

CULTURE, STOP THE HATE

Looking for Ourselves: Gauri Gill's The Americans, 2000-2007

Gauri Gill uncovers the intricate dreams and demands of immigrant life in her photographs now on exhibit now at the Wallach Gallery, New York



by Roma Patel
March 29, 2024



Gauri Gill seated in front of *The Americans*. Copyright Esra Kelin for Schirn Kunsthalle Museum, 2022. (image courtesy: The Artist and James Cohan, New York)

Looking for Ourselves

In February 2024, authorities in Seattle ruled that Jaahnavi Kandula, the 23-year-old Indian graduate student who was struck and killed by a Seattle police officer, would not receive justice, due to a lack of “sufficient” evidence. In body camera footage released by the police department, the officer was laughing upon Kandula’s death and suggesting the city would only need to “write a [small] check” and send it to India as her life had “limited value.” Kandula’s life did not have “limited value.” She came to America, dreaming the same big dreams of happiness and success as thousands of other immigrants. As the South Asian community grapples with this loss of life, engaging in protests and vigils in her honor, they question whether they contemplate their existence as Americans.



Jaahnavi Kandula, 23, was struck by a police car and killed in January 2023. (image courtesy Roma Patel)

Things that happen every day

While the death of Jaahnavi Kandula is a recent memory for the South Asian immigrant community in the United States, “these things happen every day;” notes the son of Jasmer Singh, a Sikh immigrant who was the victim of a hate crime on the Van Wyck Expressway in Queens, New York.

Incidents like these make immigrants constantly question their American identity, given the backdrop of anti-immigrant political discourse together with surveillance, racial profiling, and hypervisibility of AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) communities. They inspired Roma Patel, the curator of ***Looking for Ourselves: Gauri Gill’s The Americans, 2000-2007***, to create the exhibition currently on view at Columbia University’s Wallach Art Gallery in New York. “These hate crimes are heartbreaking yet common headlines in America today. As our community mourns these individuals, we grapple with how such stories are tied to our immigrant histories and reflect our own ongoing questioning, examining, and reassessment of our existence as Americans.”



Gauri Gill, *Indian grocery store in Queens, New York 2004* from *The Americans*, 2000–2007 (image courtesy: The Artist and James Cohan, New York)

Picturing daily immigrant life

Immigrants are one of the many groups at the margins of society that Prix Pictet-winning Indian photographer Gauri Gill has followed in her work. She has photographed indigenous people, subordinate castes, nomads, small farmers, laborers, and others, focusing on uncovering the intricacies of the daily lives of these communities, particularly how they rise above precarious circumstances. Often living alongside her subjects, she engages in “active listening,” working with and through the communities she photographs, to give a platform to those rendered voiceless by the media and the state.

Looking for Ourselves, the Wallach’s first solo show of a South Asian artist’s work, revisits Gauri Gill’s body of work *The Americans*, which was created 17 years ago.

In the aftermath of 9/11, as South Asians became stereotyped either as insiders (the model minority,) or as outsiders (transgressive others), Gill wondered what it meant to be American if one was South Asian. The series reveals what Gill’s seven-year journey discovered from rural towns to metropolitan cities across the United States.

Unlike canonical Swiss American Photographer Robert Frank, who made the iconic 1958 series of the same name, Gill’s work breaks entirely from his camera’s quick shots of strangers. Gill worked closely with her own community—photographing her friends, family, and acquaintances in temples, places of work and homes. She drew on their lived experiences to cultivate a deeply personal understanding of immigrant life in America.



Gauri Gill, *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* from the series *The Americans*, 2000–2007. (image courtesy: The Artist and James Cohan, New York)

Dreams and disasters

The Americans does not shy away from the contradictions of immigrant life. In photographs like *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*, Gill captures the precariousness of immigrant life in America, even as immigrant dreams are fulfilled.

Walekar, a successful taxi driver in the DC area, was murdered while filling gas in his taxi by the “DC Sniper,” an admirer of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Rather than underline the public nature of the case (the large reception hall is absent from the frame), Gill focuses on private afterlives and the quiet resistance at play, with Walekar’s son contemplating his father’s death.

Although many of Gill’s immigrants represent “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 Americans* invites viewers to investigate the complexity of subjects’ situations.

Introspection on Being American

The exhibition invites visitors to consider their own evolving narratives as Americans by assessing this body of work as a family album, a site for collective memories, personal histories, and dreams. Evoking the commemorative and happenstance moments found in family albums, Gill’s work engages with vernacular photographs’ existence as sites for “articulation and aspiration,” a framework proposed by visual studies scholar Tina Campt. In the thirty-four works that form the exhibit, Gill encourages viewers “to enter the frame” and actively engage in a dialogue with her subjects. Inviting memories and imagination from viewers, *The Americans* exists as a pseudo-family album for the broader American community’s contemplation, resistance, and dreaming.

Become part of the exhibition

Inspired by Gauri Gill's belief that "every person's story is equally valid," the project invites individuals who identify as South Asian American to share the stories from their family albums. [The South Asian Americans](#) is an independent Instagram-based archive-in-the-making.

Submission Guidelines

1. Any photograph(s) of South Asians in America (non-US citizens are welcome) from 1965-2010
2. Approximate date of the photograph
3. Your name
4. An anecdote about what the photograph means to your identity & experience in America

Submission via direct message to @thesouthasianamericans on Instagram

(Note: By submitting a photograph you are confirming that you have the authority to permit the public-facing publication of anyone pictured within the image)

Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery
Lenfest Center for the Arts
615 West 129th Street
6th Floor · New York, NY 10027
On View: March 23- April 7, 2024
Hours: Wed– Sun | 12:00– 6:00 PM

In addition to the exhibition, curator Roma Patel will hold a conversation with Gauri Gill, titled "[Collaborative Partnership & Active Listening in Gauri Gill's Practice](#)" on April 4 and a workshop titled, "[Reading Family Photography: Memory Work & Storytelling Workshop](#)" on April 6.