

*Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by Her Writings*. Tate St Ives, until 29 April. Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 26 May – 16 September. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2 October – 9 December 2018.

*Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by Her Writings*, edited by Laura Smith and Enrico Tassi with Eloise Bennett. Tate Publishing, 2018. 978-1-84976-598-5. 209pp. £25.

Peter Maber

Looking back on her childhood in 1939, Virginia Woolf credited St Ives with giving her “the best beginning to a life conceivable”. She spent her first thirteen summers in Talland House, on a hill with views out across the bay to Godrevy Lighthouse. St Ives, Woolf acknowledged, nurtured her extraordinary ways of seeing: recalling her nursery she describes “lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow”, whilst “hearing the waves breaking one, two, one, two”, a feeling of “the purest ecstasy”. Although she would set *To The Lighthouse* nominally on the Isle of Skye, the Cornish fishing town is immediately visible in that novel, with its “great plateful of blue water”, “hoary lighthouse”, and newly-arrived artists. It was in St Ives that the Stephen sisters decided that Virginia was to become a writer, Vanessa an artist: they suffered from none of the doubts – “Women can’t paint, women can’t write” – that haunt Lily Briscoe.

Viewing this touring exhibition in its first incarnation at Tate St Ives, therefore, is charged with these biographical and artistic resonances, even as its scope is far wider than a straightforward illumination of Woolf and her contexts. Some startlingly different visual responses greet us at the entrance. Vanessa Bell’s 1934 portrait presents Woolf the aesthete, embedded within a harmoniously decorative interior; while a tiny Bell oil on board, *Cornish Cottage*, with its pared-down form yet rough-hewn textures, suggests that the Stephen family holidays might have influenced the development of Bell’s own aesthetic. But hanging alongside, a collage by the contemporary American artist Judy Chicago, *Study for Virginia Woolf*, intersects with Woolf in an entirely different sense: translating the writer’s densely layered imagery into visual form, Chicago shows the pages of books metamorphosing into flowers, which in turn become a dinner service for Mrs Dalloway’s party. The work prepares us for some of the disorientating meetings of the verbal and the visual that are to follow.

*Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by Her Writings* is inclined to play six degrees of separation from Woolf with its artists. There are those in her immediate circle, and those who respond directly to her works, but the largest category by far are at a considerable remove, ostensibly responding to one of four themes that structure the show – landscape and interior, public and private selves – which are too broad to have any meaningful connection to Woolf in themselves. As the exhibition’s title implies, the inspiration belongs primarily to the curator, Laura Smith. Extracts from Woolf’s fiction on the walls invite us to draw our own comparisons. But there are also more subtle structural connections. The curatorial principles themselves seem to be drawn from Woolf’s experiments: the deftness with which we are transported momentarily back to the 1850s or suddenly forward to the present, has its precedent in Woolf’s narrative technique of “tunnelling”, by which she can “tell the past by instalments” and dig out “beautiful caves” that “come to daylight at the present moment”. A clue to the show’s oblique logic might be found in Woolf’s early short story ‘A Mark on the

Wall', a copy of which, beautifully illustrated by Dora Carrington, is on display: its central consciousness contemplates the possible meaning of a fixed point of reference, whilst drifting associatively across the past and the present.

Above all, this is a feminist show, displaying works by more than 80 women artists. The sidestepping of men means that the usual situation of Woolf amongst the visual arts is, refreshingly, thrown off course: there is no Roger Fry – except for one of his Omega Workshop plates, and that is decorated by Bell; Post-Impressionism scarcely gets a mention. The range of the art on display is vast, spanning different media, continents and over 160 years, and the selection does important work in bringing to light little-known names: an exquisite landscape oil by Jane Simone Bussy, date unknown, contexts not supplied, is a revelation, producing astonishing effects of presence and otherworldliness, with its quivering green brushstrokes in a leafy foreground receding into lavender-toned stillness.

The recently-excavated cavernous spaces of the magnificent new extension to Tate St Ives assist with the emphasis on new perspectives. Works are hung to utilize the full reaches of the gallery, so that it is effortful to view a cluster of enigmatic dark oils by Issy Wood, hung close to the ceiling; while shells hang down from Lucy Stein's expressionist canvas *Book of Shadows*, directing our attention to a line of found and created objects placed along the floor. The absence of clear dividing walls ensures that the central thematic pairings are not taken as binary oppositions, and conversations open up between outer and inner worlds.

The landscapes of Ithell Colquhoun, for example, speak as intensely of entrapment as any of the stifling interiors: with their pulsing, vegetal life forms and capillaried caves they draw us into their miniature psychodramas. The windowsill still lives of Winifred Nicholson, by contrast, are among the most transcendent works, with their freely wandering lines and diaphanous curtains that open onto pure qualities of light. Such surprising reversals of expectation form counterparts to the multiple meanings of spaces in Woolf: the catalogue essays are especially good on her representation of rooms in this regard, with their potential on the one hand to be liberating spaces apart, yet on the other to function as sites of oppression.

Two painted walls make interventions in celebration of domestic freedoms: a delicate selection of curlicues derived from Bell's book designs forms a backdrop to a collection of ceramics, textiles and furniture designs; while France-Lise McGurn's multicolour tracery of female figures ranges across a wall hung with portraiture. In the context of discussions in the catalogue of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* and oppressive decoration, and its antidote in *A Room of One's Own*, these embellishments form a counter-tradition, spacious and non-imposing. Their principles are extended to the attractive catalogue's *mise en page*, in which fragments of designs are overlaid with shape-shifting, collaged texts.

Is there such a thing as *la peinture féminine*? While the overwhelming heterogeneousness of the works on show gives the lie to any such essentialism, the exhibition is nonetheless prepared to make some bold claims about genre: "there are countless paintings of still lives on windowsills: a means for women to paint what the academy classified as their rightful, private domain, while covertly revealing a landscape beyond," writes Smith in her introductory essay. In a further catalogue essay, Claudia Tobin outlines the evolution of the still life to the point at which it becomes, in her assessment, "part of Bloomsbury's radical domestic aesthetic", for women painters in particular. With Ben Nicholson's windowsill still lives on display elsewhere in Tate St Ives, we are offered the chance to test these claims of a

female distinctiveness, and to ponder whether Nicholson's effects are of a different order. Similarly, when it is suggested that women's land art "dismantles metaphors comparing women with nature" it is helpful that the landscape-based abstracts of Peter Lanyon and Roger Hilton, which extend the tradition of representing women symbolically as landscapes that might be colonised by men, can be viewed elsewhere in the building. It is a mark of curatorial sensitivity that claims in support of difference in women's art are contextualised: in presenting an extraordinary cluster of spiritualist works, including Georgiana Houghton's automatic paintings in her *Spirit Album* from the 1860s, mediumship is situated within the parameters of permissiveness for women's behaviour within Victorian society.

Smith locates two principal feminist tendencies in Woolf's writings: the quest to find a space for women within patriarchal society, and the desire to remodel and redefine society through "the generation of a new and parallel language or way of being". Both are marked by an abiding belief in women's difference. But there is a third tendency too in Woolf, which moves towards the synthesis of male and female experience in an ambiguous, androgynous, multiple rendition of the self, and it is this that gives rise to the most remarkable section of the show, on 'The Self in Private'. Here the constantly evolving surrealistic figures of Romaine Brooks' drawings riff off an extract from *Orlando* on the wall – "these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another"; while canvases by Agnes Martin and Sandra Blow transport us into worlds beyond figuration which yet bear human traces. It is here that we find perhaps the greatest justification for pitching the whole show around Woolf: her works anticipate the later waves of feminism, including the all-encompassing reaches of contemporary artists such as Sara Barker, whose mirrored mixed-media works draw in each and every visitor.

Of all the site-specific effects of viewing this show in St Ives, the dialogue between the many depictions of the sea and the surrounding Atlantic is the most special. Images of the ocean become the exhibition's most compelling emblems of transformation and escape, and respond powerfully to Woolf's works. Most joyous of all are the seascapes of Laura Knight, which match Lily Briscoe's solution to the problem of being herself in painting, underpinned by rigorous form, yet "on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing". These vertiginous vistas seem to articulate Woolf's conclusion to her experience of St Ives: "it is almost impossible that I should be here".