

Image 1: Audio Description Transcript

Sunil Gupta

From the series 'Christopher Street'

(1976; 11 by 7.5 inches)

'Christopher Street' is a black and white photograph in landscape format, wider than it is high and just a little smaller than a sheet of A4 paper. It's a full-length portrait of a young man against the background of a crossroads in a city; brick-built apartment buildings, cars and people are visible in the background but they are not the focus.

The photograph shows just two arms of the junction, with the tarmac surface of the crossroad itself filling the lower half of the photograph. The camera is on one corner of the crossroads, and squarely aligned with a pedestrian crossing across one arm of the junction. The crossing leads to a corner store with a striped awning and a sign showing the name 'Fancy Groceries' and an advert for 'Coca-Cola'. In front, on the sidewalk, there's a fire hydrant and a US mailbox on legs with a curved top. 'Fancy Groceries' appears in the top left-hand corner of the photograph. Continuing in a straight line away from the camera, we pass the corner store on our left, and go down a street of brick buildings four or five storeys high, with more buildings of the same height in the distance. In the top right corner of the photograph, there is another corner store, opposite the first one. Bunting is suspended from the traffic light pole on this corner, running back down the street.

The young man is in the centre of the image, just a shade to the right of centre, and facing to our left. His body is angled at 45 degrees, suggesting that he has just

crossed the intersection diagonally. His feet disappear off the bottom edge of the photograph and his head is almost at the top, so he feels quite close, as if he's about to cross our path, within touching distance.

He is in his twenties, slim but muscular, pale skin with soft features. His collar-length hair is thick, with a long fringe blown up and back by the wind into a bouffant fringe that waves and lifts across the forehead. He has a small moustache clipped into a neat inverted V. He wears leather boots, slim jeans with the hems rolled up a couple of inches and a close-fitting black t-shirt with a round neck and folded up cap sleeves.

He is captured in mid-stride, his right leg bent, his foot lifting off from the ground. His hands are tucked into the front pockets of his jeans and his shoulders are back, lifting his chest and pulling the t-shirt fabric taut across the lightly defined muscles. His bent leg, the creases of his jeans, the angle of his forearms and the thumbs hooked over his pockets all seem to arrow casually towards his crotch. Although his stance is upright and his head is lifted, his gaze is downcast, so that his eyes seem almost closed, like those of a sleepwalker, and his full lips are slightly parted.

There is lots of space around the young man, adding to the impression of a man alone in a busy city – whether he's self-contained, lost in his thoughts, or isolated. Above his head is the brightest part of the photograph, a patch of sky above the buildings in the distance, at the far end of the street. To the left of him and further away from us, four people are crossing the street to and from the 'Fancy Groceries' store. The nearest of them has her back to us and is wearing a heavy coat, a sturdy leather bag across her body. Others also wear coats and carry shopping bags – a contrast to the unencumbered young man with bare arms. Cars are moving in the

same orientation as the shoppers – one car is disappearing out of the frame to the right, just its rear wheel and the handle of the back door visible, while another car is starting to cross the intersection, a few metres between them. In the gap between the cars, a knot of men can be made out on the opposite corner, under the bunting. The trajectory of the young man suggests that he could have just left that group to cross the junction diagonally between the cars – or perhaps he has come from somewhere completely different.

‘Christopher Street’ was part of the first series Gupta made as a practicing artist. Having moved from Montréal to New York, he found himself in the midst of a social and cultural revolution. The Stonewall riots of 1969 led to a turning point in gay liberation. He found the streets of the West Village brimming with a new openness and previously unparalleled acceptance. Added to this, photography was now being viewed with new creative potential. This encouraged Gupta to leave his business degree to study photography with Lisette Model at the New School. The series reflects the openness of the gay liberation movement, a community that shaped Gupta as a person, as well as his ‘coming out’ as an artist.

Using the camera as a tool for open expression, Gupta documented the emerging gay public space from the perspective of an active participant. He says: ‘I spent my weekends cruising with my camera, it was the heady days after Stonewall and before AIDS when we were young and busy. In retrospect these pictures have become both nostalgic and iconic for a very important moment in my personal history’.

[ENDS]