JANNAT
b. 1984 d. 2007
Work in progress

This series – which includes photographs and textual artifacts – is based upon the life of a young girl (Jannat), and her small and imperiled family of three, living in a remote hamlet in rural Rajasthan. It is drawn from over a decade of friendship between Gill and Jannat’s family, who live in the Muslim settlement in the desert.

Jannat’s name also means garden, or paradise.

"Gauri Gill’s extraordinarily evocative witness of the short life of Jannat from rural Rajasthan – not a sociological study nor a memorial."
—Sunil Gupta, 2011

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NOTES FROM THE DESERT

1999-Ongoing

This extensive series (begun in 1999) is a photographic archive of the years Gill has spent visiting her friends among marginalised communities in Western Rajasthan – including Jogi nomads, Muslim migrants and Bishnoi peasants.

The set of pictures is often structured around performance and portraiture; some spontaneous, others created in collaboration with her subjects.

It includes posed pictures made in a tent on the one hand (Balika Mela); cinema-verité style portraits on the other; and finally those photographs that were staged in people’s real life environments and so combined practices. The work references vernacular and popular practices of photography and image making often found in and around the village – including the studio portrait, passport photo, religious calendar art and Bollywood posters.

Within it are contained various narratives; Gill hopes to eventually publish them as individual books; each book is a note from the desert.

“To set up a photographic project in rural Rajasthan, in black and white, stretching over a decade, goes against the grain of several stereotypes; and signals the maturing of a ‘voice’ within the corpus of Photography in India. Defrocked of its color and tourism potential, Rajasthan, is scourged at the nomadic margins, revealing lives in transition: epic cycles of birth, death, drought, flood, celebration and devastation, through which they pass. The extremity of the situation requires no illustration or pictorialism – those vexed twins of the colonial legacy – especially from an insider, or the one who is led by the hand. Her subjects take her into their world, and she goes there like Alice. Her method embraces ‘Time’ – which does not ‘naturally’ exist inside a photograph, beyond the epiphany and commemoration of a moment (photography’s melancholy and limitation is precisely this) – within a structure of intimacy and relationships that unravel their mysteries slowly.” —Excerpted from Anita Dube’s essay: The Desert-Mirror: Reflections on the photographs of Gauri Gill, 2010.

Hanuman Nath with his daughter and Hem Nath, on Holi day, Lunkaransar.
Jogi Panchayat near Dungarpur.
Mir Hasan with his grandfather Haji Saraj ud Din, oldest member of the community, in his last days, Barmer.

Urma and Nind, Lunkaransar.
Karima and Nimli, in a home destroyed by flooding, Lunkaransar.
The set of eight photographs was made when Gill lived some days with a great dai – or midwife – in a remote village in Mutasar, Ghalan. Kasumbi Dai had invited Gill to photograph her deliver her granddaughter. The photographer ended up both photographing, as well as assisting with the birth. Kasumbi Dai died in 2010.

“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 the soles of her feet against the laboring woman’s and grasps 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 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 accompanies these great life passages in this place – with unadorned humanity rather than maudlin sentimentality.” — Excerpted from Maya Korskaya’s review, 2010.
RUINED RAINBOW PICTURES

First shown in 2010

This set of seven images was created by the photographer from rolls of film taken by children photographing in the same Barmer villages as her, and discarded by them because they were ‘ruined’.

“The children 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 their own, and it was instantly discarded as it was ‘kharaab’, failed or ruined – I kept it in my bag.

Years later, in 2010, when I was editing my own contact sheets for an exhibit, Notes from the Desert, I found these rolls. I looked at them anew, and was moved to see long familiar faces and places appear in the photographs. I wondered 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 unedited 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, if you will. I decided to include this in the show.”—Gauri Gill, 2015

Ruined Rainbow Pictures 1-7.
In 2003 the non profit organization Urmul Setu Sansthan organised a Balika Mela – or fair for girls, in Lunkaransar town, attended by almost fifteen hundred adolescent girls from seventy surrounding villages. The Mela had various stalls, food, performances, a Ferris wheel, magicians, puppet shows, games and competitions, similar to any other small town fair. Urmul Setu invited the photographer to “do something with photography” at the Mela.

“I created a photo-stall for anyone to come in and have their portrait taken, and later buy the silver gelatin print at a subsidised rate if they wished. I had a few basic props and backdrops, whatever we could get from the local town studio and cloth shop on a very limited budget, but it was fairly minimal, and since it can get windy out in the desert everything would keep getting blown around, or periodically struck down. The light was the broad, even light of a desert sky, filtered through the cloth roof of our tent. Many of the more striking props – like the peacock and the paper hats – were brought in by the girls themselves. Girls came in, and decided how and with whom they would like to be photographed – best friends, new friends, sisters, the odd younger brother who had tagged along, girls with their teachers, the whole class, the local girl scouts. Some of those who posed for the pictures went on to learn photography in the workshops that we started in May of that year, and two years later they photographed the fair themselves.”

—Gauri Gill, 2009

In 2010, Gill returned to attend a Balika Mela held after a gap of seven years, with an exhibition in a tent. Many of the girls portrayed in the pictures from 2003 were either at the fair or known to those who attended. She ended up making more portraits, this time in color.

“Gauri Gill’s photo document Balika Mela (2003-10) embodies India’s staggered engagement with modernity. What began with Ram Singh’s foto ka karkhana in the 1850s comes to Lunkaransar, 300 km from Jaipur, over 150 years later. For the young girls posing in the makeshift tent studio set up by Gill, the moment of improvisation becomes a performative gesture. The girls perform gender, cross gender, divinities, Bollywood, and just themselves, with an interested gaze at the camera. Technology enables mimicry that traverses class. The 19th century grand studio portrait of heavy velvet drapes and aristocratic subjects is here imitated with a stubborn confidence that exceeds the poverty of materials. Gill as a woman photographer lends agency, the freedom to perform, the return of the gaze, the playful mise-en-scene, not unlike the freedom for self representation afforded by the woman photographer in zenana studies, a hundred years ago.”

In Fields of Sight, Gauri Gill collaborates with Warli painter Rajesh Vangad from Ganjad, Dahanu – an Adivasi village in coastal Maharashtra – to present her most recent body of work. The work’s visual language emerged symbiotically from Gill’s initial experience of photographing the landscape in Ganjad, where she felt that although her camera was perhaps capturing the distinct ‘chameleon-like’ skin of what she was seeing through her camera, it was missing vital aspects of what was not apparent to the eye of the outsider. In her conversations and subsequent excursions with Vangad, who’s family has worked and lived in Vangad Pada as artists for generations, she discovered a new way of understanding the landscape she photographed. The landscape viewed through the eyes of Vangad and photographed through the lens of Gill was incomplete without the narratives that the Warli painter and the two collaboratively created, and which makes these photo-paintings, documents of multiple truths. In the act of employing the visual culture of seeing the landscape through the eyes of Vangad, Gill inadvertently rekindles the need to challenge the way we see things today, what our eyes capture and what may elude them.

“We see here a photographer of and from contemporary, urban India (though of a land-centered community herself), and an artist/painter of the Adivasi community from Maharashtra, whose visual narratives work together to tell stories that demand to be heard as equally contemporary, and not as relics of a traditional, or “tribal” past, a term that the British as well as independent India have called Vangad’s communities. He is not a “lost” figure of what Renato Rosaldo called “Imperial nostalgia,” asking us to mourn what we ourselves have destroyed. He is not destroyed, but there, producing a language and art practice that uses the modern medium – the photograph, the motorcycle – to assert presence rather than provide the possibility of mechanical replication of that which is lost. Gill’s own photographic practice of collaboration and presence (see her work 1984, for instance) uses the photograph as a memory practice that asserts that the moment of photographic capture can prevent closure of stories of violence and suffering. Her characters challenge us to remember that their stories are not over, much remains to be done, whether it is readdress, reparation, or in this case, recognition that identities of those deemed to be un-modern remain to challenge the politics of the neo-liberal state that denies that minority communities have a stake in the country’s future.”

Engagement and dialogue between distinguished individuals who represent a wide set of perspectives, approaches to work, and disciplines has long been the hallmark of The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center resident experience. For decades, the Center has hosted a unique residency program for artists, scholars, scientists, composers, and writers to live in residence, produce new work, and benefit from rich cross-disciplinary exchange.

From 2009-2015, to increase the capacity for outreach to accomplished artists around the world, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center established the Creative Arts Fellows program. The program brought more than twenty acclaimed artists from across the globe to Bellagio, nominated by an advisory panel of leading international curators, for extended residencies to develop projects inspired by or related to social or global issues.

Having ended the Creative Arts Program, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center remains committed to bringing in renowned international artists, and now works with regional and international arts outreach partners to attract top artists to the program. For more information about the Bellagio Center, please visit http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center.