

Queer Context
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Tate Britain's major show, *Queer British Art* has just finished. This piece reflects upon the works included and evaluates the success of the show.

The exhibition ran at Tate Britain between 5th April and the 1st October 2017. Its premise was the fifty year anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality (the 'Sexual Offences Act 1967') which has been variously debated, celebrated, criticised across many arts and political forums.

The exhibition timeline was outside of the curator's, Claire Barlow, usual range but it relates to her ongoing research interests. During a British Art Network seminar on the exhibition, Barlow described the exhibition as a "Historic show that looks at things of identity" but acknowledged that "crucially, this is a show that raises problems". For Barlow, the histories displayed are only just being accepted as interesting and important, and as such it is not a closed canon of work, but part of a (ongoing) conversation.

The show opened with a room of beautifully displayed Pre-Raphaelite works, including, of course, those by the scandalously ruined figure, Simeon Solomon. His beautifully divine *Bacchus* (1867, BMAG) appears, obviously, as does *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1877, Tate). Solomon's drawing *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love* (1865, V&A), sees the bridegroom embrace his wife, as he surreptitiously touches the hand of his presumably now grieving friend whilst covers up the very focus of their sexual attraction, an attraction that is amplified in another mythological work with a Latin inscription that translates as 'the corruption of the best is the worst thing of all'.

As one of the most tragic of stories referred to in the show, it is a shame that Solomon was not given more wall space: despite seven pieces being displayed, unfortunately there were no large canvasses. Solomon's story was both the start and the end of the exhibition. It was in 1873, long before Wilde, that Solomon was caught 'cottaging', and that his life went into an irrecoverable downward spiral.¹ Deserted by most of his friends, Solomon became an alcoholic and although he attempted to continue with his art, he spent the last twenty years of his life in and out of St. Giles workhouse before his alcoholism finally killed him in 1905. To quote Solomon's *Corruptio Optimi Pessima* (1890) - 'the corruption of the best is the worst': Solomon's corruption being brought about by society's condemnation and ostracism, *not* by his sexual preference. The violent anguish of this Solomon work shrieks not just with the classicism of Medusa, but with a modern frustration.

Other examples of 'Queer British Art' included in the show had less of Solomon's anguish thereby providing the audience with an opportunity to observe the various modes of people behaving, defining, learning and presenting notions of queer identity from the 1870s onwards.

¹ In 1873, Solomon was fined £100 for his first 'offence' (attempting to commit sodomy) and when caught in Paris, in 1874, he was sentenced to three months in prison.

John Minton's *Horseguards in their Dressing Rooms at Whitehall* (1953, Tate) is one example of the type of "flexibility" Barlow wanted viewers to ponder about whilst examining examples of queer art and presumably, evaluating or coming to know 'Queerness' both as a term, a choice, a sexuality, a code, a definition, and a lifestyle. Collectively, the works were fluid in their offerings of these codes and behaviours and viewers therefore had to be fluid in their readings: Minton's *Horseguards* speaks a story but only to a qualified interpreter of a Queer code or rather a reader with (or one who has been given) queer context.

Queer context was given via a lens upon the lifestyles and sexual behaviours of some of the artists included in the show, to such an extent that a (physical) *Box of Buttons* recalled not a sewing kit, but a series of over two hundred sexual encounters between the artists Denis Wirth-Miller, Richard Chopping, and Guardsmen, each button having been cut from each conquest's jacket as a trophy. Or perhaps not a trophy but a memory (one suspects only a passing memory at best though). In this *context*, Minton's work took on new and obvious meanings and in doing so became more fetishistic but also more textually layered. Sadly Minton's own history was no more positive than Solomon's for he committed suicide in 1957, aged only 39: I remind you reader, purely for historical context, that his suicide was ten years before the Sexual Offences Act came into being, although I caution you at conjoining those two facts.

I also caution you about creating queer context didactically. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that providing queer context where we think there may be some, can lead into a blind alley where we rewrite all ambiguities as being queer. Inevitably, some of the histories are unclear, ambiguous, covert, perhaps even secretive but viewers should be mindful of forcing a queer narrative because of our own present-day agenda. For example, Evelyn De Morgan's relationship with her model Jane was ambiguous. We know Jane appears in many works and is often nude such as in the exhibition piece the magnificent *Aurora Triumphans* (1873, Russell Cotes), but what we cannot conclusively say that Jane and De Morgan were lovers. *We can say* that there was love between them. Jane is even buried in the family tomb. It is a fine yet slightly pedantic boundary. We should open up these possible layers to re-examine the "sense of the hidden, the possible and the just-out-of-sight, whether in the realm of the visible/hidden body or the more distant realm of unseen desires, identities and relationships" (Caroline Gonda - quote from the British Art Network Seminar) but we should be mindful we don't draw pre-ordained conclusions. At points the show bordered on the comfortable through this layering of unknowns, of potentials, as it approached the potential rewriting (or even pure invention) of queer narratives. It would have felt more curatorially sound to examine what we *do* know: after all, queer artists can produce art that isn't about queer, and if this is true, presumably straight artists can produce queer art. Art is not always confessional. Could *Aurora Triumphans* have been better utilised in this context if it was displayed as part of an androgynous social narrative, rather than a lesbian personal one?

Boys and Girls

One work which does refer to androgyny is Walter Crane's *The Renaissance of Venus* (1877, Tate). Frederic Leighton remarked 'that's not Aphrodite, it's Alexandro', further commenting that 'she was a fine slip of a boy and in the Italian sun she passed well enough as a girl'.

Mistaking girls for boys and boys for girls, brings us to Sargent's *Vernon Lee* (1881, Tate). Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of the writer Violet Paget (1856-1935). She, and her family, were great friends with Sargent and his, having met when they were neighbours in Nice. Lee

and Sargent remained friends throughout their lives and this wonderful animated portrait memorialises their friendship with the words ‘to my friend Violet’ written through the very paint on the top right of the painting. The work has an energy and an impressionistic quality to it, perhaps in part due to the influence of French styles and Sargent’s Parisian training but also having been painted in just three hours.

Lee sports a decidedly masculine look, both in clothes and with her close cropped hair and round glasses which is in keeping with reports of her general demeanour and self-conscious masculine presentation.² Lee’s cropped hair is similar to the look Dora Carrington sported, and her work was also present within the show.

In other images of Lee by Sargent such as the 1889 drawing of her in the Ashmolean, Lee has a decidedly masculine look to her, perhaps even a Wildean or Bosie-seque style to her. In Sargent’s painting though, there remains a softness to Lee’s face and features which feels feminine: *she* is both masculine and feminine and our critical gaze is disrupted by this playing bridging of gender. Interestingly, despite this wonderful Sargent work being included the exhibition did nothing to examine or unpeel the layers of intrigue and suggestion about Sargent’s own sexuality which it should have done, or at least could have done. A surprising absence which was perhaps a practical one for some of the obvious candidates for the Queer exhibition would have been required for the Sargent Watercolour exhibition currently on at Dulwich which crossed. Queer British Art would have carried greater weight if we had been able to see works like Sargent’s *Male Nude* (1920, UCL), rather than De Morgan’s *Aurora*, to enable a conversation about queer context which this work surely has greater likelihood of carrying.

Another sitter who shares a similar albeit more sartorial look with Sargent’s *Lee* can be found in Jacques-Emile Blanche’s rather effeminate *Aubrey Beardsley* (1895, NPG). This work shows Beardsley sporting a soft pink flower, which he wore as a show of solidarity for Wilde who was on trial at the time. Of course, there are no known records of Beardsley’s sexuality so his inclusion in the exhibition was awkward rather than revealing (although the rare outing of the portrait was a pleasure). For the curators, Beardsley was queer by association it seems. His works *are* sexual, often puerile, e.g. his *Lysistrata* drawings (1896, V&A), but they are not queer. His inclusion in the exhibition was contrived to associate him with Wilde but was not based on Beardsley’s queerness, suggested or known. It did extend the range of the show and permit the display of Beardsley’s mastery of line, but this is ultimately an unfortunate association as Beardsley’s support of Wilde soon dimmed when the full impact of Wilde’s fall from grace had unleashed its limitations on Beardsley’s career.

Double Lives and Multiple-Meanings

Wilde of course did feature in the exhibition, adjacent to Beardsley’s works, in a rarely seen portrait by Robert Goodloe Pennington, via the original cell door of C.3.3. (which appears to be doing the rounds having been at Reading’s Art Angel exhibition in 2016), as well as the original accusatory ‘posing as a sodomite’ card left by the Marquis of Queensberry.

Pennington’s *Oscar Wilde* (1881, University of California) is a rather safe portrait, unlike the gregarious self-confident portrait of Beardsley. It was painted just as Wilde’s star was on the

² Kimberly J. Stern, *The Social Life of Criticism: Gender, Critical Writing, and the Politics of Belonging* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p.151

assent before his fully fledged dandyism and just after his American tour, but long before his scandal and downfall. Being its first foray over here for an exhibition, it was a pleasure to actually *see* the painting, particularly when we layer the well-known narrative context and history upon it. During his years of success Wilde displayed the portrait above the family's fireplace but upon Wilde's trial and subsequent downfall, the painting was auctioned off along with lots of Wilde's possessions. Displaying the 'before' (the portrait) and the 'after' (the cell door) alongside each other was powerful. It was particularly interesting to see the door decontextualized and displayed as a piece of art, as a painting hanging on a wall. But we shouldn't forget the human story behind the door, nor the story behind any of the buttons or any of the objects.

The inclusion of 'Michael Field' was another example where the objects revealed complex lives. It is a story of double meanings, a story of two people with one identity where ownership and individuality morphed into one. Michael Field was a pseudonym used by the poets Katharine Bradley and her lover, niece and ward Edith Cooper. We can say that Michael Field was a code which was used and unused, and enabled the boundaries of the women to be reconfigured beyond normative heterosexual conventions.

As Michael Field they wrote around forty works together, and a journal called *Works and Days*. As Aestheticists, they were influenced by the work of Walter Pater and they were friends with Ricketts and Shannon, also displayed, and Wilde, so their place in the show is fitting. [Their extensive diaries](#) are stored in the British Library, and have been digitised by the Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium.

The couple intended to keep their pen-name secret, but it eventually became public knowledge (apparently not long after they had confided in their close friend Robert Browning - draw your own conclusions there). 'Michael Field' had no norms. The name was used interchangeably between the two women, sometimes one was Michael, sometimes both, sometimes one was Field, sometimes both. Their friends referred to them as 'The Michael Fields' and they would swap between a single male pronoun and female pronouns. Their story isn't tragic, it is rather mundane actually, but as a pair they were devoted to each other and latterly to Catholicism (as were Wilde and Beardsley in their final days).

The exhibition included a beautiful fan and a wonderful piece of jewellery which was part of Michael Field, but its inclusion was more important for the show's exploration of blurred identities and genders, both public and private. Michael Field may well have been the prompt for Barlow's decision to avoid using any identifying pronouns in the labels. Likewise Barlow avoided using terms like gay, trans, lesbian etc., unless they were owned by the people in question: she said "it is important not to transpose terms back onto the artists if they would not have been recognised by those concerned" and whilst this is admirable, I question how diligent Barlow was with her layered narratives - I refer you to Beardsley and De Morgan as already discussed. The inclusion of Laura Knight's *Self Portrait aka The Model* (1913, NPG) caused some prattle. However, Barlow reported the LGBTQ community have been pleased to see Knight included because it is an example of a women painting a woman. Certainly in art historical terms this is rare, but did that qualify its inclusion enough though?

To Conclude

We should remember these blurred lines are still being moulded, stressed, and reshaped in both our artistic, legal, political and social landscapes. Let us also remember that it is only in

the last ten years or so that we have gone from *queer* being an insult to now being a word 'owned' by those who are. In conversation with myself, the ceramicist Matt Smith quoted a story that demonstrated this change: "I'm not *gay*" corrected a man to an interviewer, "I'm *queer*".

The exhibition teased out these societal changes and showed how people's desires are anything but straight lines. It also showed how our histories are not complete. The exhibition was thought provoking. It didn't seek to shock or be impolite, but to be sensitive and considered when considering the prejudice, the double lives and double meanings which the many stories and objects presented. The exhibition also teased out agency between people, and legal changes / challenges to certain relationships. How would we view the relationship of an aunt and niece couple now (Michael Field)? How does age or status of those involved effect their ability to consent (Wilde and the various rent boys who were on the stand during his trial)? How would we respond to the celebration or predation of a lover's body (e.g. the trophy buttons? Context is key.

One definitely didn't need to be queer to have perceived the circular nature of the exhibition. Having started with Solomon, who lived within the secretive, criminal underbelly of London homosexuality in nineteenth century Britain, we arrived in the twentieth century with David Hockney and Francis Bacon, artists who were eventually able to be overtly, outwardly and, most importantly, *legally* gay. Bacon's whole persona was centred around his sexuality, and his social and artistic circle included traversing Soho, which he called the 'sexual gymnasium of the city', and socialising with the likes of the button collecting Wirth-Miller and Chopping. Bacon's art, as always, provokes and disgusts. His figures shag (they definitely do not make love) within a blurry field of visceral violence. Hockney on the other hand offers us a rather poor piece of 'beefcake', a more Californian magazine lifestyle version of queerness.

Barlow insisted she didn't want the show to be a 'greatest hits' event, she wanted all relationships to be shown: friendships, romantic, textual, literary, artistic etc. But choosing both of these queer modern art giants as the finale seemed rather obvious, particularly as the Tate was simultaneously putting on a Hockney retrospective. Bacon and Hockney's inclusion raises the one niggling issue I had with the exhibition: is *Queer* a reductive category?

Queer British Art 1861-1967 was on view at Tate Britain, from the 5th April until October 1st 2017.

See more about each room [here](#).