



'Queer British Art: 1861–1967', Tate Britain, 5 April–1 October 2017

Reviewed by

Christopher Cook

The Literary London Journal, Volume 15 Number 1 (Spring 2018)

A somewhat second-rate full-length portrait of Oscar Wilde – dandyish in an elegant frock coat with his left hand on his hips clasping his gloves, with a cane in the right holding its ball shaped handle firmly – hangs next to the saddest thing in this Tate Britain Exhibition. It's the door from Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol, isolated now in a gallery as a symbol of Oscar's persecution, sentenced to hard labour for living as a 'sodomite' – the insult that the Marquess of Queensberry scrawled on the visiting card that he left at Wilde's club, which you can also see in a glass case here.

This is the gay martyr who fell like Lucifer for loving men. That, at least, is the conventional reading of the conjunction of these two objects. But you might want to look closely at the hands on the hip and the head of the cane grasped so tight and arrive at another reading of Robert Pennington's portrait. A slightly androgynous Oscar takes up our gaze as we look at the portrait, hinting perhaps at his sexual preferences. Provided, however, we know how to read between the brush strokes. And there's the rub as you walk through this show. Is it the artist who signals a meaning or the viewer? Is it we who are queer or the painters, sculptors and photographers on show at Tate Britain?

'Queer British Art: 1861–1967' is intended to be an exhibition that ticks all the contemporary boxes. It celebrates the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of sexual acts between consenting men; it embraces current debates

about the fluid borders between ideas about gender and sexual preference; and it hitches its wagon to that problematic word 'queer'.

In reclaiming the word 'queer' the LGBT community reclaimed a term of abuse and signalled their otherness with pride. But if the word was at first intended to be angrily ironic, since the development of academic Queer Studies at the end of the last century it has become solemn, if not downright portentous. A canon of queer artists is assembled which includes some whose work is queerer than their lives, or the little we that we know of them. The composer Franz Schubert is a case in point, presumed to have enjoyed same sex relationships on the flimsiest of evidence. But his anxiety about his 'other' life, we are told, is there in the music, the alternations between light and dark, particularly in the slow movements of his chamber music are the musings of a divided self, particularly after the was composer was diagnosed with syphilis.

So at its simplest the word 'queer' in the title of this exhibition would seem to be about gathering together a group of Male British painters and sculptors and photographers who loved men and women artists who their loved their own sex, from the Victorian painter Simeon Solomon, who was disgraced when found cottaging in 1873, to a pair of current masters Francis Bacon and David Hockney. Queer artists if you will.

However, that begs a question. There's no doubt that Henry Tuke's scrupulously painted pictures of naked and half naked boys are about desiring men. In *The Critics* two boys – one in shorts and one naked – sit on a rocky Cornish beach watching a third in the water. What are they really criticising? His breaststroke or his physique? And you don't need the Viennese witchdoctor to point out the sexual significance on the cleft in the rocks through which the sea flows! But is the same sensibility at work here and in Gluck's defiant self-portrait, or Duncan Grant's louche image of Paul Roche 'reclining' in his underwear or Laura Knight's magnificent self-portrait painting female nudes? Can we talk about a queer sensibility? Or is it another of art history's 'isms' useful as we reconstruct our taxonomy of Western art?

Back in 1964 when Susan Sonntag wrote her ground-breaking essay *Notes on 'Camp'* her argument was that camp possessed its own discrete aesthetic which Clare Barlow, who has curated 'Queer British Art: 1861–1967', calls 'a queer sensibility' in her introductory essay in the catalogue to the show. And Sonntag's 'texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content' is precisely what we find in Cecil Beaton's photographs or Noel Coward's coral coloured dressing gown with the playwright's monogram on the top pocket.

Camp is undoubtedly a sensibility with its roots in gay culture. But it is not the same as a 'queer sensibility' at least on the evidence of the work on show at the Tate. There are queer artists and queer work, but the differences between Keith Vaughan and Glyn Philpot are greater than their similarities. Philpot's portrait of Glen Byam Shaw as Laertes is high camp, Vaughan's *Korous* agonised in its desire. And by arranging each room around a different 'subject' the exhibition would appear to acknowledge the absence of a unifying narrative.

The truth is that there some pretty second rate work on show here by artists, you feel, who only qualify because they can be labelled queer. Most of the early Victorian pictures only earn a place because of their historical interest. And while

Duncan Grant's 1911 *Men Bathing* is magnificent there are too many images where his painting is almost slapdash. Pictures that lack that single-minded purpose that makes for satisfying work. (In this respect look at Roger Fry's portrait of Edward Carpenter one of the bravest pioneers of same sex love. Not by a great painter but a great portrait in its use of a mirror to signify Carpenters 'otherness' and the trope of the empty chair suggesting an absent friend.)

For the most part the artists here are white and middle class, with just two images of men of colour. You long to know how the working class artist experienced queerness. And while the visual arts rightly dominate the exhibition there is sufficient supporting material to suggest that literature might have told its queer story too.

We end with a room devoted to the work of Bacon and Hockney and it's here that the principal narrative of this show shows its hand. It's a familiar story of adversity and triumph. Just look what was possible, this room seems to say, when it was no longer a crime to be queer. Suddenly queer artists were liberated from living outside the law and how magnificent the work was. Looking at Bacon's *Seated Figure 1961*, a portrait of his one-time lover Peter Lacy or at Hockney's *Going to be a Queen for Tonight* painted a year earlier and seven years before the passing of the Sexual Offences Act, you ask yourself whether either of these painters were really dedicated followers of liberation. Queer painters or painters who were queer.

To Cite this Article

Cook, Christopher, 'Review of: Queer British Art: 1861–1967'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 15, Number 1 (Spring 2018): 40-42. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2018/cook.pdf>.