



## MEDIA RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA  
MEDIA CONTACTS: MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, NGV  
MARION JOSEPH | 8620 2346 | 0427 147 999 | MARION.JOSEPH@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU  
AMY SILVER | 8620 2299 | 0448 683 945 | AMY.SILVER@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU  
BONNIE HORNE | 8620 2166 | 0448 369 260 | BONNIE.HORNE@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU  
BRIANA TOMASINO | 8620 2237 | 0408 333 399 | BRIANA.TOMASINO@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU

# QUEER: NEW EXHIBITION REVEALS UNTOLD STORIES FROM THE NGV COLLECTION

NGV International | 18 March 2022 to August 2022 | Free entry

*“Queer” as a concept runs against all definitions, all fixed meaning, forever questioning, redeploying, twisting terms, texts and itself from conventional usage. – Christoph Ribbat, Professor of American Studies at the Universität Paderborn in Germany, and author of 'Queer and Straight Photography', published in the journal 'Amerikastudien', 2001.*



**October 2021:** Opening 18 March 2022, *Queer* is a landmark, Australian-first exhibition that will explore the NGV Collection through a queer lens and celebrate the rich, diverse and sometimes untold stories that emerge. Spanning five gallery spaces and featuring more than 300 artworks across historical eras and cultures, the exhibition will be the most historically expansive thematic presentation of artworks relating to queer stories ever mounted in an Australian art institution.

Bringing together a breadth of artworks from antiquity to the present day, the exhibition will illuminate the ways in which queer lives and stories have been expressed in art through history. Drawing on contemporary research, interpretation and analysis, the exhibition will also explore the narratives that might not have been visible in the past due to suppression, prejudice or discrimination.

The exhibition will be curated across more than ten thematic sections that will explore a variety of historical and contemporary subject matter, including activism and protest, love and desire, community and connection, text and performance, discrimination and loss, and more. The works on display span many media, including painting, drawing, photography, decorative arts, fashion, textiles, video, sculpture, design

and architecture. Highlight works include:

- Leigh Bowery’s subversive and boundary-pushing fashion ‘looks’, including *The Metropolitan* (c. 1988) in which a full-length floral satin dress is paired with a face covering, a black ‘Kaiser’ helmet and a pair of camouflage print leather gloves;
- Ponch Hawkes’s 1973 photograph, *No title (Two women embracing, ‘Glad to be gay’)*, which depicts two women proudly and courageously celebrating their love during the Gay Liberation Movement in Melbourne;
- The recently acquired video work *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* by Tourmaline, a transgender woman, artist and activist. The work weaves together the legacies of slavery, HIV/AIDS and racism in the lives of transgender people of colour, as well as the effects of gentrification of the Meatpacking District and the Piers where marginalised people, and specifically HIV positive, Black and trans communities, previously lived;
- Albrecht Dürer, *St Sebastian at the tree*, 1501, which depicts the early Christian martyr who since the Renaissance has been often portrayed as a beautiful young man, giving rise to homoerotic interpretations of his story. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sebastian had emerged as a queer icon, beloved by Oscar Wilde who, in French exile after his trial, took the alias ‘Sebastian Melmoth’;
- A Greek Chalkidian black-figure vase, 540 BCE, depicting Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, who was said by ancient authors such as Aeschylus and Plato to have taken his warrior friend Patroklos as his lover;

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- Brook Andrew's *S & D II*, 1997, in which issues of queer identity, sexuality and mythmaking are explored through the superimposition of Chinese characters for "solid" and "robust" onto the face and upper torso of Cunningham, an Aboriginal man from the Armidale district in New South Wales. The image has been taken from an 1892 photograph originally from the studios of Australian photographers Charles Kerry and Henry King;
- Peter Behrens' *The kiss*, 1898, noted for the androgynous kissing couple at the centre of its Art Nouveau composition, illuminating gender ambiguity and fluidity of the late 19th century;
- Destiny Deacon's *Where's Mickey?*, a playful photograph that challenges binary distinctions that have shaped western culture and its constructions of race and gender by presenting Torres Strait Islander man Luke Captain dressed as a drag version of the iconic cartoon Mickey Mouse;
- The watercolour *Shiva in the form of Ardhanarisvara* (c. 1980) created in the Madhubani district of the Maithil region in Bihar, India, which illustrates an androgynous Hindu deity formed by the union of the male god Shiva with the goddess Parvati, suggesting that the supreme being is neither one sex nor the other, but a fusion of both;
- Agnes Goodsir's subtle and engaging portrait, *The letter*, 1926, which features the artist's muse, lover and partner of almost 30 years, Rachel Dunn, known to her friends as 'Cherry';
- A 1654 engraving of the 17<sup>th</sup> century monarch Queen Christina of Sweden, who, like numerous European royals protected by their wealth and status, subverted the sexual mores of the time by refusing to marry and sharing close relationships with a number of women; and
- Intimate depictions of the female nude photographed by Germaine Krull and Florence Henri, two early twentieth century queer, women photographers. Krull's *Daretha (Dorothea) Albu* (c. 1925) and Henri's *Figure Composition, reclining woman with shell* (1930) are sensuous studies of the female body informed by the female gaze.

The artworks in the exhibition reflect the multifaceted meaning and usage of the word 'queer': as an expression of sexuality and gender, as a philosophy, as a political movement, as a sensibility, as an attitude that defies fixed definition, as well as the impossibility of a single term to capture the multitude of lived experiences. Many of the artworks included in the exhibition are by artists who identify as queer; some are by artists who lived in times when such identification was not possible; and some works are not by a queer artist but have a connection to queer histories.

The exhibition will also identify and negotiate absences in the NGV Collection, by excavating queer history where it has been omitted or eclipsed, through oversight or through intent. In this way, rather than attempting to present a comprehensive history of queer art, the exhibition will reflect on the gaps, strengths and idiosyncrasies of the NGV Collection, as well as broader concerns around collecting and exhibiting art works relating to queer ideas and identities in museum contexts.

Tony Ellwood AM, Director, NGV, said: 'Never has a queer thematic exhibition of this scale and nuance been staged in an Australian art institution. *Queer* shines a light on the NGV Collection to examine and reveal the queer stories that the artworks have to tell. Drawing on a broad selection of beloved and lesser-known artworks, this exhibition will present audiences with the opportunity to interpret queer concepts and stories in surprising and thought-provoking ways.'

Naysla Edwards, Vice President of Brand, Charge Cards and Experience, American Express states: 'At American Express we see diversity of people and experiences as fuel for creativity and innovation. It is therefore with enormous pride that we take our place as Principal Partner of *Queer* at the National Gallery of Victoria. We encourage everyone to experience this truly extraordinary display and to rejoice in the beauty of individual expression through the ages.'

In keeping with the breadth and complexity of its subject, *Queer* is being curated by an interdepartmental curatorial team including Dr Ted Gott, Senior Curator of International Art; Dr Angela Hesson, Curator of Australian Art; Myles Russell-Cook, Curator of Indigenous Art; Meg Slater, Assistant Curator of International Exhibition Projects; and Pip Wallis, Curator of Contemporary Art.

*Queer* will run 18 March 2022 to 21 August 2022 at NGV International, St Kilda Road, Melbourne. Free entry. Further information is available via the [NGV website](#).

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**Media Contacts:**

**Resnicow and Associates**

Christina Ludgood | Kavita Oza

[cludgood@resnicow.com](mailto:cludgood@resnicow.com) | [koza@resnicow.com](mailto:koza@resnicow.com)

212-671-5178 | 212-671-5185

**Image caption:**

**Peter Behrens**

*The kiss*

colour woodcut printed in dark brown, light brown, olive green, blue, red and black

27.2 x 21.6 cm (image); 36.1 x 27.6 cm (sheet)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne