

"Queer British Art 1861-1967"

TATE BRITAIN

The idea of encapsulating a nation's history of queer art in a single show could easily have led to a neck-breaking curatorial endeavor going awry. What makes art queer or otherwise anyway? And how can one tell what is queer and what isn't when examining a period in which socially unacceptable desires often had to be disguised, lest criminal prosecution follow? The press release for "Queer British Art 1861-1967," curated by Clare Barlow, explains that the word *queer* was meant to express the "full diversity of sexualities and gender identities represented in the show." Astonishingly, the show succeeds in honoring the richness of the subject, filling eight rooms with nearly two hundred works of art accompanied by copious, well-researched background information provided on wall labels—more than a hundred years of work executed by very diverse and extensive communities packed into one exhibition.

The exhibition timeline starts in 1861, when Great Britain abolished the death penalty for sodomy, and ended in 1967, with the partial decriminalization of sex between men. Consequently, the show marks the fiftieth anniversary of the latter event. It is impossible to forget the stories of lives broken by persecution; some of the objects on view are chilling, for instance the door to Oscar Wilde's cell at Reading Gaol. But subversive humor abounds as well, as in a series of collages made on books stolen from public libraries around Islington, North London, by the playwright Joe Orton and his partner Kenneth Leith Halliwell. These illicit works, dated 1959-62, include



Duncan Grant, *Bathing*, 1911, oil on canvas, 7' 6" x 10' 11". From "Queer British Art 1861-1967."

Queen's Favourite by Phyllis Hambleton, adorned with a suggestive image of wrestling men, and *The Secret of Chimneys* by Agatha Christie, showing a pair of cats getting married. But their pilfering from the stacks earned Orton and Halliwell each a six-month prison sentence—as Orton commented, "because we were queers."

A recurring theme in the show is the discrepancy between public and private lives. In the case of Keith Vaughan, Barlow illustrates this discordance by juxtaposing canvases meant for public display with private drawings. The paintings, such as *Kowros*, 1960, portray partly figurative, partly abstract silhouettes of men. From the flat color blocks of paint, we can read their bulky frames, muscles, and confrontational attitudes. However, it's Vaughan's drawings that frankly depict homosexual eroticism, sometimes tender, sometimes explicit.

In a section titled "Bloomsbury and Beyond," we see artists playing more daringly on the verge of the acceptable. Two large-scale paintings in oil on canvas—Ethel Walker's *Decoration: The Excursion of Nausicaa*, 1920, depicting a group of naked women, and Duncan Grant's *Bathing*, 1911, showing a group of men enjoying time by the lake—juxtaposed here, refer to classic ideals of beauty. But in subtle yet suggestive ways, both works also convey a sense of erotic freedom within same-sex communities.

A strong sense of the solidarity that binds such groups emerged throughout the show. The exhibition also highlights how intertwined the fights for gay rights and for a freer view of female sexuality could be—evoking this idea, for example, through the several depictions of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, 1894. The story is based on one from the Gospels, in which the pleasure brought to Herod's guests by his daughter's dance leads to the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. Early Christian scholars interpreted the tale as a depiction of lust, but in Wilde's hands it became a springboard for the exploration of the modern image of woman.

The enclaves where the precursors of today's LGBTQ community could converge were private houses, dance halls, and members' clubs staging censored plays. These spaces nourished fragile networks that, despite obstacles, created possibilities for the acknowledgment of equal rights, as well as of the beauty in diversity and the richness of queer arts.

—Sylvia Serafinowicz

PARIS

Marion Verboom GALERIE JÉRÔME POGGI

Presented under the title "*Temporaldaten*" (Temporal Data)—a philosophical term coined by the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl—Marion Verboom's recent exhibition explored the problem of how we experience and describe time. Eschewing chronology, Verboom juxtaposed references to artworks, artifacts, and architecture hailing from far-flung cultures, leaving the viewer to connect the dots—or *daten*, as Husserl might have said.

At the heart of the exhibition, an installation of five totem pole-like columns from the series "*Achronies*" (Anachronisms), 2017, evoked the Roman Forum. Although the columns are not classical in style, they are, like those of the famous ruins, temporally confusing: The Romans recycled parts of older structures to create new buildings and thereby upset the archeological stratigraphy of the site, whereas Verboom confuses things by interspersing citations from pre-Columbian artifacts, medieval Christian iconography, fifteenth-century Andalusian architectural details, and even Picasso. She rescales and strategically crops her diverse source imagery to create casts of roughly the same size and shape in colored resin, cement, and plaster. She then balances these modules one on top of another in stacks that mostly range in height from four to seven feet, but the tallest stack, or "elevation," as the artist calls each of the sequentially numbered works in the series, was *Achronie—Élévation I*, which rises to almost nine feet. Combining figurative and abstract imagery, the whimsical piles suggest illogical strata guaranteed to make an amateur archaeologist's head spin.

The fact that the casts are not fixed to each other implies mutability. Change and transience, in fact, have been key themes throughout Verboom's oeuvre. By decreeing her modular sculptures permutable—meaning that not only the artist herself but also a curator or a collector might reorder them—Verboom refuses a single definitive narrative. She also places a limit on her own intentionality. But, as random and



View of "Marion Verboom," 2017. Photo: Nicolas Brasseur.

temporary as Verboom's mash-ups may be, Jung's law of synchronicity holds true: Put any combination of modules together and formal, conceptual, and personal connections will emerge. And in cases where figurative imagery is in the mix, narrative interpretation is all but inevitable.

For example, in *Achronie—Élévation I*, a bronze-tinted wreath of fangs sits atop the flowing hair of a blindfolded female head cast in blue-violet plaster. The original thirteenth-century stone sculpture from which the figure was taken is an allegorical representation of the synagogue from the exterior of France's Strasbourg Cathedral. Her added "crown" is actually an enlargement of a twentieth-century Amazonian wedding bracelet with a band of human teeth. But the two modules find commonalities irrespective of these fascinating, but historically unrelated, contexts. Formally, they can be seen as a study in textural contrast—soft flowing hair and smooth fabric versus hard, sharp teeth. Conceptually, they are united by a powerful sense of loss, of being "sans eyes, sans teeth," as Shakespeare's Jacques would have it. Spiritually, they fuse together to suggest a mystical being.

While Verboom has based most of her modules on objects and structures she has encountered in museums or at historical sites, she also incorporates a few personal references. The top module of *Achronie—Élévation III* is a white cylinder with two hands sticking out, thumbs and pinkies stretched as far apart as possible. The hands are the artist's, I was told. In exposing her own personal system of measurement, Verboom reminds the viewer that distance, whether spatial or temporal, is subjective.

—Mara Hoberman

Cécile Beau 22.48 M°

If the artistic world of Cécile Beau (who is originally from a cave-studded part of the Pyrenees) feels extremely remote from the human, it is nonetheless imbued with a sense of life. Featuring materials such as air, water, rock, tree bark, and charcoal, her work has an elemental character. As seen in her recent exhibition "*Lithique*" (Lithic), it amounts to what she calls a "science-fiction poetry."

In the sculpture *Albedo 0.60*, 2017, viewers found a round vessel filled with a black liquid and a milky substance floating in the middle of it. This fluid is, in fact, a solution of water and Chinese ink, and the soft, unstable white surface is actually ice, frozen thanks to an under-water cooling unit. The blackness of the ink-stained water makes the liquid's depth unfathomable; viewers, leaning over to get a better view, saw only their own reflections. The sculpture ceaselessly changes like a meteorological phenomenon, bringing to mind Hans Haacke's early systems works, such as *Condensation Cube*, 1963-65, with its continual transformations of the contained fluid.

Five vivid blue images, cyanotypes produced using the rays of the sun, show astrological charts for the precise moments when meteorites entered the earth's orbit at five random spots around the globe, among them Assisi, Italy, and Aarhus, Denmark, between 1640 and last year. In these "*Meteors Ascendances*," 2016, all we saw were diagrams in which the visualization of the constellations was accompanied by scientific data. These in some ways make up for the absence of the object in question—that is, the meteorite itself—or for the crater, a sort of negative presence, left following its impact on the ground. These astrological maps with the signs of the zodiac included a proposed thirteenth constellation, Ophiuchus, inserted between Scorpio and Sagittarius. Astronomy and astrology, separated since modern science claimed dominion over the study of the heavens, encounter each other once again.

In a second room, one saw *Accretion*, 2017, comprising thirteen cement hemispheres—the same number as the constellations in the cyanotypes—of varying diameters. They were hung on the wall along a descending diagonal axis. Meant to represent planets, these mysterious half-orbs are covered with a mixture of pigments, sand, or earth, and each has a name derived from Mesopotamian (not Greek) mythology. More than by the shadowy space in which it was placed—the show was lit by natural light only—this work was dominated by a deafening and cavernous noise, produced by a black cement mixer. Invisible volcanic stones, sand, and charcoal turned inside this contraption's black hole. This threatening whirlpool, which seemed as if it could swallow up the entire exhibition in one fell swoop, distanced viewers from the harmony of the spheres discussed by Johannes Kepler, bringing the audience closer to the lithic dimension suggested by the show's title. In general, Beau's works seem to respond to Haacke's suggestion on the occasion of his 1965 exhibition at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf: "Articulate something natural."

—Riccardo Venturi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shree.



Cécile Beau, *Albedo 0.60*, 2017. Figurative system, copper, water, Chinese ink, polyethylene tub, 60 x 60".