

Arts Journalism Chicago

Gauri Gill: The Americans

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The Americans

Sari to Be An American?

Bright, colorful, and enlarged photographs grace the walls of the Chicago Cultural Center's Michigan Avenue Galleries, drawing the "oos" "aahs" and eyes of even the museum's predominantly WASPY clientele.

These photographs comprise Gauri Gill's exhibition, *The Americans*, which takes inspiration from photographer Robert Frank's photo essay of the same name that depicts mid-20th century American culture. Gill's project, however, focuses on the range of Indian-American experience before and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11—a time during which turban-clad Sikh Indians are deemed as Muslim or "other" and made the target of hate crimes by their fellow Americans. Traveling the U.S. between 2000 and 2007, Gill photographed Indian people of all social strata living throughout the country, from Queens to Nashville, Tennessee.

Through her intimate portraits, Gill provides a glimpse into the personal lives of her subjects, who are photographed with their families or friends, in their homes, cars, and other interior spaces. The exhibition is divided into different sections by themes such as work, holidays, courting and marriage, performance, and prayer. The artist will often

juxtapose two images to illustrate how they contrast, share the same theme, or illustrate different sections of the same space. Gill's images run the gamut from hilarious and witty to ironic and depressing. They are beautifully and artistically composed, and the vibrant colors of saris, ornaments, artwork, and religious icons render them visually stunning.

Gill's photographs largely focus on the extent to which conformist American values infiltrate and hence confuse one's sense of Indian identity. One image shows two young men dressed in baggy jeans and du-rags—one wears an oversized gold Crucifix around his neck. Similarly, an image of a Halloween party shows an attractive young woman dressed in a turquoise, midriff-baring Princess Jasmine costume with gold headpiece among hippies, disco divas, and Goths. A six year-old boy in a turban eagerly waits to blow out the candles on his birthday cake, which is designed to look like a baseball field. An Indian family adorned in all varieties of fleece-wear celebrates Christmas, complete with tree and presents. Apart from one subtle piece of Indian artwork hanging over their doorway, their home resembles that of a "standard" Christian American family.

At the same time, Gill includes documentation of Indians preserving their heritage through cultural events or religious ceremonies, such as her Indian speed-dating series. Comprised of five photographs juxtaposed in one long, panoramic frame, each image is set in the same elaborate red and gold ballroom. Each man (in a dark suit) and woman (in blue, orange, red, or yellow sari) is paired off in two chairs facing each other. At each station is a picture of a traditionally-dressed man and woman, united in matrimony by a shared beaded necklace. Also interesting was a middle-aged man who, with eyes closed, sits cross-legged on his office floor. Taped to the desk chair next to him is a prayer scrawled out on taped-together printer paper.

I enjoyed the exhibit, mainly because of its enlightening narrative. Yet, as I walked away and turned it over in my head for a bit, I had mixed feelings about the photographs I had seen. While some displayed images of fortune and success—a fulfillment of the "American Dream"—like a wealthy man examining a painting in his exquisite home, two Indian entrepreneurs, or a young Indian power couple getting into their respective luxury vehicles—others seemed depressing, like a worn-looking maid at a Days Inn or the stereotypical Indian behind the counter of Dunkin Donuts. Whether we realize it or not, the Indian experience in America is complicated by issues of race, culture, and religion, in ways we don't typically think about—something that Gill forces us to confront through her art.