

Gauri Gill

So what is this photograph about?

Sitting here—an American in Columbus, Ohio—it seems very strange and puzzling. I see a woman (I presume it is a woman) sitting behind a makeshift desk, book open, writing. She is wearing a mask. Why? And is she sitting in a classroom?

In a number of ways, the scene seems quite organized. The woman is professionally dressed. The books and papers are stacked neatly on the desk she is using. On the blackboards and on the upper wall there is carefully-rendered text (in English and in a language I don't know). The view includes a number of posters and a calendar hung neatly. The woman looks up from her tasks, serene, fixed in a contemplative moment.

But there is also a level of disorder. The wall paint is peeling. Opened paint cans are beneath the desk. The clock, the poster above the blackboard, and one of the posters between the blackboards are off-kilter. Speaking of the posters, who are the people shown? And is it merely a coincidence that the woman's mask seems to mirror in some way the faces on the posters?

The woman who made this photograph, Gauri Gill, has a history of collaborating with artisans from marginalized communities in the Adivasi or tribal areas of her native India. She has also worked with nomads, peasants and minority communities in India's desert regions. Her work has been described as operating in a zone between documentary photography and performance art.¹

The photograph reproduced on this card is from a series titled *Acts of Appearance*. In that series, Gill worked collaboratively with members of the Kokna tribe in a village in Jawhar, a district in west-central India. For years, artisans in that village have used traditional Adivasi paper mâché techniques to make not only objects for the tourist market, but also masks representing Hindu and tribal gods and demons to be worn by members of the community in an annual festival. Gill was intrigued by the masks and how they were used, and she wondered what the villagers would make if given the opportunity to create masks that reflect their own, everyday reality rather than the world of myth and religion. She was particularly intrigued by the fact that the masks previously made were always idealized. She asked, "Why are masks never made to represent someone with a mole or spectacles or grey hair or a big nose or someone who is overweight or sick or getting old?"ⁱⁱ So she asked villagers to make new kinds of masks, reflecting themselves and the things that were important to them. A critical aspect of the project was the dialogue between Gill and the local artisans. As Gill described the process:

"Despite the talent, [the villagers had] a lack of confidence. As there was no precedent, they asked for samples, and of course there were none. I was interested in what was to come from them and had no predetermined idea or script myself. ... Once they began work they kept asking if the masks were 'good' or 'bad'. But I thought they were all quite wonderful and would not interfere. Every single mask has been used in the photographs."ⁱⁱⁱ

Some, like the woman shown on this card, made masks that continue to have a human presence, but others made masks depicting the heads of animals—snakes, rabbits, dogs—or even depicting technological devices, such as TVs and cell phones, that were important in the mask-makers' lives. Gill then asked members of the community to wear the masks while she photographed them engaged in routine tasks of daily life.

The clash between the unreality of the masks and the mundane, ordinary tasks the mask-wearers are engaged in creates unsettling juxtapositions: a young man in a tee shirt but with a cobra snake head is working in a kiosk, a doctor with an elephant head places a stethoscope on the body of an old woman wearing a mask with exaggerated expressions of pain and sadness, a group of people wearing a mix of human and animal masks stand serenely on a forested hillside....

As with all of Gill's work, these photographs also raise social and political questions. It is no coincidence that the artisans Gill collaborated with are from one of India's poorest regions, an area with a perpetual water crisis and one of the country's highest rates of malnutrition, or that her international art world connections elevate their craft tradition—and the activities of their everyday lives—to the realm of "high art." Consistent with the collaborative nature of the project, Gill shares the proceeds from sales of the photographs with the villagers. As to the photograph on this card, there are two languages: the local community language (Marathi) and the English of India's colonized past. The woman's blank stare as she sits passively next to images of nationalism and colonialism—the posters depict "freedom fighters" and other important Indian figures; the English words point toward presentation or command—speaks volumes.

None of this need be known, though, to be deeply moved by Gill's work. Although one of Gill's original goals was to get the artisans to move away from making idealized masks of myth and religion, the resulting photographs themselves seem drawn from myth. The scenes remind me somehow of ancient Greek theater and the masks worn by actors there to demonstrate archetypes of Joy or Sorrow. But it is Greek theater as experienced in the everyday, not in the artifice of a theater stage, and in a place and time quite different from that of Sophocles and Aristophanes. The photographs exist at the intersection of the real, the mythical, the timeless, and the mundane. They are, as Gill has somewhat mysteriously titled them, *Acts of Appearance*.

Born in Chandigarh, India in 1970, Gauri Gill is one of India's leading contemporary artists and exhibits internationally. She earned a BFA (Applied Art) from the College of Art (New Delhi), a BFA (Photography) from the Parsons School of Design (New York), and an MFA (Art) from Stanford University. Her work is in the collections of prominent museums worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Tate Modern (London), the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), and Fotomuseum (Winterthur, Switzerland). In 2011, she was awarded the Grange Prize, Canada's foremost award for photography. Gill's *Acts of Appearance* series was initially exhibited in 2017 at Documenta 14 (Kassel, Germany) and then earlier this year at the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 (New York). The series will be exhibited again in 2019 at the Columbus Museum of Art (Ohio).

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^{i.} Pollack, Barbara. "Masks and Rural Life in Gauri Gill's Art," *Hyperallergic*, August 7, 2018.

^{ii.} *Id.*

^{iii.} Ray, Sharmistha. "Harnessing the Revelatory Power of Masks," *Hyperallergic*, July 21, 2018.