

ARTS

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# At the margin

**H**OMOSEXUALITY, whether as a stage in the development of an individual, a secondary interest or a permanent orientation, appears to be a natural and perennial phenomenon; but its cultural forms, the way that it is socially recognised, accepted or prohibited, vary widely.

In some cases there has been a considerable degree of acceptance, although often tacit, and often based on the implicit observation of certain bounds. Homosexuality is, for example, an almost inevitable part of a strong military ethos.

The most notable historical case is the Theban Legion in the 4th century BC, but many more recent instances could be mentioned.

Better known is the philosophical love of which Socrates speaks in Plato's dialogues: *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. This is the love of an older man for a younger, a sort of relationship of tutelage and, in Socrates's practice at least, chaste idealistic.

But such societies rarely approve of exclusive homosexuality, for it was considered the duty of men to take a wife and raise children for the State.

And this points to the fundamental ambiguity even in attitudes of tolerance: homosexuality has never before been a "lifestyle"; it has been an essentially supplementary or marginal form of sexuality, in the sense that it cannot serve to reproduce itself or society.

This marginality, as a gratuitous and non-utilitarian expression of sexuality, is at the origin of the instinctive fear and hatred that homosexuality so often excites. And the hatred of what is different is exacerbated by the suspicion that it may dwell secretly within each of us.

But this marginality is also the reason that homosexuality has been so closely associated with art and literature. For it can represent both spiritual and brutal extremes of sexual experience which are excluded in principle within the bounds of socially-regulated relationships.

The Platonic ideal of a pure love which ascends progressively to the love and knowledge of God is one that is incompatible with a sexual relationship, and therefore inconceivable within



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marriage (assuming, of course, a transcendent, not an immanent God).

At the other extreme, homosexuality sounds the infernal depths of sexual desire; the tendency, described by such writers as Sade and Bataille (but implicitly denied in the contemporary view that sex is just normal healthy fun), for desire to end in extinction.

The opposition or co-existence of love and desire is suggested in the title of *Beauty and Beast*, an exhibition of eight artists at the Tin Sheds, and in some of the work of David McDiarmid, who is represented in the group and simultaneously has a one-man show at Syme Dodson.

There is not, however, much evidence of spiritual love here, but that is hardly surprising in our time.

Philippa Playford deals with love in the most sentimental sense, although the tenderness hides behind an ironic and camp aesthetic; this is reflected in the structure of the work, in which extremely simple images are surrounded by elaborate mixed-media frames.

At the more brutal end of the spectrum, Grant Lingard has a perspex case full of plaster phalluses, white as though dead; below is a tap, and the work is titled *Drought*.

He also has a humorous piece called *Searching for Mr. Right*, consisting of a coffee table and hundreds of fragments cut from successive legs in an attempt to make it balance.

The most interesting works, however, are not the most obvious about their sexual orientation.

Cayte Latta has a series of self-portrait photographs in which an arm or the face, moving, is lost in a blur; these dream-like images, against the obsessive background of a spotted wallpaper,

evoke the ineffability of the self searched for in the mirror.

Deej Faby's installation suggests somewhat similar ideas: two self-portrait photographs mounted on the inside of refrigerator doors hint at silence and secrecy; and a large pool of water gradually being covered over by an oil slick evokes a mirror being progressively obscured; bathroom scales hanging above the pool invite the viewer to stand on them even as they prohibit such a conditioned response.

The fragility of their suspension echoes the stillness of the water's surface below. These works remind us that the art of minorities does not have to be minority art (Michelangelo's nudes or Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are evidence enough of that).

The universal in art is less often achieved, in any case, by pursuing some idea of universal experience than through the exploration of the particular.

It is actually quite hard to make art that appeals only to a minority, but it must be said that David McDiarmid has come close to succeeding in his work at Syme Dodson (this is not to say, of course, that it will necessarily appeal to homosexuals either).

The figure of a man bending over and offering his anus to the viewer focuses exclusively on the literal aspect of the sexual act and refuses to go any further in its pursuit, say, of an underlying submissiveness which heterosexuals, too, might recognise in themselves.

Instead, the images are stylised into the permanence of a mosaic, but a camp mosaic of iridescent holograms.

The presumably deliberate narrowness of this work seems hard to separate from its sponsorship by the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which is ultimately a political organisation.

And this raises questions about the relation of art and politics: is it one thing for art to deal with important questions that also concern politics, and it is another for it to espouse a political line.

The objection to such alignment is basically that art deals with complexity and politics with simplicity; the slogans and catch-cries to which politics reduces social questions in order to achieve finite practical goals are of little interest to art. One can be both artist and



Dykehart by Philippa Playford ... love and a camp aesthetic.

politician, but not at the same time.

There is an opportunity to consider such questions more closely in the current exhibitions at the Australian Centre for Photography. *Art is not Enough* includes both a selection of posters, stickers and other promotional material from New York City, and a series of videos (one a BBC documentary about the political response of artists to AIDS).

The exhibition shows how dramatically the terrible scourge of AIDS has trans-

formed the homosexual world in a few years. From a gradual acceptance, almost by default (marketing managers were beginning to identify a lucrative new target, like yuppies or pre-teens), homosexuals have now become an embattled, although powerful and vocal, minority.

And although there have been persistent complaints, especially in New York, of deliberate official neglect of the epidemic, society has been forced to recognise as part of itself a world to which it had long preferred to turn a blind eye.