

Image 2: Audio Description Transcript

Sunil Gupta

From the series 'From Here to Eternity'

(1999, 48.3 x 48.3 cm each)

This is a diptych, two images side by side, part of a series of six diptychs under the title of 'From Here to Eternity'. This pair is titled 'Chicago/Hoist'. On the left, a self-portrait of the photographer, taken in a hotel mirror; on the right, a photograph of the exterior of a south London club called The Hoist.

The left-hand photo shows the photographer facing us, nude. He holds a small square camera – a Hasselblad – up beside his face, just above the level of his eyes, holding the strap and the folding mirror panel on top of the camera with his left hand, and supporting it from below with his right hand. He gazes directly at us, unsmiling. His complexion is light brown, he has iron grey hair brushed in a slight quiff away from his face and a trimmed moustache. Bright light falls on one side of his body from a window just out of shot on the right-hand side, making him resemble a statue lit for dramatic effect. His raised left arm and the camera puts his face in shadow, and the position of his right arm, folded across his chest, seems almost protective. Meanwhile, the lower half of his body – slight tan marks from swimming trunks, pubic hair and genitals – is exposed in a matter-of-fact way.

In the background, slightly out of focus, is a hotel room, comfortable but not fashionable. The top half of the wall is covered with gold brocade wallpaper enclosed in cream-painted wooden moulding, like a picture frame, with matching panelling

below, eau de nil curtains and armchair, a double bed with the patterned coverlet half turned back to reveal two pillows, and a thermometer on the wall above it. On the right, under the window, there's a bulky cathode ray television set with wood veneer sides and a wedge-shaped section at the back. On top of the tv is a cardboard box of AGFA photographic paper; a standard lamp with a crooked shade is behind the tv, by the wall.

All this is contained within a golden picture frame – the frame of a mirror that Gupta and his camera are facing. The mirror frame is out of focus and skewed about 10 degrees from horizontal, and is cut off by the edges of the print.

To the right, the second part of this diptych shows the entrance to a club. Square on, we face a shuttered doorway which is in the centre of the photograph, just below the mid-line. In front of the doorway there is a gate of iron railings with spikes on top, secured with two padlocks. Above this is a black sign with white capital letters in a font designed to look like industrial stencils, with the name, THE HOIST. The doorway sits in the middle of a wall of new 'yellow stock' brick, about three and a half metres square, enclosed in a frame of black-painted wood. This wall is in turn fitted into a much older structure, a Victorian railway arch also built in yellow stock brick, with a border of red bricks, all now grimy and weathered. Dusty black windows fill the sliver of space between the top of the new wall and the arch. To the sides of the new wall the arch is filled in with glazed terracotta tiles to just above waist height and yellow brick above, perhaps from an earlier conversion of the arch for storage or workshops. The paving reflects the line of this usage, with the kerb on both sides curving round to meet the verticals of the black frame, creating an entrance into the arch for vehicles.

Added on top of these three layers of urban architecture, there is lots of paraphernalia for the nightclub – ventilation grilles set in the wall, a small, heavily barred window, a sheet of glass a few metres long fixed above the doorway as a shelter for people queuing for admittance, a burglar alarm, a sign warning of video surveillance, and pointing in at the doorway from perches on either side of the brick arch, two white CCTV cameras. Bright light comes from the left, casting long diagonal shadows, and there are puddles on the mostly dry pavement and road, reflecting bricks and railings.

This is the first body of Gupta's work directly addressing his HIV positive status. The diptyches explore how his world was affected, and were taken after a period of illness brought on by the virus. The project has two parallel strands: the architectural façades of sex clubs near his home, reflecting on a contemporary gay scene; and a more intimate series of self-portraits. Gupta says that the series is: 'An interpretation of HIV and its effects on the Third World body, a map of my local context, London as a location that is a focal point of attitudes towards survivors and also their treatments. It feels that the background of sexual politics and their erosion in the onslaught of 'in your face' commercial sexuality have left people living with HIV to deal with the larger ethical questions involved in complete isolation'.

Though the diptych invites us to make biographical connections between the two photos, there are also visual links: the gold frame of the mirror in the hotel, and the black frame around the entrance to the club; the waist-high horizontal line of panelling in the hotel room with gold brocade above, and the terracotta tiles outside the club with yellow brick above. Even the curved bedhead seems to find an echo in the curve of the arch, while the black box of the camera held up just to the right and

above Gupta's eye-level finds a different form in the black window behind bars just to the right and above the shuttered club doorway and sign.