, Gauri. To begin thinking about this body of work, I wanted to consider how your practice has followed so many different marginalized communities, not just in this series, but throughout your oeuvre. Unlike many photographic practices, your works engage with these subjects very intimately. You talk about how this is born from this proclivity and desire to repeatedly return to subjects and to know their ongoing histories and experiences and how they kind of persevere in their situations. I want to talk to you a bit about this term that you use, called "Active Listening," which suggests both empathetic listening but also, a very conscious understanding of the precarious nature of one's situation. Your practice gives this powerful voice to those that are rendered voiceless by the media and the state. Could you talk more about what this means in your practice, but also, what this means in the context of *The Americans*?

GG: I have worked with communities and within contexts of people who have been invisibilized because we do live in a very hierarchical and a very unequal world. Visibility and being seen is also determined by power, right? This has been of ongoing interest to me. Of course it's only later in life perhaps, that you start to piece together some of the dots and think about what is the thread that runs through the different projects. I think the thing that photography is able to do very powerfully is actually make visual. For me, that has been a central concern in trying to listen. In the phrase that I've used, 'active listening,' I think the listening is really about trying to understand for myself how things are working in many of the contexts that exist outside of the bubbles—the bubbles that the capitalist world has created. And whether it is the city I live in, Delhi, or elsewhere, there are so many who are excluded from conversations—this includes indigenous people, immigrants, women, farmers. Their voices are willfully unheard, right? So I do feel one of the things photography has given me is the privilege of being able to enter the spaces of these lives. And to try and understand for myself, to use the camera in a way to listen, because I realize that it is simply a conduit or a kind of way for a plurality of voices to come through. The quieter the voices, perhaps the more important and more necessary that they be heard, and for those voices to emerge. But there also has to be a clarity to what is emerging, or to somehow communicate what is emerging. So in response to what I sense is coming, I make artistic choices as a photographer, which is an intervention. In the case of *The Americans*, for instance, I am



Gauri Gill, *Indian taxi drivers party, San Jose, California 2001* from the series *The Americans*, 2000-2007.
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Gauri Gill, *Software engineer, Alok Pareek; business owner, Sumati Patel - Pareek, Silicon Valley, California 2001* from the series *'The Americans'*, 2000-2007.
Copyright Gauri Gill.

choosing that it all be in color because, to me, the materiality of the world in the US was very important to depict.

RP: Yes, you can feel it through your embrace of vernacular photography practices, specifically, as you captured your subjects in staged photographs and casual snapshots on Kodak and Fujifilm 35 mm color negative film. Your work very consciously engages with quotidian practices, as you purchased and developed nearly 520 rolls in drugstores across the country, just as immigrants did to document their own histories at the time.

GG: Every little detail was absolutely important to record. I chose a color film I wanted to work with—cheap drugstore film—because that was also the particular aesthetic that I was going for. And I wanted to work with ambient light. I wanted those tones to come through—the greens and the blues and the beautiful yellow of North America. The sunshine is very pure and different from the sunshine in Delhi. So those choices are there. And the other thing that fascinates me about photography, the very slippery claims to truth that on the one hand, we are always purportedly portraying reality and people see it that way, especially within the documentary form. But on the other hand, there's absolute subjectivity beginning with the fact that we don't even see at 1/20 of a second or whatever shutter speed. The camera imposes its own language, and I make choices too. So, there is

a dialogue between the people or the spaces that I am trying to convey something of. But I am brought into these spaces by a great desire to try and understand, to listen, and then to somehow respond as transparently as possible.

RP: When I look at your body of work, I am particularly intrigued by the titles. I think I was most moved by the ways in which you name these individuals, even in the acknowledgement section of the 2008 catalog you reference Chetan Bhai, who worked as a newspaper vendor in Penn Station. And I felt that the way in which you name these individuals who

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might not be named otherwise is a really powerful move. In relation to what you were saying about truth, your approach to documentary photography is quite distinctive from the legacy of documentary photography in America—both the original *The Americans* by Robert Frank, and also, the FSA photographers during the Great Depression. Those photographers really saw distance and a singular moment as a better way to

encapsulate an experience in America. Your work very powerfully challenges that perspective, engaging with intimacy. Can you speak further about this and your reasoning for breaking this mold of documentary photography in America at that particular moment?

GG: I have the greatest regard for Robert Frank. I think of what Kerouac said about him, that he was this nice, sweet little Swiss inobtrusive man who sucked a sad poem right out of America. To me, of course, his work was something mythic and that we grew up with, a great book in the canon. I do have a lot of regard for it, but my own work is different from Frank's *The Americans*, because it is very much within people's private spaces. It's not street photography. A lot of it is actually me being invited in by people, being very close to them. The whole project began, in fact, with me photographing my family and then moving outwards from that to friends and to networks created by friends. So intimacy is a big part of it. I think a key difference for me would be the process of collaboration, and expansion. I am very troubled by many aspects of photography. I'm constantly thinking about claims to representation and claims to singular truths.

I guess in the beginning the collaboration was implicit because, for instance, I would ride into New York with my aunt, and I would see Chetan Bhai every day on the newspaper stand at Penn Station. We started to talk, and we became friends. I was interested in how he was living, where was his family? I came to understand his

precarious circumstances because he was having to send most of his money back to them in India, and he invited me to visit his home in New Jersey, which I did. I started to get involved in many different ways with my friends, and with time, I began to collaborate more actively. But right from the beginning, it was also very much about being allowed into particular and private spaces. And being there also on other people's terms. Making those physical journeys or just being physically present in contexts for long periods of time and across years, and repeatedly seeing the same people so they became friends. In fact, photography itself feels a bit like a byproduct. I'm never sure that I am able to honor the actual experience.

RP: Yes. I think you often talk about this desire to return to the images in your practice, to make sure that the meaning and the significance of the moment holds within the image itself. And it makes me think of how so much of your practice is spending decades with these photographs, not just with the subjects, but with the photographs themselves afterwards, which has led to so many beautiful subseries. It's evident in *Notes from the Desert*, but also here with *The Americans*. From our conversations, it's been really meaningful to hear how you think critically about these photographs in a new moment. And so I'm curious, as you began thinking about *The Americans*, really in the 1990s while you were at Parsons, you were photographing your friends and your family at that moment



as you were immersed in this community as a temporary diasporic person at the time. And so how is that body of work different from these Americans? What were you looking at that was potentially different? How was your engagement with your subjects different at that time?

GG: Yes, it is very true that editing is a big part of the process, and sitting with the work. I almost see making the images as a kind of note-taking, and then to sit down with them and actually create forms that would fit the work comes later. With *The Americans*, when

I was editing, the diptychs came and the grids came and all these other forms. And I also saw that there were a lot of reflections, mirrors, and glass. And the work was sort of fractured because I think I also felt like I wanted to tell it all, right? But there was so much, and, I also realized that at some point, but it's very hard for me to let go. With me, projects do go on for a very long time.

With *The Americans*, the initial work, it was all nascent, and it began because I was going into class at Parsons, and I just never saw any of this very rich subculture that I was

Gauri Gill, 'Dandya, Union City, California 2001' from the series 'The Americans', 2000-2007. Copyright Gauri Gill.

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living in, my aunt's home, my cousins, their friends—represented. So it started just with pictures of my family, including my grand aunt, and at the time, I was also experimenting with cameras. Sometimes they were 4 x 5 images, sometimes they were slides, sometimes they were black and white, sometimes they were color. The initial work is quite raw and has a beauty of its own, but it wasn't a series, it wasn't formed in that it was still experimenting and trying to think through. And then coming back to India, and sitting with those images and thinking about them, only then did it start to crystallise in my

mind that this was a story I wanted to tell, or try to tell, and that I wanted to return to it. When I came back for my MFA, I had more clarity that I was going to try and work with color negative film, for instance.

RP: Can you talk a bit about your consideration of the family album in relation to this work and how you engage with the transient nature of memory?

GG: I was very influenced by the family album. I felt it has incredible power because it is the stories we are telling ourselves about

ourselves, right? And so I really was drawn to that form, and it was what I was trying to mimic in a sense. I still didn't know what it would be or how long it would take, finally from 2000 to 2007. Finally it became a kind of sprawling journey told in fragments. And there is that kaleidoscopic cinematic quality also to it. But so much of it, say like the diptych form, came later when I was

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actually editing and sitting with the negatives and thinking, and then I started to see these connections and also to once again try and disturb the singular narrative. And so it metamorphosed in that sense.

And only then did I think of calling it *The Americans*. It was only after the work was ready that I thought that I wanted also to stake claim to the photographic canon, and that these were my Americans, that Frank had his Americans, but that there are as many Americans as there are stories and storytellers. And so yes, that essential question of who or how we define who is American remains—which of course today is still an ongoing question.

RP: I think that's what is so critical about this body of work. It makes us realize that the family album, photography, all of this allows us to kind of engage in this ongoing questioning of who we are. And I think that's something that was really beautiful about the opening. When we are confronted with old images of ourselves as immigrants, we realize we are constantly negotiating with these questions and looking for places to belong. Finding our own niche in America as immigrants, as diasporic people, is never static. I think that's what's made this project so beautiful and working on it with you, is that, it's a project that is both so close to your heart and mine, because this is a very lived experience for so many people, and I think it's been really remarkable

in the galleries to experience other people find belonging and their experience captured in a way that hasn't been captured in American history. And yet, our presence as immigrants in America is not something new. It has been very beautiful to experience that with you. Thank you so, so much.

GG: Thank you. Thank you, Roma. And yes, we realize it's all bigger than us, right? Like we are many people. I mean, I'm part of this continuum and you are part of this continuum. That's what makes me so happy, to see the pictures and see people coming in and still finding resonance in things that were so specific.

Gauri Gill, 'Party for Indian entrepreneurs, Washington, DC 2022' from the series *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Copyright Gauri Gill.



Gauri Gill, 'Jugjit at the Volkswagen showroom where he works as a cleaner, Washington, DC 2002' from the series *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Copyright Gauri Gill.



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