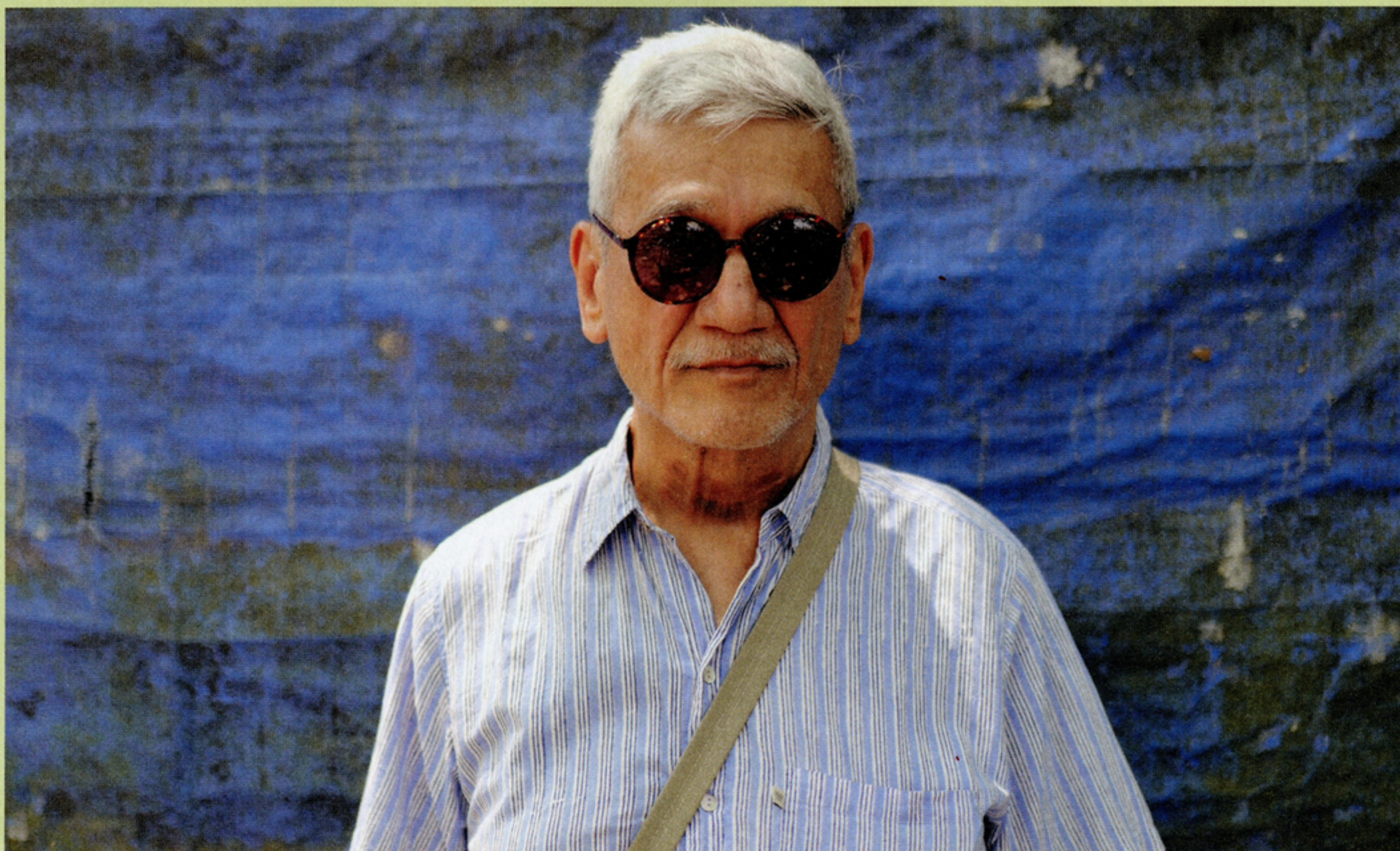




'WE WERE A RADICAL GENERATION'

Isabella Scott visits the London studio of groundbreaking photographer Sunil Gupta, to discuss a life spent documenting queer love and resistance

Sunil Gupta's studio is at the top of a Camberwell warehouse, a sun-struck room rimmed with windows and crowded with photographs. We sit at the kitchen table on a hot June afternoon, a rainbow-knitted tea cosy resting on a nearby counter. Now in his seventies, and belatedly regarded as an eminent photographer of queer life, Gupta lives and works with his partner and collaborator Charan Singh, and their photographs of queer lives and migrant communities hang side by side on the walls. For his survey show, 'Life with a Camera, 1970–Now', at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge he has returned to work from the past five decades, revisiting photographs made in Delhi, Montreal, New York and London that chart the fight for queer rights and the everyday textures of LGBTQ+ life.

Gupta's story begins in New Delhi, where he was born in 1953, and moves across continents. In 1969, his family emigrated to Montreal, where as a teenager he taught himself photography using the family camera. It was there as a student that he encountered the gay liberation movement and came out, finding in politics and local bars a sense of community he had never seen represented in images. 'My hobby suddenly had a purpose,' he recalls. He photographed friends, lovers, marches and façades of gay bars – what would become 'Friends and Lovers', a series of portraits made across the decade of his extended gay family. These pictures first appeared in *Gay-Zette*, a student newspaper and part of a DIY gay visual culture that Gupta helped to invent.

In the mid 1970s Gupta left Canada for New York, where he found his 'tribe' on Christopher Street. A gathering place for queer people, the street was home to the Stonewall Inn, a venue that became a landmark of the gay rights movement in ›

‘Christopher Street shows men striding past the camera in aviator sunglasses, cigarettes dangling below handlebar moustaches’

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Sunil Gupta, photographed by his partner and collaborator Charan Singh

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#22 from the series ‘Christopher Street’, 1976, by Gupta



› 1969, after a police raid sparked days of protest that helped launch the modern gay liberation movement. Here, Gupta cruised with his camera through a scene that was exuberant in the period before the devastation of AIDS. The resulting black-and-white series, ‘Christopher Street’ (1976), shows men striding past the camera in aviator sunglasses, fists bulging in jean pockets, cigarettes dangling below handlebar moustaches. The images are flirty and unguarded: men sauntering with confidence and ease, eyes skimming the crowd as Gupta catches them mid-glance. ‘Everybody seemed to be gay,’ Gupta recalls joyfully. ‘This was almost the era of songs like “It’s Raining Men”, and it felt like that: hundreds of handsome men streaming by.’

If Montreal and New York had felt expansive to Gupta, when he moved to London in the late 1970s he was in for a shock: ‘Nobody talked about homosexuality. It was very repressed,’ he says. The gap between his experience as a gay man and the silence of British art institutions sharpened his sense of mission. ‘I realised I needed to make these images of homosexuality and place them into art history so they couldn’t be ignored.’

In London, Gupta worked through another political crisis: Section 28, the 1988 legislation that banned ‘promoting’ homosexuality in schools, arrived in tandem with the AIDS epidemic and a wave of moral panic. He photographed protests from within the crowd, producing ‘“Pretended” Family Relationships’ (1988), a series that splices images of marches with staged portraits of gay couples and texts written by his then partner Stephen Dodd. In this period, Gupta stopped courting recognition from galleries on Cork Street, choosing instead to show work in town halls and community centres. ‘We were a radical generation – we turned our backs on galleries,’ he explains. ‘We were postcolonial, postmodern, post everything. I didn’t stop to think about who paid the rent.’

When Gupta received a diagnosis of HIV in 1995, he shifted

the camera onto his own body. In ‘From Here to Eternity’ (1999), the artist pairs self-portraits with images of gay nightclubs. ‘I photographed myself naked in the mirror. It was the first time my body was a subject and I was quite anxious about it. But it became a way to finally discuss my diagnosis in a more objective way, out there in pictures – and that was a revelation.’

Recognition, he says, only arrived in the past decade, as attitudes began to shift: ‘There was a resistance to “gay” being my lifelong subject. A lot of curators used to say, “When are you going to grow out of it?”, as if it was a kind of arrested development.’ Moving to the Camberwell studio in 2017 allowed him to consolidate a scattered archive, gathering negatives left in ex-boyfriends’ flats and storage boxes across cities.

Here, Gupta began rediscovering work he had not seen since shooting it, such as the Christopher Street images and ‘Exiles’ (1986–87), photographs of gay men at cruising sites in Delhi taken during the 1980s, against the backdrop of India’s colonial-era sodomy laws. Soon after, he uploaded the photographs to a DIY website, where the publisher Stanley/Barker stumbled upon his work, called him, and proposed a book. That publication, *Christopher Street, 1976*, marked a turning point: gallery representation and exhibitions followed, the survey at Kettle’s Yard the most comprehensive yet.

In June, Gupta was awarded an MBE for Services to Art and to the LGBTQ+ Communities – a state honour that recognises, somewhat incongruously, decades of work made in defiance of state sanctioned homophobia. What matters to him is that his images are widely seen. ‘I just made things in the 80s and 90s,’ he says, ‘but nobody really wanted them. Now they’ve found their place.’

Izabella Scott is the author of The Bed Trick (Atlantic Books)

● **Sunil Gupta: Life with a Camera, 1970 – Now Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, 19 Sep to 31 Jan 2027**