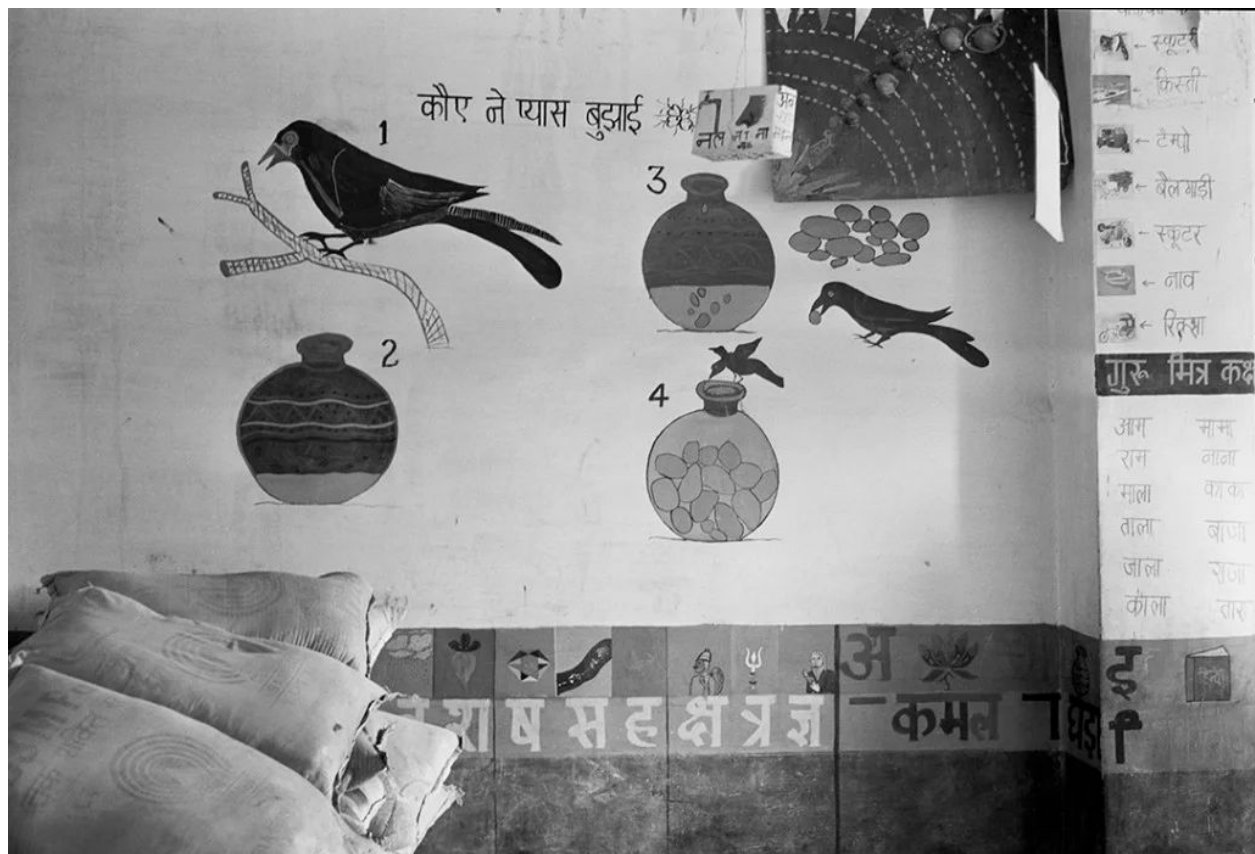


Bearing Witness: Creations of the 'Human Hand' in Gauri Gill's Photography

The photographer presents three interrelated bodies of work in her current exhibition in Mumbai.

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Untitled (16). From the series 'The Mark on the Wall' 1999 – ongoing.

Gauri Gill is one of the most thoughtful photographers active in India today. Her work is inspired by an ethic of seeing and making that struggles against the documentary photographer's sovereign gaze – a gaze that despite its claim to objectivity dominates its subjects and the manner in which they are represented. To address this asymmetry in representation, Gill has sometimes invited her sitters to co-produce their portraits. Her most accomplished series in this mode is 'Balika Mela' (2003), for which she set up an impromptu photo studio with basic props at a children's fair in Rajasthan, and asked the girls who were her protagonists to choose their own mode of self-presentation.

Gill presents three interrelated bodies of work in her current exhibition at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai. To use a musical metaphor, we see her performing first as a soloist, then participating in a duet and closing with a concert of invisible accompanists. Her first series, 'Places/Traces', includes work from an ongoing series that she has been photographing since 1999 in rural Rajasthan. Here, she submits herself to the vast expanses of the desert, where distance is measured out in mirages, and develops an aesthetic of remnant and ruin. In her loneliness, she attempts to communicate with the spirits of the place and achieve a temporary communion: the house that once was and now stands like a body without organs, graves with offerings of broken china and decomposing tyres and a tender, talismanic row of children's footwear guarding the thirsty trees in a schoolyard.

With the second series, 'Fields of Sight' (2014-2016), Gill moves to the greener environs of the west coast. She has collaborated, over a period of time, with the Warli artist Rajesh Vangad, who lives in a village in the predominantly adivasi district of Dahanu, Maharashtra. Vangad has contributed in a variety of ways to the series – as a guide taking her to places of mythic and psychic importance to him, as a protagonist appearing in the photographs and finally as an artist painting over the photographs to create a third thing, a hybrid vocabulary that operates in the interstitial zones between photography and painting.

Gill is only too painfully aware that their 'collaboration' is inevitably skewed in her favour. In any case, this Anglophone term is perhaps more useful to grant-making institutions than to artists pursuing their creative explorations together, negotiating past the differences in class, education and location that might separate them. Apart from Gill's ideological unease with the documentary format, I wonder whether she is also re-enchanting or re-investing with a sacred quality the secular act of photography by inviting Vangad to superscribe her image of the landscape with his fecund ritual and mythic symbols.



Night Journey of Forest Dwellers. From the series 'Fields of Sight', by Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad.

For Vangad, whose Warli world-view is pantheistic, it is an organic extension of his artistic practice to cover the photographic surface with a web of his cosmic forms and terrestrial creatures. Warli art, as practised today, is not a primordial and immutable art form. It has risen to confront the challenges of contemporary economic and political transformations. Once expressed as a ritual and festive iconography painted on dung-coated walls, it has migrated to paper and canvas, with Warli artists addressing sacred and secular themes alike. In fact, Jivya Soma Mashe, the most celebrated Warli artist – to whom Vangad is related – has exhibited alongside the land artist Richard Long in Germany and Italy.



Untitled (32). From the series 'The Mark on the Wall' 1999 – ongoing.

Gill's third series, 'The Mark on the Wall', begun in 1999, documents the afterlife of a long-lapsed government scheme, 'Leher Kaksha', in western Rajasthan, under which students were encouraged to learn directly off drawings made on school walls. The wall drawings now bear a forsaken look, offering testimony to an attempt at creative pedagogy that convivially brought local artists, children and teachers together. Although these individuals are absent from the photographs, their presence is strongly felt in the residues they have left behind. The local artist Hanuman Prasad Sharma, who may remain nameless in the conversations of the Indian art world, has boldly signed his name on a drawing portraying a capacious tree of 'Tenses'; one of its branches presciently proclaims, 'Future indefinite'.

The human anatomy, the planetary movements, the moral science exhortation on always being truthful, 'Sada sach bolo': these build into a lexicon designed to make everyday life legible. But a torn taxonomic chart of communities – 'Musalman 12' and 'Brahman 17' – disturbingly reveals that pedagogy reproduces existing social prejudices or prods sleeping demons awake. Or are we only approximating the truth here,

Must collaboration be restricted to the production of commodifiable objects? Or can it be, in the Bastar artist Rajkumar's sagacious words, an '*akal baanta baanti*', the exchange and sharing of intelligence? Could Gill have worked with orality and sound, instead of, or alongside, a hybrid visuality? Could their collaboration have articulated the many stories that Vangad can narrate? Stories about the ecology, the cosmos, and local knowledge, which ache to be heard. With each story, another piece of the wall of prejudice and ignorance might have collapsed. I ask these questions of Gill's works because I respect and admire her profoundly serious approach to the responsibility of bearing witness, and am certain that it may some day extend itself beyond the frame of the image.

All images by Gauri Gill.

<https://thewire.in/the-arts/bearing-witness-creations-of-the-human-hand-in-gauri-gills-photography>