

'New York was the first place I'd seen public gay life in the daytime'



First person
Sunil Gupta

Photographer and activist Sunil Gupta was born in Delhi, India, in 1953 and lives and works in London. A new exhibition of his work at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 'Life with a Camera, 1970 – Now', brings together more than 130 images that explore ongoing themes in his work of queer identity, protest and joy.

How I approach an exhibition largely depends on the curator – there's a negotiation between us. There's no definitive story, but there are particular pictures I'm keen to include. At Kettle's Yard the work is presented chronologically across different decades. Its origins lie in the Delhi neighbourhood I grew up in, which was next to a very well-known Mughal emperor's tomb. The location was very significant in my development and I keep going back to it. It's featured in an image in the book that accompanies the show – a black-and-white photograph of a man with his back to the camera, holding a cigarette, from the series *Towards an Indian Gay Image* (1982). It was still illegal to be gay in India, and so nobody wanted to be photographed.

Delhi is a very unresolved place for me. It's where I was until I was 15 and where I had an idyllic childhood, with the tomb as the playground. It's also where a lot of sex happened, but I'd never had a word for it; no one spoke about it. And so moving to Canada in 1969, a few months after Stonewall, was a revelation – I walked right into the first year of gay liberation in North America.

Montreal triggered my public role as a photographer, my activism. The *Friends & Lovers* (1970s) series was made around that time and was very foundational. I was studying at business school and teaching myself how to photograph; I was shooting our wonderful life as young gay people, the bars we went to, the marches, the myriad groups that sprang up. Suddenly, I had an audience.

My photography and activism has been pulled around by accidents of geography. I went to New York in 1976 to do an MBA, but I dropped out after doing some workshops at the New School. One of my teachers, Lisette Model, said I should do photography, and it's because of her classes that

I decided I would shoot the streets. The *Christopher Street* (1976) series came from that.

New York was the first place I'd seen public gay life in the daytime; it was a revelation to see so many men openly cruising each other. There was a kind of joyousness about it; people were in a good mood, they were promenading. It was perfect for photography because they were out there to see and be seen, and to create a kind of public space.

I first moved to London in 1977, and many remarkable things have happened to me here. In 1995 I was diagnosed HIV positive and there's a small body of work I made in 1999 called *From Here to Eternity*, which depicts my body alongside the façades of sex clubs in South London which used to be gay bars I visited. The most recent pictures in the exhibition are from the 2025 Trans+ Pride marches in London. I feel very strongly about trans rights, and I'm disappointed that a lot of cisgendered gay men and women are not supportive.

The marches were like reliving my youth; being out on the streets and coming together with a bunch of people in a haphazard, angry kind of way.

The series that really means a lot to me is *Exiles* (1986-87). I went back to Delhi and made a proper set of colour pictures about gay life there. I was trying to fill a gap: I'd done five years of art training in the UK and nobody had ever mentioned India or homosexuals. I thought it was my job to put them into the curriculum, into history. The series has been acquired by various museums including MoMA, New York, and so you could say that I've done my job, that I can retire now. Not that I think I ever will – you just keep going until you fall over.

● 'Sunil Gupta: Life with a Camera, 1970 – Now', Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 19 September to 31 January 2027. kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk, 50% off entry and 10% off in shop with National Art Pass

Interview by Chris Sharratt.



Sunil Gupta, *India Gate*, from *Exiles*, 1986-87