

Art Journal

SUNIL GUPTA

Natasha Bissonauth, A Camping of Orientalism in Sunil Gupta's Sun City,
Art Journal, Winter 2019



Sunil Gupta, Connaught Place, 1987 (detail)

In 2010, the Centre Pompidou commissioned Sunil Gupta's *Sun City* for its blockbuster survey of contemporary Indian art, *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* (2011). Bearing in mind the show's curatorial mandate, which aimed to foster dialogue between Indian and French artists, Gupta based his photo series in part on Chris Marker's experimental film *La Jetée* (1962). In this twenty-eight-minute short film of photo stills, Marker's main character is a prisoner recruited into a time-travel experiment, during which he revisits childhood memories and stories of lost love from his adolescence. He frets in particular over a memory of a woman on the observation platform at Orly Airport, a memory that succeeds another memory, his witnessing of the mysterious death of an unknown man. Yet, when the man tragically dies in the end, it becomes clear to the viewer that the death scene witnessed by the main character prior to his vision of the woman at Orly was in fact a scene of his own death—a scene from the future, haunting him all this time. Curiously, this “end” scene in *La Jetée* is also where Marker's film begins, activating an elliptical loop in the film. In *Sun City*, Gupta retains

the film's formal structure and makes this evident at the Pompidou by installing the photo series on all four walls of a single gallery room, forming an uninterrupted loop. *Sun City* also compares to *La Jetée* in terms of composition, including a death scene and a scene of embracing lovers—both of which are sited at Orly. And, as in *La Jetée*, where Gupta's narrative begins and ends remains intentionally ambiguous.

While *La Jetée* and *Sun City* parallel one another in significant ways, their points of contrast are even more illuminating. First, rather than feature an incarcerated white man, Gupta casts his main character as a gay Indian immigrant who is new to Paris. Second, instead of a series of high-contrast black-and-white photographs set in an existentially grim, postapocalyptic Paris, Gupta situates his series in a vibrant, Orientalized Parisian bathhouse named *Sun City*, which he dramatizes through overemphasized bright lighting. Furthermore, Gupta's main character does not time travel between frames but shuttles between different kinds of spaces. On the one

hand, *Sun City* features hedonistic, kitschy bathhouse scenes; on the other hand, scenes set in Paris picture the routines of a more homonormative relationship:¹ scenes of the main character and an older French man reading at the park, shopping in a department store, or resting together in their beautifully designed modern apartment. Incidentally, one of Gupta's last bathhouse scenes includes a group of men attentively watching a flat-screen television showing *La Jetée's* death scene. By directly citing Marker, Gupta reimagines *La Jetée's* narrative from a temporal to a spatial back-and-forth. This spatial reimagining is key. From this point of departure, the overemphasized Orientalized interior of the bathhouse, I develop my analytical intervention: a camping of Orientalism—a queer aesthetic analysis of Orientalist space that rethinks the relationship of race to sex as an underexamined colonial gaze vis-à-vis depictions of gay male desire.

While reviews of Paris-Delhi-Bombay criticized the show's exoticized framing of contemporary Indian art's place in globalized circuits of art, the explicitly Orientalized details of *Sun City* have gone oddly unseen. Reactions in the two major sites of the series' reception - Paris, and New Delhi in 2012 - have revolved around the main character's newfound sexual liberation and have evaded the spatial power dynamics in which this desire plays out. *Sun City* has been received as an open ended narrative that comments on the risks of homonormative love set against the allures, and dangers, of the bathhouse—a space that has become a symbolic backdrop for the threat of HIV/AIDS. Although this threat of infection resonates for an artist like Gupta, who has been HIV-positive for over twenty years, reading these campy bathhouse images exclusively as a celebration of sexual freedom overlooks how Gupta's camp Orientalism makes evident the racial codification of gay male desire. This limited framing that centers gay subjectivity at the expense of its colonial formations and residues sets up a problematic that I address. Through a formal analysis of *Sun City* I center how a highly Orientalized setting inhabits and recontextualizes a set of postures available in the history of gay erotica.

By emphasizing exaggerated aspects of bathhouse scenes (color, lighting, stage-like setup, and pose), the artifice of idealized gay male sexual beauty, and the display of self-conscious (fake and contrived, not overt) eroticism, I outline the enactment of camp in the series. Further, by situating poses in intertextual dialogue with homoerotic photography by George Platt Lynes and Wilhelm von Gloeden,² in the highly Orientalized context of the bathhouse, I reimagine Gupta's photo series as an exercise in the camping of Orientalism. I turn a set of photographs

of gay male public spaces into a diagnosis of the racial character of desire by highlighting the protagonist's failure to perform "bathhouse," or rather his overperformance of asexuality and undesirability. Ultimately, I make a case for the camping of Orientalism as an intervening racialized gaze in queer art history. Gupta's citational play recontextualizes posturing figures in order to decode and potentially diffuse the Orientalist spectacle of gay desire. In this way, my project expands the uses of an aesthetic sensibility like camp beyond the purview of gender and sexuality to assess racialized dynamics of desire. If the colonial residues of queer desire often go unseen, *Sun City's* chosen setting for its protagonist's overperformance of asexuality and undesirability animates what these residues might look like; and in mobilizing a camp aesthetic to do so, their upending possibility becomes visible in their irreverence.

I begin this article by examining *Exiles* (1986), Gupta's iconic photo series from his time in London during the Black Arts Movement, to trace the longue durée of Gupta's preoccupations with identity politics through underexamined playful form. After outlining *Exiles's* production and reception in the 1980s, I assess its inaugural exhibition in India in 2004—as LGBTQI advocacy work was gaining political ground since the turn of the millennium in South Asia. *Exiles's* exhibition in India would also instigate Gupta's return to New Delhi and his consequent entrée into the Indian art world. At this point, I assess *Sun City's* camping of Orientalism. I conclude by evidencing the prescriptive confines of art market forces that police what cultural difference should look like.

Race, Sexuality, and Playful Form: Preceding Preoccupations

Since the inception of his photographic career, Sunil Gupta has had an eye for the politics of identity. Importantly, he has also had an eye for playful form, though his career has not been historicized this way. Born in New Delhi in 1953, he spent his formative adolescent years in Montreal and moved to London in 1979 to pursue photography. Having had some training at the New School in New York City, Gupta continued his art education at Farnham College and the Royal College of Art. Gupta's time and training in London overlapped with what was emerging as the Black Arts Movement, and he would become a leading figure in black British photography. This first generation of Afro-Asian photographers in London was part of a critical mass of activist art practitioners who conceived of "Black" as a political category invested in challenging the white hegemony of the British art

world. The Black Arts Movement in the United Kingdom represents an important juncture in art history that interpreted blackness as an ideological intervention and a political category beyond essentialist characterizations of race and aimed at engendering a new sense of community in art making based on a shared sense of historical colonial oppression. Thus, artists such as Mona Hatoum and Rasheed Araeen (who are Lebanese-Palestinian and Pakistani, respectively), alongside

Isaac Julien and Eddie Chambers (both of Afro-Caribbean descent), made art in association with the main tenets of the Black Arts Movement.

Gupta's practice is firmly located in the emergence of black British photography. His practice has been committed to decoding and recoding documentary photography as a way of calling out the medium for objectifying minoritarian lives, especially the lives of those at the intersections of race and sexuality. *Exiles*, a series of twelve color, snapshot-like documentary-style photographs, is arguably Gupta's most notable series from his time in London. Yet the most crucial and underexamined aspect of *Exiles* is that the series is, in fact, staged. *Exiles* is not a documentary of gay Indians per se but a parody of documentary—a staged series that deploys artifice in order to communicate the genre's limitations, in this case around capturing censored gay publics.

Exiles is composed of twelve C-print images staged as though they were documentary stills. Similar to those in a makeshift family album, the photographs are not standardized sizes; most are formatted as 19-by-19-inch squares, but others are rectangular (e.g., 15 by 23 inches). They often hang sequentially in a row, yet they do not follow a particular order, nor do they all need to be hung together. Formally, though, *Exiles* comprises staged photos of gay men in New Delhi (the men are known to the artist, but their identities remain intentionally anonymous), and all images are accompanied by text. At first glance, *Exiles* reads as a series of documentary photographs portraying gay Indian men inhabiting public and private spaces. Commissioned by the Photographers' Gallery for its exhibition *The Body Politic: Re-Presentations of Sexuality* (1987), Gupta traveled from London to New Delhi, his hometown, hoping to produce a visibility project of Indian gay male communities. Given the organizing role of identity in art historical discourse during the 1980s, these initial intentions are not surprising. However, Gupta's encounters in New Delhi would inevitably shift his documentary goals. When he questioned men about gay life in India, he was immediately and consistently confronted with the censoring forces of Section 377 of

the Indian Penal Code, the colonial-era antisodomy law exploited by law enforcement to censor queer publics. Gupta quickly understood that *Exiles* would have to ensure his participants' anonymity. As a result, he created a series of staged, snapshot-like photographs that do not document reality but mediate it. That is, rather than spy on unsuspecting men in public, Gupta found a cast of people who were willing to pose in ways that ordinarily go unseen. Furthermore, he set his pictures around major landmarks, such as Humayun's Tomb, Jama Masjid, Lodhi Gardens, and India Gate, to intentionally reimagine a queer occupation of sites associated with Indian national history. As a staged series, *Exiles* deploys artifice to convey documentary photography's limitations, in this case around capturing censored public gay visibility.

Exiles has been received mostly as an ethnographic document of gay men in India rather than a photo series that plays with form—one that relies on artifice to enact how such gay public gestures are, in reality, quite pervasive but too fleeting to be recorded. While *Exiles* certainly confirms the existence of gay male desire, its staged quality elucidates the challenges of recording queer counterpublics in New Delhi in the 1980s, given the censoring realities of Section 377. Thus, rather than as a visibility project emerging within the rise of identity art, I value *Exiles* for how it develops a visual language around documenting invisibility. Bracketing the impulse to create alternative bodies of work that engender new knowledge from the margins and other ways of seeing, I instead read *Exiles* as an overlooked exercise in documentary parody that ultimately enacts the visual logics of that which we do not and cannot see. For example, in *Connaught Place*, from *Exiles*, a young man sits on a park bench with his arms crossed. He looks toward the center of the frame, which leads the viewer to another seated figure in the background, the object of his unassuming gaze (see page 98). Across a patch of green, the man in the background returns the glance over his shoulder. Gupta couples this image of stolen glimpses between two men seated on park benches with a text that reads, "This operates like a pick-up joint. People don't want to talk, they just want to get it off"—outing a well-known, central part of New Delhi as a furtive hot spot for gay solicitation. While such cruising gestures are commonly shared between men desiring men in the city, they are forced under the public radar. For this reason, Gupta's carefully crafted scene is not available to the documentary eye and must rely on staging to "document" unseen realities. *Connaught Place* animates fleeting aspects of the sociality of sexuality.

In another photograph, text and image again make evident and legible queer interactions in public that would

otherwise go unseen. Amid a crowd of men loitering around Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India and one of the oldest, Gupta focuses on two men sitting at the center of the frame, whose tender and familiar embrace tests the boundaries between homosocial belonging and homoerotic desire. In the foreground, a young man in profile smokes a cigarette as he gazes beyond the photographic frame. Another man, in a purple, checkered shirt, is also captured in profile, his face slightly obscured as he looks over to the seated men in the background. These two standing men in the foreground form a framing device around the image's central embracing couple, directing the viewer's gaze toward them. The text betrays the illicit undertones of the embrace and reorients this site's association from prayer toward public promiscuousness; it reads: "I love this part of town. It's got such character and you can have sex just walking in the crowd." The subversive power of text and image is twofold. First, this juxtaposition taps into a gay Indian common knowledge about "this part of town" and communes directly with underground knowledge and experiences about the underlying sexual politics of certain settings. Moreover, the relationship between image and text reimagines religious sites as brimming with discreet gay encounters. Indeed, *Exiles*'s text and image relations engender intimacies between site and citation, not only casting a lens on the queer dimensions of known landmarks (which lie just beneath the surface) but also queering the landscape of the nation's capital, despite the highly censored nature of such realities.

These two examples in *Exiles* deploy staging in documentary as a way to challenge reigning interpretations of place and their conventionally accepted significance. Mimicking the documentary form, the formal richness of these shots exposes the productive differences between merely recording one's surroundings and creating a more incisive representation of them. In this way, *Exiles* consists of documentary photographs that parody the genre of documentary. Yet these elements of *Exiles* have not been sufficiently teased out in art historical analysis; the series was received predominantly as issue-based photography rather than as a clever use of artifice that sheds light on the limits of such projects, and its formal wit went unremarked in reviews of *The Body Politic*. Instead, Gupta's series was pigeonholed as an ethnic aside within the representation of sexuality.

As Gupta's staged photography gives form to the regulatory forces that censor queer brown desire, *Sun City* pushes the boundaries of that deployed artifice by incorporating parodic posturing and camp spatial dynamics. Created approximately twenty-five years apart,

Exiles and *Sun City* are motivated by different (albeit related) sociopolitical moments: *Exiles* represents an iconic photo series created during Gupta's formative years in London and in the Black Arts Movement, whereas *Sun City* (2010) emerged out of the queer political moment that framed his return to New Delhi (2005–13). Gupta did not become active in the Indian art scene until 2004, when he exhibited in India for the first time and decided to move back to New Delhi. Thus he entered the contemporary Indian art scene in the twenty-first century, at the age of fifty-one, as a foreigner categorically invested in queer Indian representation. Gupta's decision to show in India and eventually move back there was undoubtedly inspired by the increased attention LGBTQI activist communities were dedicating to advocacy, especially around repealing Section 377. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as public discourse became increasingly punctuated by sexuality, a series of homophobic events—including those known as the "Lucknow Four" and the "Pushkin Affair" were sensationalized by the media and generated protests that consequently garnered their own media coverage. This new attention marked a significant shift for LGBTQI visibility, fostering an unprecedented public debate and an environment that was more open to the display of queer representation. In 2004, in a solo exhibition at the India Habitat Centre explicitly about queer representation, Gupta exhibited *Exiles* in India for the first time. Gupta therein encountered in New Delhi a new generation that was eager for change, and, at least among progressive circles in New Delhi, *Exiles* was positively received—a stark contrast to his experiences shooting *Exiles* in 1986. Although the show lasted only ten days, it transformed the exhibition space into a makeshift gathering place for community building and creative action for Indian LGBTQI politics.

The success of the show as a scene-making platform contributed to Gupta's return to New Delhi, and for the next eight years he created new work alongside a burgeoning activist movement committed to queer visual politics in India. In fact, with the successful reception of *Exiles* in 2004 and the production of *Sun City* in 2010, Gupta has since developed a reputation as the most eminent contemporary queer artist tied to South Asia. Yet his endeavors in the region are not without precedent. In the 1980s, prior to *Exiles* (but not prior to Gupta producing queer imagery, which began in the 1970s), Indian modernist painter Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003) began making work with explicitly homoerotic content. This shift in imagery followed a visit to London in the late 1970s, after Khakhar came out of the closet and began exploring "practices of sex, intimacy, meaning, and secrecy associated with same-sex love as a social

phenomenon and form of desire.” In his painting *Two Men in Benares* (1982), two naked men caress each other tenderly behind a gray wall. And although they appear hidden in a corner, framed only by their shadows, their penises are visibly aroused. In a scene composed mostly of dark browns and grays, peppered by multicolored domes, a cast of characters goes about its daily routines: beggars beg, vendors sell their goods, and devotees pray. Crucially, Khakhar offers a window into a scene of religious worship, which he imbues with homoerotic possibility. In the painting’s middle ground Khakhar depicts a man prostrating before a lingam—the aniconic representation of the Hindu god Shiva that also parallels as his sacred phallus. *Two Men in Benares* reimagines communal space through illicit sexual desire, and Khakhar’s paintings on homosexuality “critique the conditions of same-sex desire in contemporary India, in which practices of secrecy, and . . . falsehood are required.” This logic (around secrecy within the urban space, or the open secret) resonates with *Exiles*, not only vis-à-vis its preservation of anonymity but also in the way Gupta’s series inflects familiar urban settings with gay desire. As such, Khakhar represents an important precedent to *Exiles*’s imbricating of sexuality, secrecy, and the urban space.

Stylistically diverse and a generation apart, Khakhar and Gupta compare as artists whose representations disrupt and nuance white, Eurocentric imaginings of queerness. However, *Exiles* does not speak only to an Indian idiom, and its picturing of racialized sexual desire is distinctly legible through a diasporic lens. As a gay Indian man living in London in the 1980s, Gupta often felt indirect pressure from the gay mainstream community to forsake his so-called cultural baggage. He notes, “wherever we lived (in London), we were cut off from India and there was an overwhelming, deeply frustrated desire to claim some part of it for ourselves.” Thus, although *Exiles* reads as a portrayal of gay Indian men, Gupta’s vision is inspired by autobiographical, transnational feelings of placelessness. In this way, *Exiles* generates a palpable connection between the artist’s lived experience in London as a gay man of color and gay visibility in New Delhi. To be clear, Gupta does not draw facile parallels between London and New Delhi; rather, I read his intervention as animating intersections between sexuality and the history of empire along a transnational axis. Needless to say, black LGBTQI communities in London and the gay population in New Delhi are differently conditioned in innumerable ways, with diverging relationships to access, especially with regard to public space and notions of collectivity. However, *Exiles* conceives a shared affective sense of not belonging between two communities in which Gupta finds queer kinship. In *Hauz Khas* from *Exiles*,

the photograph’s accompanying caption summarizes the sitter’s personal thoughts: “It must be marvellous for you in the West with all your bars, clubs, gay liberation and all that.” From Gupta’s black British perspective, the caption is ironic and functions to illuminate misperceptions about East, West, and sexual freedom. Within a queer-of-color framework, Gupta’s experiences of mainstream gay establishments in the United Kingdom have been stifling in their exclusionary whiteness. Arguably, the series speaks to a kinship perhaps as yet unrecognized among those who struggle—albeit in differently textured ways across geographic borders—with the impossibility of being simultaneously Indian and a sexual minority.

Before delving into *Sun City*, it is important to emphasize that Gupta’s protagonist is an immigrant who roams the streets and bathhouse corridors of Paris, and a particular image in the series emphasizes his alien status. In the tightly framed shot, Gupta’s main character is in a park reading Victor Hugo. He turns to his lover, seeking help with translation, but finds him napping, and an expressive look of confusion crosses his features. It is a scene that is misaligned with assimilative pressures imposed on new immigrants. Arguably, *Sun City*’s bathhouse scenes are more alluring for the protagonist, as a site of sexual democracy where everyone ostensibly “speaks the same language”; however, Gupta’s chosen setting is especially othering because of its highly Orientalized interior. Thus, as I analyze *Sun City*’s camping of Orientalism that rethinks the role of race in representations of sexual desire, I ground my analysis in a queer diasporic positionality.

Sun City’s Camping of Orientalism

Although Paris-Delhi-Bombay’s curators, Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau, aimed for an unprecedented collaboration between Indian and French artists, they manifested instead a familiarly unidirectional dialogue that, according to one critic, “re-performed outdated and Western-centric categorizations of West and non-West.” Despite an inventory of precedents alongside cotemporal projects, the exhibition produced a basic guide to India, reifying France’s imaginary of India as a mysterious and unknown place. Not surprisingly, several reviews criticized the sprawling exhibition as a “behind the curve,” ethnographic, and unoriginal survey of contemporary Indian art. Furthermore, although the exhibition’s encyclopedic catalog includes essays by respected scholars of modern and contemporary Indian art, including Geeta Kapur, Deepak Ananth, Gayatri Sinha, Johan Pijnappel, Nancy Adajania, and Kavita Singh, the French curators make a problematic case for renewing a sense of exoticism, emphasizing harmony in difference. Duplaix’s essay

“Who’s Afraid of Exoticism?” misinterprets “exotic” as merely signifying “unfamiliar” and repurposes the infamous “-ism” by depoliticizing it. She suggests that in an increasingly globalized world, rethinking the term incites new modalities toward an aesthetics of diversity—a logic that naively discounts the power dynamics and processes of alienation embedded in encounters with the foreign. Considering these essentializing frameworks, it becomes clearer how the glaringly obvious details of Sun City’s Orientalized decor—never mind its camp upending—have gone unseen.

Interestingly, the series’ 2012 reception in New Delhi also sidelined a critical analysis of Sun City’s chosen setting, albeit for different reasons. Crucially, Gupta created the series in the wake of the repeal of Section 377 on July 2, 2009. The New Delhi High Court thereby marked Indian LGBTIQ history, and Sun City was received by a community still elated over the legal decision. This is the context that informs Gupta’s aesthetic labor for the show in Paris. This is also the context that overshadows the formal nuances of the series. In 2012, the Alliance Française opened Sun City in New Delhi, but bullish Hindu fundamentalists, offended by the photos, forced a shutdown by police. In response, outraged activists, members of Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) and Nigah, in particular, berated the Alliance Française for abandoning its invited artist and for conceding to outlaw communal pressures. Because Sun City was censored for its sexual content, little attention was paid to the series’ intersections with race and diaspora, let alone to its aesthetic interventions. What is more, the bathhouse acquired a geopolitical charge that perpetuated a simple dichotomy between places like Paris as open and places like New Delhi as not. However, in the context of the rapid globalization of gay culture in the age of pinkwashing, a conventional and unquestioned narrative that takes majoritarian queer culture as the point of origin and minoritarian culture as a target of discursive exchange is dangerously reductive. Sun City’s reception thus too narrowly focused on a narrative of sexual freedom, ignoring how the artist manipulates a very specific kind of spatial setting in order to inflect that narrative and those freedoms. By assessing Sun City as a camping of Orientalism, I frame Gupta’s chosen site as a formal decision that critiques rather than celebrates gay desire in the bathhouse. In making such a decision, Gupta transforms this otherwise overdetermined encounter between subject and space into one with the capacity to undermine the power dynamics at play.

Sun City operates in relation to Orientalist tropes in academic painting to speak to the racial codification of desire in the bathhouse. Gupta visually quotes gay male

erotic photography via parodic inversion, inflecting queer discourse in art history with a racialized lens. Poses inhabited within the campy Orientalist setting of Sun City form a confluence of posture and place that I claim as a camping of Orientalism. Sun City’s ornate setting is spectacular in its Orientalist imagination, and yet Paris-Delhi-Bombay’s exhibition catalog describes the “Indian décor” of the bathhouse scenes as a familiar point of reference for the main character. This position is not surprising given Duplaix’s defense of exoticism. Needless to say, treating the bathhouse as an “orienting” space for Gupta’s protagonist seems ironic, if not in poor taste, given how its design engenders a cultural myth, conflating references vaguely associated with South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Like countless nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings, Sun City’s extravagant interior is a built-in contradiction. As a fantasy directly drawn from the history of Orientalist painting—and its discursive links to the justification of European colonialist expansion and domination—the series is familiar in its fetishizing echoes of the racialized other while also distanced from any realistic referent. Consider Jean-Léon Gérôme’s well-known *The Grand Bath at Bursa* (1885) and its chosen setting of an intimate space restricted to women. As a white man, Gérôme would not have had access to such homosocial realities, a hammam setting where women bathe and are bathed in the nude. Although *The Grand Bath at Bursa* is realistically painted, it is not observed from reality; it is a fabricated scene, a collage of fragments composed out of the artist’s imagination. Given its ethnographic detail and realist technique, however, the painting reads as documentary realism, a formal strategy that, fueled by presumptions around cultural inferiority, stereotypes the Orient as naturalistically picturesque and as a believable spectacle of indulgence and sensuality. Furthermore, as the positioning of the main nude figure—the soft profile of her face, her slightly arched back and contrapposto exaggerated by platform clogs to accentuate the view of her rear—stimulates colonial sexual fantasy, the presence and proximity of the black figure functions as a familiar trope that directs desire toward whiteness.

Sun City sets up a dreamscape comparable to *The Grand Bath at Bursa*; note how the multilevel marble platform, framing arches in the background, and pristine blue basin all parallel Gérôme’s composition. However, Gupta does not use documentary realism to mark and rationalize the space’s encoded power dynamics, as is done in the Orientalist painting. Instead, his bright, garish lighting exceeds the documentation of the bathhouse’s Orientalist quotations and, in so doing, accentuates the role of Orientalism in framing gay desire. In *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014) Joseph Allen Boone argues that, “whether feared or desired, the mere possibility of sexual

contact with or between men in the (“Orient”) has covertly underwritten much of the appeal and practice of the phenomenon we now call orientalism.” Thus, Boone identifies homoerotic desire as a subtext to the pursuit of empire, and as queer studies scholar Hiram Pérez remarks in *A Taste for Brown Bodies* (2015), gay modern sensibilities continue to romanticize this irretrievable past, impressing their fantasies upon the brown body today. Crucially, *Sun City*’s scenes do not take place in an artificially fabricated set but are situated in an actual Parisian bathhouse—one of the largest in Europe—operating under the same name Gupta has given his series. Boone’s and Pérez’s logic explains the appeal of a contemporary bathhouse that looks like *Sun City* while also exposing how queer cruising does not occur in a vacuum but is highly regulated and racially codified in its sexual consumption.

Gérôme’s and Gupta’s nudes compare in the way they both invite an objectifying gaze through staged setups. After all, scenes like those set in *Sun City* offer a perspective of the bathhouse completely unavailable to a regular (predominantly white) patron, since they are all too perfectly set up—a setup that recalls postures renowned in queer art history. And so, on the one hand, Gupta’s chosen space, which speaks to Orientalist traditions, uses camp lighting and colors to underscore the racial codification of gay male desire. Yet on the other hand, Gupta’s posing figures converse with gay photographic erotica that has come to frame the gay male body as an object of desire. Gupta uses bright lighting to intentionally amplify the space’s gaudiness—for example, the ornate benches and archways that frame the water basins, the pseudohistorical Indo-philic sculptural dolls found in the entrance, and the painted characters on locker doors that read as bad replicas of Indo-Islamic miniatures. Within this brightly lit kitschiness, Gupta inhabits a set of poses, resituated and thus recontextualized.

In the highly Orientalized setup, nudes in poses iconic within queer art history surround the main character, though Gupta’s most obvious visual quotation is centrally located. Positioned next to the seated protagonist in *Untitled #9*, a nude directly references *Nude Youth Sitting by the Sea* (1836), Hippolyte-Jean Flandrin’s famous neoclassical painting. An unidentified Greek sitting on a rock with his arms wrapped around his legs, Flandrin’s solitary nude subject rests his head on his knees, his eyes closed. While the painting has never explicitly denoted homoerotic intent, it has inspired several photographers invested in homoeroticism to quote the enigmatic pose. In 1900, Wilhelm von Gloeden produced a careful reenactment with biblical intonations, given his reference

to Cain in the title. A platinum print from Fred Holland Day’s late 1890s *Ebony and Ivory* series also interprets Flandrin’s pose, this time betraying the photographer’s taste for racial exoticism. As Day instructs the sitter, a black laborer under his employment, to imitate Flandrin’s pose and to sit with a Hellenistic war figurine made from white ivory, the figurine and the model echo each other as objects on display. Furthermore, they both rest on a leopard-skin rug, reinforcing the exoticization of erotica. Finally, Robert Mapplethorpe also produced a stylized black nude in his gelatin silver print titled *Ajitto*, from 1981. Although Mapplethorpe does not include an animal-skin rug, his black nude is also propped on a pedestal to emphasize his subject’s objecthood and to explicitly expose his penis. This image is part of Mapplethorpe’s infamous *Black Book* series, which was highly criticized for fetishizing blackness, specifically for perpetuating fantasies of the hypersexual black male.

Gupta participates in this set of reenactments, arguably fortifying the role of Flandrin’s iconography within queer art history; however, the gaudy Orientalist setting of *Sun City* makes camp of this lineage. It is useful to think through the work of several scholars writing on camp and parody here. Linda Hutcheon writes about parody as a process between texts that converses with but ultimately upends the coded discourse of one visual language for another. Parody often does so through an irreverent and ridiculing tone. Establishing difference at the heart of similarity, parody can also be mobilized to indicate power relationships between the various social agents wielding those texts. Moe Meyer defines camp as queer parody, as a queer aesthetic sensibility and cultural critique that, in its surplus of performativity, undermines the constructed quality of gender and sexuality. Thus working against Susan Sontag’s approach to camp stylistics, camp has the capacity to challenge the dominant order that is made concrete through majoritarian gestural codes. In José Muñoz’s words, camp “renders visible the mechanisms of privilege that (certain) subjectivities attempt to occlude.” Furthermore, as Pamela Robertson notes, camp often relies on stereotypes of racial difference to achieve comic effect. Indeed, both race and camp rely on artifice for legibility, and given Orientalism’s reliance on artifice, one can make productive connections to camp as well. And yet, whereas postcolonial and feminist critiques in art history deconstruct the Orient’s artifice—its imperial and gendered logics—I read the artifice of poses in *Sun City* as an illuminating rendering of camp Orientalism. Beyond mere quotation, *Sun City* repurposes and resituates poses that reveal not only the conventions dictating form, content, and style within queer photography but also how these conventions have incontrovertibly

centered whiteness in desire. In this way, the camping of Orientalism defuses the whiteness of camp, transforming it into a political conduit that is able to distance itself from oppressive stereotypes couched in a history of colonial objectification and sexual exoticism.

In another example, Gupta quotes a famous photograph from the 1940s by George Platt Lynes, a staging of a frank and sensuous scene on an unmade bed between two naked men. Gupta's reenactment of the classic black-and-white photograph is chromatically lit, and a bright blue hue dominates the composition. This loud blue echoes the light blue towels that many of the bathhouse characters wear throughout the series. If the bathhouse has been celebrated as a sexually democratic countersite of equal opportunity, then the blue towels perpetuate this ostensibly homogenizing experience. Yet the contrast between Gupta's two caressing figures is sharp and worth unpacking. Against a beautifully sculpted, hairless, white physique rests the protagonist's brown, excessively hairy, softer build. If images like Lynes's perpetuate idealized notions of gay male beauty, then Gupta's quoted counterpart troubles their universalist pretense. Moreover, Gupta's interracial scene makes room for the possibility of other aesthetics, across geographical borders, meant to feed gay male desire and to reanimate queer art history anew. In *Brown Boys and Rice Queens* (2013) Eng-Beng Lim describes the white, colonial fetishization of the Asian boy as a spellbinding encounter. Centering on this interracial encounter as a queer racialized performance that is mutually constitutive, Lim insists that spells are cast in either direction, from "East" and "West," revealing how latent legacies of colonialism are still extant in queer modernity while also generating a new way of discussing Asian masculinity, typically taken as invisible and asexual. Lim's Orientalist dyad, which conjures new critical perspectives within the homoerotics of empire, is a useful point of reference for this photograph. And yet, an equally intriguing aspect of Gupta's "brown boy" is that he does not necessarily cast a spell on his audience or on the white bodies that surround him. Gupta creates a scene in which the uncomfortableness of desiring across racial lines comes to the fore instead. The presence of the onlooking voyeur is key. As this third party leans in, his potential curiosity is mitigated by his muted expression and closed-off body language. And so, while Gupta's protagonist asserts his presence by disrupting the white gay ideal, an air of hesitation imbues this triadic formation, and the posturing does not necessarily succeed in reclaiming desire for brown bodies. I will return to the productivity of such failure shortly.

In yet another photo from *Sun City*, Gupta recalls

Bacchanal by von Gloeden. Gupta's image is a direct reflection, from the loincloth to the placement of the figures' hands and heads, their contrapposto, even down to how the figures literally lean on their respective mythic backdrops. The details of Bacchanal—the architectural setting, the laurel wreath, the hanging jug, and the held goblet—conjure an image of ancient Rome as the revered site of pure form and ideal beauty in Western civilization. Von Gloeden emulates this ancient world to legitimize a classical history to gay male desire. However, his desire to valorize gay erotica relies on creating a made-up scene, and Gupta picks up on this fantastical fiction, exaggerating it to parodic effect. By juxtaposing von Gloeden's setting against the garish Indo-philic dolls, Gupta makes camp of the racial politics of gay male desire.

As Gupta parodies iconic poses within queer art historical traditions by virtue of their inhabitation within a space accented by camp bright lighting and gaudy Orientalist ornamentation, *Sun City* enacts a racialized lens within queer art history. The overemphasis of the space's Orientalism inhabits a queer failure that resists and disavows bathhouse protocols in an attempt to call out and undo their denigrating conventions. In the group bathhouse scene, although everyone strikes a highly contrived pose, no one touches or, most importantly looks at each other or the main character; he himself stares out blankly, disengaged. The scene, as a result, is stiff and tense, and the erotic dynamics here, unlike those of typical or idealized imaginations of cruising culture, are not fleeting. Instead, Gupta creates what I read as a desexualized and consequently failed bathhouse scene. As Dianne Chisholm claims, cruising practices have the capacity to transform urban spaces "into a praxis of amplified perception and cognition," and the bathhouse is historicized as "the first urban space to afford gay men a site" for such practices. Has the bathhouse failed our protagonist? It is this failure that I claim as also camp. Alongside my race analysis of queer art history, this failure to "perform bathhouse," to cruise in a highly Orientalized space, also informs what I call the camping of Orientalism.

If camp involves exaggerated stylistics, I ground *Sun City*'s campiness in an exaggerated inaction: in the overperformance of Asian asexuality and undesirability, further heightened by the depiction of white disinterest. In the public imaginary, Asian queer sexuality is either invisible or grossly caricatured. Gupta's main character's physique intentionally departs from white standards that celebrate muscular toning and hairless physiques. Against this ideal, the protagonist's soft build and non-epilated body is antiaesthetic despite being commonplace

within a South Asian imaginary. Situated within an Orientalized interior, the averted gazes and nontouching bodies not only embody how racialized formations and residues impose themselves onto sexual desire but also create camp or gesture toward undoing, in the form of overperformance, the “racial and sexual abjection” undergirding queer Asian asexualization. Indeed, it is this excess (paradoxically, through lack) that ultimately renders Gupta’s homo-Orientalist imagery camp, “a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability to fit within the majoritarian representational regime.”

The main character enters *Sun City* as a queer racialized object of desire. His presence embodies the site’s insatiable sexual appetite inflected by the history of colonialism. Functioning as a mirror, he reflects the fetishization of race in gay male desire. As such, his presence is dissonant, out of sync (because he is not made to belong or be desired) and, given the tragic and inevitable last scene of *Sun City*, his presence is always already in the process of dying or unbecoming. Yet, *Sun City* does not categorically frame the main character as a victim of racially coded desire. In other scenes, the protagonist “performs bathhouse” by actively participating as a subject of sexual consumption. The darkly lit and tightly framed shots set the stage for sultry and seedy encounters, yet Gupta captures arousal unconvincingly. Whether the main character is being penetrated while strapped to a ceiling harness or is receiving oral sex, an undeniable awkwardness imbues his demeanor. His blank, unaffected stare and listless body fail to convey the raw and crude appeal generally associated with the bathhouse. Rather, the acts are still, highly posed, and contrived. The intimacy is so unconvincing, the viewer cannot deny artifice’s role in animating sexual desire. Such forced postures in *Sun City* bring attention to the unease and anxiety that accompany some who navigate the bathhouse, begging the question: Whose queer space is the bathhouse?

Conclusion

Exiles and *Sun City* play with the optics of documentation. At first glance, *Exiles* is received as documentary but is in fact a set of staged shots. By contrast, *Sun City*’s gaudy Orientalist setting and posturing read as spectacle, yet this bathhouse is an actual space in regular use. Gupta plays with what is “real” and what is suspended from reality differently in two distinct but related series. In *Exiles*, with the realities of gay male desire in 1980s India being so highly censored, staged documentary becomes a vehicle through which one can begin to record and generate commentary on the visual logics of that invisibility. As a spectacularized setting and an overperformed asexuality,

though, *Sun City*’s camp Orientalism deploys aesthetic strategies to call out and undo racial fetish in sexual desire.

Yet the reception of *Sun City* has categorically ignored the homoerotic specters of Orientalism. Ostensibly, blockbuster shows like *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* have become possible due to the rise of contemporary international art, a category that emerged out of the global turn in the art world, which saw previously marginalized content, namely art from the Global South, begin to be assessed on comparable terms. And yet, this is not only an incomplete narrative that ascribes a provincialism to non-Western art prior to 1989; paradoxically, this art world shift also polices what cultural difference should look like, according to what is appropriately ethnic for the market. These are the institutional forces that have allowed Gupta to exhibit at the Pompidou, and equally they are the forces that have obscured the more subversive aspects of his work. What is expected of Gupta and what is marketable in the globalized art world is an image of India seeking sexual freedom, not one that is poking fun at or interrogating that freedom. While using appropriative techniques in contemporary art is common practice, and while critiquing the colonial gaze is by now quite rehearsed, Gupta’s turn to camp reorients this gaze by undermining the assumption that queer communities across borders are in uncomplicated solidarity with one another through a reductive axis of queer sexual liberation. If the Orient and the “taste for brown bodies” are but an imaginary, Gupta’s camp dares to imagine otherwise.