

# Matèria

## **From Here to Eternity – The Making.**

Mark Sealy & Sunil Gupta

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**MS:** 1999 is the point where *From Here to Eternity* is made, is that correct?

**SG:** That's right, yes.

**MS:** So, in 1999, where were you within the world of making photography?

**SG:** I was at rock bottom because I had some health episodes and it had made me take some time off. Because I was freelance, taking time off meant I didn't really have much income, I was signing on (to social security) and it was a chicken and egg existence... there was less and less money and less and less possibilities. Also, there was a short period of a few months when my health was such that I couldn't really go out myself. People had to come and walk the dog, people had to bring groceries... I became very dependent for a while. The outlook wasn't great at that point, you know, it was time to start from scratch.

**MS:** Two years into New Labour (elected 1997), there is a certain sense of social optimism around, with things changing especially in the first term of the New Labour government. There was a sense that people wanted to move past the old Labour type conversations. It's as if the socialist Left had become marginalised, because for anybody who aligned to the values of the old Left, it seemed your time was over, because New Labour had arrived and 'Cool Britannia' seemed to be on top of the world.

**SG:** Yes, and I had also made a very big investment in curating, with that OVA-franchise for Inivia. My 90's started on a high, I got this extraordinary grant that pulled me out of teaching, which I had thought was a good thing back then. My weekly commute to Hull would be no more and I could work from home. It was an exciting project, the idea of it. With the three of us, Eddie Chambers, Rasheed Araeen and me, I thought there was something to work with.

**MS:** The Iniva franchises were a very bold move from the Arts Council of England. Something that would grow really, wasn't it?

**SG:** This was 1992, before Iniva had hired full time people. We did our own thing and there was a very supportive atmosphere around it, from the Arts Council and the funders. People were very receptive, and because I had a budget given to me in advance... it really changed my game, because people in key positions in the art world now, who themselves were freelance then, would call me up and say, *can I work with you?* I had the money, you know?.

**MS:** It's amazing what money does in terms of new friends.

**SG:** Yea, then the mid 90's was a peak moment, and it turned around my fortunes a bit. Iniva got going and the staff got hired, then there was the Havana Biennale in 95, where I was showing as an artist. I went out there in the company of the new Director.

**MS:** It became very administrative... institutionalised as an Arts Council client.

**SG:** Yea, institutionalised. I didn't join, and consequently I lost my budget, and then I was on my own. I turned around to the Arts Council and said... *I'm just going to keep applying as a freelancer, keep the company going that way, on project grounds.* So that's what I did, but that became much tougher because it was harder to make longer-term programming plans.

**MS:** Everything was dependent on the success of an application. Like an annual revenue mountain to climb, funding monies every year you had to apply for and there was every chance you were not going to get it, that was a constant threat at Autograph as well as a never-ending cycle of proving your worth. In short, 92 to 94, those are what I would call the franchise years where your making process became secondary, and the curatorial process became primary.

**SG:** Yes, I completely dropped editorial work, I never worked for Fleet Street or anything.

**MS:** So there was a kind of artist meets curator. It's funny isn't it... Eddie (Chambers) was an artist, Rasheed (Araeen) was an artist, and you were an artist. There were these three men from very different access points now working directly with artists, from non-Euro-centric perspectives. They were quite interesting and were key foundation blocks concerning the Iniva's development. What happened to your photography during this period?

**SG:** I did very little photography, basically those chapters of *Trespass* were all triggered by something. The first one was triggered as a commission from *Trophies of Empire*, the project from 1992. In 1994/5 the other two were also triggered. One by a request from Frank Wagner at NGBK, Berlin to be in a show, and one by the Focal Point Gallery, Southend. The commissions were between them and Essex County Council... that's why Part 3 is all in Essex.

**MS:** Yes, it might have been part of something called the Cross Channel Photographic Mission, or something like that, wasn't it? That organisation was looking at Britain's relationship across the English channel as a response to the Channel Tunnel opening. Anne McNeill the current director of Impressions Gallery in Bradford was key in that development and it went on to become Photoworks which is now based in Brighton.

**SG:** She might have been, but the woman that was running the Impressions Gallery, York back then was called Cheryl Reynolds.

**MS:** That's right.

**SG:** She had taken over Impressions from Paul Wombell. Who had moved on to direct the Photographers Gallery in London.

**MS:** Cheryl Reynolds, I remember. We did a few things with the Impressions when Cheryl was there. She was open to conversations. In 1995 Cheryl helped us do the Rotimi Fani-Kayode exhibition titled

*Communion* at Impressions. The Cross Channel Photographic Mission was a small photography organisation based in the Southeast of the UK trying to build relationships across the channel or look at the new regulations coming in place around the EU. There was a lot of focus around the EU again in the 90's... immigration was very much in focus. That story seems to me hasn't changed for a very long time... about the fear of people coming in swamping Britain. I think the Channel was seen as a portal for possible invasion from Europe.

**SG:** That's how I approached it. Essex as a gateway to the UK.

**MS:** It's fair to say that by the time you picked up the camera to do *From Here To Eternity*, you're not in a good place. The curating has stopped, funding has dried up, old photography clients have been dropped, you're not working for an organisation, and all of a sudden you are diagnosed with a major illness. HIV.

**SG:** Yes. This kind of distance opened up between me and what used to be my home inside black arts. I was no longer seeing those people, I was no longer casually friendly, bumping into black artists anywhere. I fell out of all those networks.

**MS:** I think what happens when you become a grantee, is that the relationship changes with people because suddenly you are someone to hustle rather than a hustler. Horace Ové the film maker told me that once.

And it becomes quite distasteful doesn't it... conversations are always through the lens of *you got some funding and I don't*. It can be quite difficult to be at private views at times and you realise something has changed in the dialogues.

Something also changed around 1999, this sense of a real transition. I remember talking to you and sensed instinctively that you were not in a good place, that things weren't right. I think you said something like, *I want to make work again*. I think you said something like that and you might have showed me one or two of these pieces you had been doing... let's try and recall a little.. You and I met in 1986/87, I always knew you as a photographer. I knew you through Trisha Ziff at Network Photographers and there was Mike Abrahams and all those Camerawork Half Moon Photography project people, way back then. So It was, how do we get this process of making work going again...

I was very mindful that the HIV conversation was somehow falling off the agenda in terms of public awareness, and this project was quite important to do for you. To address the public and the private life side by side. I was very interested in that; I was very interested in places where people were still engaging with each other and how AIDS was just being ignored it seemed. The gay night club scene was still very alive but the impact of HIV was being internalised it seemed. I was very interested in that and in the honesty of the way you used your body; your relationship to the body, the mirror, degrees of reflection and these spaces of containment and desire, represented in these night clubs.

**SG:** I think the first picture was a random one, as often happens with me, and it became the basis for it; the one of the mirror and just my body holding up the camera. That camera came back into use, it was my editorial camera which I didn't use anymore... digital had come. I just put some colour film into it, this is the old Hasselblad, and I used that in a hotel room hand held. This was very accidental, almost like a phone selfie but because it was 120 and a Hasselblad, it became more than a selfie through that medium format process.

I think you are right about what you are saying. My underlying conclusion from the diagnosis, which in the early years I thought was *death is around the corner* kind of thing, *time is running out*. It made me think about what is of value in one's life, what are you doing. I thought... all this arts admin I'm doing, writing emails to people and all that, who really cares about all that? I really need to make

more pictures and less curating. I was tied to the curating as income, so I was caught in a bit of a trap. It was dwindling and I was sensing pressure from the Arts Council. People like me were gradually moving away, and they began to tell me to really narrow my focus — on to Asian artists.

**MS:** I also think that internally, once '94 had happened, with the institutionalisation of part of the blacks as such, the funders were saying *that's all the money for you lot, it's all over there now do not come here for more support*. These are the things I used to talk to Stuart Hall about, and he was very mindful that there was a danger of homogenising the one institution that speaks to all of these issues, it was clear that only one organisation that looked at diversity could exist in the Arts Councils mind. Only one organisation could be prioritised.

The idea of Autograph - I was told directly by people - was irrelevant now that these changes had happened. That sense of being told Autograph/Photography was not relevant was going on for quite a long time. Smaller grass roots organisations were seen as too local and not global. They had become much more vulnerable in this climate.

Looking at *From Here to Eternity*, if we are going to use your life in politics around the black arts, it is a very fragile moment, it's not in good shape.

**SG:** No, it's waning...

**MS:** It's about how do we survive that space and time. I do not think people realise how precarious it all was. Hanging on as a way of being was so stressful on every level. When I look at Shroud and the Pleasure Dome, it's almost as if the idea of pleasure is dead.

**SG:** Yes, there was a dismantling of stuff around me that happened very fast in the 90's. A company at the beginning of the 90's with several key people passing away, one after the other, it was crazy.

There were the deaths and people who shrugged their shoulders and walked away. Some people just said, *I'm moving to Margate, don't bother calling me, I'm done with this*. So I did feel it was waning a bit.

**MS:** Something had moved somewhere else it seems. In retrospect it seemed as if the sector courted the conversations outside of the local. Elsewhere became the go-to point of reference, everyone was chasing that kind of space as if that was the golden chalice, the holy grail. People seemed to be leaving the sector physically and spiritually. There was something out there in the international world that was being chased, and lots of things locally were being left behind in terms of the politics of state support.

**SG:** My local scene shrank; at one point it was just Joy Gregory.... I fell out of seeing people because nothing was happening in those conversations. I barely saw the other black artists in London for a while. So I was pushed to do something and I think that made me sit up and think about something about my work.

**MS:** In 1999 I had been working at Autograph for 8/9 years and I felt it was a weird time because it was as if a major chapter had ended. The new century was coming, some people were becoming very, very famous through their work, with shows in major institutions which was great. Yinka Shonibare was on the rise, Chris Ofili on the rise, Steve McQueen on the rise, mainly men actually. It seemed as if artists were becoming either disenfranchised or corporatised. Galleries were opening and becoming incredibly powerful, there were big private spaces opening, there was lots of money around it seemed and yet somehow if you were not on that gravy train, if you didn't get picked up, you would just be dropped, seen and called marginal. The Arts Council seemed to be led by Frieze magazine, Art Angel and the Serpentine... it was all heading towards blue chip, whereas underneath all of that were a lot of

people wondering how to navigate all of it. It was that moment when curators turned up in designer wear...

**SG:** Producers...

**MS:** Like TV or Hollywood executives.

**SG:** With a briefcase...

**MS:** The briefcases came out and taxis were being hailed... people were hanging out in Regent's Park, and Mayfair was on the rise again.

**SG:** That's true...

**MS:** Groucho Club, Fred's or some other members club was the destination if you were going to be successful, so it was no longer Brixton, it was back to the West End. And there you are, in a place of critical care. Medicines, drugs and isolation.

**SG:** Yes, that's true. I think this body image thing became very critical around gay male identity, where promiscuity and having the ability to attract people was very paramount. You begin to feel like nobody will want to sleep with you anymore, and then the whole trauma of disclosing your HIV status. All these things become factors to keep you indoors, it's not worth it to go out and expose yourself to all this. I began to go out less and less, even socially. And that's when I got the dog.

**MS:** Yes, then Babe arrived....

In the context of this conversation, if I look at clubs like Attitude and Pleasuredrome it's interesting because in the photographs they are all closed, nothing is open its daytime. They become symbolic of impenetrable forces of pleasure, and your drugs maintain a status quo of existence... but it's like *existing for what?*

**SG:** Yes, that's true.

**MS:** I must admit, I really thought that was a really bold way of thinking of ones place in a gay community as such, or lifestyle, and having all of that taken away from you through alienation and through an erosion in confidence... and getting older and getting ill, and then excluded and caught in this limbo of not having finance or institutional support. It's a bit like being sacked for being someone or having reached a sell by date.

**SG:** Yes, and it all happened around the age of 45. By my mid 40's I should have been getting somewhere... it was all removed suddenly.

**MS:** Were things happening in India?

**SG:** No, I hadn't been to India for a decade by then. I spent the 90's not going to India. When I began doing the curating, I think I did one project out of India. I thought I'd go beyond India, I worked with a couple of artists from Southeast Asia, I worked with Australian, Canadian and South African artists.

**MS:** The Commonwealth...

**SG:** Yes, settler colonies, landscapes... I made a sideways move very easily; nobody asked any questions. I went from little brother photography into the art world, and I was saying: *the history of landscape painting in the 19th Century blah blah blah, let's put Durban together with Melbourne, together with Toronto... they all have their Victorian painters, blah blah blah, let's see what contemporary painters make of that history.* That's what I did, and everyone said *wow!*

That also came from meeting people, I had all these conversations... I met Stan Douglas in a gay bar because he was a DJ there in Vancouver, and not because I thought he was some great artist.

**MS:** That's great.

**SG:** I feel you have to go out and put yourself out there.

**MS:** That sense of fluidity as well, and the boundaries between the making and the being. Being in it, being in the scene... lovers and conversations. I think people get confused, there are lots of conservative notions about how we make and who we are, and where consensual relationships begin and end in those conversations.

**SG:** Yes

**MS:** Babe seemed to be a way of getting out... walking the dog.

**SG:** Yes, gets you out twice a day as you know now.

**MS:** But I thought the funniest pairing in this work was Babe and then Fist... (laughs)

**SG:** (laughs)

**MS:** I mean the idea of pairing a dog next to a gay bar called Fist... (laughs). And then that Indian landscape, somewhere in frame... there is a tower beside it and an arch. There you are holding Babe and this tower and arch.

**SG:** Oh, yes, yes, yes... it's a famous 19th Century picture by Bourne and Shepherd of the Qutb Minar in Delhi.

**MS:** It feels as if it has that classical Indian architecture thing and there you are, and this phallic pole behind you and Babe (laughs).

What is nice about this work is that serendipity arrives in many parts of it. I think some of the best things are being made in the unconscious. Obviously, that is not a chance moment, it's a very deliberate act of tenderness. Against the stigma of HIV, to root AIDS back to its early journalistic days, was God's punishment... a gay plague. These narratives underpin all of these questions and media phobias.

How did you come up with the title Sunil?

**SG:** I was thinking of the movie *From Here to Eternity*, which is based on a book. It's post-war when they were doing the nuclear tests in the South Pacific. It was kind of about that Cold War pessimism... *we are on the verge of being blown up*. In fact, I have since realised that that title itself came from a poem by Rudyard Kipling. Believe it or not it was written about the last British soldiers who came out of Afghanistan back in the 19th Century. And he wrote... *and here they are, from here to eternity*. There is a famous painting about a similar moment at Tate that was displayed during that exhibition that focused on colonial painting — Artist and Empire. Curiously a reproduction of it also appears in one of the Lovers: Ten Years On portraits on the background wall.

**MS:** Yes, from a few of years ago 2015.

**SG:** There was this big painting of a horse in Afghanistan. Single horse with one guy on it, he was the last remaining English patrolman who was coming back, everybody else had been wiped out.

**MS:** That circles quite nicely to the current situation, right?

**SG:** Yes, absolutely. When I keep hearing all of this about the Taliban. People don't understand... when you are living there, they are your people. They don't want Americans telling you what to do, For better or worse they are their own people.

**MS:** I do remember the movie...

**SG:** Up the Khyber Pass?

**MS:** (laughs)... Carry On up the Khyber...

No, I mean the movie with Burt Lancaster, who is having an affair with the general's wife. It's called *From Here to Eternity* as well... again, something going which shouldn't go on, something repressed, pleasure repressed. There is the great scene when they are embraced on the beach, in the waves, but they are not to be...

**SG:** Yes, him lying on the beach in trunks looking sexy, Burt Lancaster with Deborah Kerr or someone.

**MS:** Debra Kerr, Frank Sinatra, and the pained Montgomery Cliff, who in this film is unbelievable; Frank Sinatra and the vicious Ernest Borgnine, who just beats the hell out of people... it's tragic.

It's such a poetic and loaded title but it feels optimistic. We showed the work at the Standpoint Gallery in Hoxton, which unfortunately is no longer there. The East End was still possible, still possible to live in, there were still studios for £3 per square foot, things were possible. People could be mobile.

**SG:** Then White Cube arrived there suddenly.

**MS:** That's right... right in the middle of Hoxton square. And then it went *bang!* We were in Hoxton Square next door watching this go up. And it was *wow, how do we do this, how do we survive these blue-chip moments coming in?* We were around the corner from White Cube... Jay Jopling, Damien Hirst in the window every day. And we were there, in complete antithesis to that moment. I think

that's a good point that you made Sunil, because it felt they were never going to join the conversations, or we were never really going to be allowed to speak in those types of spaces.

**SG:** Yes, I felt that by the end of that year, everything had been undone. The whole YBA... what was that Blair thing about Britain? What was it called?

**MS:** Cool Britannia.

**SG:** Cool Britannia... yes, taking over...

**MS:** I think to talk about race and queer politics, feminism, and the working class... It just wasn't cool.

**SG:** I think some people thought all that was solved.

**MS:** I do believe there was a moment where lots of even black artists felt compromised.

**SG:** They didn't want to be black anymore, women didn't want to be women artists anymore. It was a liability on their way because everybody was trying to get up there.

**MS:** Everyone wants to be in the White Cube as such...It's what success looked like.

**SG:** They didn't want to be taught by anything...

**MS:** I think there is a certain degree of amnesia around this time. History has been abstracted. I think lots of people are in denial of that period.

I think that is a really good place to leave the making of *From Here to Eternity*, the Whitecubeisation of the scene became the overriding force that was pulling on people. It was depressing, if you couldn't or didn't feel as though you were in the drag net of that development... and we certainly weren't... things remained precarious.