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Sunil Gupta
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Sunil Gupta is a storyteller. In decided contrast to Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment,” Gupta opts to engage the viewer with photographs that act as a series of narrative spaces—-they are clues to moments in time as opposed to ruptures of time—-suggesting a sense that something is continuing beyond the mere borders of the image. This interplay draws the viewer’s attention to Gupta’s deftly interwoven preoccupations with identity, location, memory, relationships, and sexuality.

A frequent component of Gupta’s work is the incorporation of text—in the form of either an artist’s statement or captions written as first-person accounts in which he candidly relates a sometimes-thorny relationship with his parents. The experience is performed as a conversation, in which the viewer gains privileged access to seemingly straightforward documentary images by having them deciphered by the artist.

Gupta was born in India and immigrated with his family to Canada in the late 1960s, settling in Montreal. He studied photography in New York and, following graduate work in the U.K., lived a nomadic existence in Europe and North America as he tried to establish his practice as a photographer. After a few failed attempts, he relocated to London, where he lives today. His alternating feelings of attachment to and alienation from the places that he has called home over periods of time and the pull of family history—manifested in his thoughts about India and his knowing it for himself—are intermingled in his work as the sites/sights of investigation of his photographs. He situates himself in relation to these locations as a perpetual outsider and, as a result, refers often to the concept of here as existing largely in his own mind. His photographs explore this state of being by metaphorically negotiating large distances of time and space through juxtapositions, reuse of historical photographs, and other associations among personally significant images.

Using this same forthright approach, Gupta is frank about his diagnosis in 1995 as HIV positive. With the photographic series From Here to Eternity (1999), Gupta engaged with his HIV status and its impact on his sense of identity by incorporating parallel narratives in his photographs, evidenced through views of South London, where he lives, and self-portraits depicting his own ageing body and the ever-present realities of living with illness. Following on the heels of this project, he received an academic grant that enabled him to undertake an extended photo essay composed of twenty large-scale colour photographs as subject material. This inescapability inhabits the space as our perceptions change over the course of time and new threads are connected to the bigger picture.

Social Security is a poignant farewell dedicated to Gupta’s father. Using old family photographs, snapshots, and other documentary objects presented as large chromogenic prints accompanied by texts, Gupta recounts the story of his parents’ marriage, immigration to Canada, and life together as a family, up to and including his father’s death. The texts that caption each image are written from both Gupta’s perspective and his mother’s, giving the viewer the feeling of poring over a family album with the help of those with intimate knowledge of the events. The carefully chosen words not only are illustrative, but, more importantly, call into question what appears to transpire in some of the photographs. Shalini and Larry Sharing a Laugh, for example, shows Gupta’s sister and her future husband enjoying each other’s company, and yet the caption in the mother’s voice belies her disapproval:

“Next time I go to India I must find you a wife.” The contradictions between image and text give the viewer deeper insight into the storyline—skillfully bringing to light the idea that things are never what they seem. Images have a context not only as a result of their conception, but as our perceptions change over the course of time and new threads are connected to the bigger picture.

Both Homelands and Social Security offer the viewer a singular opportunity to delve into Gupta’s discerning and honest meditations on the circumstances that have touched his life and the record of experience—his past and present, his relationships with his family, his struggles to find a place of belonging while nevertheless maintaining the distance required by the critical observer. By design, Gupta’s is a solitary pursuit wedded to a need to reach out and to share contact. It is an intensely moving experience because the oppressive inevitability of time cloaks both the photographs and the photographer’s words. This inescapability inhabits the space as strongly as any of the images.

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