

SUNIL GUPTA

Theo Gordon, How Sunil Gupta's images brought hidden lives to light,
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ARTIST VIEW

Backstory

How Sunil Gupta's images brought hidden lives to light

As a retrospective of the photographer opens in London, *Theo Gordon* focuses on a pivotal series that commented on gay experience in 1980s Delhi

Photography in the 1980s was an experimental and exploratory field, in which a wide range of artists produced work that reinvented the social documentary form. Sunil Gupta's series 'Exiles' (1987), to be shown in a retrospective of the photographer's work this autumn, was one such project. It comprised constructed (or staged) photographic portraits accompanied by short texts that pushed the boundaries of documentary tradition to explore hidden experiences of gay men in Delhi, India.

Years earlier, in 1969, Gupta's family had left Delhi for Montreal, where the teenager found himself in the midst of new outspoken Western conceptions of sexuality; in Canada, he says, 'I discovered that what I like to do was called "gay"'. In 1981, while studying photography at the Royal College of Art in London, he returned to India for the first time. Gupta wanted to address gay life in his former home town, but 'nobody wanted to talk about it, nobody wanted to be in any

pictures'. This was a subject not meant to be seen or spoken about. The men were often married, leading secret sexual lives under the punitive force of Section 377 that criminalised homosexuality, a law introduced during British rule in 1861 and only repealed by the Indian Supreme Court in 2018. In documenting these men, Gupta also aimed to challenge other colonial legacies: the historic silence of art history on sexual dissidence outside the West, and the tradition of Western photographers speaking for Indian culture and people in the work they made.

Lingering around cruising sites in Delhi, Gupta began to take audio recordings of interviews with the men he met there. His friend Saleem Kidwai started to cultivate an underground social circle of gay men as part of a widespread but secret and ephemeral network across the city. On Gupta's return in 1982 and 1983, he photographed some of these men in front of monuments and in noted cruising spaces in Delhi, alone or in pairs, often hiding their faces to preserve anonymity. The 'Exiles' series is made up of these photographs, placed alongside selected quotations from his interview tapes, each image captioned in bold text with the name of the location pictured.

The result is a sequence of beguiling images that put the viewer to work. In one, the artist exploits the tension between the political image of the nation, 'Indira's Vision', and the averted gazes of the men, faces turned furtively away from the camera's sight and, of course, our own (*Indira's Vision*, 1987; left). This is a protection against the law, yet the text speaks of a desire not to contest these regimes, a resignation to the status quo that Gupta says was common for men of his generation. In another image, *Jama Masjid* (1987), multiple gazes intersect and overlap as men look past each other outside the famous mosque, while the text revels in the sexual excitement to be had in cruising the crowd.

These elusive works deliberately confound any attempt by the viewer to master the scene, an impulse often courted by the documentary tradition in its supposed objectivity. Gupta describes the works in 'Exiles' as 'borderline' images, as 'the guys are real and the place is real', yet the quotations come from different sources, injecting a layer of ambiguity into the work. In these constructed images, Gupta invites the viewer into a world of looking and desire, only to keep any interpretative finitude ultimately, irresistibly, from view.

Theo Gordon is an art historian currently teaching at the Courtauld Institute of Art

● **From Here to Eternity - Sunil Gupta: A Retrospective** The Photographers' Gallery, London, 9 Oct-7 Feb 2021 (by appointment only)



Indira's Vision
Why do you go on about changing the law.
I don't want to be a martyr.
I'm happy the way things are.