

Opinion

## VAST NATIVE THOUGHTS

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There is a quiet audaciousness in the title of Gauri Gill's first solo exhibition of photographs — *The Americans* (Bose Pacia, until March 8). In 1955, exactly a quarter of a century before Gill was born in Chandigarh, Robert Frank — a Swiss Jew in his early thirties, who had emigrated to the United States — won a

Guggenheim fellowship to travel all over America taking photographs of its people and spaces. Frank covered almost all 48 states in an old, used car and then selected eighty-odd photographs from the several thousands he had taken to create a book called *The Americans*. This epochal book was published first in France and then in the US in the late Fifties. For Jack Kerouac, who wrote the introduction, Frank's images had "sucked a sad, sweet poem out of America". He was also struck by how Frank's unique and unifying eye came with an ability to be both present and absent, inside as well as outside. This elusive doubleness gave to the figure of the artist "the agility, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow".

Between 2000 and 2007 — after completing a photojournalistic stint in India, and while, for a part of this time, doing an MFA in photography in California — Gill made several long trips through America, capturing, like Frank, its people and spaces. But she chose to work with a specific category of Americans — the Indian diaspora settled in rural, suburban and metropolitan America. This is a bewilderingly diverse range of people — IT professionals, art collectors, factory-workers, farm-workers, mailmen, housewives, children — caught in the middle of work, leisure, festivity, religion or domesticity, in solitude or as part of variously-defined collectivities. Between the moment of her own work and that of the artist she pays homage to, two world-changing things happened: the emergence of colour photography and 9/11. Each has had its momentous effect on the history of looking and of being looked at, and the people who look out of Gill's photographs, or into themselves, have been, implicitly and explicitly, 'fixed' by both. 9/11 is never directly referred to in this show — and this is an intelligent decision. But colour becomes, in this work, a self-aware dimension of experience and representation.

The two pictures here are diptychs, 17x50 inches, both taken in 2002 and hung together in the show. The one on top brings together two moments during a Brahmin thread-tying ceremony for Silicon Valley professionals in a shopping complex in Fremont, California. And the diptych below shows the building of the first Sikh *gurdwara* on Massachusetts Avenue in the heart of Washington DC. This is what we read in the captions, but what we notice first is how, for instance, in the first picture, there are diptychs within a diptych. The frame is divided into rectangles of glass, in the form of doors and mirrors, that break up the human figures, singly or in groups, into different, but juxtaposed, planes of reality. Bodies coexist with reflections and shadows, and with words, numbers and logos, in English and in Chinese — and that accidentally apposite word “PHOTO” in one corner of the picture. Similarly, the two halves of the picture below are unified by the Fall colours, the red brick of the house in the background, and the shape of the scaffolding being constructed. The feel of the cold, wet day, and the contrast between being under a roof and being exposed to the weather are equally part of what the diptych is ‘about’, visually and culturally.

Gill’s work asks for a layered viewing that must not only engage with the content of the work, but also pay close attention to its technical, formal and aesthetic achievements. It is again Robert Frank’s words that provide a key to looking at this densely minimal, thoughtfully hung and sequenced exhibition: “When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of poetry twice.” One must read Gill’s images as one reads and re-reads the stories and poems of Raymond Carver and Jhumpa Lahiri (both important for understanding Gill’s work). One registers the luminous and mysterious exactitude of details, what E.H. Gombrich had called the “language of things, their textures, their shapes and their ‘feel’”. And

then, through this language, one is led to something more ineffable — a quality of inwardness that, in Gill’s vivid, yet reticent work, goes deeper than, and beyond, the question of identity understood in purely diasporic terms. Another American comes to mind here. For Walt Whitman, photographers were “Priests of the Sun” who made him wonder, in his “Song for Occupations”, “what vast native thoughts” were “looking through” the “smutch’d faces” of the men and women going about their work in his country.

“Where am I?” Gill seems to have caught her Americans asking themselves in the midst of the hard-won materiality of their lives. Photography is one way of embodying this question, without resolving how the alien and the familiar must together form the reality, and the pathos, of these lives.

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