

Vanessa Bell: on being a Woman Artist

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I have been an artist, art critic, and writer for more years than I care to remember but this is my very first blog post. I am entering the digital age kicking and screaming being an old fashioned kind of person and painter (I still use paint!) but I can see how liberating it will be to have no restrictions on word count or editorial censure, and I intend to be as idiosyncratic and personal as possible in my blogs. They will mainly focus on art exhibitions and cultural events in London and further afield. But I will dip my toes into other things, as I'm an unrepentant culture vulture and closet bluestocking.

I'm very fortunate that my more conventional work as a journalist and radio critic in the past gives me access to exhibitions and work in museums and galleries before they open to the public, and also allows me direct access to the curators responsible for the shows. I can ask museum directors awkward questions about anything from how something is made, to contentious issues of provenance, to awkward problems of authenticity. In the stagey choreographed context of a press view, museum directors and curators have to be polite and answer. I know some of them cringe when they see me coming and often my hand is the first up in the air when question time arrives. I am shameless. I want to use this privilege to write in these blogs about what interests me, infuriates me and perplexes me – what editors in my past have pompously called “think pieces”. Is there any other kind of writing?

Last week I went down to Dulwich in south London to the Picture Gallery, one of the best small museums in the world. It's always worth paying a visit to Dulwich to see the 600 world class artworks on show, among which are the mind-boggling Rembrandts, not to mention the majestic Van Dycks, the stately Gainsboroughs, the

austere Poussins and the voluptuous Rubens, but right now a monographic retrospective of Vanessa Bell (1879- 1961) is a real treat.

Vanessa Bell is too often reduced to a flighty pretty bit-player in the great drama that was Bloomsbury, but she was a good painter and an even better designer. The Tate has a few of her paintings on show sometimes, but a retrospective exhibition of her oeuvre has never happened before. Being Virginia Woolf's older sister is a real curse, and her notoriety as unfaithful wife to the equally unfaithful Clive Bell, lover of both Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, good friend to Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes among countless other luminaries of early 20th century intelligentsia gathered at the Charleston Farmhouse, has caused her to be banished to the wings – sort of a visual footnote to a literary phenomenon.

But she is so much more than this. She is also so much more than the proto-hippie pacifist feminist – a role to which she has been consigned, mirroring the contrasting reflection of austere and suicidal Virginia. She was irreverent, iconoclastic and utterly unafraid. To Duncan Grant, a homosexual and also the father of her daughter, she writes about abstraction, "I believe distortion is like Sodomy. People are simply blindly prejudiced against it because they think it's abnormal". Indeed!

There is a lovely dusty looseness to her brush marks in the paintings and a particularly fluid design sense that came to fruition in the Omega workshop years, so copied by other British fabric designers of the 20th century. Designers Guild, Conran, Cath Kitson eat your hearts out. This show has fabric designs, paintings, screens, and lovely book covers she made for Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press. The show is a reflection of a life devoted to art, friendship, free love, light, sensuality, motherhood, domesticity, craft, beauty, and life itself. Patti Smith, the singer, poet and keeper of

the flame, has been given a small room to complement Vanessa's photographs with her own. A revelation.

It seems very fitting to me that my first ever blog post should be about a woman artist- and a progressive and unconventional one at that, who has served as a beacon of hope for generations of woman artists for well over a century. Vanessa Bell was born in the stifled Victorian age when women in the art world were at best models, appendages, muses or lovers of famous men. That she became the sure-footed and wonderful painter she clearly was, evidenced by this show, makes a mockery of this presumed fate.