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With masks and some alchemy, photographer Gauri Gill tells real and fantastic stories in Maharashtra

In collaboration with papier-maché artists from Maharashtra, Gill creates an important piece of work.

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Untitled, Acts of Appearance | Gauri Gill

The image of an elephant head on a human body is not a novelty in India. But when that image is re-contextualised in photographs that straddle art and craft, tradition and modernity, powerlessness and empowerment, life and performance, then that image becomes something to take note of again. Such an image occurs in two photographs – Untitled, (52) and Untitled, (10) – in photographer Gauri Gill’s new solo show, Acts of Appearance, at Nature Morte gallery in Delhi.

Untitled, (52) is a group photo. The “performers” in it could be a family, just as easily as they could be characters in a fantastic play – next to the elephant (man) in the photograph are people donning masks depicting a rabbit, a tiger and an antelope as well as people aged approximately 10-70 years. In Untitled, (10) the “elephant” is a doctor in a hospital examining the heart of an elderly woman.

The multiple identities of the elephant-man in these photos is typical of Acts of Appearance. It is indicative of Gill’s engagement throughout the series with representation, identity and role-play. “We are all constantly changing beings, as many different selves as moments in time,” Gill said. “And others read us in their own subjective ways, perhaps different from how we imagine ourselves to be.”



Untitled, from Acts of Appearance (2015-). Photo courtesy: Gauri Gill.

Crafting a collaboration

Spending extended periods of time in Maharashtra to work on her series *Fields of Sight*, Gill first learnt about the sacred Bahora masks in 2013. Bahora – or Bohada – masks are made all over the state. They often depict the faces of gods such as Ganesh and demons like Mahisasur and Ravan from Hindu scriptures, as well as local deities, and are made to be worn in annual ritual processions. The papier-maché masks are brightly painted, polished and lacquered with elaborate headgear.

In 2015, Gill first began a dialogue with a community of papier-maché artists from Jawhar district in Maharashtra to deviate from making classical masks. “I wondered if we could work together as fellow artists to speak about the present moment, what was all around us, rather than a mythological, imagined past.” The artists were asked to “We are artists – *kalakaar*. We can make all kinds of masks – human, animal,” said Yuvraj Bhagvan Kadu, one of the young artists from Jawhar who collaborated with Gill. “What appealed to us was working together. Everyone came up with so many ideas, which helped us develop new masks such as those depicting a frog, a television set, a fly, a camel, a fish, a book, a mobile phone or a child.”

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Over the past three years, Gill has made photographs of the artists and other locals, performing as actors while wearing the masks, in local scenarios, for *Acts of Appearance*.

Tradition and modernity

Gill's process in *Acts of Appearance* introduced a twist. Instead of an imagined state, the wearers projected quotidian realities and professions like an artisan or doctor or teacher. "The staging of the photographs was collaborative and improvisatory," said Gill. "There was discussion...[on] where and what to photograph. In a way, this has all emerged through forms of play and trying out ideas together."

In one frame, a young boy sitting in a tree wears a mask depicting a young boy. There's an element of playfulness, a contemporaneity in the performance, compared with the ritualistic performances normally associated with the masks.



Power and photography

Gill's process of sharing creative freedom and responsibility with the subject has resulted in empowering them at least once before. In 2003, Gill shot a series of "studio" portraits at a Balika Mela or fair for adolescent girls in Lunkaransar in Rajasthan. Gill's "studio" was in fact a makeshift tent, with props borrowed from the local studio such as a stool, bench, a vase and plastic flowers. As part of the series, Gill invited the girls to choose how they wanted to be photographed and with whom. The girls took charge of the image-making process in a way that clashed with the general perception of their powerlessness.

A similar alchemy seems to be at work in *Acts of Appearance*. To cite one example, in *Untitled (17)*, a woman assumes a sleeping Vishnu-like pose on a sofa in her home. Her features are hidden behind a mask depicting a king cobra. The photo cheekily relies on our collective knowledge of religious iconography and power equations in the domestic space, to enact small subversions.



Craft is art

Acts of Appearance isn't Gill's first collaboration with a tribal artist. Since 2013, she has worked with Warli artist Rajesh Vangad on the ongoing series, Fields of Sight. As with Vangad, Gill shares the credit for Acts of Appearance with the tribal artists – the first thing viewers see on entering the gallery is a long list of names of all artists, starting with veterans Bhagvan Dharma Kadu and Subhas Dharma Kadu.

“Craftspeople’ are contemporary artists like any other, it’s a false category,” said Gill. “If given the the space and time, practising artists make the craft their own – to have imbibed and know the traditions but find their own voice within that, to reflect and take the practice in new directions. This voice could belong to a community or collective, as much as an individual.”



Acts of Appearance is a large show comprising 71 photos. Forty-six of these are colour images from the eponymous series. The remaining are black-and-white photos from Gill's ongoing series from Rajasthan, Notes from the Desert (1999-) and The Mark on the Wall (1999-). The Mark on the Wall is a series of pictures of visual aids and diagrams on school walls in Rajasthan.

Acts of Appearance is powerful, because of Gill's ability to show you something in sharp relief, and at the same time make you question its veracity. Is the man behind the brooding, green mask actually laughing? Could the woman behind the wrinkled and creased mask really be young? "There can never be one true story to be told about his, mine or any world, these are only documents of pure fiction, about heterogeneous beings," said Gill.

Acts of Appearance is on till February 27 (closed Sundays) at Nature Morte, Neeti Bagh, New Delhi.

All images by Gauri Gill

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