“Not to Know the Unknowable”: Queer Australian Art, 1880–1940

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The artist Jeffrey Smart (1921–2013) once said he thought he was “the only homosexual in Australia . . . . Being an artist and being queer was a very lonely situation.”[1] I start my essay with this anecdote because the history of LGBTQIA+ art in Australia pre-1940 is distinctive, “askew,” and inherently queer. A gay thinker said to me recently, “There were no homosexuals, queers, or gays in Australia before the 1970s—there were just ‘pooftas’ [poofters].” (This highly pejorative, ubiquitous slur for gay man was used until the 1980s but is rarely heard anymore.)

Were there were no “homosexuals” as such in Australia in the period covered by this exhibition?[2] This essay attempts to unpack the distinctive contours of homosexual artistic experience in Australia and highlights the very different experiences of queer women and men, many of whom were part- or full-time expatriates. Today, Australia has one of the best known and most vibrant queer cultures in the world. A part of this success rests on the work of what I term here the “queer Australian art ancestors,” the subject of this chapter. For a nation with a population of less than four million at the time of its federation (1901), it can be argued that the relatively small continent of Australia has made a major contribution to global visibility, practices, and understandings of queer art.

Background to Same-Sex and Queer Life and Art in Australia

Following the American War of Independence, a British Act of Parliament authorised the use of ‘New South Wales’ (where Sydney, or ‘Port Jackson’, is situated) as a penal colony in 1784. The so-called ‘First Fleet’, a now most contentious arrival or ‘invasion’ arrived in 1788. Everyone on board was under military control, which is important in understanding Australian mentalities. Australia experienced great waves of migration during several gold rushes and during economic downturns in Europe. It always had a multicultural population, with foreign people of color present from the first wave of British settlement/invasion and mixed race populations living in many parts of the nation. Indigenous Australians were poorly understood and perturbed some missionaries because they did not always adhere to a strict gender binary. In 1901, the newly established Federation of former colonies legislated a

"White Australia Policy" to restrict mainly Asian immigration. In addition to prohibitions on such "others," there had already been a raft of laws prohibiting homosexual behavior in Australia. Upon being colonized by the British, the Australian colonies inherited a mosaic of laws including the Buggery Act (1533). Male homosexuality was policed under a cluster of laws that included buggery, gross indecency, and soliciting (prostitution). The death penalty for buggery was in place until 1883 in New South Wales [in Britain it was 1861]; the following maximum penalty was life in prison (lasting in the state of Victoria until 1949). Tensions between the two dominant religions, Anglican and Catholic, ran deep, and Catholic influence remained a major impediment to homosexual law reform in the twentieth century.

The Australian colonies were marked by a shortage of women and the dominance of homosocial environments. In order to discredit transportation of convicts, Sydney was called the "Sodom of the South Seas." Homosexuality was often associated with foreigners and cosmopolitan affectation. A culture of hedonism, heavy drinking, pub (public house or hotel) life and cross-class socialising pervaded colonial life. This influenced the emergence of homosexual subcultures in the 1920s and '30s, which were often brash, socially mixed and alcohol-fueled. One such homosocial venue was Black Ada's Academy School of Dancing, a coded venue in 1930s run by an openly gay person of colour (POC), Samuel Roy Pearce (1898–1976); a mystery remains as to whether Pearce had a drag persona "or merely managed this 'resort for perverts.'" Ada had been a radio and vaudeville worker, and his identity is unclear—he might have been Portuguese, an Indigenous Australian, or a POC from elsewhere; his mother was descended from enslaved Africans in Nova Scotia.[6] At Ada's club, same-sex body-to-body dancing was allowed, but "no funny business," and the police regularly made raids.[7] The moral policing so endemic to Australian life was an inducement alongside the relatively small art market for creative practitioners – ambitious artists, writers and performers - to become expatriate.

Expatriate or Sexual Refugee?

Gertrude Stein said that "self-exile *was* modern art."[8] There was considerable entanglement of queer and queer adjacent people working in the art world overseas. The concept of queer "crossing" or "traffic" is essential in studying Australian queer art, as Australians have frequently moved between their continent and various queer "homes"—predominantly London, Paris, and New York, which were the best places to study art since they were among

the richest cities in the nineteenth century world. As a result, Australia suffered from a type of sexuality "brain-drain." Indeed, until the 1970s, many creative individuals found Australia's stringent censorship and the absence of a substantial art world reason enough to force them abroad.

In conducting the research for this Australasian (Australia and New Zealand) part of the exhibition, I have been struck by the number of queer and queer-adjacent women born as early as the 1860s in Australia who became successful artists, albeit often as expatriates. As writer Susan Thomas notes, expatriates are also informants.[9] For many of the women-loving women we have ample surviving evidence in letters, memoirs, diaries, and other recollections—along with the art itself—to assert a queer identity. Assessing the men, with the exception of a handful, is more akin to an archaeological dig: many of their records were deliberately or accidentally destroyed (Charles Conder's in a London house fire that also killed his wife).

Although Australia had less class consciousness than Britain, money helped. Financial standing played a major role in the making of queer art in Australia, and it was central to gay and lesbian horizons and possibilities. Women had better access to education and suffrage in Australia than many nations elsewhere. The first female Australian university student, Bella Guerin, graduated in 1883. Furthermore, New Zealand and Australia were the first self-governing countries in the world to enshrine in law the right for women to vote in parliamentary elections (New Zealand in 1893, the colony of South Australia in 1894, and the Australian nation in 1902, where women could also stand for election).

Work made by Australian queer women throughout the first half of the twentieth century is remarkable—and there is a lot of it. It is essential to recognize that some of these women might have seen their "same-sex desire as evidence of an evolving higher type that could pursue an aesthetic sexuality that was divorced from the reproductive maternal desire" typical of the period.[32] They were not necessarily lesbians and they did not use this word, anyway.

One of the earliest and most important artists is Dora Ohlfsen (1869–1948). She moved more or less permanently to Europe in 1886, living in Berlin, St. Petersburg (where she met her lifelong partner, Russian countess Elena von Kugelgen), and mainly in Rome, becoming one of the world's best-known Edwardian female sculptors. She specialized in low-relief medal

work. Her bas-relief *The Awakening of Australian Art* (1907) represented a beautiful, nude woman rising from the bush (forest) and was acquired by the Petit Palais (fig. 3). She also created an iconic medal depicting the ANZAC sacrifice, and another representing suffragettes, bringing upon "the artist a shower of appreciation from women of all countries in Paris at the time." She created exquisite medal portraits of her lover, and sculpted highly erotic, female nudes.

Ohlfsen lived for a short time in Sydney, where she was meant to create a large-scale bronze relief for the state gallery, but this fell through due to costs.[1] Ohlfsen remarked on the good situation of women there: "In other lands your Australian women are looked to as pioneers, as women with golden opportunities; but here you seem to take your advantages as a matter of course . . . . It certainly is good to see the absence of the sex-antagonism which is so pronounced in other countries." Back in Italy she did work for Benito Mussolini, creating war memorials and churches. She and her partner von Kugelgen were found dead together in mysterious circumstances in their Rome flat in 1948.[33] Their tombstone states in part: 'Elected souls – Inseparable friends'.

Arts and Crafts practitioner Eirene Mort (1879–1977), designed an unconventional house named 'Weld' in an exclusive part of Sydney to share with her female partner Nora "Chips" Weston.[34] Mort was a prominent figure in the crafts movement and worked across disciplines. Margaret Preston (1875–1963) is probably the most loved and famous Australian woman artist of this period. She was in an unconventional marriage from 1919 (she lived much of her later life in an hotel, refusing to manage a household) and she spent much of her life in close relationships with other women artists. Preston inherited an estate at an early age, enabling her to open an art school in Adelaide. She was probably in a same-sex relationship with Brisbane-born Bessie Davidson (1879–1965), a Sapphic pioneer, who was her pupil in 1903. They traveled and studied in Europe on Davidson's allowance between 1904 and 1910. Preston returned to her native Australia, but Davidson remained in Paris until 1947. Davidson subsequently had a close relationship with another Brisbane painter, Anne Alison Greene (1878–1954), who returned home in 1946 because of illness."[35] In 1911, Davidson settled full-time in France and spent her whole career with her "patron" and "beloved companion"

[1] In 2023 this commission was completed with a new design by a queer, female, First Nations artist, Karla Dickens.

Marguerite Le Roy, also known as "Dauphine." Davidson painted post-Impressionist landscape and figure studies and was the first Australian woman to be made a member of the Salon Nationale des Beaux Arts. She received the *Légion d'honneur* in 1931. Davidson and Dauphine were buried in the same grave.[36]

Adelaide potter Gladys Reynell (1881–1956) was also intimate with and traveled overseas with Margaret Preston from 1912 to 1914 to see the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition by Roger Fry. The colony (later state) of South Australia is significant, as it was the only colony that had no convict labor (its arrivals were "free settlers," many German), had a socially advanced capital (Adelaide) that benefited from the high standard of German university education, and was the first Australian place to grant women the vote, including Indigenous women. Davidson, Preston, Reynell and Black were born there. Davidson painted a portrait of Reynell in mannish clothes, a pith helmet and a riding crop, calling it *Portrait of Miss G.R.* (1906).

New Zealand queer-adjacent woman artist Frances Hodgkins set up a studio in Paris and St. Ives, England, where many women, including Davidson, worked with her. Western Australian artist Kate O'Connor decorated their shared studio. O'Connor—who was also close to Nina Hamnett, part of the Bloomsbury set—worked for Paul Poiret on textile designs and painted intense domestic still lifes, including the new exotic batik textiles popularized in France by the Dutch.

A very fine and until recently underrated artist was Janet Cumbrae Stewart, who depicted female nude studies in pastel beginning in 1918. A critic in *The Age* wrote that her work "is curiously free of any sex sensationalism."[38] Highly successful in Australia but subsequently forgotten, she left Melbourne for London in 1922 and spent the next seventeen years painting and exhibiting there. Cumbrae Stewart's work clearly held a charge—the Women's Prohibition League (NSW) complained about her and other's nudes, which had been selected to represent Australia at Burlington House in 1923.[39] In 1931 the artist settled in Alassio, Italy, with her "companion," publicist, and business manager, Miss Argemore Farrington "Billy" Bellairs. Billy was noted for her masculine fashion sense and was friends with Sapphic writers Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf.[40] Cumbrae Stewart's work was extremely popular in London. In fact, Queen Mary purchased one of her works in 1924. In 1938 she made the following frank statement in the *Melbourne Argus* in reply to an article by Joan

Mitchell entitled *Are Young Men Becoming Effeminate? Here is a Modern Girl Who Unmasks the Secrets of Our Gay Lotharios*:

> she wants (and how many of us have tried to exterminate him) the Cave Man back again….who smelling of drink and cigars, returned to the hearth to find his crushed wife – usually so much younger that himself – awaiting his pleasure….It is not only the rough he-man who answered the terrible call of 1914. The so-called effeminate ones, believing their country to be in danger, shouldered a man's burden: and all the more bravely, because they were peace-loving and had never wished to hurt or kill.[41]

This is a rare defence of gay men as worthy Australian citizens for that time.

Cubist painter Grace Crowley, known as "Smudge," lived and worked in Provence and Paris from 1926 to 1930 with her Australian ceramicist lover and friend Anne Dangar.[42] Dangar resided most of her adult life in the South of France, at Moly-Sabata, producing Cubistic, painted ceramics influenced by their shared interest in the teacher-artists Lhote and Gleizes.[43] (Her main dealer in Sydney was the first interior designer there, also a lesbian: Margaret "Maggie" Jaye.[44]) Dangar's niece, Norah Singleton, noted the pair's ongoing parodies of conventional gender roles. Described as deliberately liberated from housework, Crowley "dressed with chic, favouring the simplest, cream, linen dresses and silk scarves and insisted her name be pronounced as in 'slowly'."[45] They kept up a regular, loving correspondence after Crowley returned to Australia in 1930; the redacted correspondence to Crowley survives, but the letters to Dangar were burned at Crowley's request.[46] Crowley and Dangar were closely connected to and sometimes lived with another Adelaide artist, Dorrit Black (1891–1951).

In many ways the interwar years in Australia were truly "queer" or non-binary for certain people of means—women might wear mannish suits and entertain the troops one minute, get married the next minute, then return to women again (here I refer to the sister of artist Donald Friend, Gwen, who lived with a famous actress). Ethel Spowers (1890–1947) and English-born Eveline Winifred Syme (1888–1961), who were about the same age and both extremely wealthy from their fathers' newspaper money, traveled and worked together in Europe, studying linocut under Claude Flight. Spowers was "tall, slender and graceful." Syme, used proceeds of her art to help establish a Women's College at the University of Melbourne, was said to have had a "crisp, quick voice" and a "rather abrupt manner."[48] Spowers's *Resting Models* (1934; Plate X) represents that rare thing for Australia at this date, a lesbian post-

coital scene, in which one woman looks at the other, unobserved and at ease. The work was exhibited only once in Spowers's lifetime.[49]

Elma Roach (1897–1942) spent much of her artistic painting life in Paris and knew many of the women artists mentioned here. She lived in London and Paris and traveled across Europe throughout much of her adult life with another Australian woman artist, Madge Freeman. Mary Cockburn Mercer (1882–1963) was another Australian (married) woman artist linked to European 1920s queer circles, including that of Marie Laurencin. She was Janet Cumbrae Stewart's lover and made flower paintings in the manner of Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein). Mercer was satirized in the lesbian spoof novel by Compton Mackenzie, *Extraordinary Women* (1928). When she returned to Melbourne in 1938, her neighbors were the artist couple David Strachan and Wolfgang Cardamatis as well as her lover Janet Cumbrae Stewart, of whom she drew a dignified Sapphic portrait with short hair, large, collared coat, and penetrating blue eyes (1939) (fig. X).[54] Perhaps in homage to Stewart's great skill with the medium, the work is a pastel.

The Australian etcher Jessie Traill (1881–1967) cross-dressed, some say in order to gain easier access to depict the Sydney Harbour Bridge while it was still under construction. Little is known about Traill's private life, but she had a close relationship with Melbourne-based Constance Coleman (1903–1990), who printed many of her works and was possibly left Traill's estate.[55] Cumbrae Stewart made a fine pastel portrait of Traill (1920) in her VAD nurse military uniform (NGV). Artist-historian Christine Dean defines her as Australia's first 'trans-masculine' artist: we know of no other trans Australian artists until Michelle Collocott (born 1945, transitioned c1990).[2]

Perhaps most remarkable for the purposes of this exhibition is the Victorian-born Agnes Noyes Goodsir (1864–1939). One of Australia's "lost generation" of expatriate women artists who went to the artistic center of Paris to seek both artistic and sexual freedom, Goodsir should be at people's recall as easily as the lesbian Tamara de Lempicka. From a well-to-do Melbourne family, Goodsir left her provincial art training in the old gold rush town of Bendigo for Paris in 1899, aged thirty-six, to study at both the Académie Delécluse and Colarossi and then at Académie Julian and de la Grande Chaumière. She showed three works

[2] Correspondence with the author, 2024.

at the Paris Salon, and in 1923 one was reproduced in the Salon magazine. She was the third Australian to be elected to the Salon des Beaux Arts.

For her first self-portrait (1900), she wore green and framed the work in the same color—green was associated with the Symbolists and decadence at that time. Although it cannot be confirmed she knew Rupert Bunny when in Paris, they both painted a similar Breton cottage scene. She also painted a brilliant image of dignified domestic labor, *La femme de ménage* (1905). In the early 1900s to the 1920s she lived and taught in London until she received an inheritance. Most remarkably, Goodsir appears to have painted an untitled nude self-portrait, *Standing Nude*, in 1902 (Plate X). These are rare in early Australian women's art and in fact in art elsewhere, and Goodsir's, which clearly depicts her face and long, elegant hands, is more remarkable for being full length, naked, and not disguising the pudenda. Although in shadows, there is the suggestion of pubic hair, too. The next such full-frontal nude painting with pubic hair appears to be *Standing Nude* (1944), a self-portrait of Freda Robertshaw , who is dressed only in sandals.

Goodsir was no outsider. She was highly respected in Europe, and was invited to contribute a miniature painting to the famous Queen Mary's Dolls' House commission (1921–24). She exhibited at the Royal Academy a painting entitled *Divorced* (1914). In London she was friends with Bernard Roelvink and his wife, Rachel Melissa (née) Dunn. Upon divorcing her husband, Rachel, or 'Cherry' as she was often called, became Goodsir's lifelong companion and partner. Goodsir and Dunn moved to Paris in 1921 and shared a flat and studio; they lived in the same building as lesbian couple Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier and their flat was comfortably furnished in damasks and brocades with carefully chosen objects. They cohabited for close to thirty years. Goodsir sent photographs back to her Australian family of her clearly lesbian friends sitting outdoors in Paris cafes—"you notice I don't drink, but I smoke"—and had a sense of humour about it all: "I saw a lady in Bond St. recently wearing a man's straw hat, buckskin gloves … and a walking stick, I felt like slapping her on the back and asking him for a drink."

She did smoke a great deal, and often depicted Cherry with a cigarette, an index of female modernity. A successful artist, she painted notables including the actress Ellen Terry and it was claimed she had been invited to paint Mussolini. Some of Goodsir's portraits, such as *Miss Grant* (1925), depict what we would now call "butch lesbians": women with no

makeup; very short, parted hair; in mannish clothes—sometimes in daywear and sometimes pajamas—and with uncompromising profiles. Sadly, many of her original paintings are lost. Goodsir spent most of her working life abroad, returning to Australia for a successful visit and acclaimed exhibitions in 1927 after twenty years abroad, at age sixty three.

The Cult of the Male Body

Australia is a nation that throughout the twentieth century deified a cult of male beauty, and continues to do so, today. From the nineteenth-century swimmer to the interwar lifesaver, the athletic body has contributed to images of the nation and a sense of self. Indeed, the Victorians—both men and women—liked looking at photographs and paintings of nude men. Nineteenth-century commentators argued that city culture debilitated its male youth, and they developed a set of formalized body-work rituals in place of manual labour. Physique magazines, pioneered by the Russian-born body builder Eugen Sandow—who toured Australia in 1905—were widely circulated; they also functioned as pornographic stimulants. A whole repertoire of new male professions emerged at this time: the physical athlete, boxer, professional strongman, physical culture instructor, model, and gymnastic instructor. Scenes of athleticism were popular as subjects for high-art painting and feature, for example, in the queer-appearing work of George Lambert.

The body of the World War I ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldier was a frequent subject of literary and artistic enthusiasm: the Antipodeans (many of whom were from the countryside) were better fed, taller, and stronger than their English counterparts. The poet John Masefield wrote thus: "For physical beauty and nobility of bearing they surpassed any men I have ever seen; they walked and looked like the kings in old poems . . . ."[58] Images of soldiers bathing recalled Michelangelo's *Battle at Cascina* and were created with homoerotic overtones by artists as different as George Lambert (fig. X) during the Great War and Sidney Nolan in the 1950s. Will Dyson's *A Voice from Anzac* (1927) joined the growing interest in spiritualism with the cult of the dead and a homosocial eroticism (fig. X). This image was much reproduced and was popular with returned Australian soldiers. "I doubt if ever the Ancient Greeks produced better examples of physical beauty and grace," the sculptor Rayner Hoff said in 1931 of Australia. Bertram Mackennal (married, and King George V's favorite artist) created astonishing work such as the ephebe-like War Memorial for Eton College (1923).

An interest in the male form was was still fraught territory, particularly when semi-nudity was invoved. William Lygon (1872–1938), later Earl of Beauchamp and governor of New South Wales from 1899 until the federation, lavished abundant praise on the natural grace of naked athletes and lifesavers. He was later disgraced as a homosexual in his English divorce case in 1931, spurring the famous statement by King George V: "But I thought men like that shot themselves."[59]

"Not to Know the Unknowable": Assessing the Men

Looking at the men of this era is frankly more challenging as they (perhaps understandably) left fewer traces. Discussing this matter with queer-adjacent colleagues, many of us agree that some of our most significant male artists of this period have also been "straightened up" by the curatorial and arts establishments in Australia. The best examples here are Charles Conder and Rupert Bunny. Bunny married his French model, Jeanne Morel, yet they were certainly "queer adjacent." Conder painted in Australia a landscape scene, *Holiday at Mentone* (1888), in which a boulevardier-style man in a fine, white suit possibly "cruises" near a beach-hut sign that reads "Men" (the cut-off word Mentone); but he might also be cruising women. Conder painted gentle Edwardian landscapes and fantasy scenes on supports including silk fans, decorated entire salons in escapist painting, and made designs for women's high fashion. Conder's nickname was "K" or "Kay," which has an effeminate air to an Australian ear; he was also called "the strange bird."[61] Equally at home in England and France, he was a friend of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who depicted him in paintings. He was also friends with Sergei Diaghilev and Oscar Wilde, and even visited the latter on his release from jail. Wilde once wrote to his publisher, Leonard Smithers, "You must make friends with Conder: it is absurd not to know the unknowable."[62] Unfortunately, Conder's artistic career was cut short; he died of syphilis at an early age, and his entire household and records were destroyed in a London house fire which also killed his wife.

Rupert Bunny left Melbourne for London and Paris when he was twenty. He lived mainly in Paris starting in 1886. Bunny was an extremely attractive and urbane young man who was closely linked to Parisian artistic and musical circles. His likely lover-companion was Alastair Cary-Elwes, grandson of a Baronet. Cary-Elwes depicted Bunny playing the piano in their shared studio (fig. 4). Bunny in turn sketched Cary-Elwes playing the violin, and these works were brought back to Australia by Bunny. Additionally, photographs of Bunny survive

showing the artist "camping it up" with Cary-Elwes and other attractive young men at the beach with parasols, including their wealthy, queer friend, the Hungarian Zsigmond Justh, who wrote an account of their lives.[63] Bunny returned to Australia after fifty years, in 1932. His Francophile work did not always find favor with the locals: the conservative gallery director J.S. McDonald wrote, "Rupert allowed himself to become boulevard-bound", or in other words, urbane.[65]

The Modernists

Roy de Maistre (1894–1968) is considered to be one of Australia's most important modernists and experimenters with color and formalism. He was successful as an artist, collected by the Tate and making a commission for Westminster Cathedral. He worked in Europe between 1923 and 1925–26 and in 1930 moved permanently to London. He was an intellectual mentor or a sort of social glue for other gay men in the arts, connecting the spheres of painting and decoration. He was probably a lover of Francis Bacon's (Bacon was a decorator then, before he became a well-known artist), and perhaps briefly around 1936, of Patrick White's (the Nobel-winning Australian novelist). White spent his youth in England, writing from a desk designed by Bacon (an authorised copy of which is in the State Library of New South Wales), whom White noted wore "rather too much lipstick."

William Dobell (1899-1970) is considered to be one of Australia's most important portrait painters but is not often recognized as queer. Unlike most of the other artists mentioned here, he was working class and "masculine acting," often depicting himself and others in worker's blue singlets (tank tops). In London in the mid 1930s, Dobell painted the London underground scene—camp images of city life, "lounge lizards," and figures such as Helena Rubinstein. He drew and painted tender scenes of men sleeping in his bed, including men seen prostrate from the rear, as well his likely lover Aegus Gabrielides. That the lover was Greek would have been even more shocking in Australia with its premium on Anglo-Saxon superiority. On his return to Australia, Dobell was subject of a debilitating court case (he subsequently had a nervous breakdown) after winning the esteemed portrait prize, the Archibald, in 1943.[71] He was accused of having painted a caricature, not a portrait. Gay historian Humphrey McQueen believes that the barrister Garfield Barwick knew that Dobell was queer, and that this explained part of the attack. Could artistic modernism be equated with sexual perversion? This was certainly suggested by a range of powerful Australian

commentators from writer-artists such as Lionel Lindsay to gallery director J.S. McDonald, who claimed that women and 'pansies' were corrupting art.[3]

Fashion and Fancy, or the Queer Infiltrators

In the early twentieth century, Sydney had a more integrated, cohesive, and social gay scene than Melbourne, where there were very few venues and where most men met at outdoor cruising areas known as beats. For example, Madame Annie Helen Pura ran the Latin Café in Sydney from 1923 until its closing in 1953. She said the gays who frequented it were "the people I adore."[73]

Being queer in 1920s Sydney and Melbourne was not in full view, but neither was it obscured. Gay male artists and commercial designers in Sydney lived their queer lives discreetly, on moderate incomes with a few beautiful clothes. Men from nice families worked for lesbian decorators (for example, biscuit heir Bruce Arnott for Maggie Jaye).[76] They unpacked crates of French ceramics sent from an expatriate lesbian (Anne Dangar). At lunch they would look in a department store window decorated by a gay man (Donald Friend or Wolfgang Cardamitis), or read through a copy of *The Home* with a camp image on the cover (Adrian Feint). Artist Adrian Feint (1894–1971), who lived in Elizabeth Bay, produced many bookplates depicting languid young men with a queer mood. His disguised self-portrait of a dandy, entitled *The Collector* (1925), depicts eye and lip makeup, and the figure wears archaic Edwardian dress, a top hat, cane, plaid suit, and cape (fig. 5). Feint made a more "cleaned up" version to be etched in which the figure is less camp. However, the suggestion of wealthy assurance could excuse eccentric behaviour considered *outré*.

His cover design for *The Home*, July 1929, featured a "Rum Corps" officer transformed into a heavy-lidded and made-up male beauty, recalling the Ballets Russes—who toured Australia in 1926 and 1929—as well as Rudolph Valentino and contemporary Hollywood film (fig. 6). Feint's bookplate for *John Gartner* (woodcut, 1938) shows a languid young male with a nipped-in waist, straw boater, and heavily lashed eyes. Feint and his male friends were described in *The Home* the next year as "giving a London touch to the party with their well-cut clothes and their air of having chosen their ties and socks not haphazard but with a nice

[3] Peter McNeil, 'Designing Women: Gedner, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c1890-1940', *Art History*, 17:4, December 1994, 631-657.

deliberation." Feint gained an international reputation as a bookplate designer in the 1920s and then switched full-time to flower painting in 1939, creating bravura displays influenced by Surrealism. He lived for close to twenty years in a grand bayside apartment with John Winter; a rare photograph survives showing his stylish dinner party friend. Feint was also good friends with Margaret Preston and owned one of her best works. The bourgeois subject matter of Feint and his circles' work – domestic life, flower-pieces, the theatre – was at odds with the Marxist emphasis of much subsequent Australian art history, barely mentioned by Bernard Smith, and dismissed by Robert Hughes as 'Charm School'.[4]

Several prominent female artists were known to cross-dress, either as an expression of their sexuality or perhaps for safety, male privilege, or convenience. One of the nation's first so-called industrial designers (mainly furniture, and about whom we know very little), Molly Grey, was photographed in 1935 with a severely Sapphic hairstyle and oversize mannish collar, bow tie, and cuffs. Writer Eve Langley (1904–1974)—who changed her name to Oscar Wilde in 1954—and her sister, June, lived in country Gippsland and the Blue Mountains near Sydney, where they were known as the "trouser women."[77] Langley sported trousers and a pith helmet in remarkably butch publicity shots. Kylie Tennant (1912–1988) wrote the novel *The Battlers* (1941), which included cross-dressing women; she also wore men's clothes to research her novels.

David Strachan (1919–1970) was a painter of still lifes and figure studies who traveled to Europe to study Jungian psychology. His partner was an antiques dealer Lindsay Stewart; the pair was killed in an accident in 1970. The openly gay Orry George Kelly (born Jack Kelly, 1897–1964), the Academy Award–winning Hollywood costume designer from the beachside town of Kiama, was at one time the lover of Archibald Leach—better known as the movie star Cary Grant; they lived together for nine years. After trying his hand at acting and textile design, he was chief costume designer for Warner Brothers from 1932 to 1944, doing the costumes for the cross-dressing classic *Some Like It Hot* among 295 other films.[78]

Back home in Australia in the 1940s, a group of queer artists, dancers, and designers lived in Merioola, a run-down mansion in Edgecliff known at the time as "Buggery Barn." Among

[4] Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788,* Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945; Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970.

them were the artist Donald Friend; acclaimed costume designer Loudon Sainthill; his partner, the theater critic and gallery director Harry Tatlock Miller (later director and chairman of the Redfern Gallery, London); and artist Justin O'Brien, then in love with sculpture student Colin Brown. The landlady was the butch looking but married artist Chica Lowe. She provided them a set-like stage on which the residents performed their countercultural lives. Edgar Ritchard (1908–1984) also lived there, painting queer fantasy, theater, and Pierrot scenes. Queer-adjacent painter Margaret Olley (whose sexuality is ambiguous) was close to many of them; when David Strachan was killed in a car accident in 1970, she sat in his Paddington house for many months painting beautiful, melancholy still lifes of his possessions, which stood in for him and function as memento mori.

Friend (1915–1989) was one of these "Charm School" artists (as dubbed by art critic Robert Hughes), frequently an expatriate who lived with local men in Africa, Ceylon, and Bali. Friend is an important figure to consider in this project, as he has been effectively "cancelled" after it was highlighted in a sensational manner that he sometimes had sex with youth in Bali (Friend recorded accounts in diaries published after his death). No Australian gallery exhibits his work (one mural may be seen at Retford Park), and there is an unwritten agreement that they will only show his work when required for other contexts alongside "warning" signs. Yet Friend is one of our most important queer artists—one who kept that rare thing for gay men in Australia: a diary for much of his life that is extremely revealing. In 1931 Friend was likely the short-term student and lover of the successful Art Nouveau artist Sydney Long.[81] Though married, Long was known for trysts with his male students. His painting *By Tranquil Waters* (1894), depicting a group of naked, male youths, caused at least one politician to complain about the state gallery purchasing such obscene paintings.

In Sydney, Friend lived with several men during the 1930s, including the German and Greek born Australian artist Wolfgang Cardamatis (1917–2020) (whom he called 'brown and faun-like') and the bisexual actor Peter Finch.[82] Friend created an extremely telling representation of his relationship with Donald Murray, an English-born interior decorator, entitled *The Happy Couple* (1936). In the finished drawing, the heads are obscured and smudged, but on the basis of comparison with other sketches of the time Murray is on the left and Friend on the right (fig. X). In 1932 Friend travelled to North Queensland where he was attracted to Melanesian and mixed-race pearlers and fishermen "sprawled on the lugger decks at night

like wreaths of glinting ebony," as he wrote in his diaries. Many of his sketches from this period were lost, but Friend tended to work up his sketches and memories into commercially successful paintings in subsequent decades. He lived for a while with other artists in the aforementioned Buggery Barn before traveling to London to study art in 1936–37. There he published an essay on "Tap-room Ganymedes" and "Aesthetic young men who ogle 'drunken sailors.'"[83] Friend sought out POC lovers and grew to dislike Caucasian men, opining with the writer Patrick White, "English sex shivered and popped remorsefully like a gas fire on its way out."[84] White's life-time lover, Manoly Lascaris, was Greek Alexandrian.

Friend also enjoyed making art about mid- to late Victorian Australia that mirrored that of camp men abroad. He was a voracious reader of contemporary works of artistic and literary satire. Cecil Beaton published *My Royal Past* in 1939, the fictional autobiography of Baroness Von Bulop, presumed to be one of Beaton's cross-dressing friends. It echoes Friend's "drag" images such as *Coogan's Gully* and his observation of city pretension in *The Sherry Party*. He also painted tender portraits of his Nigerian lover Daniel Lapido John, whom he met in London (themselves reminiscent of the work of Glyn Philpot), ultimately leading a peripatetic life in Africa, Italy, Ceylon, and Bali.

James Gleeson (1915–2008) is another significant Australian artist whose body of work is inherently queer. Influenced by Surrealism, in the late 1930s he began to include body parts of attractive blond men, later depicting miniature muscle men in vortexlike compositions and images of naked men cruising. His model for these works was his partner of fifty years, Frank O'Keefe. Gleeson was a part of the (gay) establishment, being on the first board of the National Gallery of Australia, which opened in 1982. He openly identified as gay in his lifetime, and I find it extraordinary that as late as 1998, when I viewed his work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, his sexuality was nowhere addressed. More remarkably, this was also the case of the Donald Friend retrospective in 1990. In both cases it appeared that the public was meant to intuit it, or that it was irrelevant to the experience of the work.

Sidney Nolan (1917–1922) is one of Australia's iconic artists; he was widely exhibited and collected in the UK starting in the 1950s. He often referred to himself as "ambidextrous"—his word for bisexual, and Australians focussed on the fact that he was married. Most people in the 1930s and '40s knew it was "just part of him."[86] A lover to the poet Randolph Stow, he was deeply conflicted about his sexuality. Jeffrey Smart (1921–2013) was a queer artist who

painted Giorgio de Chirico–like urban landscapes that often included images of sexually available young men. He became as expatriate to Italy in the 1940s and wrote an autobiography entitled *Not Quite Straight*. Several Australian artistic executors refuse requests for a new online queer art collective, KINK, to reproduce artwork by Gleeson and Smart.[5] The suggestion is that the artists would dislike being identified by their sexuality. In this ongoing reality we see some of the challenges of writing gay and queer histories.

Connectivity and the 'queer ancestors'.

Many gay men, lesbians, and nonconforming people owe great debts to the intergenerational "queer ancestors" (my expression). Even if many were expatriates, they were "knowledge connectors" with Australia, and drew upon their Australian backgrounds and perspectives in making their work. Then, as now, Australians were often considered fascinating in Europe—how could these Antipodeans speak French, be well educated, and able to occupy *mondaine* artistic society? Gay men and lesbians travelled the enormous distance to the art centres of Europe, some coming home, some remaining, all transferring information via art practice and sales, relationships, and correspondence. This experience and aesthetic were passed on and transformed for successive generations of queers, some of whom did not have the means to travel to Europe, Asia, or the United States. London is 10,500 miles from Sydney; the ocean journey took 40-60 days after the opening of the Suez Canal. Connections between generations are essential in passing on gay and queer knowledge and histories. Hence the devastation of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and '90s for the creative classes, from photographers to fashion designers and decorators; links were severed with older generations of gay men, some of whom were young in the period of this chapter.

Many of the works mentioned in this chapter were barely exhibited until the past twenty years, and one, Goodsir's *Nude*, has never been published before and will be shown for perhaps the first time at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago in 2025. Why investigate this art in terms of sexualities? As George Haggerty has said of the eighteenth century and Horace

[5] 'Queer Australian Art History: KINK in the Archive', Artlink, 15 February 2023, see https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/5029/queer-australian-art-history-kink-in-the-archive/#:~:text=The%20KINK%20collective%20(from%20which,text%20Archive%20Fever)%2C%20reveal. accessed 30 December 2024.

Walpole, when we queer figures from the past, we do so precisely because we do not fully understand their richness nor dimension.[87] [88]

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[2] There is no general encyclopedia of Australian gay and lesbian cultural producers. Until the National Gallery of Victoria did their sprawling but impressive *Queer: Stories from the NGV Collection* in 2022, no national overview had ever been attempted. For an important survey of women's art see Megan Fizell, Natalie O'Connor, and Louise Tegart, *Slow Burn: A Century of Australian Women Artists from a Private Collection, In honour of Eva Breuer 1943–2010* (Sydney: S.H. Ervin Gallery, 2010).

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[38] Harris, II, 347.

[39] Harris, I, 144.

[40] Juliette Peers, *May I re-introduce Miss Cumbrae Stewart?*, in James, Mornington Peninsula Gallery; https://www.bayside.vic.gov.au/services/art-gallery-and-exhibitions/her-own-path-janet-Cumbrae stewart.

[41] Courtesy Juliette Peers and Richard Perram.

[42] Elena Taylor, *Grace Crowley: Being Modern* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006).

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[49] Harris, I, 144.

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[82] Ibid., 129

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[86] Suzanne Falkiner to Phillip Adams, "The Lost Life of Randolph Stow," ABC Radio National *Late Night Live*, broadcast, 2016.

[87] Lecture, "Penile Politeness: The Society of Dilettanti, Richard Payne Knight, and Horace Walpole," *Politeness and Prurience: Situating Transgressive Sexualities Conference*, Edinburgh College of Art, 2013.

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