

Symposium, controversial exhibit explore gay identity

Leo J. O'Donovan | Feb. 11, 2011



"Salutat" by Thomas Eakins, 1898, oil on canvas (Addison Gallery of American Art)

WASHINGTON -- On Jan. 29, the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution held a symposium on "Addressing (and Redressing) the Silence: New Scholarship in Sexuality and American Art."

Gathering in the Nan Tucker McEvoy Auditorium, which boasts Robert Rauschenberg's great lithograph triptych "Autobiography" (1968) at its entrance, 11 scholars, some well-established figures in the field, some now entering it, held their audience amazingly fast from 9 in the morning to 8 at night.

One might have thought the symposium was an act of public penance for the removal of David Wojnarowicz's video "Fire in the Belly" from the gallery's Oct. 30-Feb. 13 exhibit "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture."

G. Wayne Clough, secretary of the Smithsonian, succumbed Dec. 1 to the two-pronged attack of John Boehner and Eric Cantor from the House of Representatives and Bill Donohue of the Catholic League. (Wojnarowicz's AIDS-themed video contains a brief passage showing a crucifix crawling with ants.)

In fact, with generous support from the John Burton Harter Charitable Trust, the symposium had long been planned by the curators of "Hide/Seek," David C. Ward and Jonathan D. Katz, and, with the exception of a stirring final paper by Jennifer Doyle, touched on Wojnarowicz's work only tangentially.

For David DeCosse's view on critics of Wojnarowicz's work, see: [Critics miss deeper truth of a fully human Jesus Christ](#) [1]

Living up to its title, most of the papers were drawn from book projects or current research agenda. The crucial importance of archives was a recurrent theme. With the gallery's Lisa Curran, painter and writer Jonathan Weinberg had co-curated "Lost and Found: Searching for the Lesbian and Gay Presence in the Archives of American Art," an auxiliary show to "Hide/Seek" drawn from the gallery's own archives.

He pleaded for preserving the past, even in its ephemera, as well as interpreting it. Joe Lucchesi described

accidentally finding a photograph of the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein in the archives of the Musée de l'Opéra in Paris and gradually learning from it of the dancer's liaison with the American painter Romaine Brooks, and how the two women chose to manage their invisibility -- and visibility.

Other papers were rather more like case studies. Against the spreading canvas of the civil rights movement, Diana Linden presented the little-known gay artist William Christopher and his series of paintings dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr.

James Boaden, a young scholar from the United Kingdom, explored the antique surrealism of the artist Jess (Burgess Collins was his name as a nuclear physicist) and the home he created in San Francisco with his poet lover, Robert Duncan. The presentation concluded with the "The Enamored Mage: Translation # 6" (1965), a marvelous summary of the artist's ambition in the style of a Victorian Maurice Sendak.

David Getsey from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago convincingly argued that Scott Burton's performance art and explicitly gay imagery were interiorly related to his (better-known and more successful) stone furniture.

Several presentations aimed to show how art representing non-normative sexuality can shed light on a historical period. Tavia Nyong'o, for example, related the curious case in the 1830s of Peter Sewally, a black man who posed as a woman to solicit white men while adeptly picking their pockets. He was repeatedly represented in a woman's dress ("The Man Monster") that mimicked fashionable women's clothes of the time. Dominic Johnson, another young Brit, resurrected Jack Smith's movie scandal of 1963, "Flaming Creatures."

Perhaps most interesting of all were three papers whose examination of individual artists opened broad historical and methodological questions: Tirza Latimer on Gertrude Stein, Christopher Reed on Mark Tobey, and Jonathan Katz on Agnes Martin.

Starting with Faith Ringgold's painted quilt, "Dinner at Gertrude Stein's" (1991), which re-imagines Stein's salon to include four prominent black writers, Latimer showed how Stein's open partnership with Alice B. Toklas represented sexual freedom for fellow artists and countered the politically expedient tendency to stigmatize sexual difference.

With almost breathless enthusiasm, Reed presented the unjustly neglected Tobey, and argued that the eccentric character of his wonderful "white paintings" suggests a new understanding of regionalism.

Katz showed how Martin came to her mature style in the 1950s in a gay community greatly influenced by Zen. Her profound commitment to heightened sensory awareness, with work that appears simply material but takes us unerringly beyond the material, Katz argued, justifies speaking of a "sexuality of abstraction."

Meanwhile, the "Hide/Seek" exhibition continued on the gallery's second floor through Feb. 13. One wonders if its congressional and Catholic critics ever considered visiting it.

Introduced as "the first major exhibition examining the influence of gay and lesbian artists in creating modern portraiture," it begins with two male nudes, one Larry Rivers' in-your-face, larger-than-life-sized image of his then lover, "Frank O'Hara with Boots" (1954), the other Andrew Wyeth's Apollonian vision of his blond neighbor, Eric Standard, in "The Clearing" (1917). In the former, the pose says everything; in the latter the erotic charge is deepened by the subject's tanned upper body and pale flesh below the waist.

The show ends with two life-sized "Self-Portraits" by Jack Pierson (2003, 2005), showing not himself but two different young men who, while not indeed indecent, are certainly sexually insinuating. Critics uncomfortable before such images might be still more uncomfortable if they took the time to ask why that is really so.

Some of the other artists shown are major indeed, above all Thomas Eakins, represented by one of his most famous boxing pictures, "Salutat" (1898), which fairly trumpets his interest in the male body.

But there are others of the first rank as well: George Bellows painting boys and young men escaping August heat "River Front No. 1" (1915), John Singer Sargent drawing a young black bellhop from his hotel, Ellsworth Kelly with a fine line drawing of David Herbert (1957), representative pieces by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (who were lovers in the mid-1950s), and Alice Neel with her vibrant portrait of Frank O'Hara (1960).



It is not that all the artists were gay, but rather that they shared the exploration of gay

identity by artists who were, but in variously open ways: Charles Demuth with celebrations of sailors that were not at all like his precisionist cityscapes, Marsden Hartley with his coded abstract tribute to his lover Karl von Freyburg in Berlin, Berenice Abbott photographing legendary figures such as Djuna Barnes and Janet Flanner in Paris in the 1920s, Paul Cadmus' flamboyant eroticism during and after World War II, the full visibility of photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin. (Anyone put off by Mapplethorpe's pictures of nude men might think again on seeing his searing image of Roy Cohn and his own self-portrait.)

A special moment in the show, and probably its high point, comes about midway through, with the pairing of two portraits by Romaine Brooks (1874-1970): her "Self-Portrait" of 1923, and "Una, Lady Troubridge" of 1924, opposite Grant Wood's deeply affecting "Arnold Comes of Age" (1930). The Brooks self-portrait, on a balcony overlooking the rooftops of Paris, could not be more self-confident or contained.

In her masculine attire, with heavily rouged lips and firmly set chin, she dares the viewer to consider who she is. Lady Troubridge, painted with two pet dachshunds and also in male-style dress, is still more severe, coolly awaiting what questions one might have about her fervent Catholicism or way of life.

Young Arnold, on the other hand, pensive and newly aware against a typical Woods landscape of golden abstraction, ponders what has just happened in the lower right background of the painting, where two nude figures have been bathing. This is the Grant Wood of "American Gothic," painted also in 1930, his supposed traditionalism undercut by his personal identity.

The great ruckus over the censorship of "Fire in the Belly" has had salutary results, for the artist Wojnarowicz and for the show from which his video was censored. Both have drawn far greater attention, as is almost always the case in a democratic society responding to censorship.

The video, which the curators of "Hide/Seek" might well have not included (shot on a trip to Mexico, it is relatively piecemeal and unresolved), can now be seen everywhere. Behind the National Portrait Gallery, and until the conclusion of "Hide/Seek," for example, a "Museum of Censored Art" was set up in a trailer truck to show the video all day long. The Museum of Modern Art, which had not previously owned the piece (a significant fact in itself), also quickly bought a copy and now shows it daily.

'Hide/Seek' has been criticized for reductionism, as a latter-day revival of Dr. Freud's pansexualism. But if insisting on sexuality can become obsessive, then surely ignoring it can be dangerous repression. We still have much to learn from Walt Whitman (represented in the show with a wonderful photo by Thomas Eakins), who wrote in *Leaves of Grass*:

Through me forbidden voices;
Voices of sexes and lusts -- voices veiled,
And I remove the veil; Voices indecent,
By me clarified and transfigured.

A society that listened to Whitman's prophecy would more readily allow Rauschenberg's 'Biography' to celebrate men who were not simply his friends and fellow painters but whom he also loved.

[Jesuit Fr. Leo O'Donovan is president emeritus of Georgetown University in Washington.]

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