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National Portrait Gallery's 'Hide/Seek' finds a frame for sexual identity

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It's a formal portrait photo, and in it you see two handsome young men, crisply dressed in 1940s tweed, seated side by side and looking off into the distance. The shot could be an ad for ties, or from a class reunion. And then you look closer, and you realize that, although the two sitters never even glance at each other, they are strangely pressed together, sharing a physical intimacy most men rarely do. And then you look still closer, and a new awareness dawns: Two of their hands are missing, hidden from view behind the blonde's left arm, where they are clearly clutched in affection. These are two cultural stars -- the choreographer Antony Tudor and his great dancer Hugh Laing -- and yet everything about their lifelong love for each other is hidden, at most hinted at in an image carefully constructed by a leading photographer, Carl Van Vechten, who was himself a closeted gay man.

This is the fascinating world, and powerful art, that fills a new show called "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," at the National Portrait Gallery. It surveys how same-sex love has been portrayed in art, from Walt Whitman's hints to open declarations in the era of AIDS and Robert Mapplethorpe's bullwhips. Amazingly, this is the first major museum show to tackle the topic. "Hide/Seek" handles it with all the subtlety required. Scholars Jonathan Katz and David Ward have mounted one of the best thematic exhibitions in years.

"Hide/Seek" assembles work by some of the modern era's most notable photographers and painters including Thomas Eakins, John Singer Sargent, George Bellows, Walker Evans, Marcel Duchamp, Berenice Abbott, Grant Wood, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Georgia O'Keeffe, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, David Hockney, Agnes Martin, Andy Warhol, Nan Goldin, Felix Gonzalez-Torres -- and even Andrew Wyeth. The sheer length and breadth and *quality* of this roster suggests an odd possibility: That being gay -- or being straight and paying close attention to the twists of gender and desire -- makes you a better, more careful observer.

In a homophobic society, there's nothing that gay eyes can take for granted: The crowd of sailors approaching could be potential mates, or they might want to beat you up. (We get to see them in Charles Demuth's dockside watercolors.) The well-dressed silverback in the elevator could be a future boss, or a future boyfriend waiting for your move: Are his white suit and sky-blue tie patrician fashion, or are they code for longing? (We ask the question of Van Vechten, as painted by Romaine Brooks.) That slender dandy in tails might just be a woman, waiting for another woman to recognize the signal and offer her love. (S/he's there in Brooks's drag portraits of herself and her lesbian friends.)

For much of modern American history -- and even today, except in a few areas in a few big cities -- the world of gay love has had to be a world of codes and obfuscations, of close reading and uncovering. It has been the perfect schoolroom, that is, for fine and subtle artists.

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In 1898, Eakins, whose own sexuality was probably more fluid than binary, paints a victorious boxer, wearing shorts so small they're almost a thong, surrounded by men who applaud him -- and who are also, necessarily, cheering his winner's physique. Admiration for what a body can do always carries with it some kind of lust for what it looks like. Eakins's picture refuses to see the issue of erotic energy as confined to who likes doing what to whom.

Not much later, the same refusal flavors the work of the commercial illustrator Joseph Christian Leyendecker, who, amazingly, used gay love to sell clothes to straight men, or at least to the women who shopped for them. Leyendecker's "Men Reading" is the original painting for an Arrow shirt ad that appeared in 1914: It shows two stunning young men (one was modeled by the artist's partner) luxuriating in their beauty, in the beauty of their faun silk socks and pink shirts, and in a casual closeness -- a homosociality, to use the current word -- that is so potent it's erotic. Replace either man with a woman, and you have an ideal image of a warm, well-heeled, fecund domesticity. Despite the sanctions on his own erotic tastes, Leyendecker is such a fine visual salesman that he channels them into a form that sells his goods to viewers of all kinds.

Even Wyeth, though apparently straight as they come, couldn't resist the appeal of a beautiful man conceived as an object of lust. In 1979, when Wyeth was 62, he painted a picture of an athletic young neighbor standing naked in a clearing, arms on unclothed hips and with his blond hair blowing in the wind. This is not a tasteful, artfied nude, on the model of Michelangelo's "David." It is fully, impressively frontal, indistinguishable from the kind of corny gay cheesecake we could never run in this paper. And it's that censor-baiting force that clearly made it worth painting for Wyeth -- and worth looking at for all the rest of us.

Those of us who happen to be straight almost have to envy how much force builds up in gay sex and yearning. Unless you're pretty out-there in your tastes (and even then) straight sex and sexuality is inevitably banal, just by virtue of its dominance; dwelling on it almost always leads to cliché. "Guy Wants Girl," however true and important, always risks becoming the artistic equivalent of "Dog Bites Man." Homosexuality, on the other hand, has almost always mattered so much, as a risky and risqué social fact, that it has been worth dwelling on, turning over -- making art about.

When the artist Ray Johnson looks at the world around him, his gay desire changes what it means. In his hands, in 1957, a magazine clipping of Elvis Presley, the mainstream's new-minted idol, becomes a face that runs with blood -- Oedipus with his eyes gouged out. For a queer man who's lived through McCarthy's Lavender Scare, when more gays than leftists lost jobs, gazing at your fresh-faced object of desire was as perilous as when Oedipus looked wrong at this mother.

This show is full of tragedy. In the company they keep in "Hide/Seek," the all-gray paintings of Jasper Johns, always poignant in their reticence, now seem like the concealments of a bright life confined to the shadows. Works from the same period by his lover, Rauschenberg, come clear as full of coded thought. You can't help noticing, and caring, that his "Canto XIV" illustrates the circle in Dante's hell where sodomites are made to run across hot ground -- and that Rauschenberg has pressed his own footprint onto the picture. The wild mess of his collaged self-portrait asks to be deciphered even as it refuses to go fully public in its meanings: "As codemakers know, nothing is as effective as a superfluity of messages to camouflage particular meaning," writes Katz, dean of American queer studies, in his catalogue essay. (The essay isn't always easygoing -- but it's also the best treatment of the subject I've read.)

There's sorrow even when, at long last, same-sex love stops its hiding. By the 1980s and '90s, Catherine Opie and Mapplethorpe and others are depicting open gay and lesbian desires, in all their wild range. And then AIDS hits, and the celebration stops.

On the show's furthest wall, a giant color portrait depicts the artist Felix Partz, one-third of the pioneering gay collective known as General Idea, as photographed in bed by AA Bronson, his partner in art and in life. The harrowing, almost unbearable image was taken on June 5, 1994, a few hours after Partz passed away, wasted to a skeleton by AIDS.

His bed is a welter of gay-fabulous color, at last released from the shadows. But death has lain at its center.

"Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture"

runs through Feb. 13 at the National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW. Call 202-633-8300 or visit <http://npg.si.edu>.

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