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The eighth colour of a ruined rainbow

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New Delhi, Feb 7 (IANS): Since 1999, she has been photographing in rural Rajasthan. After some years of her visiting, several of the children, who were always avid followers of where she was going, decided they too would like to take pictures. They had fiddled around with her camera and tripod, and commented elaborately upon the images that she would bring back to the village for them.

"I asked them if they were serious, and as they insisted they were, I brought them some Kodak point and shoot cameras. These now belonged to them. They could decide, for instance, whether they wished to photograph in colour or black and white. All of them immediately picked colour over the black and white I had chosen deliberately in order to resist making exotic images charged by the dramatic local colour, and that I had grown up seeing fetishised by tourist photographs and in coffee table books. They did not have my baggage," says photographer Gauri Gill whose work 'A Ruined Rainbow' is part of Vadodara-based Gallery Ark's ongoing show 'In The Light Of'.

One of India's most respected photographers who won the Grange Prize, Canada's prestigious contemporary photography award in 2011 remembers

how the children in Barmer were excited and enthusiastic, and photographed widely, from inside their homes to out in the fields. In the process of learning, they made 'mistakes'. "On one occasion they were horrified to see flashes of light streaked across the images I brought them... the photographer had accidentally opened the back of the camera and exposed the film to light. No one would claim the film as theirs, and it was discarded as there was no use for it... it was kharaab, failed or ruined... I kept it in my bag."

Years later, in 2010, when she was editing her own contact sheets for the exhibition titled 'Notes from the Desert', Gill found those rolls. She looked at them anew, and was moved to see long familiar faces and places appear in the photographs, wondering which particular child had made the images, and at the precise exchange that might have occurred at that moment.

"I thought about photography, and how despite all of its superior claims to representing the truth, even completely undoctored images offer only a subjective narrative -- this particular one quite different from my own, therefore there are as many possible narratives as individuals. As with life, the medium of technology introduces its own presence through chance and accidents.

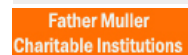
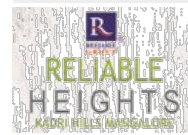
"I played with the prints, and when I looked at them again, the ruined images had formed an unexpected rainbow -- A Ruined Rainbow. I decided to include this in my solo show, 'Notes from the Desert', as a strategy, to disrupt and question my overarching self created narrative."

This Delhi-based photographer, who completed her MFA in photography at Stanford University feels that it might be the interplay between so called reality, and our inherent subjectivity that keeps her fascinated towards the medium. "Everything seemingly 'out there' is in fact coming from me, despite the play of appearances," she adds.

For someone who has employed photography to document lives of her friends and families living abroad ('The Americans'), worked on 'The 1984 Notebooks', an example of using photography as a memory practice besides multiple projects like 'The Mark on the Wall', 'Jannat', 'Balika Mela' and 'Birth Series', Gill who had been resisting joining Instagram for a long time, and did that recently, says, "For years, photographer friends had urged me to join, but somehow I never had the time and also feared getting addicted to social media, putting pictures out on the fly without the necessary mental processing time. But at the start of the lockdown, when the quiet descended, I decided to give it a try. I thought it might provide a certain discipline, and help me better see so-called ordinary things around me. Photography often does that."

Ask her if it was a conscious decision to photograph Nizamuddin East (where she resides) as she recently revisited her series 'Nizamuddin at Night' during the lockdown, and Gill cites what she wrote in 'Civil Lines' in 2010. "Well, it was more accessible as I live here. In fact I wrote about it in Civil Lines in 2010: I started to photograph my neighbourhood in the year 2005. Returning home late at night, I would notice things that I didn't in the day. Lit up by streetlights, house lights and moonlight, sometimes diffused by the rain and fog, Nizamuddin became another place. One of the first pictures I took was of a white van. Its precise location on the road, its mysterious alignment with the shadows imprinted on it, transformed it from an ordinary van into another creature altogether. It was as if I had passed through a door into another world. Sometimes, I imagine a conversation between the two halves of Nizamuddin: the West side which houses Baba Auliya's shrine; a piece of old Delhi in New Delhi, alive with qawwali singing, pilgrims, beggars, tourists, migrants, butcher shops, filth and prayer -- and the genteel East side, with Humayun's tomb; grand, isolated and austere. The Saint and the Emperor."

"In retrospect, I think I was doing the East a slight disservice here; indeed, it is often eclipsed by the vitality of the West. The East has some very romantic old homes, initially built by refugees, full of humility and elegance. Many are now being razed to the ground and converted to nondescript builder flats, so it also reflects the city at large. There is Arab ki Sarai, the most beautiful gate in India perhaps, from which the last Mughal emperor, the poet Bahadur Shah Zafar, was brought out when he was captured by the British. It has had



a tradition of barsatis, or inexpensive terrace flats, and of artists living here, from VS Gaitonde to Mrinalini Mukherjee. It has the front views of houses which are all dressed up, and the back lanes, or 'service lanes', which flip your perspective. And for me, it has a great deal of personal history and reminiscence, which might be the most important thing anyway."


She continues, "After the lockdown, I began to walk around the neighbourhood again, late in the evening, only once a week or so, as a very special treat. Lots of old memories began to come back. The first evening I was out for hours, full of excitement. I didn't intend to make more pictures but ended up doing so, this time with my phone, and in colour. The earlier pictures were all black and white, made with medium format film on a large rangefinder camera which I would handhold without a tripod."

For someone who feels that dusk is a time that is full of possibility for her, the artist says, "I have walked around in the night for years, and mostly felt safe because of my camera. In fact I might have scared others coming out suddenly from an alley in my neighbourhood at an odd hour."

Gill, who feels that collaborations are fundamental to her practice, adds, "Life is a series of collaborations -- implicit and explicit."

Talk to Gill, who among other things is working on book projects, about her process and she says that it is all about starting with a question, quite often driven by a human interaction. "Then I keep taking micro-steps, for as long as it takes, perhaps forever. One thing usually leads to another, and I never know where I will be led."

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