



Gauri Gill
Kolkata 2009 (a), from the series "Rememory",
2003-ongoing



Vinnie Gill
Shyok River in Nubra Valley, at the foothills of the
Karakoram, 2020



Ladhki Devi
Dhartari Devi, 2020-21

The Goddess Who Created This Passing World

Natasha Ginwala

The Goddess who created this passing world
Said Let there be lightbulbs & liquefaction
Life spilled out onto the street, colors whirled
Cars & the variously shod feet were born
And the past & future & I born too
Light as airmail paper away she flew
To Annapurna or Mt. McKinley
Or both but instantly
Clarified, composed, forever was I
Meant by her to recognize a painting
As beautiful or a movie stunning
And to adore the finitude of words
And understand as surfaces my dreams
Know the eye the organ of affection
And depths to be inflections
Of her voice & wrist & smile

– Alice Notley¹

The image worlds that assemble in *Sheher, Prakriti, Devi*, invite a mode of sensing built and organic landscapes through unusual juxtapositions—sifting through aspiration, acts of faith and gestures of survival. These suites of photographs and drawings interlace the pedestrian, cosmographic and ecological as a common horizon. Gauri Gill forges matrilineal connections in the exhibition, giving rise to an asynchronous yet deeply intuitive tableau. Time-phases collapse into one another: from interpretations of the *Silk Cotton* trees at Humayun's tomb during autumnal shedding by Vinnie Gill to an avatar composed by Ladhki Devi of *Udti Naari* who is able to take flight when called upon to 'troubleshoot' in the life of mere mortals.



Vinnie Gill *Silk Cotton tree in Humayun's Tomb*



Gauri Gill *Grand Trunk Road, Delhi 2007 (c)*

Situating her series *Rememory* (2003 – ongoing) amidst encounters that foreground femme intelligence, Gill prods us to peer into metropolitan and semi-rural terrains—across Delhi, Maharashtra and Rajasthan—to work loose all that is hidden in plain sight. Like the bundles that lie on the side of a highway in *Grand Trunk Road, Delhi 2007 (c)*, she focuses on orphaned elements. Elsewhere, her study of gateways, decorative facades and grilled doors discloses the tension of proprietorship, and the splitting of bodies between the categories of guests and strangers. These portals address the rise in securitised spaces and attitudes of ‘guardedness’ in cities and mofussil towns alike. Conversely, she brings into proximity other registers of guardianship—such as in her mother Vinnie Gill’s rendition of the owl nesting in a *Kigelia* tree (*Kigelia Pinnatta*) or the representation of *Ghar ki Mata* by Ladhki Devi, amid a range of household tools to protect the homestead and its residents. These constellations of work by the trio of intergenerational women artists’ produce a sense of ‘fluid jointness’,² as uncanny lines of relation conjoin. Each one is keen

to decipher the psyche of places and arouse logics of belonging. The exhibition is staged as artist, psychoanalyst and philosopher, Bracha Ettinger proposes: a matrixial encounter-event.³

Gill’s lens excavates the collective debris of socio-political fantasies and failures. Moving between the dense latitudes of *shehers* (cities) charting castaway skins, shadow spheres and granular intersections, her pictures bring haunting refrains to the humdrum of vertical dwellings. City streets often elicit secret lives, forms of cruelty and wretched alienation. The night brings a characteristic tonality to compositions such as *Kolkata 2009 (a)* and *New Delhi 2006*. The mood in some of these images from *Rememory* calls forth in my mind the partition poem *A Call to Waris Shah* by Amrita Pritam, as it addresses forced departures through the torment of the natural world and in the capacious ways one grieves a beloved:

Waris Shah I call out to you today to rise from your grave
 Rise and open a new page of the immortal book of love
 A daughter of Punjab had wept and you wrote many a dirge
 A million daughters weep today and look at you for solace
 Rise o beloved of the aggrieved, just look at your Punjab
 Today corpses haunt the woods, Chenab overflows with blood
 Someone has blended poison in the five rivers of Punjab
 This water now runs through the verdant fields and glades
 This fertile land has sprouted poisonous weeds far and near
 Seeds of hatred have grown high, bloodshed is everywhere
 Poisoned breeze in forest turned bamboo flutes into snakes
 Their venom has turned the bright and rosy Punjab all blue
 Throats have forgotten how to sing, the yarn is now broken
 Friends are lost and the spinning wheel has gone silent
 Boats released from the harbour toss in the rough waters
 The peepul has broken its branches on which swings hung
 The flute that played notes of love is now forever lost
 Brothers of Ranjha have lost the hero’s devotion, his charm
 Blood rains on the earth, even the graves are oozing red
 The princesses of love are now weeping midst the tombs⁴



Ladhki Devi *Dasha Devi*

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'The shade of a tree is often compared to the protective shadow cast by a mother upon her children.'

– Vinnie Gill



Vinnie Gill *Pine Tree (1)*



Vinnie Gill *Pine Tree (2)*



Vinnie Gill *Pine Tree (3)*



Vinnie Gill *Pine Tree (4)*

This spring I returned to the garden of my childhood. Being separated from a family home during the enduring and unhinged temporality of pandemic makes one feel as though time is lived without a rim. Upon my return, it felt as though connections needed to be rekindled not only with close relations but also as much with the flowering trees that have sheltered us, and exceeded my lifespan. During my long absence, our grandmother's memory had turned into a muddy river. It felt as though our communication needed to outwit speech. Seated in a floral gown, wheeled into the garden she knew every inch of—as our eyes met, I figured we may as well converse through the bristly Bottlebrush (*Callistemon*), the patch of sunset orange *Canna*, and the hummingbird hovering over *Mukkopeera* (*Passiflora*).

When observing the botanical expressions of Vinnie Gill, I recognise a sense of kinship with neighbourhood trees, in her fluid renditions of the mountainous Nubra Valley, and the palette of seasonal transformations. Having spent her youth at her grandparents' cottage in Kasauli and Dalhousie in the lap of young mountains, she developed a keenness to draft from her more-than-human surround. Recognising the asymmetry of petals, textures of barks and medicinal qualities of shrubs, Gill's pastel, ink and watercolour sketches such as *Pine Trees 1-4* (2021) and *Rhododendron tree, Dharamsala* (2020) do not strive for technical perfection, but form sequences made over decades of committing to memory those transient moments of unfolding, shedding, cross-pollinating and perishing. Studying old growth forests and the "understory of a forest" led by bacteria, fungi, the archaea as protagonists, forest scientist and author Suzanne Simard calls the mature hub trees in a forest 'mother trees'—parenting; eldering in a mode of mutuality and reciprocity; modelling what we also know to be true of genuinely flourishing human ecosystems. Long known in aboriginal science, natural forests in many ways mirror maps of the human brain.⁵

In Gauri Gill's photographs of apartment foyers and the outdoor landscaping surrounding private residencies, plant life is often reduced to a backdrop, wedged between concrete blocks and functioning as manufactured decor. Yet, beyond the automated gateways and fake palm trees on

manicured lawns there are wild intrusions and the productive refusals of fauna. Botanical excess surges forth and survives amidst dust and grime as an insistent mode of growth. As her photographs are set in dialogue with her mother's sketches, the erect towers meet the circulation of urban foliage that takes up slow processes of 'unbuilding' and stubborn co-existence. This grid work prompts one to look anew at some of the most natural compositions that prevail in our midst: wild flowers breaking through pavements and trees protruding from road dividers—to notice the aliveness of cracks in the surface of the metropolis and in turn its visual representation as a counterpoint to corrective order and control. Animate subjects of the *Sheher* jostle for common groundwater and gasp for air. For those humans not hooked onto GPS applications, navigation is often entwined with these vivid signs of life: 'Turn right at the *Neem* tree by the corner of the lane'; 'the house gate is between the *Hanuman* shrine and the *Champa*'; 'circle around the *chowk* with the old Banyan tree'.



Gauri Gill *Mumbai 2012 (g)*

When chronicling Sultanate period and Mughal era tombs, ruins, and Masjids in her Delhi neighbourhood as well as during travels around the country, Vinnie Gill observes the mood, protocols of worship and 'eerie silences' that are palpable. These historic sites often turn into spaces of refuge, secrecy and solace amidst the brash energies of an overburdened metropolis. In the present times of heightened nationalism and communal fury, such syncretic and devotional architectures often fall prey to abandonment, erasure and heated misreading. A beloved monument, Humayun's tomb recurs in Gill's sketches. She casts her gaze once more toward the Magnolia trees, a murder of crows and the changing light during the magical hours of dawn and dusk. The tomb is thus studied as a host site and a sort of scaffolding for multispecies co-habitation.



Vinnie Gill *Afsarwala Masjid at dusk with Crows 1*



Vinnie Gill *Afsarwala Masjid and Tomb with the Full Moon*

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In Gill's photograph *Kolkata 2015 (b)* depicting a wall hanging of *Durga Ma* placed above an air conditioner, one is brought to consider the role of deities in the private and public realm as an expansion of *Darshan* in everyday life. The circulation of looks between people and deities, notions of 'seeing and being seen'⁶ as immersed in popular visual culture, as a transaction between divine and



Gauri Gill *Mumbai 2021 (n)*

profane forces is part of what Christopher Pinney describes of Hindustani scopic regimes. Also included in this exhibition is Vinnie Gill's luminous avatar of *Shrinathji* made after visiting a temple in Ranthambore. Having grown up in Gujarat where *Pichhwais* are a frequent element of a home's interior, I've often read these complex figurations as coded maps to be deciphered rather than pure idolatory of a supreme being, revealing as they do social entries into pilgrimage routes, ceremonial aesthetics and desires projected by faith-bound communities. Pinney



Vinnie Gill *Sri Nath ji*

further stresses *Darshan's* mode of interaction, especially in the rural sphere, mobilising vision toward a unified human sensorium and an outward reaching process composed of multiple contact fields.



Ladhki Devi *Kansari Devi*

Since 2013, Gauri Gill has been collaborating with esteemed third-generation Warli practitioner Rajesh Chaitya Vangad especially on the series *Fields of Sight* (2013 – ongoing). Moreover, their process has yielded a 'worlding' of Warli representations summoning principles and experiences of contemporary Adivasi life ranging from ecological catastrophe, communal rituals, forest secrets, rural pedagogy, to migration and epidemics. In this striking collaboration with Vangad's mother Ladhki Devi, it becomes manifest how the miraculous is inseparable from quotidian nodes of life. Gill notes, 'Devi's style is fluid. She holds the bamboo stick upside down,

whereas her son holds it the other way. The lines made by her vary in thickness and weight, where his are more controlled and precise. She admires his deliberate exactitude, while he appreciates her purity and artistry, which he tries to emulate. The intuitive nature of her work comes from her lived experience, and years of devotional drawing.'

The series of fourteen paintings in *Sheher, Prakriti, Devi* draw upon oracular knowledge, in the sense that they are prescient in composing the devotional form 'at work'. Be this the goddess of the wind (*Vayu Devi*) who must ensure that the seeds she carries—as a swirling mass—flourish over the next seasonal cycle or the *Paani Naari* (water woman) who spreads her limbs to embrace the waters and all creatures in its ambit. Since the early seventies, Devi has been making *chauks* or auspicious squares using rice-flour paste at weddings and *pujas* (prayer ceremonies) of local deities.⁷ These are resonant forms of *Shakti* or the inner life of power that is constitutive rather than destructive.



Ladhki Devi *Vayu Devi*



Ladhki Devi *Mata*

In considering the entwinement of the human and vegetal body prompted by these works by Vinnie Gill and Ladhki Devi, I am reminded of the Lotus-headed goddess *Lajja Gauri*, who has enthralled me for years. Her swollen belly and petal crown convey the tension between the flood of desire and the damming of a fluid body. Across representations dating as early as the second century to the twelfth century, she stands as a life force in a stage of expulsion with the assurance of regeneration. In places like Siddhanakolla and Huligemmanakolla, the images are carved right onto the boulders and are worshipped even today. Local beliefs and myths are closely connected with tantric practices of yoni puja.⁸ Sita returns to the womb of the earth (Bhumi) after trials by fire, captivity and vengeance—and thus a circuit is accomplished.

Unlike the chemically treated surface of the photograph, the mud painting is a breathing work. It is far more prone to external imprints and deterioration through exposure just as earth matter itself. Gill is conscious of the limits of her chosen medium, which leads her to explore its artifice, allure and (re-) distributive potential. Instead of the photograph's indexicality defined by the 'I' of representation or 'thereness',⁹ Gill has continuously embraced its performative realm and enduring forms of collaboration. The schemes of representation pursued by Ladhki Devi are boundary-defying indices of venerated symbols and natural elements. At times the circulatory grammar of these figures lends them to float as if dreamed onto the page. Devi interprets divine forces as agents of manifestation, to be recognised beyond the choices of formal representation, rather as intimate icons ordained with a responsibility, justness and enmeshed in communitarian ways of life.

There are numerous modes of teleportation. And the lines between divine vehicles in the form of birds and animals, and industrialised machines are not rigidly separated, in indigenous cultural systems, be this Warli, Madhubani or Gond art. The presence of teleportation and levitation has been a recurring feature: the vehicle includes machine forms by air, road and sea. These engines of movement summon a time-space in which all manner of crossings are possible, moving from one place to the next and from one realm of the universe to the other, with the journeys often undertaken through the same source. This leap is not only a means of acting out one's faith but also claiming a field of sovereignty and social freedoms as a transgressive lexicon of embodiment.



Gauri Gill *Kolkata 2015 (b)*

I wonder if the ensemble *Sheher, Prakriti, Devi* is a kind of metaphysical document, one that is vibrantly located in material grounds and fecund imagination—ways of remembering earth through a common sense of belonging, protection and recovery. It is meta-speculation as manna, offering generational perspectives and ways of seeing between three women across cities, mountain valleys and a village. Benevolent and fierce mythical forces are activated amid infrastructures of sustenance and accumulation. These pictures avow the 'disorder of things' and refute the violence of total legibility. Bringing to the fore, an aesthetics of bewilderment¹⁰ as Jack Halberstam puts it; becoming lost in space and time, in order for unknowing, unthinking and unbecoming to take hold, as we are living in the ruins of other worlds and their visions for the future.

next time they come
i hope they bring soil and green
soothe for the roots
i hope they bring dirt and depth
and plant us in it
we could sure use the grounding
for remembering earth¹¹

– M Jacqui Alexander



Gauri Gill *Mumbai 2007*



Vinnie Gill *Lotus Pond, Ranthambore*

¹ Alice Notley, 'The Goddess Who Created This Passing World', *Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1993).

² Bracha L Ettinger, 'Copoiesis', in *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organisation* 5(X): 2005, 703–713.

³ Bracha L Ettinger, 'Copoiesis'.

⁴ Nirupama Dutt, 'When Amrita Pritam called out to Waris Shah in a heartrending ode while fleeing the Partition riots', *Scroll*, August 14, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/847004/when-amrita-pritam-called-out-to-waris-shah-in-a-heartrending-ode-while-fleeing-the-partition-riots>

⁵ Suzanne Simard, 'Forests Are Wired for Freedom', *On Being*, September 9, 2021, <https://onbeing.org/programs/suzanne-simard-forests-are-wired-for-wisdom/>

⁶ Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 7.

⁷ As recounted by Gauri Gill and Rajesh Chaitya Vangad to author.

⁸ Carol R Bolon, *Forms of the Goddess Lajjā Gaurī in Indian Art*, College Art Association 49 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

⁹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, (1): 2007, 1–6.

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam at RIBOCA 2, 'Wild Things: An Aesthetics of Bewilderment', *Youtube*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la5CmrzTqw4>

¹¹ M Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).