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Author/s:
Sequeira, D

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Sensuality and Symbolism: Sunil Gupta's The New Pre-Raphaelites

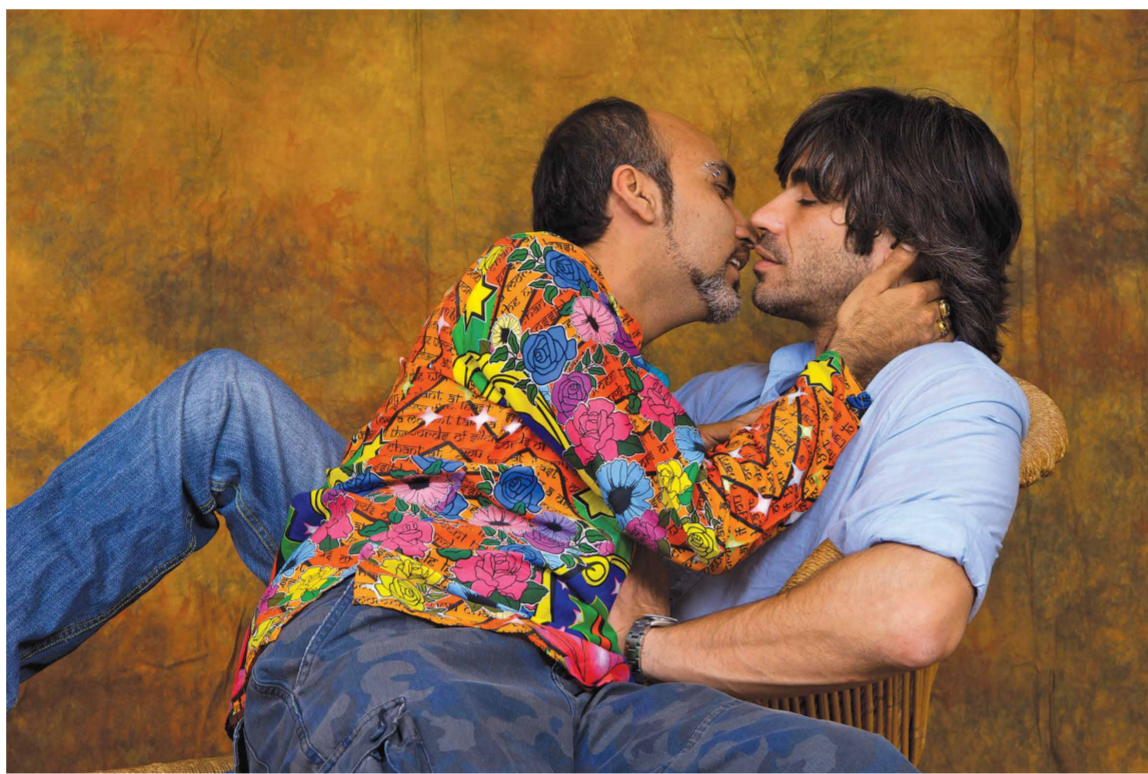
Brimming with tenderness and sensuality, *The New Pre-Raphaelites* exemplifies Sunil Gupta's unique capacity to make connections across complex histories and cultures. The suite of photographs can be understood as an exploration of the intersection of queer identity and Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (used to criminalise homosexuality), through the lens of the Pre-Raphaelites. The poetry of Gupta's imagery highlights the ways in which art history can be used to illuminate aspects of contemporary experience. More specifically, Gupta draws on the potent symbolism of the Pre-Raphaelites to reveal the lives of those impacted by Section 377. Although not discussed in this essay, the display of this body of Gupta's work as a companion exhibition to major showings of Pre-Raphaelite art¹, asserts the importance of contemporary works of art in generating new understandings of art history. Focussing on four images, the purpose of this essay is to provide a short context for this extraordinary body of work.



The term 'Pre-Raphaelites' refers to a group of 19th century British artists who looked beyond the high renaissance (fashionable at the time) to the medieval period for new models of art making. For these artists, 14th and early 15th century European painting provided a stylistic reference point and philosophical approach based on naturalism and the inseparability of art and life. The Pre-Raphaelites developed a visual vocabulary grounded in gesture and symbolism that rejected Victorian subjects, styles and values. For example, women depicted by the Pre-Raphaelites seem charged with agency and power. They appear in paintings with loose hair and free from the restrictions of corsets, imbuing the works with a sense of freedom and sexual autonomy.

In 2008 Gupta was commissioned by Autograph² to create new works of art that responded to Section 377 a law, initiated in 1861 by the British and not overturned until 2018. The loose overlap in timeline of the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and the initiation of Section 377³, provides fertile ground for exploring the continuing reverberations of colonialism. Gupta's title and all that it infers about Victorian values is one of the most revealing aspects of the project. Whilst the term the 'Pre-Raphaelites' refers to artists, *The New Pre-Raphaelites* refers to the sitters. The sense of abandonment (that can be associated with the Pre-Raphaelites' rejection of Victorian values) seems to exude more from the sitter than the photographer in Gupta's images. In this context, Gupta's studio scenography, combined with his conceptual ambitions, can be considered as a psychological space in which the sitter steps into, encouraging and allowing an expression of self and sexuality that transcends iconography and alludes to the essence of being.

There is an air of confidence and knowingness about the woman in *The New Pre-Raphaelites, Untitled #04*. Gupta's photograph takes its cue from John Everett Millais, *The Bridesmaid*, 1851.⁴ Gently tilting her head towards the heavens, she seems present to who she is and the overt symmetry of the whole composition affirms her as centred and in control. The absence of personal adornment – clothing, jewellery, hair tie – suggests that her strength lies in her honesty and vulnerability. The delicate pink hues of the gerberas and the sharp citric yellow lily may provide further insight to her understanding of self.



In *The New Pre-Raphaelites, Untitled #06* a solitary woman, who appears more mature than other figures in the series, stands barefoot in front of painted scenery. Her left foot arched and her back elongated, she stretches her body, possibly after a long period of sitting. The compositional source of the image, John Everett Millais' *Mariana* 1851⁵ depicts a character from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*⁶ who, until her dowry was lost in a shipwreck, was about to be married. Gupta's figure seems to be waiting for or anticipating something. Her rich peacock blue drapery luxuriously spills onto the floor in a train, further connecting her body with the earth. There is a sense of tentative fortitude about her. Knotted at the heart, the opulent fabric could unravel at any moment.

Riddled with symbolism, *The New Pre-Raphaelites, Untitled #07* depicts a shirtless young man lying languidly, across a chaise, one hand on his chest, the other dripping onto the floor. The image takes its reference point from Henry Wallis' *Chatterton* 1856⁷ which depicts the dead romantic poet, Thomas Chatterton. Despairing of his lack of success, Chatterton poisoned himself in 1770 at the age of 17. The vertical blinds in Gupta's image are closed except for a small section in the central part of the window. Behind the figure an empty vase rests on the windowsill and an unlit candle sits on a side table. It is unclear whether the man is deep in slumber or dead. Separate from the world beyond their windows, Gupta's figure and Wallis' Chatterton (both youthful) lie in states of lifelessness.

Echoing Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* 1867⁸, *The New Pre-Raphaelites, Untitled #02*, is an image of affection, attachment and arousal in which two men, both in denim jeans, one in a wildly patterned shirt, the other in cool blue monochrome, are about to share a kiss. Referencing the Pre-Raphaelites' symbolic use of flowers and colour, the exuberance of the floral print is tempered by the calm blue, which is often used to symbolise truth. Articulating the physicality of love, the anticipation of this intoxicating and tender kiss seems palpable. Their body positions, hair, hands and eyes draw the viewer towards the electric space between their lips. This image of intense intimacy, like others in the series, provides a profoundly touching human counterpoint to Section 377.

Gupta's sensitive transposition of a quintessentially British art movement is a brilliant and unexpected filter through which the impact of one of the legacies of colonialism in India can be examined, challenged, interrupted and dismantled. However, to consider *The New Pre-Raphaelites* as only giving visibility to issues surrounding sexuality, relationships and intimacy in an Indian context misses a valuable aspect of this work. Although it was made 16 years ago, Gupta's *The New Pre-Raphaelites* has a sharp contemporary relevance that extends far beyond India. The work demonstrates the relatively rarely discussed non-linear, trans-historical and trans-cultural possibilities of art movements and provides a powerful reminder of the relationship between the law and the multifaceted nature of personhood.

David Sequeira

Associate Professor, David Sequeira is an artist and curator based in Naarm. He is currently Director of the Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

- ¹ *The New Pre-Raphaelites* accompanied the exhibition Rossetti's Portraits, Holburne Museum 24 September 2021 – 9 Jan 2022; *The New Pre-Raphaelites, Untitled #02* was part of the exhibition *The Rossettis*, Tate Britain 6 April – 24 September 2023
- ² Autograph is a London based gallery specialising in the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight questions of race, representation, human rights and social justice. In 1988 Gupta was one of the founding signatories.
- ³ The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1848 and continued in various iterations into the 1860s.
- ⁴ John Everett Millais, *The Bridesmaid*, 1851, oil on panel, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
- ⁵ John Everett Millais, *Mariana* 1851, oil on panel, Tate Britain, London
- ⁶ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, written c1603, first performed 1604
- ⁷ Henry Wallis, *Chatterton*, 1856, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London
- ⁸ Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* 1867, Tate Britain, London.

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GREAT ART. DEEP WEST.

Sunil Gupta – The New Pre-Raphaelites

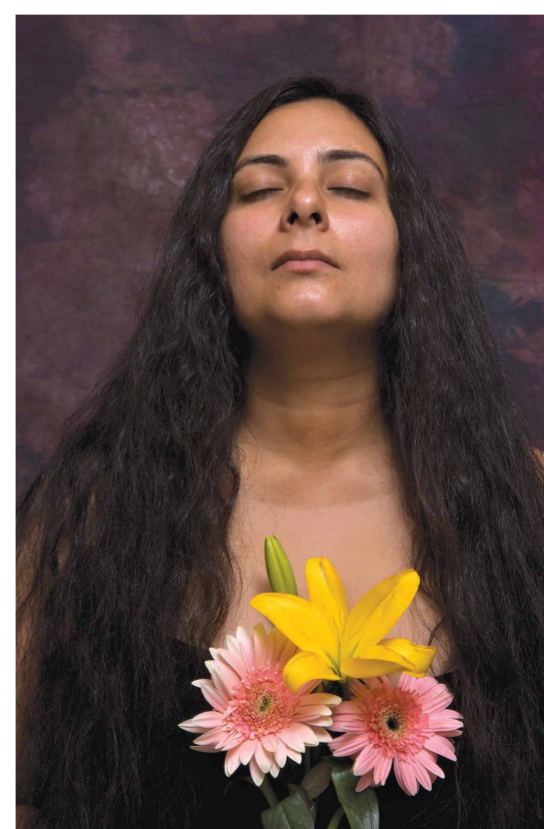
An exhibition produced in partnership with Autograph London.

Sunil Gupta 'The New Pre-Raphaelites', is a collaborative exhibition by Autograph London and Wyndham Art Gallery. Featuring a series of 13 photographs which take their starting point from historical paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites, a collective of English artists and reformists founded in 1848. The staged photographic works recreate the vivid colours and strong physical presence of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, but, as Gupta states, "I've updated them to reflect contemporary queer culture in India." Sunil Gupta's practice will extend to the Project Hub at Wyndham Art Gallery as part of Queer Photo.

Sunil Gupta: The New Pre-Raphaelites is presented at Wyndham Art Gallery in partnership with Autograph, London 27 January – 14 April, 2024.

Exhibition: 22 January – 14 April 2024

Queer Photo Launch: Friday 1 March 6.30 – 8.30pm



Artist Talks

Sunday 3 March, 2 – 4pm

Wyndham Art Gallery,
177 Watton Street, Werribee 3030

QUEER PHOTO – TOUR: Meet the Queer PHOTO artists showcasing within the Wyndham precinct for this jam packed day of LGBTQIA+ photographic art!

What should I expect?

- A talk from Sunil Gupta (UK) and walk through his exhibition of 'The New Pre-Raphaelites' at Wyndham Art Gallery.
- Visit Station Place where Peter Waples-Crowe will give an artist talk on 'Affirm'.
- Head to the Werribee Park Mansion where Karla Dickens will give a talk on their new work 'To See or Not to See'.
- See the work from Asafe Ghalib's on 'Queer Immigrants' and hear them speak at Werribee Park Mansion.

Wyndham Art Gallery will be running a shuttle bus between the artist talk sites.

If you would like to reserve a free spot send an email wyndhamartgallery@wyndham.vic.gov.au

Front:

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #08* (detail), 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.

Top to bottom, left to right:

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #07*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #11*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #02*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #06*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.

Sunil Gupta, *The New Pre-Raphaelites Untitled #04*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Autograph, UK.