

Sex Life: Homoeroticism in Drawing

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SAW GALLERY

OTTAWA

JULY 19 –

SEPTEMBER 28, 2019

In July 2019, Ottawa's SAW Gallery inaugurated its completely renovated and expanded facility in the Arts Court building with a 3-part series of events: the centre piece being the exhibition *Sex Life: Homoeroticism in Drawing* curated by Jason St-Laurent, the gallery's curator. Focusing on a wide range of graphic work, the exhibition brings together, painting, drawing, books, zines, and other printed material by a diverse group of artists in terms of both artistic approach and geography. Included in the show are: Cindy Baker (Lethbridge), Panos Balomenos (Athens/Helsinki), Dave Cooper (Ottawa), G.B.Jones (Toronto), Sholem Krishtalka (Berlin), Zachari Logan (Regina), Kent Monkman (Toronto), Diane Obomsawin (Montréal) and Mia Sandhu (Toronto). Despite its variety, however, the show maintains a rigorous focus on the tense pairing its title implies: sexuality and the body as a vital way of inhabiting both personal and social/political existence.

This is immediately apparent upon entering the gallery, where one is struck first by one of Zachari Logan's large drawings: a self-portrait titled *Invincible 2* (2009). A black and white nude, the figure wears sunglasses and bears what appear to be two bullet wounds. Moreover, there is something obscurely feminine in the man's stance, the position of the arms and shoulders, the tilt of the hips and neck subtly echo the postures of figures in Renaissance painting while at the same time highlight the man's somewhat idealized beauty and fragility. It is the conjunction of that posture and his wounds that drives one to read the figure as a contemporary iteration of St. Sebastien, a long-standing and traditional figure of homoerotic interest from as far back as Guido Reni, suggesting the work's self-conscious relationship to and awareness of a particular tradition in homoerotic art. In this drawing, however, the Sebastien figure is not gazing heavenwards, but directly at the viewer through sunglasses, marrying vulnerability or anxiety with a come-on. The work is juxtaposed, in a telling choice, with another male nude, in blue this time, *Feeding No. 5* (2015), in which the central figure is covered in living birds that perch upon his body. Here the strange marriage of Eros and Thanatos that gives *Invincible 2* its power is replaced by a peculiar cross-species intimacy, that again highlights the figure's vulnerability and seductiveness and, in focusing on the contact between man and bird, or nature, foregrounds the inevitable question of relationality the nude evokes as genre: the potentially scopophilic relationship between work and viewer certainly, but also that of the gay male gaze and the extent to which it may or may not be analogous with the male gaze more generally, or again the relationship, or conjunction, of desire itself with its representation.

Hanging next to these drawings, Panos Balomenos' watercolours capture sexual encounters that sometimes take on orgiastic energy as in *In Camera/Purple* (2007) with its sodomitical daisy chain. *Metropolitan Encounters 2*, on the other hand, represents just two men: the first wears the vestments of an Eastern Orthodox cleric and seems to be mounting the other, seemingly nude, man, while inserting a finger into that fellow's mouth. If one sets aside the ecclesiastical costume, which is admittedly difficult to do, the image is likely to be familiar to viewers of gay porn films. Despite this, the painting captures, in relatively tight close up and in isolation, a single moment in a sexual experience, giving it a paradoxical static quality not characteristic of motion picture pornography, a kind of timelessness heightened by the image's refusal to let the represented men's gazes meet. The priest stares down at his partner while the second man gazes out towards the viewer, highlighting the presence of the viewer once again, and the extent to which the image is one at the intersection of activities: fucking and viewing, yearning and distancing. In this it acts, in some ways at least, as a place holder for some displaced but longed for experience, something analogous in hazy ways to the feeling of icon paintings in religious settings, which inevitably position their viewers in relation to the longed for divine or communion of the saints.

Other standouts in the exhibition are the drawings of G. B. Jones, which recuperate something of the technique and iconography of renowned draughtsman and queer paragon, Tom of Finland. However, in Jones' iconographical world, Tom's impossibly butch and excessively endowed sailors, soldiers, cops and bikers become young lesbians sporting the clothing and other accoutrements of their work. Moreover, these images offer up what could be read as a succession of events and scenarios in which the "Tom Girls," if one might, meet, have sex and create new forms of community in an implied, but fractured, narrative and in so doing offer a radical challenge to conventional ideas of relationship and gender alike, even queer ideas of them. Mia Sadhu's works of gouache on cut paper take a different, but no less fascinating, approach to the matter of queer women's desire. Pieces such as *Summer Solace* (2017) leverage contrast and tension against expectation, what we look for against what is possible, joining human and plant forms in ways not entirely dissimilar to Logan's work, or colour and detail against flat volumes of black, in compositions that call to mind the paradoxically two-sided phenomenological nature of sexuality: the ways it joins pleasure and danger, contact and loneliness.

Sholem Krishtalka's homage to Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions* (2017-2019) dominates the gallery's second room. For this piece, Krishtalka painstakingly recopied pages of Mitchell's book, a germinal and fantastical novel from the early years of the Gay Liberation Movement¹ that has had a significant impact since. He inserts hand illuminated capitals and ornaments and hangs the finished pages in the company of watercolours depicting scenes from life in Berlin's gay milieu. These "Berlin Diary" images, which are visually dense and layered, and make effective use of both colour and chiaroscuro, present the full range of contemporary gay life as it is lived in urban centres across the world: domestic scenes, portraits, erotic scenes, and depictions of nights in clubs and sex clubs. Juxtaposed with the fairy-tale tone and ambiance marking Mitchell's

text, Krishtalka's work simultaneously suggests the continuity and complexity of elements of gay culture, particularly—and appropriately, for this exhibition—the sexual and intimate elements Frank Browning has characterized as the “culture of desire.” In both the novel and the paintings, the ways in which community arises from sexual contact are dramatized and rendered vividly and, importantly, situated both socially and artistically as part of an ongoing tradition.

In considering these and the other works in the show, however diverse they may be, one is struck most powerfully by the unity of the thematic, the political and formal concerns driving them. Underlying the force of bodily presence and sexuality in the show's images is a conception of eros, of desire as *connection*. This connection is consciously conceived of and structured as both diverse and *proliferating*: the sexual connection between people, the connection of human beings to nature, artwork to artistic tradition, and the creation of community are made legible as embodied and pleasurable, as *erotic*. Time and again the import, the agency of desire in psychological, social and political contexts is put forward, indeed offered as one answer to the perennial question: What

is to be done? In this the exhibition, *Sex Life* joins with Bataille in his affirmation concerning the power of eroticism (and poetry, that in this context one might take as *poiesis*, or *making*), that it leads to “the blending and fusion of separate objects [...] through death to continuity.”² And in an increasingly fractured, polarizing and isolating world, that is an idea that feels more timely than ever.

1. The novel was first published in 1977 by Calamus Books and was reissued in 2019 with a new introduction and preface by Nightboat Books.
2. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 25.

Peter Dubé is a Montréal-based writer, art critic, and member of the editorial committee at *ESPACE art actuel*. He holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Humanities from Concordia University and his most recent book is the short fiction collection *Beginning With the Mirror*.



Sex Life: Homoeroticism in Drawing, 2019. Exhibition View. Photo: Justin Wonnacott / SAW.