

Queer British Art

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REY CONQUER

The art critic Jennifer Doyle describes visiting Andy Warhol's estate in Montauk, and noticing that all of the books on the tall shelves lining the house faced inwards, the page edges turned, vulnerably, to the room. It's possible that this was because they had come with the house and so they weren't in any meaningful way his, or that it wasn't even Warhol who had done it; but this gesture, superficially a sly—and camp—subversion of cultural capital, an ironic inversion of belle-lettrism, can also be seen as a “queer sort of formalism”, as Doyle puts it. A work (or perhaps ‘practice’) obeying formalist principles, but doing so by explicitly—literally—turning its back on the expected function of its constitutive materials, displacing utility with an ambiguous, purposeless beauty. Doyle points out that the backwards books also “literalized the ambivalent place of narrative within contemporary art”, and we could flesh this out further by noting that this rejection of narrative is achieved through an act of ostentatious concealment: the prurient curiosity which demands narrative content in order to shore up an aesthetic hierarchy—in which queers and other ‘others’ are too messily historical for the purity of formalism—is frustrated through a kind of bibliographic mooning.

In giving a history of queer theatre Neil Bartlett points to two traditions; the first, which “always claims to be the liberal or confrontational one”, is the genre of the ‘issues’-based ‘problem play’, in which queerness, as part of narrative, is shown to be a source of tension or distress. The second is one in which queerness is a mode, and is “not a problem, but a source of pleasure”, and rather than telling queer stories through the words of a script, revels in a formal, bodily queerness; and it is this, Bartlett argues, that has “done much of the heavy lifting in the fight for queer cultural freedom”. It seems clear that an exhibition which wanted to document, and certainly to contribute to, this fight, should foreground this second tradition, that is of queerness as mode or form; moreover it should foreground it on its own terms, rather than retelling it as if part of a ‘problem play’ dealing with the sad and often troubling personal lives of a century of artists.

This is the main argument that has been made against the Queer British Art exhibition held at the Tate Britain between April and October, in whose catalogue Bartlett's essay was published. “Queer formalism” does not exist outside the history of its making, and it is this history that the exhibition was, essentially, telling, but without ever seeming to realise it. Instead, ideas of

pleasure, in form or flesh, were ignored, and the often deliberately concealed narratives surrounding the exhibits, many of which could be seen to function as books flipped defiantly on the bookshelves of 19th and 20th century art, were spelled out in inelegant and gossipy captions. The exhibition began with a copy of the 1873 edition of Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, open at its famous, and famously suppressed, "Conclusion". This could have been a programmatic move; as it was, placed in a case alongside a photo of John Addington Symonds, and furnished with such a caption, its importance in the history of queer aesthetics was sidelined.

It is difficult to separate out an abstracted 'queer' art history from the desires and experiences of the artists making that art; and this would itself be a kind of defanging. But if art is queer it is not because of the life story of its maker: Pater's "Conclusion" is queer whether or not we know that he suffered, professionally and emotionally, because of an affair with a student, and indeed whether or not he did. And, for all of the apparent implications of Pater's finding beauty in "the face of one's friend" – the only part quoted by the curators – this is not the reason it was, and is, 'clocked' by those both sympathetic and otherwise to queer aesthetics: queerness does not begin and end with depictions of homoerotic encounter. Rather, it is because of the idea that art might "come to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake", in which pleasure in form is prioritised and an ends-motivated understanding of art undermined. And it is also because Pater's prose hides its meaning in subtle, beautiful sentences which achieve what they achieve through echo and allusion; for queerness, in aesthetic terms, is not a fixed quantity, but a flexible sweep of references and coded or formalised suggestions, developed between works, and between works and their avid, attuned viewers or readers. Of all this the plodding literalism of the caption shows itself clearly ignorant.

(This is not to say that queerness is 'in the eye of the beholder', a matter of reading in, rather than off, as some more conservative reviewers seemed to think – although what is also clear from these reviews is that if queerness is something like a language, not all critics can speak queer, as demonstrated in pitch-perfect philistinism by the reviewer from the Daily Mail, who could not see anything 'queer' about Frederick Leighton's eyewateringly gay *Daedalus and Icarus*: "Daedalus was Icarus's father, for God's sake!")

The show's curator has nonetheless claimed that it is a show "about art, not artists"; but in the same interview goes on to suggest that Gluck's *Lilac and Guelder Rose* is queer because it was painted "at the start of her famous relationship with the society flower arranger Constance Spry". No – although it seems clear that this these hard, flattened flowers are involved in a conversation, even an affair, that you will never be party to. They offer a curiously unerotic sensuality; they are shape, they are texture, they are, as a contemporary viewer said, "gorgeous", but any attempt to follow a well-trod allusive pathway to genitalia is deflected in a cloud of teasing spray, and by their ironic, recursive decorativeness (the 'Gluck frame', as Jack

Halberstam points out in their contribution to the catalogue, was painted not to stand out from the surrounding walls, but to match them). That a queer aesthetic might involve exaggerated attention to surface is, as Brian Dillon has pointed out, a rather tired idea, but it is worth pointing out that an obvious through-line across the rooms of the exhibition was the suspicion that, often, the ‘sitter’ of the portrait was not a person, but a piece of fabric or upholstery: Walter Sickert is indistinguishable from his armchair in Ethel Sands’s domestic scene, for instance, and a portrait of Edith Sitwell is rather desperately allowed to be included because the painter was bisexual and the writer celibate (which is certainly a kind of queer); but what seems much more obviously queer is the fact that the surrounding textiles are much more expressive than Sitwell’s inscrutable face.

The exhibition concluded with a trite invitation to a ‘conversation’ in which visitors were, in a tone-deaf reduction of painting to two-dimensional storytelling, encouraged to write or draw responses to various exhibits. Many people used these as an opportunity to comment more broadly on the exhibition (often, rightly, criticising its cosy elitism—what Huw Lemmey has **described** as its reproduction of “all the tendencies of English class anxieties that make this such a priggish, suffocating, small little country”) or else tell stories from their own lives. I later saw someone tweet one of these responses, now mounted next to William Strang’s portrait of Vita Sackville-West. “To those who ask: what is art for? On seeing ‘lady with a red hat’ at Tate one woman was moved to write ‘I like women’ for the very 1st time”, the tweet went. This is very sad: that we are still at a point where people are afraid to write this (which, whatever Richard Littlejohn may say, we are); but also that queer art had been reduced to a pale exercise in self-narration, and that this was the abiding impression the show left in its visitors.

To think that we might have to ask what art is for is to concede the fight in advance; moreover, this question is simply not very queer. Instead, we should be asking, ‘what does art do?’, or better, ‘what can art do?’. And this is a question for all of us, not just the implied philistines addressed in the tweet. If queerness in art is to mean anything other than naked young men draped over nice fabrics or each other, it must be understood as an activity, an ongoing history of recognition, redeployment, a reversal of non-queer norms. My favourite exhibit was a case showing the covers of books stolen from Islington Library by Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, altered via witty, absurd and often bawdy **collages** and thereafter returned and hidden in the stacks. They were imprisoned when they were caught: queer art can do that.