

# Gauri Gill: Acts of Appearance

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The picture's setting is familiar, but the appearances of the characters that populate the scene render it surprising, surreal, humorous, and symbolic. Behind a desk in a medical office sits a doctor with the head of an elephant, the arc of its trunk extended by the stethoscope the doctor uses to listen to the heartbeat of a patient. This second figure has the body of an older woman—judging by the clothing and the bangles wrapped around a tiny wrist—but the head of a frowning, apprehensive man, with wide eyes beneath a thick sweep of hair. Behind



Untitled, from the series Acts of Appearance. 2015–ongoing. Pigmented inkjet print, 42 × 28" (106.7 × 71.1 cm)

these two fantastic characters, small details bring us back to the everyday: a calendar, a desktop computer monitor, and, hanging high on the wall above, a framed image of the Hindu god Vishnu, his radiant blue skin set off by the container of bright turquoise liquid on the desk. The presence of Vishnu, the preserver of earthly life, is an added reminder that we are among the living. The people pictured are real, and their masks are as tied to their real identities, circumstances, and experiences as their bodies are.

This picture is part of Gauri Gill's most recent series, Acts of Appearance, color photographs that the artist created in close collaboration with members of an Adivasi (indigenous) community in Jawhar district, Maharashtra, India, that is renowned for its papier-mâché objects, including traditional sacred masks. While spending time in the area, Gill (Indian, born 1970) heard about the Bahoda festival, a ritual celebration of performance and dance observed by members of the Kokna tribe. Over several nights, the entire village enacts well-known Hindu epics intermingled with tribal myths; these narratives are performed with the aid of papier-mâché masks that depict Hindu gods, local tribal gods and demons, and other characters.

After reflecting upon the possible distance between such traditions and the everyday realities of the Jawhar community, Gill approached local artists Subhas Dharma Kadu and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, sons of the late celebrated mask-maker Dharma Kadu, and asked them to collaborate with other villagers on a project. She commissioned the group to create a new set of masks that, instead of depicting gods and deities, would represent their own lives. She proposed that the participants make masks in the form of familiar people, animals, or objects that were important to them or portray aspects of human existence such as various life stages, states of health, or emotions (*rasas*). Gill also suggested that they might choose to render “so-called inconsequential moments and beings . . . not just the grand animals like the tiger or elephant (which are also represented in the traditional pantheon of masks) but . . . the house fly, the frog or donkey, those beings all around us yet never noticed or archetyped.”<sup>1</sup> The openness of this prompt and the diversity of the masks made by the community in response speak to an understanding of the self as layered rather than one-dimensional, influenced not only by custom or religion but also by metaphor and imagination, by everyday experiences, by relations to other living beings as well as inanimate things, and by the landscape.

Gill and her collaborators then composed scenes of them and other volunteer actors wearing the masks while engaging in routine activities, often improvising as they went. With this approach, the artist hoped to prompt the mask-makers to think about “what happens when we choose to self-reflexively ‘play



Untitled, from the series Acts of Appearance. 2015–ongoing. Pigmented inkjet print, 60 × 40" (152.4 × 101.6 cm)

ourselves’ or enact the things we do unthinkingly most of the time.” The resulting pictures include scenes of outdoor village life: an eagle-woman kneeling to sweep the area outside her home; a man resting against a tall stack of straw with his young son, who wears the face of a sweet, obedient dog, albeit one with red eyes. In one image, two figures saunter down a dusty path, their faces turned slightly toward the sky. One man has the face of the sun, the other the face of the moon; both are round, shining, and calm. Only upon closer observation does it become clear that the moon is missing his left hand. Great and powerful forces, like celestial entities, might guide us, but our bodies are not immune to injury.

There are also indoor tableaus, such as the image of a seated figure whose head takes the form of a gray television that resembles the one on the table behind him. The picture transmitted on his television-face is a cityscape: a car driving

down a paved street next to tall buildings, worlds away from the rural village life outside his home. In yet another picture, a teacher looks up from her desk at the front of her classroom. She can be understood as wise, composed, and kind, or, just as easily, naive or blind—given that her eyes appear to be shut or blank, or to lack pupils—and provokes a comparison between her and the figures represented in the posters on the wall behind her. (On the right is a poster featuring the patriotic slogan *Maa tuihe salaam* [Motherland, salute to you], the Hindu warrior kings Shivaji and Maharana Pratap, and the iconic freedom fighters Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose below them; on the left is the Hindu mystic Swami Vivekananda). Her classroom is also decorated with local Warli paintings, in which distinctive white figures appear against a dark ground. Also appearing throughout the room are examples of writing in Marathi, Hindi, and English, including blackboard instructions on standing and sitting. These are the influences that shape the children of this community.

In this exhibition, gelatin silver prints from Notes from the Desert—a multi-series body of work shot in rural Rajasthan that Gill began in 1999—are displayed alongside the Acts of Appearance series. One parallel between the two groups of works is the emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals that exists in rural communities. In a picture from Notes from the Desert, Sumri, daughter of Ismail, a shepherd, kneels next to a goat amid the pebbles and dry earth; it is hard to decipher whether she is embracing the animal or is propped up by it. Hung nearby is a large photograph from Acts of Appearance of a man with a sickly green face and a thin goat-woman wearing a black scarf that camouflages the small, black baby goat in her lap. Many of the earlier images in the exhibition are from The Mark on the Wall, a series of photographs of drawings local artists, teachers, and children made directly on the walls of schools as part of a now-lapsed government initiative to help children learn visually. Gill sees all of this work—the earlier photographs from Rajasthan and the recent series from Maharashtra—as evidence of resilience through visual culture, of “how even in the starkest of landscapes and places with scarce economic resources, local artists continue to . . . find ways to exert agency and voice.”

Gill, who studied painting and applied art before turning to photography as her primary medium, has long advocated for and supported other artists, both formally trained and untrained, and has embraced collaboration in her work.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, while she was working on Notes from the Desert, Gill was invited by the nonprofit organization Urmul Setu Sansthan to participate in the *Balika Mela* (fair for girls from rural areas) it had coordinated in the town of Lunkaransar.



She set up a photography studio in a tent at the fair, offering anyone who was interested the opportunity to have their portrait taken and to later receive a gelatin silver print of the image. The girls who took Gill up on her offer chose their poses and props, which granted them power and confidence in constructing their own self-representations—something that may have been discouraged in other aspects of their lives. In 2010, Gill returned to the fair, conducting a second portrait session and presenting an exhibition of the photographs she had made seven years earlier.

Besides working closely with the subjects of her photographs, Gill has also expanded her art practice by incorporating materials made by others. In *What Remains* (2007–11)—which considers notions of belonging and home in the face of migration, specifically the movement of Afghani Sikhs and Hindus into India over successive generations—Gill interspersed photographs she had taken in Kabul and Delhi with photographs taken by anonymous members of the Sikh community in Afghanistan, as well as texts composed by children who participated in writing workshops she conducted in Delhi. And in the project *1984*, which reflected, almost thirty years later, on the attacks on the Sikh community in Delhi that took place in the titular year, Gill created a free digital publication containing her own photographs together with captions from the print media where those images had first appeared, as well as texts submitted by poets, filmmakers, and many other artists.

More recently, for the ongoing series *Fields of Sight*, Gill has been working with Rajesh Vangad, an accomplished Warli artist from Ganjad, an Adivasi farming village in Dahanu, coastal Maharashtra. In 2013, she traveled to the area to work on a project at the local school and stayed in Vangad’s family home. While there, she was inspired to photograph the surrounding landscape but felt that “her images aestheticized and flattened the place at the expense of its very specific history.” After conversations with Vangad, she began to photograph him in places that had special meaning for him. Looking at her contact sheets, however, she felt something was still missing: she saw the places defined only in terms of the instants she had clicked the shutter, not Vangad’s stories about the significance of each setting or the unique experiences he had had there. To bring out these layers, Gill and Vangad worked together to decide on the narratives they wanted to represent, staged each photograph in the chosen setting, and Vangad then drew with ink directly onto Gill’s prints.

Like Vangad’s drawings, the masks of the Jawhar village community confirm that meaningful experiences or aspects of identity are not always readily visible. Gill has found that



*Sumri, daughter of Ismail the shepherd, Barmer, from the series Notes from the Desert. 1999–ongoing. Gelatin silver print, 14 × 11" (35.6 × 27.9 cm)*

tribal artists are often expected to “perform their culture” rather than being “permitted an interiority or individual complexity” as she or other art-school-trained contemporary artists are. She has emphasized these complexities in her photography. Photography is a medium that “takes you out into the world,” Gill has noted, and, indeed, *Acts of Appearance* chronicles the rich worlds of a community with its active participation, and invites viewers into these worlds.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gauri Gill, email correspondence with the author, March 7, 2018. All subsequent quotations by the artist are also from this exchange.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Gill was cofounder and editor, together with Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, of the free nonprofit journal *Camerawork Delhi*, which ran from 2006 to 2011 and promoted contemporary photography and its practitioners in the region and internationally. Gill received her BFA from the Delhi College of Art, followed by a second BFA from Parsons School of Design in New York and an MFA from Stanford University.

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Cover: Untitled (detail), from the series *Acts of Appearance*. 2015–ongoing. Pigmented inkjet print, 60 × 40" (152.4 × 101.6 cm)  
Images courtesy the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi. © 2018 Gauri Gill

*Acts of Appearance* was created with the participation of Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, Subhas Dharma Kadu, Yuvraj Bhagvan Kadu, Rahul Arvind Kakad, Rahul Bhagvan Kadu, Makhaval Bhagvan Kadu, Madhuri Subhas Kadu, Rangeeta Arvind Kakad, Darshana Devram Kakad, Ganesh Ganpat Lokhande, Sangeeta Ganesh Lokhande, Sangeeta Navnath Kadu, Kusum Bhagvan Kadu, Harishchandra Rama Kadu, Suvrna Harishchandra Vad, and Anjana Sachin Kurbude; along with Sachin Sankar Kurbude, Sanjay Sakharam Vatas, Ganpat Ganga Lokhande, Rupesh Arvind Kakad, Nalini Pradip Valvi, Jyoti Sanjay Vatas, Shravan Budhya Tumbda, Saraswati Subhas Kadu, Sapna Bhagvan Kadu, Bhawna Bhagvan Kadu, Pooja Arvind Kakad, Tushar Prakash Vatas, Tushar Dinkar Vatas, Vijaya Navnath Kadu, Suraj Tukaram Vad, Nishant Tulshiram Thalkar, and Nilam Sunil Marad.

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