


SUNIL GUPTA

Ksenia M. Soboleva, Queer Cruising in a Time Capsule,
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Queer Cruising in a Time Capsule

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The 1970s in the United States was a decade marked by conflict: the Vietnam War, the race riots, the debates over women's equality, not to mention inflation and unemployment. Yet for some groups the decade was also marked by sexual liberation, as the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (incited by black drag queens, not white gay men) aimed to put an end to police brutality against queer people. For the first time in history, many felt that they no longer needed to hide their sexual identity, and after embodying the understanding that homosexuality was - in the words of Eve Sedgwick - constituted as secrecy, this newfound freedom held a utopian promise of endless possibility. Public spaces became sites of queer cruising to an unprecedented degree, with the Chelsea piers being one of the favorite destinations, and Christopher Street being another. Situated in the heart of the West Village, and home to the Stonewall Inn, gay men frequented the street to pick up partners, to be seen, or simply to watch. Among these men was the London-based photographer Sunil Gupta, whose exhibition *Christopher Street*, currently on view at the Hales Gallery in New York, is a testament to the vitality and ardor of the period.

Born in India in 1953, Gupta spent his college years in Canada, and then moved to New York in 1976 to pursue an MBA in finance. New York was unlike anything Gupta had experienced as a gay man before. The uninhibited public manifestation of sexual identity provided a major source of inspiration for the artist, and he turned to photography as an instrument of investigation into this lived experience. As the photography critic Philip Geffer has pointed out, the growing visibility of gay men in the early 1970s occurred simultaneously with the growing reputation of photography in the art world. Gupta quickly realized that finance was not where his passion lay, and dropped out to study photography at the New School. The illustrious street photographer Lisette Model, whose 1938 series *Promenade des Anglais* earned her critical recognition, would become one of his mentors there.

Christopher Street constitutes the first series of photographs Gupta made as a practicing artist in 1976, and a selection of sixteen silver gelatin prints from the series is installed at Hales Gallery.

The black and white images balance the fine line between street photography and portraiture; they are formal in their approach yet too intimate to be considered purely documentary. The influence of Lisette Model is immediately palpable, but while Model's subjects usually appear quite static, lounging on the boardwalk or relaxing in a café, Gupta's subjects are in constant motion. Indeed, captured in these photographs are people passing by Gupta on Christopher Street; some completely unaware of his presence, others locking eyes with the camera with scepticism or amusement. The majority of the subjects are men that Gupta desired and, as the artist has noted himself, he used the camera as a tool for cruising. Catching and parting glances, many of the men showcase the "castro clone" look popular with the gay community at the time, sporting leather gear, denim jackets and full mustaches, while others embody a quieter look.

I recommend circling the gallery at least twice, letting one's eye travel over the many faces it encounters, and then encountering them again, and again. Imagine that this is what Christopher Street in the 70s looked like. Imagine intimately knowing this neighborhood and its queer community. Then imagine the heartbreak, and catastrophic loss the AIDS crisis brought with it. Despite their dynamism, there is a bleaker side to these images as well, as this utopian moment in time came to an end only a few years after Gupta shot his *Christopher Street* series. When the AIDS crisis hit the United States, thousands of men died due to government neglect and homophobia. Conservative politicians used the epidemic as an excuse to put confinements on sexual freedom, closing the popular bath houses and porn theaters, and policing public cruising grounds. The carefree sensibility captured in *Christopher Street* would never be seen again. Thus, Gupta's photographs are not simply snapshots documenting queer history; they are time capsules in the truest sense of the word, preserving a zeitgeist that no longer exists today as contemporary queer life is still marked by the legacy of the AIDS crisis.

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