



Gupta, Sunil (b. 1953)

by Richard G. Mann

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"Untitled #2," a photograph from Sunil Gupta's series *The New Pre-Raphaelites* (2008-2009). Image courtesy Sunil Gupta.

Internationally prominent artist Sunil Gupta (b. 1953) has gained recognition for his achievements as photographer, curator, and cultural activist. In all of these endeavors, Gupta has explored multiple sexual, racial, and cultural identities and challenged restrictive conventions. Although his work has significant social and political implications, it is consistently poetic and evocative rather than polemical.

Gupta is a native of India, but he is a Canadian citizen who worked primarily in the United Kingdom between 1978 and 2004. His return to India in 2004 has opened up his art to new directions.

Childhood in India

Sunil Gupta was born on September 8, 1953 in New Delhi, India. His father was from a socially respectable North Indian Hindu background. However, his mother, a Tibetan raised by Anglican missionaries, was casteless.

In reminiscences about his childhood, Gupta has emphasized the importance of the numerous relatives, friends, and associates who provided a cohesive and supportive social network for his family. Although he grew up in the densely packed urban environment of New Delhi, he had opportunities to visit relatives in rural areas, where his family owned property.

His family did not have a television, but he enjoyed seeing American motion pictures, which impressed him with their colors and strong story lines. Movies not only provided his introduction to film, but they also ultimately influenced many aspects of his mature work, including his organization of images in extended series and his use of text and other devices to suggest possible narratives.

Although Gupta migrated from India while still a teenager, aspects of its rich cultural heritage impacted his later art. For instance, his representation of the male body without idealization accords with artistic traditions in India, where the human figure is seldom physically heroized. Furthermore, his interest in bringing together very diverse, and even opposed, images from a wide range of sources might be correlated with the (often unharmonious) blending of very different cultural traditions in modern India, which Gupta has described as "a very big country overlaid with many histories and many cultures . . . a minefield of contradictions."

Migration to Canada

In 1969, Gupta moved with his parents and sister to Montreal. Although his parents expected that the move would benefit the family economically and socially, it had many unforeseen negative consequences, especially for his father, whose health declined as a result of his work as a night porter at a club. Utilizing photos from family albums, recordings of telephone conversations with his mother, and other materials, Gupta later articulated the difficult experiences of his immigrant family in *Social Security* (1988), commissioned by Canada House, London.

Gupta's nuclear family lived largely in isolation in the center of Montreal, which did not have many South Asian residents at the time. Both Sunil and his sister, Shalini, ultimately made life choices that were not acceptable according to the conventions then prevailing in the Indian middle class. Thus, Gupta's parents opposed his decision to become a photographer, and they never openly acknowledged his homosexuality.

After completing high school in Montreal in 1970, Gupta continued his studies at Dawson College, Montreal, from 1970 until 1972. He became a Canadian citizen in 1972.

Initially planning to fulfill his parents' expectations that he would undertake a business career, Gupta studied for an advanced degree in accountancy at Concordia University from 1972 until 1977, but his real enthusiasm was for film.

Although he has spent only relatively brief periods in Canada since 1983, Gupta retains his Canadian citizenship and considers Canada one of his homelands.

New York, 1976

In Montreal, Gupta had developed his interest in film by frequenting art cinemas and by teaching himself how to take photographs on an amateur basis. In 1976, he resolved to improve his understanding of photography through several months of study at The New School for Social Research in New York City. Among his teachers, he was particularly influenced by Lisette Model, who recognized his talent and encouraged him to make photography his profession.

While in New York, he also was inspired by the Gay Liberation movement, then in full swing, and he resolved to come out and be active in the movement.

Celebrating his proud acknowledgment of his sexual orientation, Gupta made an extended series of photographs of gay men hanging out in the vicinity of Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Although not exhibited until recently, the photographs constitute a significant record of gay life in New York during the mid-1970s, and they also provide an early demonstration of Gupta's commitment to depicting gay life with honesty and dignity.

Imitating Lisette Model's practice, Gupta avoided contrived poses in the *Christopher Street* series and portrayed his subjects in a direct, straightforward way. Reflecting the confident mood of gay culture at that moment, many of the men look directly at Gupta's camera. Although the subjects are predominantly white, they differ significantly in age, social class, and physical attributes. In accord with photo conventions of the era, Gupta utilized black and white to emphasize the documentary realism of the images.

Early Years in London

Returning to Montreal, Gupta continued his business studies until 1977 while he made plans to pursue a career in photography in London.

After completing a diploma program in Photography at the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, where he studied from 1978 to 1981, he earned his Master's degree in Photography at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London, where he studied from 1981 until 1983.

For his final year show at RCA, Gupta undertook a significant project, *Tilonia*, supported by a student award, which enabled him to travel back to India for the first time since his family had migrated to Canada. His subject, Tilonia, was an impoverished rural village, but Gupta did not want to depict the residents as objects of pity, as a Western documentary photographer might have. Therefore, he made his images with color film, rather than black and white, which was conventionally employed in the era to dramatize the

suffering of Third World subjects.

Because he spent several months getting to know residents before beginning to photograph them, he was able to produce images that represented individuals as distinct personalities, seen in the contexts of their daily lives. In arranging his exhibition at Commonwealth Institute, London, Gupta depended primarily on supplementary documentation to explain the difficult economic circumstances of the community. Although reviewers criticized his lack of emphasis upon the poverty of Tilonia, Gupta resolved that he would continue to depict minority subjects with dignity.

After earning his M. A. in 1983, Gupta returned to Canada for a few months, while he successfully applied for permanent residency in the United Kingdom. He returned to London before the end of the year.

Until the early 1990s, Gupta depended for income primarily upon freelance work for news media, supplemented by occasional part-time teaching jobs. According to him, the need to convince busy picture editors to buy his work sharpened the skills that he needed to produce immediately effective images. He devoted whatever "spare" time he had to his independent artwork and to cultural activism.

Ten Years On, 1984

Gupta had decided to attend art school in England and to live there at least partly because he wanted to be with a man with whom he had fallen in love. Therefore, he was deeply distressed when their partnership came to an end in 1984, after ten years. In the hope of discovering the keys to a successful, long-term gay relationship, Gupta decided to meet and photograph gay couples who had been together at least ten years.

For this project, he photographed approximately 35 couples, primarily West London residents, whom he met through various social contacts. Gupta came to realize that gay relationships are too diverse to permit a simple checklist of factors guaranteeing success. However, he succeeded in identifying partners who had made a strong commitment to one another.

Utilizing black and white film, Gupta photographed the couples in their home environments in a straightforward "documentary" fashion. While respecting the privacy of his subjects, he managed to capture their distinctive personalities.

With the current emphasis on same-sex marriage, it may now be hard to realize how innovative *Ten Years On* was. These portrayals of gay men in the context of emotionally grounding relationships challenged prevalent visualizations of gay men in terms of their sexuality, while often ignoring other aspects of their humanity.

Arts Activism

Gupta demonstrated his commitment to arts activism while still a student at RCA, where he helped to organize the first black student group show in 1983. Through his involvement in that project, he met Ken Livingstone, then Leader of the Greater London Council (and, later, Mayor of London) and other politicians dedicated to multiculturalism. At Livingstone's invitation, he joined the Anti-Racist Year Design Committee, established by the GLC in 1984, and he subsequently participated in numerous other groups that linked arts and political engagement (including Greater London Arts: Black Arts Strategy Policy Group).

As a result, he became part of a closely-knit but informal network of artists from Asian, African, and African-Caribbean backgrounds. Responding to the need for an organization to support photography by individuals from minority communities, he helped to found Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers, in 1988. In collaboration with Monika Baker, Gupta managed all of the activities of Autograph during its initial difficult years, serving as organizer, fund-raiser, writer, and curator. Under the leadership of Gupta and Baker, Autograph supported the development of aspiring artists and sponsored

several important exhibitions and seminars, including *Autoportraits* (1989-90).

During the later 1980s and early 1990s, Gupta curated several important exhibitions for various organizations, including *An Economy of Signs: Contemporary Indian Photography* (1988-90) and *Disrupted Borders: An Intervention in the Definition of Boundaries* (1993).

From the perspective of queer cultural history, the most notable of these exhibitions probably is *Ecstatic Antibodies, Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, which, under the auspices of the Arts Council of Great Britain, toured to various institutions in the UK from 1988 to 1990. Gupta and queer arts activist Tessa Boffin jointly curated this exhibition and edited the book, initially published to accompany the show and subsequently reprinted as an independent volume, providing valuable insights into the epidemic.

From the beginning, Gupta and Boffin intended the project to challenge stereotyped portrayals of individuals with AIDS as objects of fear, revulsion, and pity. To this end, they commissioned both art works and essays from artists involved in communities that had been deeply affected by AIDS. Participating in the exhibition were the most significant, cutting-edge queer artists, then active in the UK, including Isaac Julien, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Allan deSouza, Lynn Hewett, and Pratibha Parmar, among others.

For *Ecstatic Antibodies*, Gupta created *No Solutions* as a response to the policies of Avtar Singh Paintal, Director-General of the Indian Council for Medical Research, who wanted to ban sex by Indians with foreigners and Non-Resident Indians, as a means of preventing AIDS. As a counterpoint to pronouncements by Paintal (displayed in the exhibition), Gupta produced four large photographs of himself and his British partner, portrayed in their living room in various scenarios, ranging from casual conversation, seated on a couch, to nude embrace. These photographs of an interracial couple challenge the xenophobic proposals of Paintal.

Displayed in pairs with the photographs were reproductions of four large paintings and drawings of Hindu deities. In opposition to the health minister's pronouncements, the religious images remind viewers of the openness to sexual and gender diversity often characteristic of Hinduism in earlier historical periods. In this regard, it is significant that the poses of Gupta and his partner recall the arrangements of sculpted figures of lovers on the exteriors of medieval temples at Khajuraho and elsewhere in northern India.

Art Works of the Later 1980s

Many of the political concerns that motivated Gupta's cultural activism are evident as well in his own artistic projects from the mid-1980s onwards.

For the group exhibition, *Reflections of the Black Experience* (1986, Brixton Art Gallery), Gupta created a series of photographs about British Asian life. Although the photographers participating in the exhibition were expected to produce objective documentation of the lives of immigrants, Gupta approached the project in a very different way: faking scenes related to a variety of immigrant issues (Fear, Elderly, Family, among others).

Although his use of black and white film conformed to the expectations of documentary photography, he revealed the staged nature of his images through dramatic effects (strong contrasts of light and shade, diagonal compositions, etc.), which deliberately recalled film noir of the 1940s.

Included in the *Black Experience* series, the photograph *Gay* shows Gupta standing with his arm around his British partner. In the background, a movie theater marquee advertises Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), a popular film written by Hanif Kureishi concerning the relationship of a Pakistani man with an Englishman. Looking directly outwards, Gupta and his partner seem to be inviting the viewer to participate in a world with blurred racial boundaries.

Although Gupta's earliest gay-themed work focused primarily on white subjects, he became increasingly concerned with broadening queer art to encompass non-white, especially South Asian, men. Therefore, in 1986, he utilized a commission from Photographer's Gallery to create *Exiles*, a series of photographs of the lives of gay men in New Delhi, his hometown. Gupta hoped that this project would help combat the invisibility of gay men in his native country and to promote queer cultural activity there.

Because homosexual acts were at the time punishable by up to ten years in prison, gay life in India had been concealed by "an intimidating wall of silence," as Gupta explained in *Pictures from Here* (2003). Gupta hoped that *Exiles* would help combat the invisibility of gay men in his native country and to promote queer cultural activity there.

The emergence of HIV/AIDS intensified the prevalent conception of homosexuality as a deadly Western disease. According to Gupta, until recently most gay men in India acquiesced to family pressures by marrying women and living in the closet. As Gupta did for much of his adult life, many Indian men committed to an openly gay lifestyle chose to live in Western societies, despite having to confront racism and other forms of oppression.

Recognizing the dangers to which gay men were subject in India, Gupta was determined not to violate the privacy of his subjects. Therefore, he recruited the help of "accomplices" to enact rituals of gay life in New Delhi. In *Connaught Place*, the glances and body poses of men seated in a park convey both furtiveness and solicitation. In *Jama Masjid*, Gupta skillfully exploits glances, gestures, and figural arrangements to suggest that the crowded street is a focal point of gay encounters. In other images (such as *Jangpura* and *Hauz Khas*), Gupta eloquently conveys the loneliness of men seen only from the backside. Textual panels incorporating statements by his accomplices in India enrich the meanings of the photographs.

By addressing simultaneously issues of race and sexuality, *Exiles* challenged limited notions of identity then prevalent in the international art world. Channel Four subsequently commissioned a short film, *Indian Postcard* (1988), which addressed the themes of *Exiles* through a musical narrative, involving men in different cities (Bombay, New Delhi), who do not actually meet.

Through his art and political activities, Gupta also confronted homophobia in the United Kingdom. For example, in *"Pretended" Family Relationships* (1988), a multimedia work incorporating both black and white and color photographs, large text panels, and audio commentary, Gupta explored the complexities of gay male and lesbian relationships, while also suggesting the necessity of political action. The passage of Clause 28 by the British Parliament, which restricted positive representations of same-sex relationships, caused Gupta to emphasize political themes more strongly than in his earlier pieces.

Each of the individual pieces in *"Pretended" Family Relationships* consist of three components: a large color photograph of a same-sex couple (on the left); a central text panel, with excerpts from poetry by his then-partner, Stephen Dodd; and a black and white photograph of protests against Clause 28.

In contrast to *Ten Years On*, Gupta did not care if the individuals shown as couples actually were life partners. Even in the heated political climate caused by the passage of Clause 28, Gupta chose not to idealize same-sex partnerships. For example, displayed next to a photo of an interracial couple on the Thames Embankment, the text--"I call you my love though you are not my love and it breaks my heart to tell you"--reveals the ambiguities and complexities of the relationship shown to us. While some pieces do suggest loving commitment, others deal with street cruising and unfulfilled longing.

Trespass Series

In an extended series of mural-size works, created in the early 1990s, Gupta explored the intersections or "trespasses" of multiple social and personal factors, including the collective histories of different cultures, economic agendas, political propaganda, race, sexuality, and health status, among other elements.

Utilizing digital technology, Gupta combined his own photographs (both newly taken and pre-existing ones), archival images, and ads and other popular source material.

In 1992-93, Gupta undertook *Trespass I* for a commission for the *Triumph of Empire* exhibition (intended as a counterpoint to the quincentenary of the discovery of America). In response to the theme of empire, Gupta developed the concept of strangers in an alien land, focused specifically upon the circumstances of South Asian immigrants in the newly unified European empire. Considering Germany to be the heart of the New Europe, Gupta decided to undertake the project in Berlin.

In the eight panels composing *Trespass I*, Gupta incorporated a wide variety of images, including historical photographs of Nazi Germany; views of war monuments, art galleries, and other buildings in contemporary Germany; self-portraits (clothed and nude), as well as portraits of his British partner; photographs of unidentified South Asians; and advertisements. The visually provocative combination of images suggests multiple interactions among diverse cultural, economic, and historical referents. Furthermore, boundaries between the personal and political are blurred through the juxtaposition of images of Gupta and his partner with indications of Nazi authority and modern capitalism.

The second installment of the series, *Trespass 2*, was created in 1993, in response to a commission from NGBK, Berlin (Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende, New Society for Pictorial Arts) for an exhibition entitled *They Call It Love*. The ten panels explore how Gupta's partnership with one man was affected, and ultimately destroyed, by a third man, who initially came into their household simply to remodel the kitchen (seen as background of many of the personal photographs in the series).

Large portraits of Gupta (mostly nude), as well as separate photographs of his long-term partner and the third man emphasize the personal dimensions of the series, although they are not organized in terms of a sequential narrative. By juxtaposing these portraits with a wide range of pre-existing images--color photos of food, Mogul miniatures, Indian billboards, a photograph of his grandfather's army regiment, newspaper headlines, soft gay porn--Gupta eloquently reveals how the supposedly personal space of the home can become a battleground for diverse racial and cultural perspectives.

Commissioned by Essex County Council and Focal Point Gallery, Southend, *Trespass 3* (1995) interpreted Essex as a point of entry for foreigners into the UK and investigated how the lives of Asians in the UK have been shaped by military and economic authorities.

In this series, Gupta largely downplayed the sexual and obviously personal elements, with some notable exceptions. Approximately midway through the series, he inserted a portrait of himself, to mark his recent diagnosis as HIV-positive. In addition, in another panel, he provocatively combined photographs of the following: an open public space with three empty lawn chairs (with a train station visible in the distance), a "cottage" (British gay slang for a public men's room used for cruising), and a Body Positive rally.

From Here to Eternity and Homelands

Distressed by his diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1995, Gupta at first tried to avoid dealing with the implications of his medical condition, and he fell into a creative slump once he became ill. However, by 1999, he had completed *From Here to Eternity*, a series of six mural-sized diptychs about his life as an HIV-positive gay man living in South London. For this project, he returned to his photographic roots by using "traditional" positive prints, which he personally developed from negatives in the darkroom.

On left side of each diptych is a self-portrait, taken during a period of illness. One of the portraits, *Shroud*, in which Gupta's body is wrapped in a curtain, obviously alludes to the possibility of death, and two show him undergoing medical treatments. However, the three others do not directly depict illness; these include a notably tender image of the artist embracing his dog (*Babe*). On the right side of each diptych is an exterior view of a gay club, seen in the light of day. Each of the diptych combinations reveals the artist's

subtle, ironic humor in the face of illness. For instance, *Hoist* is balanced by a photo of the artist raising his camera to take a shot of himself in the mirror. With its implications of military attack, *The Fort* is appropriately paired with *Blood*, showing the artist having blood samples taken in the hospital.

Begun in 2000 and completed in 2003, *Homelands* consists of fifteen mural-size diptychs, which collectively present an intellectually and psychologically complex interpretation of his life as an HIV-positive man. Recognizing that he carries the virus inside himself, he conceived the series as a "personal travelogue," composed of "landscapes in which, if you like, the HIV is traveling," as Gupta explained in an interview with Bernadette Buckley in 2003. For this project, he chose a variety of locations, which had personal significance for him, in India, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

He did not attempt to organize the series into rigid narrative, and he paired images in diptychs for various reasons. For instance, *Hunida Pamar, Uttar Pradesh* and *Bar Harbor, Maine* both depict landscapes that have been deeply eroded over time. However, the combination of *Hunida Pamar, Uttar Pradesh / Chesapeake Bay, Maryland* was determined intuitively, partly on aesthetic grounds. A pastoral view, *Mundia Pamar* depicts a meadow on property that Gupta inherited in northern India, with a cow in the foreground and a calf barely visible in the distance. In contrast, *Chesapeake Bay* presents a backside nude view of the artist in a hotel room. The light entering this rather ordinary space infuses this photograph with the same idyllic mood as the landscape.

The diptych *Ajmer, Rajasthan / Great Yarmouth, Nova Scotia* reveals the humor and autobiographical concerns that often are present in Gupta's work. For *Ajmer*, Gupta photographed the fading outdoor wall ad for a medical potion because he was intrigued by these super-muscular men, rare in Indian culture. The Dairy Queen, recorded in *Great Yarmouth*, represents a distinctly North American manifestation of consumer culture. Actually, the Dairy Queen incorporates a variety of personal references for Gupta, who became addicted to the brand of frozen custard while living in Canada. In accord with the American gay slang definition of "dairy queen" as a black gay man attracted to white men, Gupta also identified the subject with himself.

Return to India

In 2004, at the opening of a retrospective exhibition of his work, *Pictures from Here*, at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, Gupta encountered a beautiful Indian man, with whom he immediately fell in love.

In several interviews, Gupta has emphasized the profound significance of his relationship with Shankar, the first man with whom he had become deeply involved after his diagnosis with HIV in 1995.

In collaboration with Shankar, Gupta began a photographic series entitled *Love and Light* in Ladakh, the mountainous northernmost region of India. This series of large diptychs juxtaposes softly focused and gently lit images of nude figures with strongly colored, brightly lit, and sharply focused views.

Light and Love No. 1 well exemplifies the mood of the series. In the photograph on the left side of this panel, the seated nude figures of Gupta and Shankar are shown in profile. Gazing lovingly at one another, they embrace and intertwine their bodies. The soft focus, muted colors, and radiant lighting of this image eloquently underline the affection evident in their poses and expressions. In the photograph on the right, the clothed figure of the artist is seen from the backside, as he looks at an austere but awe-inspiring mountain landscape. Through his combination of distinct formal and thematic elements, Gupta creates a work that seems at once tender and sublime.

Although his relationship with Shankar ended in 2005, Gupta decided to remain in India indefinitely. He continues to live in New Delhi, making occasional trips to the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

New Directons

Gupta's work has evolved in interesting new directions since his return to India. Evolving out of his long-term interest in the history of Delhi, Gupta photographed older parts of the city (that is, Old Delhi) for the series, *Tales of the City* (2004), a title which may allude to Armistead Maupin's series of novels about San Francisco. Some of the images, such as *Diwan-i Khas* lyrically convey the beauty of ancient monuments, while others record bustling commercial areas.

In its intentions and scope *Tales* is inherently very different from *Exiles*. Nevertheless, at least one photograph of the new series--*The Lanes of Shaahjanabad*--seems to evoke possibilities of furtive cruising, as do so many of the images in the *Exiles* series.

Gupta also has completed two series interpreting the lives of children resident at the NAZ Care Home in New Delhi for women and children living with HIV and AIDS: *A Time to Love* (2004) and *Imagining Childhood: Living with HIV in New Delhi* (2006).

He conceives these as part of a larger project, and he intends to continue to photograph these children over the course of several years. Concerned with protecting the privacy of the children, he avoids revealing their identities in the photographs, often presenting back and partial views of them. He also has made extensive images of their environment.

To counter not only the invisibility of gay life in India but also the lack of attention to gay children in virtually all cultures, Gupta has also begun another project, which will interpret the circumstances of growing up gay in India.

Political and Cultural Activism

In the first couple of years after his return to India, Gupta felt discouraged by the state of queer life there, which, he felt, remained as hidden as it had been in the mid-1980s, when he created *Exiles*. Drawing upon the expertise that he gained through his extensive work with Autograph and other progressive organizations in the United Kingdom, Gupta quickly became actively involved in queer political organizations, most notably Nigah, a collective that seeks to create safe spaces for queers in Delhi and that organizes diverse educational and cultural activities, including the annual Nigah Queerfest.

At Queerfest and other venues, Gupta has conducted photo workshops, intended to empower queer individuals through art expression.

In 2007, Gupta and Gauri Gill founded *Camerawork Delhi*, a free photographic journal, which is intended to combat the secondary status of photography in the Indian art world and to bridge the gap between older craft traditions and digital technologies.

Under Gupta's leadership, *Camerawork Delhi* has fostered politically progressive film and photography not only through articles, but also through workshops and exhibitions. Reflecting Gupta's commitment to queer political issues, *Camerawork Delhi* often has focused on questions of gender and sex.

Mr. Malhotra's Party

Within a few years of his return, Gupta was delighted to notice the increasing visibility of queer people in Delhi. In 2007, he undertook *Mr. Malhotra's Party* to celebrate the emerging, new queer lifestyles.

This series of thirteen large color photographs (ranging in size from 42" x 28" to 42" x 42") show queer individuals in different kinds of public spaces in Delhi, including parks, highways, sidewalks, and shopping areas, among others. By depicting his subjects outside, Gupta literally outs them.

The name of the series was inspired by a sign that Gupta saw posted outside a pub in Delhi, where gay nights frequently are advertised as private parties, hosted by a specific individual. About the series, Gupta has stated: "I envisaged the people in my pictures as guests in this imaginary coming out party. I liked the name 'Malhotra' as it's associated very much with the hard working post partition Punjabi refugee who helped to develop Delhi and give it its current character. It's very much a work about a particular city."

Although all the subjects are relatively young, they include men, women, and transgender individuals of diverse social classes and ethnicities. None of the subjects are models; all are self-identified queer people who chose to have their portraits made by Gupta.

In *Mr. Malhotra's Party*, the subjects gaze confidently out at the viewer. Their upbeat mood frequently is emphasized by bright sunlight and strong colors, as, for example, *Raju*, in which the model is posed in front of a brightly decorated storefront roll-down gate.

Mr. Malhotra's Party makes a striking contrast with *Exiles*, which depicts men enacting scenarios revealing the furtiveness and difficulty of queer life in Delhi in the mid-1980s. The generally somber tonalities, averted gazes, and other formal component elements of the photographs in *Exiles* reinforces the emotionally dark mood.

In contrast, *Mr. Malhotra's Party* includes no references to sexual acts, however oblique. The sexual orientation of the subjects can be assumed, but it is not foregrounded as their primary identifying feature.

Although the last names of the subjects in *Mr. Malhotra's Party* are omitted, the titles accurately record their first names. Thus, the presentation of these images in public exhibitions attests to a new openness in India, although Gupta acknowledges that many glbtq people in India still do not want their full identities revealed.

The New Pre-Raphaelites

Perhaps the most provocative of Gupta's recent series, *The New Pre-Raphaelites* eloquently addresses complex identity issues in sumptuous visual form.

The series of thirteen photographs originated in 2008 as a commission from Autograph, London. From the start, both the artist and Autograph intended the series to support the legal battle against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Instituted by the British colonial government in 1860, this provision allowed arrests and prison sentences of up to ten years for any homosexual act.

In theory, the law encompassed both women and men, but, in recent decades, it was primarily enforced against working-class men. To the jubilation of India's queer communities, the Delhi High Court finally overturned Section 377 in July 2009.

The New Pre-Raphaelites can be understood as a highly original and distinctive contribution to the fight against an oppressive legacy of colonial rule. As in the *Trespass* series and other earlier projects, Gupta avoids any didactic and simplistic advocacy and evokes political issues in a complex and indirect way. It is perhaps ironic that Gupta found inspiration for his project in the work of a group of artists who came to prominence in the United Kingdom during the era when Section 377 was instituted.

The title of his series references the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an association of British artists founded in 1848 by Holman Hunt, Sir John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Opposed to restrictive academic formulae, the Pre-Raphaelites claimed that nature was their direct source of inspiration; their works are characterized by vivid colors and sharply focused details. They often dealt

with lofty mythic themes and sought to infuse depictions of modern life with the spirituality associated with the medieval era. Yet, despite the boldness of their artistic goals, they often were socially conservative. Thus, they disdained their artistic follower Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) because of his Judaism and his homosexuality.

In his comments, Gupta has emphasized his strong admiration for the commitment of the Pre-Raphaelites to visual truth and for the way "they used painting to express their situation." Gupta based each of the photographs in the series on a painting by a member of the Brotherhood or by one of their close followers. In his photographs, Gupta eloquently recreates the vivid colors, strong physical presence, and intense, mysterious moods of Pre-Raphaelite canvases.

Gupta has explained his appropriation and transformation of Pre-Raphaelite compositions: "I've updated them to reflect contemporary queer culture in India."

While respectful of the originals, Gupta's images are often subtly ironic and occasionally brazenly campy. Throughout the series, he inserts friends and associates into compositions devised by the Pre-Raphaelites and revises the settings to incorporate elements of the contemporary Indian environment.

He expands the Pre-Raphaelite pursuit of truth to encompass emotionally honest, positive, and sensual visualizations of South Asian gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals. In the process, he subverts racist and homophobic conventions and deconstructs Orientalist stereotypes.

Throughout *The New Pre-Raphaelites*, Gupta transforms tragic images into jubilant affirmations. Thus, for example, in *Untitled no. 13*, a transgender individual looks out boldly and confidently at the viewer. Her attitude contrasts with the aura of sexual repression in such quintessential Pre-Raphaelite paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as *Monna Pomona* (Gupta's probable prototype), as well as his famous *Beata Beatrice* (both in the Tate Collection).

Untitled no. 9 well exemplifies Gupta's creative queer reinvention of Pre-Raphaelite compositions. Gupta based this photograph directly on Simeon Solomon's *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1864, Tate Collection). His use of this prototype is of special interest because of the importance of Solomon's painting for queer cultural history. Solomon exploited the theme of the famous ancient Greek poet Sappho embracing her supposed lover, Erinna, as a means to articulate his own commitment to same-sex love.

In Solomon's painting, the aggressiveness of Sappho's embrace of Erinna and of her apparent attempt to disrobe her companion far exceeded the acceptable limits of close friendship among Victorian women. The solemn and almost sorrowful expressions of Sappho and Erinna eloquently suggest the difficulties experienced by homosexuals in Victorian England.

In replacing European women in togas with South Asians in saris, Gupta blurs cultural boundaries and reveals how queer themes can resonate across diverse cultural and historical contexts.

In contrast to Solomon, Gupta infuses his image with intense joy. The woman on the left (Erinna in Solomon's composition) smiles contentedly as her lover gently removes her garment. Moreover, Gupta emphasizes the creation of alternative family structures through same-sex love by replacing the little deer in Solomon's painting with a child, who gazes boldly out at the viewer. Gupta wittily symbolizes the multiple changes involved in his revision of Solomon's painting by reversing the colors of the women's garments.

In some of the other photographs in the series, Gupta reveals homoerotic resonances in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which almost certainly were not intended by the Victorian artists (even if they may have been perceived or imagined by earlier queer viewers).

In this regard, one can note, for example, *Untitled no. 12*, evidently based on Millais's *Saint Stephen* (1895, Tate Collection). Millais depicts the martyred saint lying on the ground, surrounded by the stones that killed him. The saint's twisted limbs, anguished expression, and blood-spattered robes powerfully evoke his suffering.

Although the direction of the saint's body has been reversed, the pose of the figure in Gupta's photograph replicates the positioning of Millais's saint. The open black shirt in Gupta's photograph directly recalls the placement of the outer robe around Millais's saint. However, the shirt of the man in Gupta's photograph opens to reveal beautiful, glowing flesh, rather than bloodied, torn vestments.

Moreover, golden light infuses Gupta's image, intensifying the mood of sensuality. It is evident that in Gupta's photograph, the subject's "death" is the languid repose following intense lovemaking.

In *Untitled no. 7*, Gupta similarly transforms Henry Wallis's dark painting of the tragic death of Thomas Chatterton (1856, Tate Collection) into a sensual image, suffused with soft light, of a beautiful young man lying on a bed in an apartment.

In *The New Pre-Raphaelites* and other projects in India, Gupta has revealed a commitment to a broader range of gender and sexual issues than in most of the projects that he undertook in the United Kingdom.

In interviews, he has emphasized that he has found that there is a "greater fluidity across gender and LGBT boundaries" in India than in the West.

This fluidity is emphasized in such photographs as *Untitled no. 6*, in which Gupta envisions strong lesbian women living independently of the patriarchy.

Untitled no. 6 is obviously based on Millais's painting *Mariana* (1851), which was originally exhibited with lines from Tennyson's poem "Mariana," conveying the dreariness of the young woman's life after she was rejected by her fiancé. In Millais's painting, the sorrowful facial expression, tired pose, fallen leaves, and somber colors are among the features that complement the mood of despair in Tennyson's poem.

Although loosely replicating the pose of Millais's figure, Gupta makes several changes from the original, which enable him to convey a sense of happiness and empowerment rather than the hopelessness of Millais's painting. For example, the barefooted woman in Gupta's photograph stands on tiptoes, and she exposes her strong arms and shoulders; and a brightly painted stage set replaces the beautifully detailed, but gloomy room in Millais's painting. This photograph exemplifies the aspiration to a better life for queer people in India that motivated the entire series.

Love Undetectable

The ongoing series of photographs, *Love Undetectable* (begun 2009) is much more loosely structured than other recent projects. In both *Mr. Malhotra's Party* and *The New Pre-Raphaelites*, Gupta presents his subject matter--whether confident portraits or fanciful recreations of Victorian imagery--in relatively consistent ways throughout the series. Moreover, although multi-layered in their meanings, the significant themes of these series can be discovered by viewers comparatively easily.

On first inspection, however, *Love Undetectable* seems to defy any clear narrative interpretation. The project consists of a heterogeneous collection of diverse images, including facial portraits, glimpses of body parts of single individuals and couples (both nude and clothed), scenes of gay male and lesbian couples in a variety of interior and exterior settings, among other components.

But the initial problem with detecting the intent of the series ultimately enables the viewer to develop a more profound understanding of the subject indicated in the title. Love may seem undetectable to those

who are unaware of it and who do not wish to acknowledge it. Yet love is there to be detected by those who are willing to open themselves to it.

As one looks longer at the series, one realizes that, although it is not tied together by consistent treatment of subject, it is unified by the soft, gentle mood pervading all the images. Such formal elements as soft lighting, muted colors, and slightly "out-of-focus" presentation contribute to the lyrical romanticism that pervades the series.

In interviews, Gupta has explained that he intended the title word "undetectable" to have multiple connotations. Most obviously, this word acknowledges the medical status of individuals who achieve virtually "undetectable" viral loads through medical treatment. However, this term also references the difficulty that Gupta and many other HIV-positive individuals have in detecting love.

In a broader sense, Gupta also wants the title to highlight the reluctance of society to acknowledge the importance of love in all queer lives. Thus, he has expressed his concern that media discussion of the repeal of Section 377 encompassed sociology, law, and sex, but entirely ignored the emotional experiences of queer people. He has stated, "As people, our lives have a significant emotional aspect too, and the pictures brought that to the fore. So it's not only about sex between same-sex [couples]; the love between same-sex [couples] is never discussed."

The viewer's initial inability to perceive the theme replicates the difficult experience that Gupta has had in coming to terms with the reality and power of romantic love in his own life after his diagnosis with HIV. The recognition of the allure of romance that develops as one looks at the series enables the viewer to appreciate the importance of love in his or her own life.

Untitled no. 5 can be used to exemplify the impact of the series. In this photograph, we view from backside the reclining figure of a young man, as he gazes out at a tranquil grassy area, surrounded by houses. Because we see Gupta embracing the same man in another image, we can imagine he is someone with whom the artist is deeply involved. In the deceptively simple but deeply poetic *No. 5*, the viewer is privileged to assume the position of Gupta, as he gazes at this man with the eyes of love.

Conclusions

From the beginning of his career in the arts, Gupta repudiated the conventional representation of homosexuals as "perverted objects, fixated with the penis" and sought to depict gay men in relationship to their diverse life experiences. Although often autobiographical in origin, his pieces resonate with a wide range of viewers because they are structured in an open-ended fashion.

In the *Trespass* series, *Homelands*, and numerous other projects, he has explored the complex interactions of sexuality with many other personal and communal identity factors, including race, social class, geographic location, and health status. A desire to counter the dearth of images of minority gay men and also to promote queer culture in India motivated Gupta to create *Exiles*, a series which gave visibility to individuals who had too long seemed invisible.

Since his return to India in 2004, Gupta's art has evolved in new directions, and he has explored new themes. While most of his work prior to 2004 was focused primarily upon gay men, he has broadened his subject matter, and he has visualized the experiences of lesbians and transgender individuals in many projects. In *A Time to Love* and *Imagining Childhood*, he called attention to the lives of children living with HIV/AIDS, and he has begun a project on queer childhoods.

Gupta has retained his commitment to blurring cultural, racial, and sexual boundaries and to promoting political causes through subtle and poetic (rather than didactic) imagery. Thus, for example, he appropriated compositions devised by nineteenth-century British artists for the powerful and sensual

images of South Asian queers in *The New Pre-Raphaelites*, which was intended to support the fight against Section 377.

In such works as *Love and Light* and *Love Undetectable*, Gupta celebrates romantic love with a lyrical tenderness not previously seen in his work.

An artist at the height of his powers, Gupta continues to evolve and to offer rich commentaries on a diverse range of queer experience.

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