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ART REVIEW

This Gay American Life, in Code or in Your Face

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Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture at the Brooklyn Museum includes Catherine Opie's "Papa Bear."

"Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," a diligent exhibition centering on 20th-century portraits and self-portraits of or by gay artists, is now at the Brooklyn Museum, and it is more or less intact. Which is to say that once again, nearly a year after it was first mounted at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, it includes "A Fire in My Belly," a four-minute excerpt from a video made in 1986-87 by David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992, at 37.

Early in its run at the Portrait Gallery, "Hide/Seek" was abruptly divested of the Wojnarowicz (pronounced voy-nah-ROH-vitch) video, whose spliced-together imagery reads as a sometimes furious pictorial lament about human suffering. A brief close-up showing ants crawling frantically over a small plastic crucifix offended Republicans in Congress, who made threatening noises about the Smithsonian's financing. G. Wayne Clough, the Smithsonian's director, evidently agreeing that art should never offend anyone, immediately had the video removed from the show. (He later indicated that he regretted acting so quickly, which was small comfort.) That video, along with the longer version from which it had been excerpted by the show's organizers, became widely available on the Internet, and was in all likelihood viewed by many, many more people than saw the actual show.

Another result of the contretemps is that "Hide/Seek," which was originally not scheduled to travel, has been reassembled and brought to Brooklyn, almost in its original form. (A handful of the loans could not be renewed.) In March it will travel to the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington State.

There are plenty of criticisms to be made of the exhibition, which was organized by Jonathan D. Katz, an art historian at the University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York, and David C. Ward, a historian at the National Portrait Gallery. It is more a sketchy overview than a thorough exploration of its subject, clinging too closely to established names, from Thomas Eakins to Robert Gober, with Marsden Hartley, Grant Wood, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Agnes Martin and Keith Haring in between.

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With a couple of exceptions, there is almost no work from the last decade, when art by avowedly queer artists, especially women, continued to flourish. And the material that is included often seems tame and mild-mannered when stronger stuff is available. The American modernist Charles Demuth (1883-1935) made vibrant watercolors of sailors dancing together, one of which is represented here, but he also portrayed sailors engaged in more explicitly erotic activities. Demuth felt compelled to keep nearly all his sailor images out of sight during his lifetime. More than 75 years after his death, it would seem to be time for Demuth's more risqué efforts to be seen in museums.

Still, this show is a historic event. It is the first major museum exhibition to focus on homosexuality and to trace some of the ways that same-sex desire — and unconventional notions of masculinity and femininity in general — have been manifested in early Modern, Modern and postmodern American art, as evinced primarily in portraiture. It was organized not by a big private museum with lots of resources but by a national institution whose purview as a portrait gallery is relatively narrow and implicitly conservative. Like many events that are the first of their kind, it feels both overdue and a little behind the times.

In his essay in the catalog Mr. Katz makes it clear that the exhibition's parade of familiar names is quite deliberate. "Our goal is not to challenge the register of great American artists, but rather to underscore how sexuality informed their practice in the ways we routinely accept for straight artists," he writes. In other words, this register, like most other sectors of American life, is already full of, and actively shaped by, individuals who do not conform to the heterosexual norm. The show sets out to look at their already recognized achievements through the lens of non-straight sexuality, and also to tell something of their stories as it goes.

And it is very much a storytelling show, with works carefully parsed, lives outlined and various circles of friends indicated in extended labels. In Romaine Brooks's stylishly mannish self-portrait, painted in 1923; in Berenice Abbott's 1927 photograph of the writer Janet Flanner wearing a white top hat appended with two masks, one white and one black; and in Abbott's photograph, also from 1927, of a relatively demure Betty Parsons, future art dealer of the Abstract Expressionists, we see vivid portrayals of what a label calls the "elite expatriate lesbian society" that flourished in Paris between the wars.

With Florine Stettheimer's saintly, androgynous portrait of Marcel Duchamp, who had himself photographed by Man Ray in drag as Rose Sélavy, we glimpse a friendship played out in the New York salon of Stettheimer and her sisters, "a space," according to the label, "where sexuality remained fluid, ambiguous and largely unspoken, yet at the center of social roles."

The tensions of being gay in straight society are insinuated in works like Grant Wood's 1930 "Arnold Comes of Age," a portrait of a pensive young man against a sparse landscape where two male nudes frolic in the distance. And there are occasional bravely open declarations, like the tender male couples among the mostly nude crowd of Paul Cadmus's latter-day history painting "What I Believe," of 1947-48.

Some works are fascinating period pieces, among them Brooks's 1936 portrait painting of the photographer Carl Van Vechten, a white married man, known for his role in the Harlem Renaissance, who also went uptown to cruise young black men. Perhaps this is why Brooks embedded five shadowy black heads in the back of the looming armchair in which Van Vechten sits.

Other works are cornerstones of American modernism, including Hartley's "Painting No. 47, Berlin" (1914-15), the roiling semi-abstract of signs, symbols and a plumed helmet with which the artist commemorated the love of his life, a young German officer who was killed in the first months of World War I.

As the exhibition moves forward, it touches many stones, even if it doesn't completely turn them over. Works by Mr. Johns, Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg represent a distinct break with the machismo of

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Abstract Expressionism, while continuing the coded references to same-sex relationships that prevailed in earlier generations. The gray tone and implicitly distraught mood of Mr. Johns's 1961 "In Memory of My Feelings — Frank O'Hara" in which a fork and a spoon dangle from a wire like a metaphor for upended, dysfunctional domesticity, commemorate the end of his relationship with Rauschenberg. It takes its title from a poem by O'Hara, who is visible nearby in a full-length nude portrait by Larry Rivers and a clothed one by Alice Neel in which he is shown in profile, against a profusion of lavender lilac blossoms.

The references to sexuality are often more pointed in the show's final third, where most of the work is from the post-Stonewall era, and photography is the dominant medium. It registers in the efforts of older artists like Lucas Samaras, shown vamping with a blond wig in 18 of his Auto-Polaroids of 1970-71. Among younger artists' work, Robert Mapplethorpe's 1979 photograph "Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter" shows two men in black leather and chains in their antiques-filled living room.

Yet even here the exhibition pulls its punches and glosses over a bit of history by avoiding the more sexually explicit Mapplethorpe images that did so much to set off the cultural wars of the early 1990s. Peter Hujar documents the prickly, high-flying dignity of Ethyl Eichelberger in drag, but also the more subtle androgyny of Susan Sontag in thoughtful repose, an image more in keeping with Abbott's photograph of Betty Parsons. Catherine Opie's images of male-identified women are bracingly confrontational.

The specter of AIDS and its politicizing effects are visible in Wojnarowicz's video and even more in his 1990 photograph "Untitled (Face in Dirt)," which shows his face almost completely buried in dusty earth. It was made three years after Hujar, whose friendship had been Wojnarowicz's salvation, died of AIDS, and several months before he learned that he himself had H.I.V. It depicts him, as the label puts it, "at once disappearing peacefully into the American landscape and being violently suffocated by it."

By the time you reach this point in "Hide/Seek" and look back over the immense amount of art and social history that has been covered, and the lives and personalities brought into sharper focus, you may be inclined to forgive the show's deficiencies and oversights and its general air of caution. It is trying to win converts, after all. It is a significant beginning to which the most fitting reaction may simply be: Good enough. Now, more, more, more.

"Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" runs through Feb. 12 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.