

Gauri Gill

Acts of Appearance

Kamayani Sharma

Each May, the villagers of Jawhar District, in the Indian state of Maharashtra, come together for a festival called Bohada celebrated throughout the region. Donning papier-mâché masks, select members of the Kokna and Warli tribes put on ritual performances involving song and dance. Over a number of nights of pageantry, actors play the roles of various deities and demons, bringing to life well-known mythological tales. In 2005, the photographer Gauri Gill approached the brothers Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, from a family of hereditary mask makers, with a proposition. She commissioned the Kadus to make masks representing contemporary everyday reality rather than fantastical episodes. Gill then photographed volunteers from their village wearing these masks, posing not as characters from legends but as themselves in improvised scenes.

Over more than thirty years of photographic practice, Gill has collaborated with communities and individuals on the margins to tell stories together, through stagings, inscriptions, and narrative duets. In *Acts of Appearance* (2005–ongoing), the traditional mask form—spanning species, ages, facial characteristics, and even inanimate objects—is untethered from its mythic moorings, connoting the passage of time and expressing moods in the context of ordinary life. A dog-headed man relaxes on the floor next to his seated friend, dozing behind a wide-open-eyed mask; a woman props her snake-form head on an arm as she reclines on a sofa, the posture a blend of human and serpent; a man with a TV for a face sits before an actual television, in a kind of Magritte-ian pun. Despite their desecration, the masks evoke an otherworldliness, transforming the rural setting into a surreal landscape. The animal heads nod to the continuum between human and nonhuman that is part of Adivasi cosmologies, emphasizing the intimacies that vitalize lifeworlds.

Like Indigenous people everywhere, the Adivasi citizens of India have historically been disenfranchised by the state. In Jawhar, too, the crisis around access to food, water, and other public goods is severe. The exclusion from and subjugation within the political field is replicated in the visual one, where colonial and nationalist practices of ethnographic photography long objectified Adivasi individuals. By inviting the protagonists of her images to represent themselves through masquerade, Gill satirizes the violent legacies of the spectatorial gaze, denying it purchase.

Refusing to be seen and, consequently, known might be understood as a tactic of subversion. At a moment when surveillance based on facial recognition is encroaching on civil liberties in India, Gill's faceless antiportraits seem to mock the regime's attempts at identification. In an essay for the recent photobook of this series, Gill reflects on the existential conundrum of masking the self: "To whom does my face belong—me, or to the world that views me?" Disguise as dissent brandishes humor against the panopticon. It reverses the power dynamics of looking and affirms the sovereignty of the subject in cahoots with the photographer, now an ally, a fellow storyteller.

Pages 188–222:
Shuffled (18), (17), (16), (20),
(7), and (24) from the
series *Acts of Appearance*,
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