

The Picture Show

Express Yourself: A Major New Showcase Of Gay Portraiture

Categories: [Daily Picture Show](#)

08:00 am

November 13, 2010

by NEDA ULABY

Hide/Seek is not exactly hidden, but to find it, you have to thread your way upstairs and through the crowds visiting a hugely popular Norman Rockwell exhibit at the adjacent Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery is a smaller show, but it marks the first time a major museum in the United States has dedicated an entire exhibition to gay and lesbian portraiture.



1 of 13

Hide/Seek begins in the 1880s with Walt Whitman — before the legal codification of "homosexual." Whitman spent the days before and after the Civil War with his lover, Peter Doyle, a Confederate deserter. *Walt Whitman*, 1891 (Walt Whitman)

Credit: Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

scholar and art historian. He agrees that the Smithsonian's involvement is a

"To see artwork, all by gay men and women in this country, all exhibited in a place like this — it's amazing," enthused a visitor, Gary Fisher of Washington, D.C. He added tartly, "It's about time."

The artists are actually not all gay, but the subjects generally are. Co-curator Jonathan Katz is an eminent queer studies

landmark achievement. "For a gay man of my generation to understand the federal government as a helpmeet was, shall we say, a new feeling," he observed.

Katz came of age as an art historian in 1989, when the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. Their confrontational gay and S&M content stirred a furor in Congress. Since then, Katz says, major museums have basically blacklisted exhibitions focusing on gay sexuality. He put together this one with the Portrait Gallery's David C. Ward, and [its reviews](#) have been terrific. Ward credits that in part to their different perspectives.

"Jonathan is gay, I'm straight," Ward said. "Jonathan is the outside guy; I'm the inside guy."

Ward says *Hide/Seek* is one of the biggest and most expensive shows the National Portrait gallery has ever launched, with over a hundred works of art. The show includes an ad for Arrow dress shirts from 1914 that pictures a pair of handsome bachelors enjoying domestic bliss. The illustrator, J.C. Leyendecker, used his boyfriend as one of the models.

Other pieces in the exhibition include a pair of somber grey paintings by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Lovers for six years, the artists completed the paintings during their breakup. And a moving conceptual piece by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, is a pile of Jolly-Rancher-type candies that weighs 175 pounds. That was the weight of his lover Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related complications. Viewers take candies until the piece vanishes, evoking the subject's slow passing — and his sweetness.

As well as portraiture by well known gay artists, such as Andy Warhol, Annie Leibovitz and Romaine Brooks, *Hide/Seek* also includes work by straight artists that seem to suggest an appreciation of same-sex erotics. For example, A 1979 portrait, titled *The Clearing* by Andrew Wyeth, of a handsome young beefcake with flowing blonde hair evokes a male Helga, the artist's female lover of many years.

Ward explained: "Wyeth said when you paint somebody's portrait you fall a little bit in love when them."

Hide/Seek will come to a close the day before Valentine's Day, 2011, but many of its images and much of its scholarship is available [on its website](#).

comments

Discussions for this story are now closed. Please see the [Community FAQ](#) for more information.

Recent First 



Betsy Grigoriu (BetsyG) wrote:

Neda Ulaby didn't do her homework on Andrew Wyeth. Makes me question the accuracy of other comments about artists. This is not a comment on the show itself (which I'm a fan of). It's a comment on the reporter's work.

Wednesday, November 17, 2010 9:46:36 AM

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Jenn Smith (jas0806) wrote:

@ Diepiriye Kuku Siemons -- I don't think the NPG show promotes such stereotypes. Works in the show by Glenn Lygon and Lyle Ashton Harris productively complicate the very stereotypes about black men that you are worried about promoting...

Tuesday, November 16, 2010 4:58:05 PM

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Diepiriye Kuku Siemons (diepiriye) wrote:

I remember seeing an expo in New York in the late 90's called "Black Men." There were Warhol and even Mapplethorpe and his huge Black penises, but not even one Black male artist working on the Black male body. That's telling. As a black gay man, I am so sick of having non-black gay men approach me as if I have some hose between my legs, and not an ounce of brains. What's amazing is that because the work is 'gay' it's taken as transgressive by the mainstream viewers, yet promotes the same old stereotypes that the straight world circulates.

Tuesday, November 16, 2010 1:53:48 AM

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J. Morris (72John) wrote:

An NPR moderator has removed this comment because it does not adhere to the discussion guidelines

Monday, November 15, 2010 9:42:47 PM

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Karen Chance (fightingchance) wrote:

Lynn S: You are right, and I am so proud of the NPG for doing this exhibit. It isn't about promoting "the gay agenda" as some have suggested -- it's about acknowledging that gay people are part of the fabric of America.

It is also nice to see the truth told that two of our most talented artists, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, were not only gay, but a couple.

Monday, November 15, 2010 9:07:58 PM

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Lynn S (fact_or_belief) wrote:

@Karen Chance:

I agree w/ Jyuyoung Lee. And I think it's a mistake to worry about those who may take it as

"another opening to say 'Ewww, look how gross ...'"

Those people aren't going to go to this exhibit anyway, and we can't let their bigotry guide our choices. If the National Portrait Gallery made its choices based on what those people object to, instead of allowing the curator to choose w/ integrity, it would be diminished as a museum.

Monday, November 15, 2010 3:46:38 PM

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Vincent Keung (IKnowKungFu) wrote:

Whoops. I meant to ask "Do you think your children would act differently?" in previous post. Ugh, point is made with the last part of the comment anyways.

Monday, November 15, 2010 3:25:25 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

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Vincent Keung (IKnowKungFu) wrote:

To all those who say that NPR/Contemporary Media/Leftists-in-General (btw NPR is about as unbiased a source as I can think of, other than Bloomberg) are embracing and furthering the homosexual agenda, you guys aren't taking into account one very important fact, a fact that can be easily verified by yourself.

By being exposed to the homosexual lifestyle, are you yourself suddenly compelled to change your own sexual orientation?

If your answer is "No," do you think your children will react the same way?

I honestly don't think anyone would say Yes. This is because any rational person can see that being homosexual is NOT a choice.

Monday, November 15, 2010 3:23:23 PM

[Recommend \(3\)](#)

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Karen Chance (fightingchance) wrote:

Jyuyoung Lee: You are probably right about the intent. It's just that it seems to give certain people another opening to say "Ewww, look how gross gay people are." Point taken, though.

Monday, November 15, 2010 11:56:48 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

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Jyuyoung Lee (the_jyu) wrote:

@Karen Chance & Mark P

I think that's the point.

Her entire composure is sarcastic, like "...yeah I guess this is media's idea of a sexy pose."

If you think of it that way, it's actually kind of funny.

Especially considering she's a comedian.

Monday, November 15, 2010 6:25:18 AM

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