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Gauri Gill has taken the fruits of her incredible collaborations to New York



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Untitled works from Gauri Gill's 'Acts of Appearance' series

On display at New York's James Cohan gallery until November 13, Gauri Gill's photographs have been described as "rich" and "remarkable" by The New Yorker, and as "visually spellbinding" by The New York Times. Neither review is off the mark. It's hard to look away from Gill's work. While some images make you laugh, others demand longer consideration and empathy.

Having travelled to Ganjad in rural Maharashtra, Gill met Warli painter Rajesh Vangad in 2013. As she heard him talk about the landscape, the rituals of Ganjad, Gill felt there was a gap between her contact sheets and all that he was saying: "While I saw the village through the lens of my education, urban privilege and camera, he saw it through memory, his intimate lived experience." Gill began photographing Vangad against Ganjad's backdrop, but soon realised her collaboration with him would have to go deeper to be meaningful. "It was a leap into the dark. It has taken us eight years to begin to understand each other."

In *Fields of Sight*, we see Vangad use Gill's black-and-white pictures of Ganjad as canvases for his folk art. He fills its empty spaces—sky, horizon, water—to narrate a cultural and mythic history. In 'The Great Pandemic', for instance, Vangad is both subject and co-artist. His drawing of Dhartari Devi is poignant (she is holding not the earth but a virus in her hands), but also hopeful. We see her blessings shower on scientists creating vaccines. "It is documentary as a form of theatre," says Gill. "The photograph becomes a set, the stage on which Rajeshji can perform a story through drawing. As someone put it to me, it's as though the resident of an old home I was photographing came out and began to speak."

Compared to the three Vangad-Gill creations on display at James Cohan, it is the 40-odd pictures from Gill's *Acts of Appearance* series that are, perhaps, even more ostensibly theatrical. In 2014, Gill was in Jawhar, where she invited mask-makers from Maharashtra's Kokna and Warli tribes to work with her. Though taken by the classical papier-mâché masks of gods and goddesses these artists made for the annual Bohada festival, Gill was after something "less idealised". Speaking to INDIA TODAY from New York last month, Gill says, "I asked, 'What if you were to make masks of people you know?' I'm sitting here talking to you on the phone, but what if I was playing myself talking to you on the phone, how would I do that?" Looking at Gill's pictures, it is clear that the artists took her questions—"How can we embody the nine rasas? Can we express common human experiences like sickness and ageing? How do we describe the so called banality of today? How do we collapse the internal and external?"—and ran with them.



Untitled works from Gauri Gill's 'Acts of Appearance' series

Acts of Appearance revises our notions of the urban-rural divide. It also seems to ask if photography is fact or fiction. Seeing people wear masks of faces that might or might not be their own, we can wonder if selves are fixed or mutable. But before any of that, her somewhat comical pictures are first radical. In pictures of a woman driving a van with a lizard's face, of people with radio heads going about their daily business, we see a lightness that beats the worst of odds. She says, "Jawhar has a terrible infant mortality rate. The water is almost undrinkable, but as these pictures show, there is, in the face of heartbreaking suffering, terrific humour, attention to beauty and resilience. I am interested in strategies of survival and learning from those who have faced formidable tests."





Gauri Gill