

APRIL 7, 2017

Queer British Art 1861-1967
Tate Britain

Robin Richmond



Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein)
Self-Portrait 1942



Portrait of Oscar Wilde, 1884, Robert
Goodloe Harper Pennington, and the door
from Wilde's prison cell in Reading jail

On the day I write this, it has been announced that Jeffrey John, an openly gay Anglican clergyman in a civil partnership, has been passed over yet again for promotion to a Bishopric, despite his proven commitment to the Christian church, his experience and his undoubted qualifications. Objections to his sexuality were the reasons why his appointment as Bishop of Reading was summarily and shockingly withdrawn by the Church of England fourteen years ago, and this is why he has been an almost-ran in seven other diocesan elections since. This is a scandal that is hard to countenance in our supposedly “enlightened” times, when even a child of five is likely to be familiar and accepting of diverse sexual orientations. I find myself baffled by these supposedly Christian value judgements. As Groucho Marx said; “Get me a child of five.”

This new show at Tate Britain takes its specific dates from the year when the death penalty for sodomy was abolished, and ends with the date of decriminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales, so it's clearly a show with a defining agenda and a powerful and moving story to tell. I find I have an aversion to exhibitions that sequester groups into movements, like Women's Art which I wrote about last week, or Black Art, which will be the subject of a

future show at Tate. But my *a priori* prejudice about this thematic approach is well and truly humbled here.

My aversion to fulsome accompanying text is also quietened. Exhibitions should have a clear, strong, eloquent narrative arc that speaks out from the floor or walls. But bring your reading glasses because but these stories are essential reading. And there is a lot of reading to be done. Why is a beat up old door covered in locks hanging on the wall? Why is a chiselled masculine gaze interrogating us in the poster? Why is a dressing gown immured like a religious relic in a glass case?

Because there is so much coded sexuality history embedded in these objects. Oscar Wilde's prison door is a chilling reminder of his years in Reading jail. Noel Coward's dressing gown speaks volumes of the protectiveness afforded to him and so many others by the theatre. The stern, apparently male gaze is a self-portrait of Gluck, otherwise known as Hannah Gluckstein. This is a show that celebrates the consolations of art, and the transformational power that turns fear and loathing and prejudice into something good - an alchemical process that is profoundly life affirming.

"For me to use the word 'queer' is a liberation; it was a word that frightened me, but no longer." Derek Jarman

I hope that members of the General Synod of the Church of England have a day out at Tate Britain one day soon.