

Gauri Gill: The Americans

Shot across the United States from 2000 to 2007, Gill's photographs document the Indian diaspora as it has settled across the country in rural areas, small towns and big cities, both retaining its traditional signifiers of Indian identity and merging within a larger American plurality. The resulting color photographs are simultaneously humorous, poignant, ironic, and beguiling. Gill's portrayal of her subjects and their lives emerges through her strict attention to detail and sympathetic juxtapositions.

Peter Nagy – curator and owner of Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi

"Nearly five decades after [American photographer] Robert Frank, Gauri Gill takes a series of solitary journeys through America traveling extensively from New York and New Jersey to California to the Midwest and five Southern states. She moves outward, from the nucleus of family and friends to their networks, through a map lined with the material and psychological presence of migrants. The resultant body of photographs. "The Americans," emerges as a palimpsest that pays homage to Frank as much as it documents the new Americans – Indian immigrants. That Gill addresses her subjects with the transnational gaze of the traveling photographer brings her subject within the potent discourse of migration and diaspora, post-coloniality and the new world. Set in the chromatic intimacy of the candid photograph, it is inscribed by the material residue of two cultures, of the glittering flecks of Bollywood and Hollywood, the Indian and the American dream....

...In sharp contrast is the vivid chromatic snap shot quality of *The Americans* – a style that establishes the photographer's easy access to her subject, her location of America in technicolor consumerism, and India in chromatic flashback of vivid nostalgia. An apocryphal photograph records a painted backdrop of a tram placed before the American flag. Within the painting we see houses, a red automobile and boats on a placid lake – visible ingredients of the American dream. Within the team are figures of mixed racial descent with a couple of prominently positioned, smiling Indians. Framing the photograph are physical details of the room where the painting is hung, two prominently positioned photocopiers, that could perhaps replicate this idyll of the smiling migrant infinitely."

From the catalog essay by Gayatri Sinha – Independent curator and critic.

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.

Aveek Sen - The Telegraph newspaper, Kolkatta

With a nod to Robert Frank's seminal 1955 book of the same title, Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill's *The Americans*, on display from March 15th to the 29th at Delhi's Nature Morte Gallery, documents the anxieties, excesses and sprawling suburban dreams of South Asians living in the United States. Drawn from a body of images shot over the course of seven years, the results are intimate and arresting, collected in an evocative show that echoes her famous predecessor's commitment to the narrative power of the still image. Gill brings an outsider's lens to bear on a community of people who are themselves poised near the threshold, constantly negotiating a sense of belonging, forging individual and group identities amid the manifold forces of memory, tradition, displacement and change.

Alienation and ennui are running themes in the photographs. A young couple leaves for work in a cookie-cutter gated community, turning away from each other and from the camera, getting into separate cars. Elderly immigrants sit in immaculate and empty rooms, sparsely furnished with objects charged with symbolic meaning: a garlanded portrait, a religious icon, a family photograph caught from the side. But Gill doesn't give in to the temptation to reduce the complexity of diaspora lives to a simple experience of loneliness, loss and nostalgia: we also see Indian-Americans actively shaping their engagement with the world around them, making homes and families, exercising agency in the choice and pursuit of a distinctively desi American dream.

Alexander Keefe – Independent writer, New Delhi

In Gauri Gill's *The Americans*, we are given glimpses into South Asian immigrant communities in the America of today. The full breadth of Indian and South Asian immigrants is here: from the glossy-haired professionals of Silicon Valley to the physics graduate student, to taxi drivers and restaurant cooks, to drag queens and bhangra homeboys, to motel owners and Indian entrepreneurs. We have celebrations and rituals, big and small: weddings, thread-tying ceremonies, funerals, exam celebrations, upscale Christie auctions. We have, significantly, Sikhs in the flat hinterlands of Yuba City, a community which dates back to the early twentieth century. Most importantly, we have the full vista of America — from San Francisco terraces to Taco Bells and Dunkin Donuts, from strip malls to Washington suburbs.

The South Asian diaspora is here to stay. They have two storey, three-storey, old and new homes, apartments, cars, pools, mortgages, debt. They scrub toilets; they meet-and-greet in Washington DC, deliver mail, are shot by snipers. They marry; they gather to

watch wedding videos; they do Bharatanatyam performances, celebrate Halloween and India Day and Diwali. Indeed I would say — and these photos suggest — that rather than the stale polarities of East and West, the Indian immigrant is peculiarly suited to America.

Marina Budhos – Writer, in Tehelka Magazine