

COLLABORATIVE, LIBERATING, RESISTANT: THE SCHIRN PRESENTS PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE ARTIST GAURI GILL IN THE FIRST MAJOR SURVEY OF HER WORK

GAURI GILL
ACTS OF RESISTANCE AND REPAIR

OCTOBER 13, 2022–JANUARY 8, 2023

PRESS PREVIEW: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2022, 11 A.M.

Far away from India's urban centers, the photographer Gauri Gill (*1970) has been exploring the modes of survival and daily lives of the country's rural population for more than two decades. From October 13, 2022, to January 8, 2023, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting the first extensive survey exhibition of the artist's multifaceted photographic oeuvre, bringing together around 240 works from major series.

Gill's quiet, concentrated images focus the viewer's gaze on barely perceived peripheral areas of Indian society. In an open, collaborative process that resists documentary conventions, the artist devotes her work to themes such as survival, self-assertion, identity, and belonging, as well as conceptual issues relating to memory and authorship. Along with the dimension of time and serial continuity, tenacity and empathy are decisive factors in her practice of art, in which she seeks to overcome outdated narratives and stereotypes. Through her dialogic use of the camera and intense, personal communication across classes, religions, and generations, the artist explores a new form of "collective vision" as she searches for diverse voices.

The foundation of Gill's work and the starting point for several of her photo series is the long-term archival project *Notes from the Desert*, in which she has used photography to engage with marginalized communities in Rajasthan in the border region of western India since 1999. In this series, as across her entire oeuvre, the artist particularly expresses her long friendships with women, whom she highlights in intimate portraits. A counterpoint to her projects in the desert is the photo series *The Americans* (2000–07), devoted to the diverse lives of the Indian diaspora, especially in terms of migration, homeland, and connection to culture. The exhibition at the Schirn also highlights Gill's collaborative approach, which includes working with artists from rural regions. In her most recent series, *Acts of Appearance* (2015-ongoing), for example, she incorporates masks made by papier-mâché artists from the Kokna and Warli communities in Jawhar, Maharashtra, into improvised scenes of daily life, devising a fascinating dialogue between reality and fiction.

The exhibition "Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair" is supported by the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e.V. and the Hessische Kulturstiftung.

Sebastian Baden, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, remarks: "Gauri Gill gives viewers direct access to her work. With the most profoundly human themes, as well as the topicality and political scope of her photographs, she combines social and aesthetic aspects in her work. Her projects, often created in cooperation with others over periods of many years, testify to a deep connection to the land and its people and, as a liberating artistic tool, are uniquely capable of overcoming stereotypes. It is with great pleasure that we look forward to presenting Gauri Gill's exceptional oeuvre in her first large survey at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt."

Esther Schlicht, curator of the exhibition, comments on the artist's work methods: "Gauri Gill pursues an extremely diverse repertoire of visual strategies, from intimate snapshots and a conceptual body of motifs to overpainted landscape photographs and tableaux vivants. Beyond all formal and conceptual differences, her impressive body of work is permeated by a deeply felt interest in people, their struggles, and their creativity, which is reflected in an approach based on dialogue and cooperation, while also expressing a decidedly political stance."

TOPICS AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Since 1999 Gauri Gill has been a freelance photo-artist traveling through the barren regions of western Rajasthan. She captures the lives of marginalized rural communities in the intimate scenes and portraits of **Notes from the Desert**, an open archive consisting of several thousand mostly black-and-white photographs. Free of sentimentality and folklore, she draws a picture of resistance and survival in an environment characterized by extremes. Personal encounters and long years of friendships with local populations comprise an elementary part of her practice of photography.

Notes from the Desert gave rise to several major series in which Gill seeks to redefine the relationship between the photographer and those photographed, in particular expressing her solidarity with girls and women. The intimate series **Jannat** (1999–2007) pays tribute to a close friendship. The fifty-two-part cycle of small gelatin silver prints follows a Muslim girl, Jannat, describing the precarious life of a family abandoned by the father in everyday, often casual-seeming situations. Gill's concern about giving visibility to women, especially those from rural regions dominated by patriarchal power structures, can also be seen in **Balika Mela** (2003 and 2010). This series assembles portraits of girls and women from various village communities taken in a tent studio as part of a workshop initiated by Gill in the city of Lunkaransar. Because the people portrayed also took the position behind the camera themselves, they also participated in determining the conditions of their representation. Likewise, the seven-part series **Ruined Rainbow** (1999–2010) stems from a project with children and teens from Barmer district in Rajasthan. The badly exposed snapshots that they took using Kodak cameras provided for their learning reveal a playful, experimental encounter with moments from childhood, and another view of the village.

Other series deriving from Gill's photo archive *Notes from the Desert* have a more pronounced documentary character. For example, the ongoing series **The Mark on the Wall** (1999-ongoing) shows hand-drawn diagrams on the interior and exterior walls of remote schools in the hinterlands of Rajasthan, relics of a government-sponsored program to support education. Another alternative archive is the series **Rememory** (2003-ongoing), whose title alludes to Toni Morrison and which features photographs of abandoned, newly constructed, or decaying buildings, gates, and paths taken by Gill on her travels through India. They are testimonies to places between the rural and cosmopolitan that subtly focus on gentrification and its effects on the reality of people's lives. In addition, the large photographs from the project **Traces** (1999-ongoing) feature the gravesites made of found or marked stones, branches, shards of clay pots, and personal belongings of Muslim and Hindu communities alike, while reflecting upon the cycle of life of birth and death that is integrated into the landscape. A counterpoint to *Traces* is provided by the eight small photographs of the 2005 **Birth Series**, which capture the intimate experience of a birth as conducted by an experienced midwife in a distant village in the Thar Desert.

Besides her primarily black-and-white projects in the desert, Gill has also devoted a series of color photographs, **The Americans** (2002–2007), to the living environments of the Indian diaspora in the United States. On her photographic journey from New York to California, from the Midwest to the South, Gill documents personal moments of success and exhaustion, sorrow and joy, religion and culture from a transcultural perspective in her encounters with relatives, friends, and new acquaintances, while also referring to Robert Frank's eponymous and epochal work published in 1958.

In her more recent projects, Gill has added new dimensions to her collaborative approach. The group of works titled **Fields of Sight** has been jointly authored with the Indigenous artist Rajesh Chaitya Vangad from the Warli community since 2013. This project combines Gill's black-and-white photographs with Vangad's delicate drawings. The images are inscribed with memories tied to the place, as well as traditional local stories. The Schirn is presenting the 2021 triptych *Jal, Jungal, Jameen* (Water, Land, Forest) for the first time. The title refers to the three basic values of

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Warli life, which the political movement of the Indigenous populations in all parts of India use as the slogan for their protests against displacement and environmental destruction.

For another group of works, **Acts of Appearance** (2015-ongoing), Gill has been working with papier-mâché artists from the Adivasi communities of the Kokna and Warli in Jahwar. As is the case with *Fields of Sight* Gill's approach leads through traditional local arts and crafts, while her photographs become a kind of stage for new forms of artistic expression. Using the masks collectively produced for *Acts of Appearance*, she develops a playful, experimental process of self-reflection, in which participants choose how to represent themselves and the reality of everyday life in the village community.

In addition to Gill's major series, the exhibition at the Schirn presents Gill's selection of individual pieces by some of her artistic partners and people who have been of significance to her work. This includes photographs of migrant life in London made by her father, Manohar Singh Gill, as well as drawings of nature by her mother, Vinnie Gill. Documentation of her collaborative projects include her films *On Seeing* (2020) and *Paper to Figure* (2022, with Pradip Saha), as well the magazine *Camerawork Delhi* (2006–11), which she coedited, provide insight into Gill's development as an artist and how she sees herself as a photographer.

Gauri Gill, born in Chandigarh in 1970, studied applied arts at the Delhi College of Art, New Delhi, and photography at the Parsons School of Design, New York, before acquiring her MFA in art from Stanford University in California. Today, she lives in New Delhi. Her works have been presented in India and at important international exhibitions, including the 58th Venice Biennale, documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, the 7th Moscow Biennial, and the 2016 Kochi-Muziris Biennial. Her most recent solo shows have been at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; MoMA PS1, New York; the Museum Tinguely in Basel; and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

An exhibition of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in cooperation with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk.

CATALOG *Gauri Gill: Acts of Resistance and Repair*, edited by Esther Schlicht, with texts by Alexander Keefe, Luise Leyer, Jisha Menon, and Esther Schlicht, as well as a foreword by Sebastian Baden, the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. German/English edition, 268 pages, 245 ills., 22 x 30 cm, softcover, Kehrer Verlag, ISBN 978-3-96900-099-1, 35 € (SCHIRN), 45 € (bookstores)

LOCATION SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main

DURATION October 13, 2022–January 8, 2023 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **E-MAIL**

welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **ADMISSION** €10, discount €8, free

admission for children under 8 **TICKETS** Available in the online shop under schirn.de/shop or at the Schirn ticket office **BOOK INDIVIDUAL TOURS** Individual tours or group tours can be booked

at fuehrungen@schirn.de **INFORMATION ABOUT THE VISIT** All information about the visit and the current corona measures are available at www.schirn.de/en/visit/faq **CULTURAL PARTNER**

HR2 **CURATOR** Esther Schlicht, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt **ASSISTANT CURATOR** Luise Leyer

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