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The Gay & Lesbian Review

WORLDWIDE

March–April 2015

\$5.95 USA and Canada



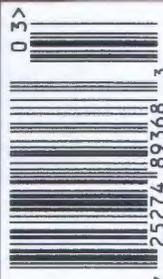
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Cassandra Langer talks with an insurgent painter

Filling the Void in Lesbian Art

CHRISTINA SCHLESINGER

CHRISTINA SCHLESINGER is a wickedly interesting, unapologetic, and high-spirited visual artist whose erotic works were featured in a “pop-up” exhibition at the Leslie Lohman Museum in New York’s Soho district in late January.

The show was called *Tomboys*, and it featured 36 paintings of butch females by the artist, many of them self-portraits painted onto T-shirts and other articles of clothing. In self-portraits based on old photographs of herself, Schlesinger tomboyishly mugs for the camera. Her portrayals collapse time and space like the pages from a lesbian version of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, detailing the sweetness of lost time and memory. Yet the artist’s images are not just about her own memories but speak with wit and compassion to every tomboy who has felt same-sex desire and loved another girl.

Schlesinger came of age in the 1970s, at the dawn of the gay liberation era but a time when gay men and lesbians were still reviled and ostracized and known only by names like *homo*, *sissy*, *faggot*, *bull dyke*, *lesbo*, and *queer*. Even as late as the 1990s, the idea that a lesbian artist would dare to depict her authentic sexual self, much less display same-sex eroticism in a public context, was unthinkable. It was against this backdrop that Schlesinger began to create images depicting her own coming of age and the various sexual practices and pleasures of women loving women.

But finding an outlet for her work would prove another matter. Boyish girls with stiff dildos on their hands and knees adorning their girlfriends were the stuff of future lesbian wet dreams. In the 1990s, images of lesbian sexual desire did not figure prominently in the mainstream, or even the underground, art world. Only in 2015, and only because the Leslie-Lohman Museum made it happen, was this aspect of Schlesinger’s pioneering work shown to the general public. When this work was first created—even though she was well-known for her landscapes and other paintings, and even though heterosexual (and even gay male) art was experiencing a new period of sexual freedom—she couldn’t find a venue for it. The idea of parting and penetrating another woman with a dildo, something that’s taken for granted today among lesbians, was taboo.

As an out lesbian, Schlesinger put herself in a dangerous position by being overtly joyous about lesbian sex and declaring herself to be the subject of her art. She wasn’t out to shock anyone but was only rendering her lesbian desire and illustrating the erotic pleasure she derived from making love to women.

Cassandra Langer is a freelance writer based in New York City. Her biography of Romaine Brooks will be published later this year.

Her intimate drawings depicting, say, a woman using a dildo to part the folds of a lover’s vagina, were considered outrageous at the time. This kind of imagery is repeated in slightly differing variations throughout the series, showing lesbian erotic desire as simply a part of nature.

It is gratifying to me as an art critic and a lesbian to think that after 22 years of gathering dust in her studio, these works can finally be exhibited—all because a curator named Cupid Ojala believed that Schlesinger’s work would make a new generation aware of how far we have come. My only regret is that these pop-up shows are so short-lived, so her work was on display for far too short a time. However, a good introduction to her work can be found on her website (www.christinaschlesinger.com).

I communicated with Christina on-line in late December about her forthcoming show.

Cassandra Langer: Let me start by asking you about the historical context for lesbian erotic art.

Christina Schlesinger: I can’t say that there’s much “lesbian art” in the annals of Western art history. However, I do consider my work to be contextualized by Romaine Brooks, who was the only “out” lesbian artist in the 20th century—excluding the final decades—that I am aware of.

CL: Who were some of the other artists that influenced your work?

CS: First, I would cite Toulouse-Lautrec. He did a small sketch of two women in bed, their hair tousled, the sheet up to their chins. This painting totally enthralled me when I first saw it. It might have been the first time I ever saw two women depicted in such a way. After this I began sketching women in bed together. I later discovered that he did a couple of other drawings of women in bed, much more explicit than the one I first discovered. I wish I had seen those drawings earlier!



Going back in time, I’d also like to mention a late-16th-century painting called *Gabrielle d’Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (*Gabrielle d’Estrées et une de ses soeurs*), by an unknown artist from the École de Fontainebleau. This painting riveted me when I first saw it. Upon research, I discovered it did not necessarily

have a lesbian meaning, that this gesture of a woman squeezing another woman's nipple apparently was common between sisters and may have indicated that one of the sisters was pregnant. I made a painting called *Sign for a Lesbian Bar* based on this painting, replacing the faces with Romaine



Brooks' portraits of Peter and Lady Una. Judy Chicago included this painting in *Women and Art: Contested Territory*, a book that she wrote with Edward Lucie-Smith.

Let me also mention [20th-century Hungarian photographer] Brassai, whose photographs of lesbian bars in Paris were an early inspiration for me. I made monoprints and paintings based on the women he photographed.

Creating in another medium, I sometimes use paint on my own clothing in my work. The use of fabric by Miriam Schapiro and Sigmar Polke in their work has been an influence.

CL: I'm working on a biography of Romaine Brooks, as you know, so I'm always happy to learn that other women have been inspired by her work.

CS: The "outness" of Romaine Brooks' lesbian portraits exhilarated me when I first saw them in the mid-80s. I chose Brooks as my Guerrilla Girl artist name.

CL: Oh, you mean the anonymous group of feminist artists, curators, and critics devoted to fighting sexism and racism within the art world. I remember several of my friends were members, including yourself. They were feminist activists who wanted to expose the white male dominance that discriminated against women in the art community. New York in the mid-'80s was still a beehive of feminist activity in the arts. The Guerrilla Girls made it their mission to focus on gender and racial equality within the fine arts mainstream, including galleries, museums, and art schools. These were very smart, savvy, professionally active women who had won their spurs in a patriarchal art world. They hit upon wearing gorilla masks to remain anonymous and to get attention. They had to conceal their identity for two reasons: they wanted to make a point that issues, not who you are professionally, are what matters; and they had to protect themselves from a backlash by powerful men who would have had them fired from their jobs and/or made sure their work was never shown or reviewed. The posters and billboards they created were funny, sharply pointed, and got immediate attention from not only the world of art but society in general. So your taking Romaine's name and being the only out lesbian in the group was also a radical lesbian feminist statement.

CS: So, I made a series of monoprints and paintings

based on Romaine's work. These include the monoprint *Lesbian Artist* and the painting *Self-Portrait as Romaine Brooks*. Her serious consideration of the women she painted, capturing their inherent strength and individuality, along with both their tenderness and vitality, moved me greatly. I also loved the mystery and melancholy of her self-portrait.

CL: Are there any living lesbian artists whose work you especially admire?

CS: Other lesbian artists who work with lesbian imagery and whose work I admire would include two American artists: [documentary photographer] Catherine Opie and [painter, sculptor, performance artist] Patricia Cronin.

CL: In making your explicitly erotic work in the 1990s, to what extent were you consciously setting out to make a political statement?

CS: I don't think I was consciously making a feminist statement at the time. I was more just fooling around. It was also, I guess, about how wearing the dildo made me feel: "cocky," for sure, and confident—yes, I can have one too—and I liked the thrusting movement it gave you in sex. Later, I had an affair with a woman who used the dildo on me, and that was a



Christina Schlesinger, *Self-Portrait as Romaine Brooks*, 1994.

whole other feeling, being fucked rather than fucking, though both were good. It seemed to depend more on the partner you were with.

CL: How did it feel to create and attempt to show work with lesbian feminist content that subverted male power, authority, and privilege?

CS: My insistence on representing female masculinity meant that I had claimed the right to give and take pleasure with other women, thus refuting the notion that the artist's erotic gaze is exclusively male. It wasn't long before the era of lipstick lesbians and the girls-just-want-to-have-fun attitude. Girls actually did enjoy being the object of desire and flaunting their

femaleness without inhibitions about wanting to have sex with other women.

CL: How would you characterize the current state of lesbian representation in the arts and in the popular culture? What has changed, if anything?

CS: When I tried to show my paintings in Provincetown, people were uncomfortable with them. Now nobody seems to care because gender has become so fluid. Representations of lesbian sexuality are all over popular media now: witness *The L Word* and *Orange Is the New Black*. Lesbians are presented as attractive, sexy, compelling, and interesting women. It's no longer a big deal to represent women making love and or for a character

ART MEMO

Secrets of the Met, Hanging in Plain Sight

ANDREW LEAR

The following comes from Andrew Lear, an art historian and founder of Oscar Wilde Tours, which will be offering gay tours of New York, including the Met, starting this spring, as well as a gay history tour of Italy next October. For more information, visit www.OscarWildeTours.com.

AS AN ART HISTORIAN who works on homoerotic, sometimes I meander around museums, looking for homoerotic works that scholarship has overlooked. I usually spend most of my time in the ancient Greek and Roman galleries, since that is my specialty. But sometimes I wander off. I look for male-male couplings in Indian temple carvings or pictures of actor-prostitutes in 17th-century Japanese teahouses. One of the best places to hunt is the Renaissance galleries, where artists like Donatello and Michelangelo made versions of Classical nudes that expressed their homosexual desires—and their vision of homosexual attractiveness.

Recently I've been exploring New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, partly because I want to give some tours of it in the spring, but also because it's such a big treasure house of art—and of homoerotic. And of course I have found some fun things.

This is one of my favorite finds: Andrea Sacchi's *Marcantonio Pasqualini Crowned by Apollo*, in which the god Apollo crowns a famous castrato, Marcantonio Pasqualini, the top male soprano of Rome in the mid-17th century. I particularly like this painting because it set off my "art gaydar" before I knew the story behind it—and it turned out I was right. It's a complicated painting with a lot of meanings. Among other things, it is a memorial to a homosex-



Andrea Sacchi, *Marcantonio Pasqualini Crowned by Apollo*, 1641.

ual relationship between Pasqualini and Cardinal Antonio Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII and, like his uncle, a great patron of the arts. Yes, a love affair between a castrato singer and a cardinal, me-

morialized in an elaborate painting: it sounds like something out of an Anne Rice novel, but here it is in the flesh.

I suppose the first thing that caught my eye was the nude Apollo; not only is he

to identify as a lesbian. This was not true when I made the dildo and lesbian sex paintings in the early 1990s.

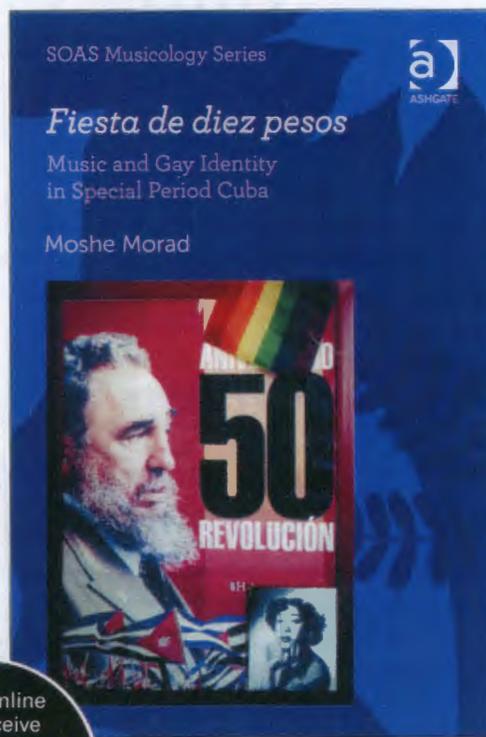
CL: You live in New York now, but you started out in L.A. after going to college there in the '70s. How did you position yourself between the two coasts? Was there in fact a difference between lesbian culture and art between the East Coast and the West? Was there a different attitude—edgy versus quirky, butch-femme roles, etc.?

CS: I came out in the 1970s in Venice, California. While briefly at the Feminist Studio Workshop at Cal Arts I did a project on lesbian bars. My mural pal Judy Baca and I drove all over L.A., from the [San Fernando] Valley to West Hollywood to the beach, photographing and audio-taping women in these bars. In those days, women were very much into role-playing, and the Chicano women were the best, with strict femme and butch roles and attire, flouncy dresses, and sharp suits. In the Valley we saw a lot of women with big hair who would definitely pass as straight housewives or secretaries on the outside. Now, of course, the butch is a vanishing breed, as more butch women transition into men, thereby gaining the privileges of being male.

However, this is not really answering your question. Which coast was edgier? In Venice there was Big Linda on her chopper, and Jan, a recovering heroin addict who cared for a talented sculptor named Gaylen Vaughn, loving her and protecting her from drink. It wasn't being painted. Who in New York City was making edgy lesbian art? I am sure there were plenty of edgy dykes, but I can't point to anyone who was documenting their world or making art about it. 

Fiesta de diez pesos: Music and Gay Identity in Special Period Cuba by Moshe Morad

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nude, but his genitalia are right in the center of the painting, which is pretty unusual. He's also a perfect example of the Renaissance idea of a male sex object. He's like a Classical nude; in fact, he's a pretty close copy of the *Apollo Belvedere* in the Vatican. But while the ancient sculpture is rather hard-lined and somehow seems domineering, here the artist has softened his lines: he's muscular but tender, and he has the face of an intersex angel. This is typical. Unlike the ancient Greeks, the Renaissance saw adolescent males as attractive because they were somewhat feminine—hence their taste for castrati—so they tended to feminize their ancient prototypes.

But the main things that struck me as I looked at the painting were that it was obviously very complex and that it somehow felt very gay to me. The complexity stems from the variety of elements, and the complicated relationships among them. First, there's the contrast between Apollo and Pasqualini: Apollo is naked, Pasqualini very dressed up; and the painting seems to go out of its way to emphasize the fact that Apollo has balls, while, of course, Pasqualini did not. Then, to the right, there's a weird figure who's tied up. This is the satyr Marsyas, who challenged Apollo

to a musical contest and who was flayed alive by the victorious Apollo. There's an obvious contrast between Marsyas and Pasqualini: Marsyas is nude and has red skin and a wild, angry expression, while Pasqualini has elaborate clothes, a peach complexion, and perfect composure.

There's also a contrast between their three instruments: Pasqualini is playing a sort of a clavichord that's also an upright lyre—Apollo's instrument—decorated with a figure of a girl turning into a tree, i.e. Daphne, who turned into a laurel tree to avoid being raped by Apollo. Marsyas has a zampogna, a kind of rustic Italian bagpipe.

So, what does this all mean? Well, I've read a lot about this painting in recent weeks, and it seems it is probably a complicated allegory about styles of art. Pasqualini represents art that is classy and obedient to tradition, while Marsyas represents wild folk art. Some scholars have suggested that Marsyas represents the followers of Caravaggio, and he does remind me of Caravaggio—who, by the way, also has a homoerotic canvas at the Met! I'm frankly not sure of the meaning of the body parts theme, but it is something like the following: Pasqualini gave up his testicles out of obedience to God, while Marsyas is going to lose his skin out of disobedience.

True, it's a little weird, but keep in mind that Italians in the 17th century were very enthusiastic about castrato singers and defensive about how they got that way: "*Eviva il coltello!*" ("Long live the knife!"), they would shout as they applauded at the opera.

What I am sure of is that there's a further, gay meaning. As it turns out, it was Pasqualini's lover, Cardinal Barberini, who commissioned the painting. He was the patron of Pasqualini and also of Sacchi, the painter, both of whom lived in his palace. So, in some sense Apollo, the god of the arts, who is crowning Pasqualini, must represent Barberini, his actual patron. This must be why the Cardinal had the painting done: to commemorate his artistic patronage and brag about his relationship with a famous (castrated) sex symbol.

This is not the kind of gay relationship people have today (I hope!), but it is a very cool artifact from the gay past. And that is exactly the kind of thing I'm looking for when I meander around a museum.

Andrew Lear, PhD, is a classical historian who has taught art history and Classics at Harvard, Columbia, and NYU. He is the founder of Oscar Wilde Tours (www.OscarWildeTours.com).