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Portrait of the artist as a gay man

by **Roberto Friedman**

It's Thanksgiving week, and Out There is scribbling away, sitting in the courtyard of the building that houses the Smithsonian Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, DC. We're waiting for a friend, here to see *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, the first major museum exhibition to examine sexual identity in modern American portraits (through Feb 13, 2011). It was co-curated by **Jonathan David Katz**, director of the doctoral program in visual studies at SUNY/Buffalo, and NPG historian **David C. Ward**.

The works on display begin with the late 19th century, and at the sight of the **Thomas Eakins** oil painting *Salutat* (1898) in the gallery's entrance, we know that we have come to the right place. In the painting, an all-male crowd is roaring its approval of a boxer's physique. It's a rousing kick-off to the show of 105 works, and in our procession through to works of the late 20th century, we'll have plenty of occasions to bestow similar appreciation.

Notable photographs include a study of artist **Marcel Duchamp** as his transgender alter ego **Rose Selavy** by **Man Ray**; a handsome **Lincoln Kirstein**, taken by **Walker Evans**; and photos of gallerist **Betty Parsons** and **Bessie Smith**, who was a male impersonator before her famous singing career. But the show's paintings are even more revealing than its photos. There are whole worlds contained in **Charles Henry Demuth**'s watercolors of same-sex dancing in the Harlem Renaissance (*Cabaret Interior with Carl Van Vechten*, 1918, and *Dancing Sailors*, 1917), or in **John Singer Sargent**'s charcoal drawing of a hotel bellhop, *Nude Male Standing* (**Thomas McKeller**) (1917-20).

Pre-Stonewall America picks up the pace, with pieces such as **Andy Warhol**'s drawing **Truman Capote's Shoe**, in gold leaf and ink (1955),

and a rare **Robert Rauschenberg** self-portrait from 1965. RR's lover **Jasper Johns** ' *Ventriloquist* (1983) looks back to this era, when gay people had to speak the truth of their existence through indirection or other means.

Stand-out works in this exhibit are too plentiful for us to be anywhere near comprehensive, but they include the **Jess** collage *The Mouse's Tale* (1951-54), **Beauford Delaney's** portrait of **James Baldwin** (1963), and rare figurative studies of lovers from **Ellsworth Kelly** and **Agnes Martin**. There's a painting by **David Hockney**, who was courageously out in his life and art in the early 60s, when homosexuality was still illegal in Britain. *We Two Boys Together Clinging*, from 1961, refers to the poem by **Walt Whitman**, whose image, in a photograph taken by Eakins in 1891, presides over the show like a guardian spirit.

AIDS-era masterworks include **Jerome Caja** 's *Charles Devouring Himself* (1991), painted with his friend's ashes mixed with nail-polish; *Interim Couple (1164)* (1994), an out-of-focus impression of the world since AIDS by art photographer **Bill Jacobson**; and mere dips into the deep wells of inspiration in works by **Robert Mapplethorpe** , **Duane Michals**, **David Wojnarowicz**, **Peter Hujar**, **Mark Morrisroe** , **Tee Corinne**, **Keith Haring**, **Catherine Opie**, **Nan Goldin** and **AA Bronson**. When we tell you that we have merely scratched the surface of the show with these gay artists' contributions to the world of portraiture, you know that any upcoming visit to DC should include a visit to the NPG. Its website is found at npg.si.edu.

PS: A complementary exhibition, *Lost and Found: The Lesbian and Gay Presence in the Archives of American Art*, presents letters, photos and printed materials that provide glimpses into the lives of gay American artists, at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, also through Feb. 13 of next year.

Epic epidemic

Looking ahead to the new year, we're pleased to pass along an announcement for the commercial release of a popular success from this year's Frameline fest, director **David Weissman's** *We Were Here*, which is set to open at the Castro Theatre in SF on Feb. 25, 2011. Here's the 411:

"*We Were Here* is the first film to take a deep and reflective look back at the arrival and impact of AIDS in San Francisco. It explores how the city's inhabitants were affected by, and responded to, that unprecedented calamity. The film tells an epic story through only five voices. All the interviewees lived in San Francisco prior to the epidemic, their relationships to SF formed in more exuberant times. Their stories of how the epidemic altered their lives are not only intensely personal, but also address the much larger historic and metaphoric themes – the political and sexual complexities, the terrible emotional toll, and the role of women, particularly lesbians, in caring for and fighting for their gay brothers.

"*We Were Here* explores what was not so easy to discern in the midst of it all – the parallel histories of suffering and loss, and of community coalescence and growth. Despite legitimate fears of being forced back into the closet by AIDS, the gay community was in many ways greatly empowered by the challenges that the epidemic presented. Though an SF-based story, the issues addressed in the film extend not only beyond SF, but also beyond AIDS itself. *We Were Here* speaks to our societal relationship to death and illness, our capacity as individuals to rise to the occasion, and the importance of community in addressing unimaginable crises." The work-in-progress version that screened at the film festival garnered raves. We're already looking forward to the Castro run.

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