

Sunil Gupta, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, November 25, 2005-April 23, 2006

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Sunil Gupta

Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography
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Sunil Gupta is a storyteller. In decided contrast to Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," Gupta opts to engage the viewer with photographs that act as a series of narrative spaces – they are clues to moments *in* time as opposed to ruptures of time – suggesting a sense that something is continuing beyond the mere borders of the image. This interplay draws the viewer's attention to Gupta's deftly interwoven preoccupations with identity, location, memory, relationships, and sexuality.

A frequent component of Gupta's work is the incorporation of text – in the form of either an artist's statement or captions written as first-person accounts in which he candidly relates a sometimes-thorny relationship with his parents. The experience is performed as a conversation, in which the viewer gains privileged access to seemingly straightforward documentary images by having them deciphered by the artist.

Gupta was born in India and immigrated with his family to Canada in the late 1960s, settling in Montreal. He studied photography in New York and, following graduate work in the U.K., lived a nomadic existence in Europe and North America as he tried to establish his practice as a photographer. After a few failed attempts, he relocated to London, where he lives today. His alternating feelings of attachment to and alienation from the places that he has called home over periods of time and the pull of family history – manifested in his thoughts about India and his knowing it for himself – are intermingled in his work as the sites/sights of investigation of his photographs. He situates himself in relation to these locations as a perpetual outsider and, as a result, refers often to the concept of *here* as existing largely in his own mind. His photographs explore this state of being by metaphorically negotiating large distances of time and space through juxtapositions, reuse of historical photographs, and other associations among personally significant images.

Using this same forthright approach, Gupta is frank about his diagnosis in 1995 as HIV positive. With the photographic series *From Here to Eternity* (1999), Gupta engaged with his HIV status and its impact on his sense of identity by incorporating parallel narratives in his photographs, evidenced through views of South London, where he lives, and self-portraits depicting his own ageing body and the ever-present realities of living with illness. Following on the heels of this project, he received an academic grant that enabled him to undertake an extended photo essay composed of twenty large-scale colour ink-jet prints entitled *Homelands* (2001–03). The work was first exhibited in London and New York in 2001, and was recently presented at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography along with an earlier body of work titled *Social Security* (1988).

Travelling to India to photograph sites for *Homelands* posed health risks to Gupta's compromised immune system, prompting those close to him to ask why he couldn't visit virtually or use other means to create images. The series proved to be as much about making the journey as it was about the resulting photographs. They speak to an underlying need for a pilgrimage – to seek out, reconnect, embody, and document old family haunts and familiar spaces that nonetheless have changed over time.

Gupta positions the topic of HIV/AIDS in the photographs through dichotomies such as in *South Delhi, India/Act Up, Washington*, which couples the image of a cyclist on a quiet street passing by a sign that spells out in English, "HIV/AIDS is Fatal, Know AIDS to avoid it" with a photograph of *ACT UP!* protesters on top of a building in Washington. Gupta himself operates in the photographs as subject – at times clearly present within the picture



Queens, New York/Lambeth, London, from the series *Homelands* 2001-2003
ink jet print, 76.2 x 149.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist

plane or visible as a shadow on the landscape or a reflection in the window. In works such as *Mundia Pamar, Uttar/Upper East Side, New York*, the exterior scene below is depicted through an interior space, underscoring the idea that the viewer looks through the eyes/lens of the photographer. Still other images evoke the feeling of being in one place and being drawn inexplicably to the memory of another, such as in *Chor Minar Hauz Khas, Delhi/Montreal*, two photographs that sharply contrast the warm sun of one locale against the scene of a grocery-laden passer-by walking on a snowy street far below the windows of an apartment. The bittersweet pleasure of reverie is an undercurrent in *Homelands*, given shape in understated but interconnected sensibilities in works such as *Constitution House, New Delhi/Downtown Montreal*, marrying the image of a brightly coloured maple leaf on the ground beside the photographer's sandaled feet with the portrait of a small laughing child, visibly enchanted by the breeze in the trees.

Social Security is a poignant farewell dedicated to Gupta's father. Using old family photographs, snapshots, and other documentary objects presented as large chromogenic prints accompanied by texts, Gupta recounts the story of his parents' marriage, immigration to Canada, and life together as a family, up to and including his father's death. The texts that caption each image are written from both Gupta's perspective and his mother's, giving the viewer the feeling of poring over a family album with the help of those with intimate knowledge of the events. The carefully chosen words not only are illustrative, but, more importantly, call into question what appears to transpire in some of the photographs. *Shalini and Larry Sharing a Laugh*, for example, shows Gupta's sister and her future husband enjoying each other's company, and yet the caption in the mother's voice points to difficulties ahead – "He wasn't the kind of boy we had hoped she would marry." *Social Security* also touches upon Gupta's parents' feelings concerning his sexuality. In a photograph reminiscent of a travel snapshot, Gupta holds hands with his partner, Steve. The accompanying words in his mother's voice belie her disapproval: "Next time I go to India I must find you a wife." The contradictions between image and text give the viewer deeper insight into the storyline – skilfully bringing to light the idea that things are never what they seem. Images have a context not only as a result of their conception, but as our perceptions change over the course of time and new threads are connected to the bigger picture.

Both *Homelands* and *Social Security* offer the viewer a singular opportunity to delve into Gupta's discerning and honest meditations on the circumstances that have touched his life and the record of experience – his past and present, his relationships with his family, his struggles to find a place of belonging while nevertheless maintaining the distance required by the critical observer. By design, Gupta's is a solitary pursuit wedded to a need to reach out and to share contact. It is an intensely moving experience because the oppressive inevitability of time cloaks both the photographs and the photographer's words. This inescapability inhabits the space as strongly as any of the images.

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