

Notes from the Desert: Gauri Gill Solo Exhibition at Nature Morte in New Delhi

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Two girls pose before a crumbling wall, one before the other. Their outstretched hands are clasped together and in each hand a precious egg is carefully balanced. The eggs offer a symmetrical counterpoint to the small oval shelves cut into the sandy walls, and those shelves appear as the eyes in an abstract face of tenuous life in the impoverished Rajasthani desert where these nomadic peoples live. *Karima and Nimli, in a Home Destroyed by Flooding*, like the other photographs in Indian photographic artist Gauri Gill's expansive ten-year study in Rajasthan, is displayed without a numeric date in her solo exhibition—*Notes from the Desert*—at the prestigious New Delhi gallery Nature Morte.

“This was taken the year the floods came,” Gill explains, and this sort of notation, rather than calendrical time, is how the people she has been documenting since 1999 measure the passage of their lives. It was “the year of a great monsoon – when Barmer became Kashmir.” Time—in this place of harsh extremes, human struggles, and great uncertainties—is measured by the significant events that have shaped the lives of the communities she has returned to again and again for over a decade: the death of a camel, the loss of a woman to snakebite, Panchayat elections, marriages, births.

The array of 63 photographs of varying sizes, mostly black and white silver gelatin prints, alongside seven color images shot by the local children in the Barmer community (their accidental overexposure creating a fiery rainbow effect across the tableaux), were selected out of over 40,000 images taken by Gill during her repeated sojourns in the desert.

Far from replicating the Othering, disciplinary gaze of traditional colonial photography, or offering up her subjects as curious ethnographic specimens of cultural difference or subaltern subjugation, Gill's own integration into the community has shaped a language of intimacy that permeates the works with powerful visual ellipses and comfortable, confident silences. In doing so, she avoids the troublesome territory of authoritative representational pretensions that often plague documentary-style works done by outsiders in various communities that inadvertently (or sometimes self-consciously) craft images that feed into and trade on larger narratives of backwardness and deprivation, or serve to engender a sense of privileged pathos in viewers. Gill's work feels more like a visual diary of her engagements with these people—in the spirit of someone like Nan Goldin, perhaps, although her language and techniques bear little in common with that of the American photographer—and her investment in their lives makes her gaze compassionate but never condescending.

In the *Balika Mela* series, Gill set up a rural photo studio as part of the desert bazaar for girls that was being held, and invited the children to learn about photography and have their photographs taken. The girls participated with gleeful seriousness and charming ingenuity, bringing simple props from home—a paper peacock, veils and shawls and newsprint hats—striking poses, and using their mehendi henna painted hands to create images that were as much authored by them as the photographer. This dialogical spirit of engagement pervades the whole body of images, and Gill deftly opens up spaces in her own visual language to allow the people in her images to become genuine interlocutors rather than simply subjects.

In one image *Urma and Nimli*, we see little Urma, hanging in the arms of her friend upside down from a tree, watching the camera with fierce intensity. We follow her from adolescence into adulthood, and see how this bold little girl's intense, penetrating stare is not lost as she grows into a woman with a child of her own. In other, a lovely, frail girl named Janat watches herself in a hand mirror with a lost expression on her face, as if she is staring at herself across the divide between childhood and womanhood and is bewildered by what she sees. But in another image, *Ismat at Janat's Grave*, we learn that perhaps the divide Janat was peering across was the one that separates life from death.

Gill handles these vicissitudes with the lightest possible touch, rather than manipulating them for affective impact. The works are displayed far apart from each other, the wall free of captions. You might never notice the continuities and ruptures in these lives if you are not paying close attention. But these subtle vicissitudes are, in fact, the ballast of the show.

One room in the gallery contains a series of small photographs in which the elderly midwife Kasumbi is delivering her granddaughter on the sandy floor of their desert hut. The veiled mother-to-be, arms clad to the shoulders in ivory bangles, strains and pushes. The midwife helps by pressing her the soles of her feet against the laboring woman's, and grasping her hands to create resistance. We see the infant's emerging head and the outstretched hands guiding it into the world, and then the newborn gasping its first breaths in the sand. The understated beauty of these images—the faint outlines of the mother in labor's face through her veil, strong hands clasped lovingly together, the neighbor and midwife outside after the birth, with the new mother's freshly washed skirt drying in the sand—mirrors the dominant aesthetic of the series as a whole. The great dramas of life and death, love and longing, growth and change, captured in these images are presented with the same matter-of-factness that accompany these great life passages is this place—with unadorned humanity rather than maudlin sentimentality.

“To live out in the desert as a poor, landless person without a regular job amounts to an inescapable reliance on one's self, on each other and on nature,”

Gill writes. “The stakes are high, the elements close and life is as cheap as jokes are rampant. To sleep out on the icy cold sand dunes at night, in the winter, with only some tarpaulin and heavy old quilts, means that everyone must huddle in together, along with the dogs, and breathe into the quilt. One isn’t quite sure what is what or who is who, in the huddle.”

While there are border skirmishes exist between so-called “documentary” photography and “contemporary art” photography, on which cultural capital and market value, as well as access to various sorts of exhibition fora often ride, Gill gracefully limns this unnecessary, constructed divide and offers a series of works that do more than transcend this artificially invidious dichotomy—the images in *Notes from the Desert* glide effortlessly over, and elide that dichotomy altogether. In this way, the work is freed to offer up its richness unimpeded by such superficial turf-battles, allowing us to feel that we could join these people in their huddle beneath those quilts; and breathing together to ward off the bitter cold of desert nights, we might find our common humanity together.