

QUEER AS FOLK

This spring, Tate Britain will host the first exhibition to extensively explore material relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) identities. *Queer British Art 1861–1967* will mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, beginning its journey the year the death penalty was abolished for sodomy. Lara Monro met curator Clare Barlow ahead of the show's opening to discuss her motivations, and how the inclusion of work by Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell contributes to the exhibition.

In addition to David Hockney and Cecil Beaton, the show will feature artists who are less well known for their contribution to queer British art. This includes Pre-Raphaelite painter Simeon Solomon who, until accused of sodomy in 1872, produced works suggestive of same-sex desire, such as *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1864).

Queer British Art aims to offer a fresh perspective, not only on the artists exhibited, but also on our cultural past. The detailed and in-depth research that has gone into its curation will show how artists and audiences challenged the established views of sexuality and gender

identity. This includes the varied attitudes that materialised around the taxonomy of desire. As sexuality and the definitions behind it gradually became less rigid and more fluid, individuals were increasingly inspired to explore their core identity. As Barlow explains, "Our past is so much more diverse than we think; there are undoubtedly traces of individuals resonating with LGBTQ identities. I think it's really exciting that we can host an exhibition that will highlight this."

The loosely chronological exhibition will map out a number of themes within a queer framework for the viewer to respond to independently. The idea of allowing

the spectator the freedom to engage, or perhaps not, with the works exhibited is an important element for Barlow. "I see my role as a curator being very much about giving people the tools to interpret these works in a way they find compelling. It is up to the audience to make their minds up, and I find that exciting. There may be some things in the show that enrage you or some that you are not that into, but I personally think that is OK."

It becomes apparent that this is an exhibition about possibilities, aiming to incorporate artworks and objects that provoke questions, rather than dictating a canonical trajectory. This is mirrored in the inclusion of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell's artistic interventions, which subsequently led to their imprisonment. The exhibition will contain six of the book covers that the couple famously stole and 're-worked', from their local Islington Library. Their playful and transgressive project involved the defacing of original covers, which they adapted in order to pervert and ridicule. Their decorative, and often homoerotic embellishments involved collaging male nudes, toys, animals, etc., into surreal or provocative positions, often accompanied by outrageously rewritten flyleaf texts. Once complete, the couple would place the mutilated books back in the targeted library, observing those who came across their alterations of the original works.



David Hockney
Life Painting for a Diploma (1962)
Yageo Foundation
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It is fitting that Orton and Halliwell have been integrated into the exhibition section labelled *Private Lives, Public Passions*, as their playful project traversed both of these spheres; taking from the public realm of the Library and editing in the privacy of their Islington flat. Their interest in counterculture and subversion highlights the exhibition's aim to foreground and explore themes surrounding gender and sexuality. Barlow sees *Queer British Art* as a tool to initiate further conversation on a topic that has been researched very little up until now. By examining individuals on the margins of the artistic establishment as well as influential artists, such as

Bacon and Wilde, who gained fame and notoriety independently from their sexual orientation, she hopes the show will encourage more exhibitions and interest in this area of art and academia.

Simeon Solomon (1840–1905)
Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene (1864)
 Tate. Purchased 1980

— **QUEER BRITISH ART 1861–1967 IS AT TATE BRITAIN, 5 APRIL – 1 OCTOBER 2017**