

PRESS RELEASE

Gauri Dancers

Latitude 28 presents *Gauri Dancers* – a series of painted photographs by Waswo X. Waswo and Rajesh Soni.

The Gauri Dance of Mewar is a centuries-old performance art tradition that is celebrated among the tribal communities of Rajasthan. The dancers are all men or young boys, who often portray female characters and deities while dressed in traditional feminine clothing. The troupes travel from village to village and perform stories that span the diversity of the region's cultural history: some are folk tales, others are religious re-tellings of the Bhagavad Gita or the Puranas. Little is known about the art form outside of Mewar—but rural communities are familiar with the tradition and its various practices.

Academic history has largely ignored the Gauri Dance, but details of its evolution and practices have been preserved in the cultural consciousness of its audience. Udaipur-based photographer Waswo X. Waswo delved into the rural landscape of Mewar to learn about the Gauri Dance first-hand, from the rural communities that witness the Gauri Dance every year, and from the performers themselves. The project was documented in a series of digitally shot studio photographs, meticulously hand-painted by artist Rajesh Soni, and were published in the eponymous book *Gauri Dancers* by Mapin Publishing in 2019. The series has also been showcased in parts by a number of galleries across India. Now for the first time, the collection will be on view in its entirety at Gurugram's Museo Camera Centre for the Photographic Arts. On view from 17th September to 15th October, 2021, the exhibition invites audiences to discover and engage with an ancient folk art form while also considering the increasing importance of oral narratives in democratising the historical process.



Waswo X. Waswo, *Gauri Dancers*,
Black and white pigment print,
hand-coloured by Rajesh Soni

“Waswo and I have been discussing the possibility of exhibiting the series of ‘Gauri Dancers’ for the audience in NCR for more than two years. We are excited to bring it to life finally, at the stunning Galerie Museo at Museo Camera Centre for Photographic Arts in Gurgaon. Artist-photographer Waswo X. Waswo collaborates with Rajesh Soni, a third generation hand-colourist based in Udaipur and accompanying the exhibition is the book *Gauri Dancers*, published by Mapin consisting of photographs by Waswo with text by Sonika Soni and a preface by Pramod Kumar KG. Shot mostly at Waswo’s studio in the village of Varda, these photographs are captured digitally, though the staging itself harkens back to the days of painted backdrops, arranged sets and natural light. Selected images are printed digitally on matte, fibre-based papers, with archival inks. The Gavri (Gauri, Gavari) Dancers are a phenomenon unique to the confluence of southern Rajasthan and its borders with Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. This predominantly tribal belt has a glorious tradition of oral literature and performing arts, by way of dance and drama. Eschewing the word theatrics leaves us with no other real term to explain the Gavri performance and can be viewed as a liminal interlude between classical proscenium style portrayal and risqué folk ballads that have a dedicated following amongst communities who shun the mainstream and revel in their wondrous world of Gods, world-views and situations. With Gauri Dancers, Latitude 28 with the artists venture into the terrains of mapping the local cultural history of performance not yet explored in academic history and we are so excited with the possibilities.” – **Bhavna Kakar,**

Founder-Director, Latitude 28

“Museo Camera is an institution which celebrates the historicity of photography and its evolution. Waswo’s body of work stands out on the confluence of digital & analog and beautifully highlights the indian traditional art of hand-painted photographs. These layered images created by pixels and pigments mark the continuity and timelessness of the art of photography.” – **Aditya Arya, Founding Director, Museo Camera**

Dates

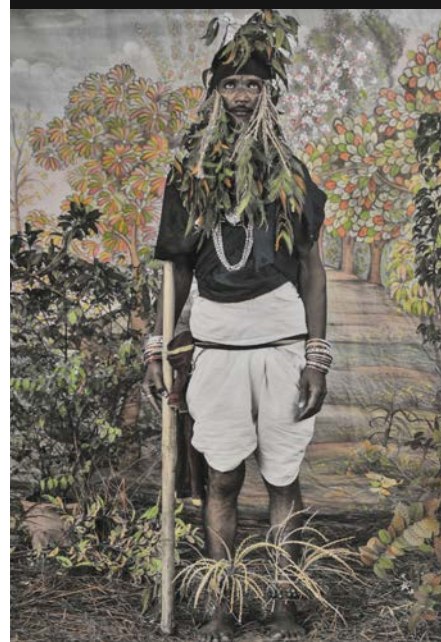
17 Sep — 15 October

Venue

Galerie at Museo,
Museo Camera Centre for
Photographic Arts,
Shri Ganesh Mandir Marg,
DLF Phase IV, Sector 28,
Gurugram, Haryana 122002

Hours

Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 7pm
(Closed on Mondays)



Waswo X. Waswo, *Gauri Dancers*,
Black and white pigment print,
hand-coloured by Rajesh Soni

Notes to Editors

— *Gauri Dancers* by Waswo X. Waswo is presented by Museo Camera Centre for Photographic Arts and Latitude 28. The exhibition will be on view at Galerie at Museo from 17th September to 15th October 2021.

— The book *Gauri Dancers*, published by Mapin Publishing in 2019, features a large collection of painted photographs from the series, as well as texts by Pramod Kumar KG, Waswo X. Waswo and Sonika Soni. It will be available for sale at the museum.

— This is the largest exhibition of the *Gauri Dancers* series till date.

Press

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Black and white pigment print,
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PUBLICATION

"Women participate in the beginning — when the performers arrive in the receiving village — and at the end of the forty days when they bid farewell to the Gauri Dancers, while singing folk songs narrating the Bhasmasur story, and praising Lord Shiva, and Parvati. Each performance normally happens in the daytime, but a few stories can be prolonged till late evening, depending upon the responsiveness of the audience and the rhythm of the performers. A number of stories are performed over the course of forty days, the majority of these being mythical tales, others touching upon social issues, while still others are created by the performers, who improvise stories on the spot. At the beginning of each day, the Pat Bhopa, or head priest, installs the *trishul* (trident) and a *jhanda* (flag) as an effigy of the Devi and performs an *aarti* which is attended by all the participants and the audience. The performance starts with circling and a slow dance around the effigy, which turns into a rhythmic, synchronised, fast-paced dance, before the performers disperse to dress up for various acts. Every day, after the performance, a group dance and a mesmerising grand *aarti* happens, after which the effigy is uninstalled."

– An excerpt from the essay by Sonika Soni, *Gauri Dancers* (2019), Mapin Publishing

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a book entitled *Gauri Dancers*, published by Mapin Publishing in 2019.

Text © Waswo X. Waswo, Sonika Soni and Pramod Kumar KG

Illustrations © R. Vijay and Dalpat Singh Jingar

Photographs hand-painted by Rajesh Soni



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Waswo X. Waswo was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the U.S.A. He studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, The Milwaukee Center for Photography, and Studio Marangoni, The Centre for Contemporary Photography in Florence, Italy. His books include: *India Poems: The Photographs*, published by Gallerie Publishers in 2006, *Men of Rajasthan*, published by Serindia Contemporary in 2011 (hardcover 2014), and *Photowallah* published by Tasveer in 2016. In 2019, his latest book, *Gauri Dancers*, was published by Mapin Publishing. The artist has lived and travelled in India for over twenty years and he has made his home in Udaipur, Rajasthan, for the past thirteen. There he collaborates with a variety of local artists including the photo hand-colourist, Rajesh Soni. He has also produced a series of semi-autobiographical miniature paintings in collaboration with the artist R. Vijay. This collaborative miniature work was documented in the book *The Artful Life of R. Vijay*, by Dr. Annapurna Garimella. Waswo is most known for addressing issues of Otherness and collaboration in his work.

Rajesh Soni is an artist who has become known primarily for his abilities to hand paint digital photographs. He is the son of artist Lalit Soni, and the grandson of Prabhu Lal Soni (Verma), who was once court photographer to the Maharana Bhopal Singh of Mewar. Prabhu Lal was not only a court photographer, but also a hand-colourist who painted the black and white photographs that he produced. His skills of hand-colouring photographs were passed down to Rajesh through the intermediary of his father Lalit.

ABOUT LATITUDE 28

Since its inception in 2010, Latitude 28 has been promoting creative dialogue and presenting dynamic exhibitions that focus on contemporary art from South Asia. Founded by art historian Bhavna Kakar, Latitude 28 has become synonymous with cutting edge art from the region, seeking fresh perspectives and innovative thinking in its attempt to stimulate interest in new waves of art making and provides a horizontal environment where artists are encouraged to contextualize and experiment with medium and material, positioning them within historical and contemporary frameworks that critically respond to the canon. When making programmatic decisions, Latitude 28 seeks to promote diversity through building a community and culture that is inclusive of all groups and individuals. Keeping with its wider role as an institution dedicated to the arts, Latitude 28 has paved the way for active collaborations between artists from Iran, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India through its curated shows and outreach events. The gallery, thus, continues to work towards making art accessible and inclusive to larger audiences and our patrons, with exhibitions strategically located at the nexus where artists, their work, art institutions, collectors and many different publics intersect.

LATITUDE 28

ABOUT MUSEO CAMERA

Located in the heart of Gurugram city, Museo Camera is one of the largest not-for-profit, crowdfunded centres for the photographic arts in Southeast Asia. A unique public-private partnership between India Photo Archive Foundation and The Municipal Corporation of Gurugram, Museo Camera is one of its kind in India with 18,000 sq. ft. of space dedicated to the art and history of photography. It comprises a museum, which has a collection of over 3000 cameras and photographic equipment dating back to the 1850s. In addition, it houses studio spaces, exhibition galleries showcasing contemporary art practices, a reference library and a fully functional darkroom.

