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Disorientations: John Singer Sargent and Queer Phenomenology

Abstract

Art history has long struggled to find a method to account for the diverse expressions of queer desire across the heterogeneous landscape of history. While there has been a surge of research on the lives, artworks, and audiences of artists that trouble the heterosexual norm, the wider impact of this scholarship is often limited to singular biographies. Following the call for greater self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of difference in queer theory and phenomenological approaches to art history, the additive goals of gay and lesbian scholarship with its political investment in strategies of representation can be brought into scrutiny. To this end, a critical historiographical review of gay and lesbian art history is undertaken and a queer phenomenological method is presented as a new means forward. Applied to the work of John Singer Sargent, it is argued that a focus on the spatial orientation of bodies in his album of male nudes provides a more nuanced and ethical account of the queer than a focus on identity and identifications.

Reflecting on queer historiography, as well as the practice of writing history more broadly, Heather Love notes, ‘we are condemned to the search for roots and for resemblances; we cannot help searching the past for images of ourselves.’¹ This has certainly been the case for many LGBTQ art historians compelled into the field by a spark of recognition in an artist or artwork, whether it be Romaine Brooks’ portraits or Marcel Duchamp’s drag. Following the feminist critique of the art historical canon, past decades have witnessed a rise in sexual minority scholarship seeking to locate and celebrate artistic figures that have troubled the heterosexual norm. Such efforts are doubtlessly important, as the presence of marginal identities within larger cultural narratives can bolster the security of a contested present and ease the melancholic sense of loss that threatens the obscure figures of the historical closet. As Love states, this engagement with history is often as much an affective project as it is a political one.²

The fight for inclusion, however, has its limits. As famously articulated by Linda Nochlin, the desire to foreground great women artists risked denying the historical conditions that contributed to their obscurity.³ Similarly, and particularly within the context of period scholarship, claims about the sexual

¹ Love, 2007, p. 45.

² Love, 2007, p. 34. See also Dinshaw, 1999.

³ Nochlin, 1988, pp. 145-78.

identity of artists can often be an ethically fraught endeavour. While there is an ongoing recalcitrance to accept the evidence of queer encounters in the lives of artists,⁴ such claims must necessarily be tempered by an examination of the historically contingent nature of sexuality. “Outing” artists not only risks re-enacting what has historically been a violent assault on an individual’s privacy, it also poses the potential to essentialise diverse experiences and desires under a retroactive identification whose meaning and associations may not adhere across time.⁵ The LGBTQ scholar, therefore, is often poised in tension between a desired identification and an acknowledgement of difference. A dance between the political, affective, and ethical has long played out over the course of this academic history in its various efforts to recognize queer voices within the discipline’s objects and subjects of study.⁶

Given the challenges of this scholarship, as well as the ongoing drive to produce it, I have come to suspect that method, rather than canon, is the most promising site for queer interventions. This essay traces the historical goals and strategies of sexual minority scholarship within art history and proposes an alternative way to study and articulate sexuality, outside the confines of identity and identifications. This search, part of a wider trend of critical self-reflexivity within queer historiography, has led me to the work of Sara Ahmed, whose *Queer Phenomenology* planted the seed for this investigation. By attending methodologically to the spatial and visual orientations of bodily relations between artists and models, I argue that desire can be explored without artificially undoing the opacities of private historical experience. I conclude this essay by applying this method to the work of John Singer Sargent, reflecting on the directional interplay of gaze and pencil in his album of male nudes. Such efforts, I hope, can provide a more attentive and respectful account of sexuality, one that lingers in the traces of lost desire, hesitating at the prospect of orienting them roughly towards present political horizons. By taking visual culture as an orientation device for artists, scholars, and publics, queer phenomenology reads art not as the external proof of an identity or a subjectivity, but as a support or index of proximity and embodied attraction. The ambiguity that emerges from this approach may actually be more

⁴ See, for example, Carlo Pedretti, as quoted in Rosheim, 2006, p. xi.

⁵ For more on an increasing preference within queer methodologies to approach subjects on the basis of desire rather than identifications, see Spade and Rolfs, forthcoming.

⁶ In the effort of clarity, it may be helpful to note the multivalent deployment of the word queer. In its historic context queer has shifted from being a homophobic slur to an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of practices, identities and communities that depart from the heterosexual norm. Additionally, following critiques of the exclusionary effects of the identity politics of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, queer began to take on the nuance of a disidentification with categorical understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. Further developed in multiple strands of queer theory, the term queer came to represent a broader membership or tactic against the normative in virtually every dimension. As a verb, queer reflects a bending away from the straight and proscribed to new and unexpected possibilities. These terms will be used somewhat interchangeably throughout the text. For more on the development and tensions within the use of “queer”, see Jagose, 1996.

politically productive and affectively satisfying than a history that seeks to wrench its figures completely into the light of day.

However, in order for this method to be entertained, there must first have been a queer art history to begin with. Consequently, the method I propose in this paper is deeply indebted to the pioneering work of gay and lesbian historical scholarship even as it applies criticism to certain aspects of its aims and direction. Indeed, as Jonathan Weinberg notes, the concept of the “queer” and queer theory is itself historically located, made possible only through the prior work accomplished by the gay and lesbian liberation movement and feminist identity politics.⁷ Thus, the first step towards articulating a new methodology lies in the construction of a critical historiography.

A History of Inclusive Intention

Queer sexualities have a long history in the study of art, albeit to varying degrees and to selective audiences. As prominent gay art historian Whitney Davis points out, art history’s origins are themselves located in a climate of occluded same-sex desire.⁸ One of the discipline’s key founders Johann Joachim Winckelmann led a double life within the arts, displacing questions of homoeroticism in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764) despite evidence of his own personal interest and involvement in social circles for the appreciation of erotically-charged male antiquities. These unwritten – but not unacknowledged – queer looking practices persisted in forms of early modern connoisseurship as collectors continued to assemble objects and informal scholarship on art that presented unusual or taboo erotic possibilities.⁹ Through the cultivation of such images a historical sense of continuity and legitimacy could thus be established, even if the membership of this claim consisted largely of an internally-focused and somewhat secretive community.¹⁰

If, as Davis suggests, Winckelmann succeeded in constructing art history as something of a well-curated closet, then the labour of subsequent art historians has been to wrench it open.¹¹ Following the effects of the gay and lesbian liberation movement in the 1970s, extant homoerotic connoisseurial culture began to professionalise and make strides into academic spheres, arguing for a unification of contemporary and historical artists under a shared gay and lesbian identity and celebrating the

⁷ Weinberg, 1996, p. 14.

⁸ Davis, 1992, p. 173.

⁹ Davis, 1998, p. 117.

¹⁰ Davis, 1998, p. 117.

¹¹ Davis, 1992, p. 174.

persistent nature of same-sex desire across time.¹² By the early 1990s, this body of scholarship received institutional recognition in the form of several special issue art historical journals. Davis' 1994 issue of *The Journal of Homosexuality* asserted that homosexual identity had arrived in the discipline 'as one of the necessary logical fulfilments of art history itself rather than a mere excrescence upon or within it.'¹³ In a similar vein, the Winter 1996 volume of *Art Journal* focused on the rise of gay and lesbian visibility with the politically inspired slogan 'We're Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History.'¹⁴

The issues of visibility and representation, informed by the identity politics of feminism and gay liberation, took on unique methodological concerns in the context of gay and lesbian art historical scholarship. Given the continual presence of homophobic repression throughout much the history of the West, queer content was invariably codified, hidden, restricted in circulation, censored or destroyed. This led to what Davis identifies as an orientation towards absence, studying a field of representation that is apparent at times only through its 'constitutive *invisibilities*.'¹⁵ Given the limited material available for analysis, gay and lesbian art historiography focused on the reconstructive efforts of filling in these absences and illustrating the mechanisms which produced and reproduced this lacuna.¹⁶ Indeed, as editors of the aforementioned issue of *Art Journal* Peter Horne and Reina Lewis note, the impetus to "out" artists is a precondition for analysis, a trait unique from other forms of minority scholarship wherein gender, race or class is more materially apparent.¹⁷ This representative work, moreover, was often imbued with a sense of contemporary need, making self-recognition possible for modern gays and lesbians in the hostile climate of the twentieth century.¹⁸ However, the result of this approach, as Davis admits, was 'not a method in the strict sense,' but rather an amalgamation of theoretical and biographical research with a common political goal.¹⁹

By the 1990s, however, the effects of Post-structuralism and nascent strings of queer theory had begun to problematise the representative claims of gay and lesbian studies. Michel Foucault's influential work on sexuality brought the stability of sexual identity into scrutiny, suggesting that homosexuality was a

¹² Davis, 1998, pp. 301-26.

¹³ Davis, 1994, p. 6.

¹⁴ Rando and Weinberg, 1996.

¹⁵ Davis, 1998, p. 124.

¹⁶ Weinberg, 1996, p. 11.

¹⁷ Horne and Lewis, 1990, p. 3.

¹⁸ Rando, 1996, p. 8.

¹⁹ Davis, 1998, p. 115.

‘historical construct’,²⁰ and ‘discursive fact.’²¹ Locating the origin of homosexual identity and psychology at the point of its entrance into discourse in 1870, Foucault’s scholarship cast doubt on the transcendental nature of gay and lesbian identities and experience across history.²² In his scathing criticisms of the repression hypothesis, moreover, Foucault denounced the claim that contemporary sexual liberation was cause for celebration or indeed has even been achieved.²³ Instead, he cautioned that liberation’s demand for legibility could further constrain the possibility of freedom by bringing marginalized practices into greater visibility and therefore heightened regulation through discourse.²⁴

This anxiety concerning language and meaning was felt in other areas of art history as the effects of Post-structuralist thought spread through the discipline. Notably, Michael Baxandall’s attentiveness to the mediating role of verbal and written description in art historical methodology raised the stakes of Foucault’s problematic of historical representations. As the foremost component of Baxandall’s ‘triangle of re-enactment’, linguistic description is highlighted as a necessary and crucial mediation between a visual object and its historical analysis.²⁵ If to engage with an object is first to re-enact it through language,²⁶ then the anachronisms and social constructions in our contemporary language inevitably risk epistemological contamination with the past. In this light, constructing a canon of homosexual art and artists throughout history could be seen as a project of discursive appropriation that misrepresents historically-situated identities whilst also robbing them of a certain sort of freedom that was made possible through a position outside of discourse, or at the very least, the modern concept of the homosexual as a ‘pathological species.’²⁷

Concomitant with rising concerns about the practice of naming and outing historical gays and lesbians, nascent queer scholarship was nurtured by the antiessentialist strands of Foucault’s argument and the introduction of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Drawing from Foucault, Butler sought to explore how marginalised communities can come to be complicit with the systems that name and police their identities.²⁸ By voiding gender of any *a priori* ontological status, Butler’s theory of performativity troubled political and cultural communities that had been formed around a shared

²⁰ Foucault, 1976, p. 105.

²¹ Foucault, 1976, p. 11.

²² Foucault, 1976, p. 43.

²³ Foucault, 1976, p. 98.

²⁴ Foucault, 1976, p. 98.

²⁵ Baxandall, 1985, p. 32.

²⁶ Baxandall, 1985, p. 5.

²⁷ Foucault, 1976, p. 43; Horne and Lewis, 1990, p. 3.

²⁸ Butler, 1990, p. 17.

experience of gendered oppression and gendered attraction.²⁹ In the wake of this theoretical intervention, anxieties rose as to how claims to solidarity through a shared identification might not only risk obscuring difference, but could further support a system of discursive violence that renders certain acts and bodies as derivative and secondary,³⁰ or worse, unintelligible and ungrievable.³¹

Emerging from this critique of identity politics were new strategies to contest regulatory structures through practices of disidentification.³² As a refusal of fixed, categorical gender or sexual identity, the term queer came to prominence as a rhetorical strategy to articulate an opposition to heterosexual and gender binary norms without recourse to the identity politics of second-wave feminism or gay and lesbian liberation.³³ Constituting multiple shifting and inchoate practices, the term encompasses what pioneering queer theorist Eve Sedgwick describes as ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically.’³⁴

The historiographic implications of such a stance are both profoundly challenging and hotly contested. With queer deployed as an open-ended terminological horizon, the problematic anachronisms of homosexual histories are ameliorated to a degree, though an accompanying attentiveness to the intricacies of distinct queer subjectivities and practices is necessary to disclose the specific nuances of history. However, queer’s broad membership raises concerns in scholars such as Weinberg who are cautious to defend the specific struggles and historically contested gains of its gay and lesbian precedent.³⁵ Davis, moreover, adds the spectre of relativism, suggesting that the inchoate foundation of queer may lead to a permissive attitude towards sexualities he sees as morally objectionable,³⁶ while historian David Halperin denounces the surge of politically unhelpful “tourist queers” who take on the term for its cultural caché without ‘having to do anything icky with their bodies in order to earn it.’³⁷ A certain degree of hostility, therefore, can be seen from both sides of the debate.

At best, gay and lesbian art historical scholarship seems to offer a tentative alliance with queer theory,

²⁹ Jagose, 1996, p. 83.

³⁰ Jagose, 1996, p. 93.

³¹ Butler, 1993, p. 16.

³² Butler, 1993, p. 4.

³³ Jagose, 1996, p. 99.

³⁴ Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8.

³⁵ Weinberg, 1996, p. 14.

³⁶ Davis, 1998, p. 130.

³⁷ Halperin, 1995, p. 65.

recognizing the potential political utility of a destabilised account of identity and representation, though only in so far as this discursive construction does not occlude the task of redressing the gaps in history that signify homosexual desire. Davis argues for a synthesis of queer theory with gay and lesbian art historical practice, perhaps underplaying the tensions that could arise therein.³⁸ Weinberg's concession to the political work of queer theory, meanwhile, is bracketed by the assertion that, 'it should not replace the task of recovering gay and lesbian iconographies and historical moments.'³⁹ While queer theory and its historical work represent a diverse range of scholars and approaches, it seems that at least a significant part of this community would find Weinberg's position to be incompatible with a larger project of the deconstruction of identity structures and regulatory forms of political legibility. When approached as a tool kit without its own specific research concerns, queer theory seems to take the subordinate role in this uneasy scholastic union.

All the while, the impact of gay and lesbian art history has been questionable, particularly when seen from the discipline's totality. Unlike earlier feminist struggles for recognition in art historical narratives, there are several "great artists" that can and have been claimed as gay or lesbian.⁴⁰ This "mix and stir" approach of broadening the art historical canon, however, does not seem to have stirred much. Minority scholarship, with its focus on biography and its additive orientation towards the Western art historical canon, often fails to achieve wide-reaching effects outside its artists of study. Perhaps this reveals the extent to which the methodological frames of the discipline underpin its core assertions. As suggested by recent explorations into the expansion of Western art history into a more global discipline, while the canon can be stretched almost indefinitely,⁴¹ the value and integrity of the objects therein rests heavily on the methods employed in their study.⁴² A revolutionary turn to the discipline, therefore, might not be to merely fight for queer recognition in the body of art history, but rather to queer the methodology by which this body is known.

The Ethics of Body and Method

Phenomenology may be a powerful ally to queer theory, evinced by the former's recent incursions into art historical method. Pioneered by Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss in the 1960s as a means to enrich an aesthetic and embodied account of interactions between viewers and art objects, this

³⁸ Davis, 1994, p. 5.

³⁹ Weinberg, 1996, p. 12.

⁴⁰ For example, da Vinci, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Rosa Bonheur, Romaine Brooks, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, etc.

⁴¹ Elkins, 2007, p. 18.

⁴² Kesner, 2007, p. 87.

phenomenological approach heralded the return of the body as a major concern to minimalist art, and art history more broadly.⁴³ Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, to a lesser extent, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, a phenomenological art historical approach privileges situated, embodied interpretation over distanced objectivity. In the scholarship of Fried and Krauss, this interpretive work is profoundly subjective, located in the individual art historian's encounter with an art object.⁴⁴ Like the desiring queer scholar elucidated by Love, phenomenological analysis is motivated by affect and embodied experience. As an extension of the viewer's intentionality (whereby, in the Husserlian sense, objects are experienced only through the directedness of the perceiver's consciousness)⁴⁵ this process renders explicit the complicated interpenetration of description and interpretation later elucidated by Baxandall's triangle of re-enactment.⁴⁶ The relativity that follows Krauss and Fried's phenomenological writings is thus illuminating, but lacks the objective punch to instantiate it as a methodology. Indeed, art historian Stephen Melville situates phenomenology as the converse to a rigorous disciplinary foundation, stating that, 'it is more nearly a highly general and consequential way of understanding what kind of thing an object is, and its outcome, at this level of generality, is essentially antimethodological, if not antitheoretical.'⁴⁷

These limitations, however, are interpreted in a different light in subsequent appraisals of the intersections of phenomenology and art historical method. As art historian Amanda Boetzkes demonstrates, there is an ethical charge to this project of limited knowledge and indeed a productive acknowledgement of meaning that exists in excess of the viewer's experiential access to an object.⁴⁸ Ever present through the bodies of the viewer and the maker, Boetzkes' "phenomenology of difference" opens up new research questions through an examination of how objects and their makers construct the phenomenological experiences of their viewers, revealing some but not all of their being to the perceiver's intentionality.⁴⁹ Resisting total legibility, and beginning and ending in the recognition of an alterity inherent to objects both historical and contemporary, Boetzkes situates phenomenology as methodologically and theoretically useful precisely because it works against the objectivity of seamless art historical narratives.⁵⁰

⁴³ Melville, 1998, p. 148.

⁴⁴ Fried, 1967, pp. 116-47; Krauss, 1986, pp. 99-145.

⁴⁵ Melville, 1998, p. 152.

⁴⁶ Baxandall, 1985, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Melville, 1998, p. 153.

⁴⁸ Boetzkes, 2010, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Boetzkes, 2010, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Boetzkes, 2010, p. 54.

This founding recognition of difference and partially occluded epistemological terrain is resonant with many of queer theory's constitutional ethics and points of departure from gay and lesbian studies. Indeed, queer theory and phenomenology have recently been brought into productive accord through the work of Sara Ahmed in her groundbreaking *Queer Phenomenology*. With a title that is part interdisciplinary statement and part revisionist declaration, Ahmed's book attempts to re-think the tradition of phenomenology through critical race, feminist and queer concerns while also seeking to reorient the scope and meaning of phenomenological enquiry itself.

As Ahmed notes, queer is a spatial term and this etymology is not incidental.⁵¹ Originally referring to a twist or a slant, queer not only implies a directional metaphor of bodily action away from a straight course, but also a shaping of the body through its inhabitation of space.⁵² A queer phenomenology, therefore, is attentive to the twists and turns of bodies towards and away from the linear norm as well as the means by which these bodies and spaces are formed and deformed in turn.

Ahmed's concept of objects as orientation devices is key to this project. Rather than Melville's singular point of intentionality or Boetzkes' dual points of phenomenological alterity, Ahmed builds a phenomenological model wherein a perceiver is directed through the propensities and design of objects to orient and move themselves through space in different ways, allowing the body to extend in certain directions and towards certain bodies.⁵³ Objects, acting as relational anchors and phenomenological lenses, by consequence do not solely constitute that which is faced and intended by the perceiver, but also that which is behind, supporting specific perceptions of bodily encounters and extensions in space.⁵⁴ Applied to the schema of the heteronormative organizing of the world, Ahmed shows how certain objects can straighten a body's orientation, bringing it into line with a gender binary that prohibits certain forms of contact and extension. Conversely, other objects can be disorienting, providing a different slant on the normative directionality of bodies, queering their orientation towards and through space.⁵⁵

This phenomenological framework, applied to art history, provides a multitude of avenues for exploration in a variety of temporal orientations. Whether through the gay and lesbian liberation

⁵¹ Ahmed, 2006, p. 67.

⁵² Ahmed, 2006, p. 67.

⁵³ Ahmed, 2006, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Ahmed, 2006, p. 166.

⁵⁵ Ahmed, 2006, p. 169.

movement's deployment of art historical objects as historical anchors for its own orientation towards contemporary political and romantic bodies, or through the connoisseur's carefully constructed spaces and communities of desire, art objects have played an important role in art historiography as both backgrounds and foregrounds that enable queer extensions between bodies.

Queer phenomenology also grants, with due limitations and respect for alterity, a means through which to approach the phenomenological world of historical actors and their constituent objects, spaces, and bodies. By reconstructing something of the relationship between artists, scholars, audiences, and their spatial subjects and objects, select phenomenological traces of bodies and orientations can be uncovered across time. Firmly grounded in a commitment towards greater neutrality in language, Boetzkes' ethical orientation towards objects of study and Ahmed's attentiveness to spatial relations between objects and bodies, a queer phenomenological art history may be better equipped to reproduce the nuances of desire and bodily enactments than a method that takes its basis from an identity claim or a contemporary politics. Oriented thus, a queer art history could achieve great things.

Denuding the Artist: Queer Phenomenology and the Case Study of John Singer Sargent

These rather lofty claims certainly require testing and John Singer Sargent's contested sexuality provides fruitful ground on which to do so. Before the 1980s Sargent scholarship was largely constituted by the efforts of American art historians to claim a fellow countryman as a great innovator of early Modernist art, typically on formalist terms.⁵⁶ Ostensibly a life-long bachelor, the subject of Sargent's sexual orientation did not enter into academic appraisal of the artist until 1981 when Trevor Fairbrother published a groundbreaking exploration of the homoerotic nature of an album of male nudes created and kept in private by the artist. Challenging what he perceived as a cowardly presumption that Sargent's asexual public demeanour was also true of his private life,⁵⁷ Fairbrother compared the nudes with gay erotic post cards contemporary to Sargent's period, exposing convincing parallels in the pose and focus of both sets of bodies.⁵⁸ Describing the motivations for his research, Fairbrother states, '[m]y primary concern is to introduce the drawings as an important segment of Sargent's enormous and uneven oeuvre and to see how they enlighten his more public statements; but they must also be seen as providing insight into his private interests, about which so little other

⁵⁶ Gardner, 1957, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Fairbrother, 1981, p. 70.

⁵⁸ Fairbrother, 1981, pp. 72-5.

evidence exists.’⁵⁹

Beyond this rather humble front one might also suspect larger ambitions for such work and its reception. Writing at the start of the AIDs crisis and during a high period of activity for the gay and lesbian liberation movement, Fairbrother’s outing of Sargent could be seen to reflect contemporary anxieties and ambitions. There may also be similar concerns at stake in the subsequent responses to Fairbrother’s assertions. Most notably, the artist’s great-grandnephew Richard Ormond strongly objected to the quality of evidence presented. Art historian Patricia Failing has pointed out, however, that Ormond was holding Fairbrother to a standard that Ormond himself inconsistently upheld across his own scholarship.⁶⁰ Further archival research has produced some substantiation of Fairbrother’s claim, with an anecdotal remark surfacing in the correspondence of an acquaintance that Sargent was a ‘frenzied bugger.’⁶¹ Little other evidence can be expected to surface, however. The artist’s personal files were destroyed after his death.

As a key figure in the canon of American modern art, Sargent’s sexuality continues to be a site of discourse and contestation. Fairbrother revisited his earlier assertions in a curatorial and book project in 2000. He was able to exhibit the entire collection of male nudes alongside several pivotal works of Sargent’s public corpus. He argued that a common feeling of sensuality pervaded Sargent’s entire artistic production.⁶² The somewhat feminising descriptive language deployed by Fairbrother – he described Sargent’s ‘loving’ control over the pencil,⁶³ and ‘sensuous temperament’⁶⁴ – stands in contrast to the artist’s description by his own contemporaries as someone who possessed a ‘health-giving, manly art.’⁶⁵ Fairbrother’s linguistic slant casts somewhat essentialising glances at the spectre of Sargent’s sexuality and he concluded that while Sargent’s public works were normative in content, he nevertheless, ‘developed his own impressionistic and suggestive style that left the door open for other audiences to pursue independent conclusions.’⁶⁶

Sargent scholars have continued to do just that. Alison Syme’s 2010 book *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* expands on Fairbrother’s suggestion through

⁵⁹ Fairbrother, 1981, p. 71.

⁶⁰ Failing, 2001: <http://www.artnews.com/2001/05/01/the-hidden-sargent/>; accessed 17 November, 2012.

⁶¹ Fairbrother, 1999, p. 39.

⁶² Fairbrother, 2000, p. 15.

⁶³ Fairbrother, 2000, p. 44.

⁶⁴ Fairbrother, 2000, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Robert Ross, quoted in Fairbrother, 2000, p. 91.

⁶⁶ Fairbrother, 2000, p. 97.

an exploration of a larger sphere of deviant sexuality seemingly secretly encoded in the plant, hand, bird and insect imagery present in Sargent's portraits. While deploying queer as a term in her study and making occasional references to queer theorists along the way,⁶⁷ Syme's project is still fundamentally located in the representational concerns of gay and lesbian politics and its attempt to decode and repopulate the absent archive of LGBTQ experiences. Anachronisms abound in her playful deployment of language, referring to Sargent in the context of the modern term of 'homosexual',⁶⁸ the period term of 'invert',⁶⁹ and the botanical metaphor of 'backdoor-pollinator'.⁷⁰ This disregard for the historically located connotations of terminology extends to some fairly broad assertions about sexuality and its deployment by Sargent more generally. In the context of Sargent's somewhat androgynously rendered hands, for example, Syme notes that their 'hermaphrodite condition ... reflects the innate bisexuality of humans.'⁷¹ As a queer alternative to the over-determinism of gay and lesbian studies' treatment of art historical materials, Syme's work is limited.

In this light, it is evident that the descriptive language deployed by accounts of Sargent's sexuality prove to be a non-trivial encumbrance towards an ethical engagement with the artist's bodily desires and sexuality. In response, through applying a queer phenomenological method to the work in question, one can begin to resolve this impasse by leaving questions of identity aside and examining how Sargent's work has functioned as an orientation device for different bodies and embodied relations throughout their history.

In the case of Trevor Fairbrother, the nude folio has been a key object guiding his direction within Sargent scholarship and a larger curatorial practice. In contradiction to the ascetic Sargent depicted by the existent research on the artist, the album of male figures was a profoundly disorienting discovery. Expressing concern for its worn edges and puzzling at its construction, Fairbrother's attentiveness to its materiality is evident in his introduction of the album to his scholastic community.⁷² Indeed, the material nature of the object and the phenomenological mode of its use might further condition its deployment and reception. Over the course of its study, Fairbrother would have to have visited the works in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum, carefully opening and closing the volume, fingering its fragile pages through gloved hands. The interiority of the drawings, hidden within their bindings and

⁶⁷ Syme, 2010, p. 173.

⁶⁸ Syme, 2010, p. 67.

⁶⁹ Syme, 2010, p. 18.

⁷⁰ Syme, 2010, p. 196.

⁷¹ Syme, 2010, p. 79.

⁷² Fairbrother, 1981, p. 70.

their context in a private collection, runs parallel to the narrative Fairbrother has constructed about Sargent's divided life more broadly.⁷³

This partitioning between inside and outside was further instantiated in Fairbrother's 2000 exhibition 'John Singer Sargent' at the Seattle Art Museum. Fairbrother oriented his viewer early in the exhibition towards the full collection of the male nudes from the infamous folio. Clustered together, the collection of figures instantiated a visual theme through the repetition of their figures, bending and twisting sequentially on the wall. These works were oriented in tension with the show's centrepiece gallery, a dark green room containing twelve of Sargent's society portraits of women in elaborate costume. Following Fairbrother's intended orientation through the exhibition, the viewer alternated between crowding close to the intimate charcoal sketches and mingling from afar with the lofty portraits. An intentional counterpart to one another,⁷⁴ the binary between genders, media and publics were reified in the show's layout, which bridged Fairbrother's scholarly direction with an embodied orientation in the gallery.

Just as the album oriented Fairbrother, one can conjecture at the direction it may have offered to Sargent. If one accepts Fairbrother's suggestion that the album served as an object of private reflection and personal construction, one can imagine Sargent returning to it over time, carefully pasting his nude drawings into its bindings. As one item in his larger collection of aesthetic objects, which featured Edwardian luxuries and other more curious portraits such as *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller*, the album was arranged in a domestic environment designed to offer visual pleasure, particularly that of the male nude. As Sara Ahmed notes, the private space of the closet or home need not be wrenched open to be resistant to the wider norms that construct public space.⁷⁵ Instead, Sargent's home can be seen as a profoundly queer interior, resistant to straight lines that orient public spaces and providing new possibilities for connections between bodies that were not otherwise permitted to meet.

Yet for Sargent the album was more than just an aesthetic object in a domestic space; it was also an on-going technical project of drafting, sketching, and collecting. The book contains thirty drawings and one collotype, probably produced between 1890 and 1915.⁷⁶ Rendered mostly in charcoal on a mixture

⁷³ Fairbrother, 1990, p. 30.

⁷⁴ Pucci, 2000: <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=20001210&slug=4055626>; accessed 17 November, 2012.

⁷⁵ Ahmed, 2006, p. 175.

⁷⁶ Fairbrother, 2000, p. 180.

of off-white papers of varying dimensions, the book suggests that drawing the male figure was a sustained practice for the artist, perhaps even an object of satisfaction or pleasure.⁷⁷ Nicola D’Inverno, Sargent’s manservant, was a frequent model. Some drawings, such as *Studies of Sleeping Figures for “David in Saul’s Camp”* (c. 1895-1900, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig.1), were preparatory sketches for biblical paintings that were never fully realized. The majority of the drawings, however, have no further iterations beyond the album.



Fig. 1. John Singer Sargent, *Studies of Sleeping Figures for “David in Saul’s Camp”*, c. 1895-1900. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 62.7 x 48.3 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.16. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

As a phenomenological document, the drawings present traces of how Sargent’s body moved through

⁷⁷ The album and its drawings can be viewed in detail at Harvard Art Museums, n.d.: <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/307680>; accessed November 17, 2013.

space and practised a concerted form of looking. Figures 2-4, for example, present a series of studies of the same nude in a uniformly upright posture, seen from three different angles. The consistency of the materials and pose suggests that the artist slowly moved around the model from the back to the front in a single sitting, maintaining a fixed radius around the body. Deftly sketched through a mixture of hatching, smudges, erasing, and linear weight, the figure is quickly and expertly rendered. When the hurried shading in the background, which hazily surrounds the figure, is compared to the more refined work of the mottled shades around the chest and legs, it suggests that the latter were the most important aspect of the study to the artist. In the dark space of what was probably Sargent's domestic studio, the figure is lit to emerge from the shadows with a nuanced musculature. Moving around the model's body, Sargent captures the changing curves and tones of his figure, engaging in a deep study through a carefully scanning eye and quick hand.

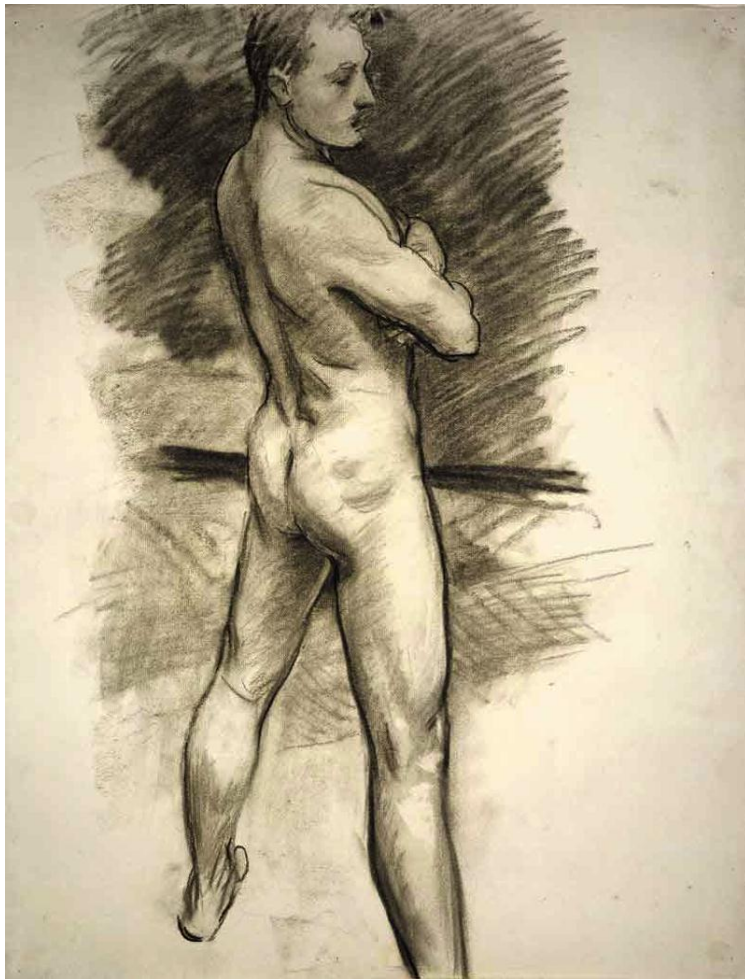


Fig. 2. John Singer Sargent, *Male Nude Seen from Behind*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, actual: 62 x 47.5 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.10. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)



Fig. 3. John Singer Sargent, *Standing Male Nude*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 62.3 x 47.5 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.11. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

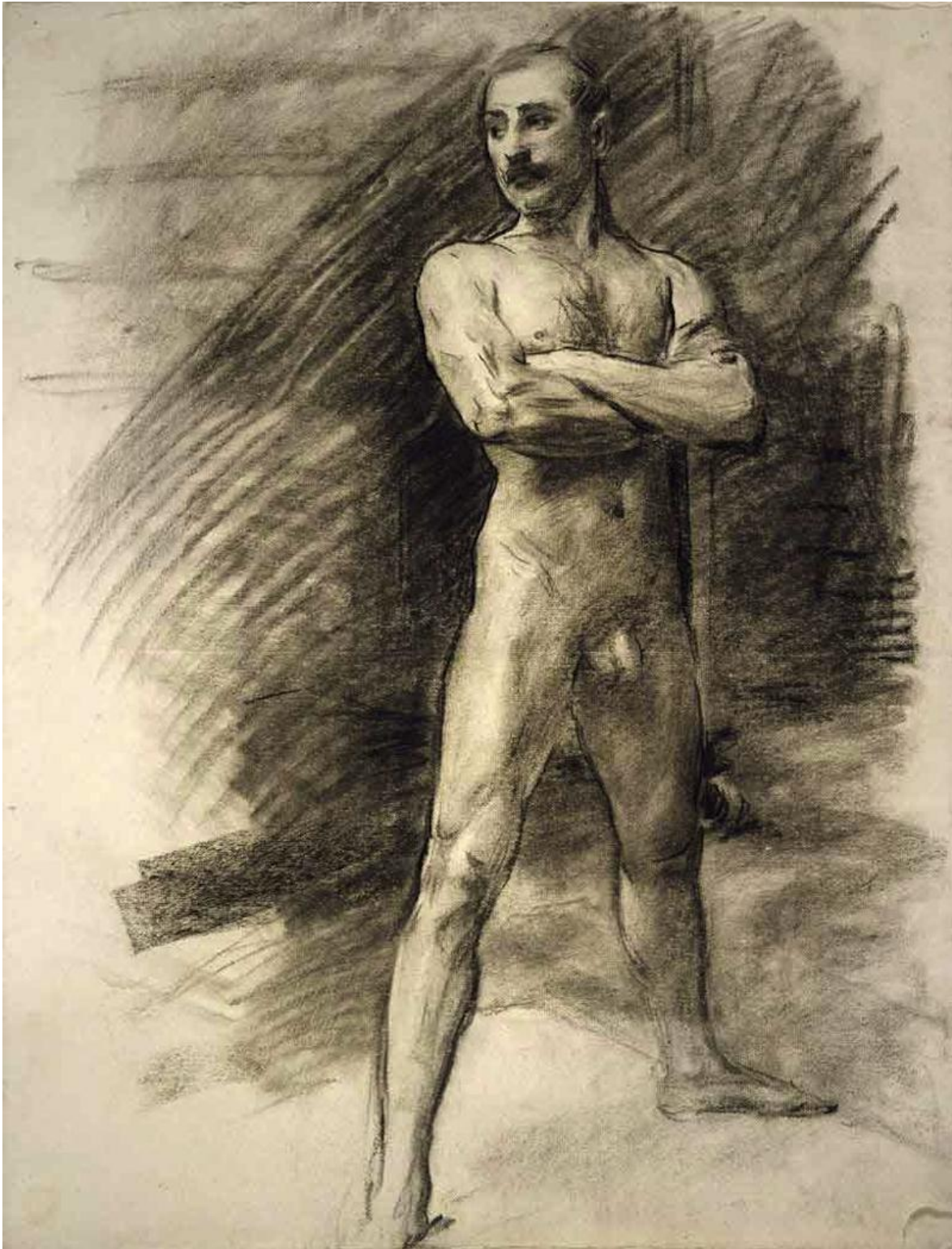


Fig. 4. John Singer Sargent, *Standing Male Nude*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 62.2 x 47.5 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.12. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

The body that emerges from these pages is a luminous and deeply corporeal subject. Like a zoetropic

array, the sequential, spatial movement of the artist records D'Inverno's body as more than a mere pictorial object. The viewer perceives the model's three-dimensional presence, the extension of his curves beyond the actual perspective afforded at any given time, and his resolute focus on a fixed point in space (at which Sargent appears to rest in the second drawing). The heaviness of the line weight, most pronounced in the first two sketches, attests to the intensity of the artist's gaze and his focus on the precise and volumetric contours of the foremost leg, the back, and the chest. The figure, moreover, is positioned against a background that seems to exist solely for the benefit of accentuating these features. This theatrical visual treatment and the triangular shape of the scissored legs results in a composition that centres on the evocative and curvilinear back and hips.

The final drawing in this sequence, *Standing Male Nude* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 4), concludes the series with an emphasis on tonal form. Focusing on the minute gradations of shadow that fall from D'Inverno's tensed ligaments and muscles, Sargent fleshed-in the dynamic form he had been circling, perhaps with the intent to resolve the energetic sense of motion that had accumulated in his progression around the figure. The dramatic body that Sargent arranges, records, and archives stands lithe and confident like the sculptures of ancient Grecian youths. The resulting form not at rest, but is instead rendered as a site of potential energy.

What does it mean for the artist to have conducted such an exercise and to have saved the results in a carefully curated volume? Such an effort seems to suggest more than the mere technical practice of a professional artist maintaining his skill. Instead, the resulting sketches present a deeply reverent depiction of the male form. Sargent, in orienting and ambulating his body and gaze around the male nude, centred it spatially and conceptually in a rather embodied way for the duration of the hours of domestic study required to produce the images. Perhaps this was also the case when the artist later returned to the drawings in his personal album, and reflected not only on their visual pleasures but also the physical memory of their making. The heightened proximity between bodies, the studious and selective movement of Sargent's hands, and the rapturous attention of his study are evident in the material results of the encounter, both to the contemporary viewer and surely to Sargent himself. The act of creating and collecting these sketches supported a particular kind of intimacy between artist and subject that is apparent in the drawings, though never fully disclosed.

This interest in the model's body and its vibrant affordances in space is continued in other drawings in the album. *Two Male Figure Studies* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum)

(Fig. 5), for example, depicts two recumbent and extremely foreshortened men, perhaps belonging to the set of biblical preparatory studies. This bizarre angle orients the viewer at ground level with the figures who twist and bend in their restfulness. It is likely that both sketches are the result of an extended session with a single model (possibly D'Inverno). In preparing the arrangements for the drawing the figure was likely either raised and situated at eye-level for the standing artist to better attend to the dynamism of his repose or Sargent chose to crouch or lie down on the same planar field as the model to better capture the view. The result is an intimate portrait of a sleeping nude seen not from the surveying eye of a figure that stands above it, but rather from the shared ground of a common bed or floor.



Fig. 5. John Singer Sargent, *Two Male Figure Studies*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 52.7 x 65.6 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.15. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

Male Reclining on a Stairway (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 6), moreover, continues this fascination with a twisted and sinuous pose, arranging the model with an arched back and raised torso reposing in the angular descent of a flight of stairs. The light on the figure's chest seems to glow against the darker wall underneath the banister while the heavy line demarcating the body's edge jumps noticeably to articulate a nipple in profile. This twisting and display of the belly is made even more striking in *Male Nude Leaning Back on a Ladder* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 7), wherein the model is perched quite vulnerably on his support, bending over backwards and seen from below to better showcase the figure's supine verticality. With looser lines and broader hatching strokes, the image suggests something of a hurried notation, perhaps owing to the model's precarious contortions.



Fig. 6. John Singer Sargent, *Male Reclining on a Stairway*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 47.7 x 62.1 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.5. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

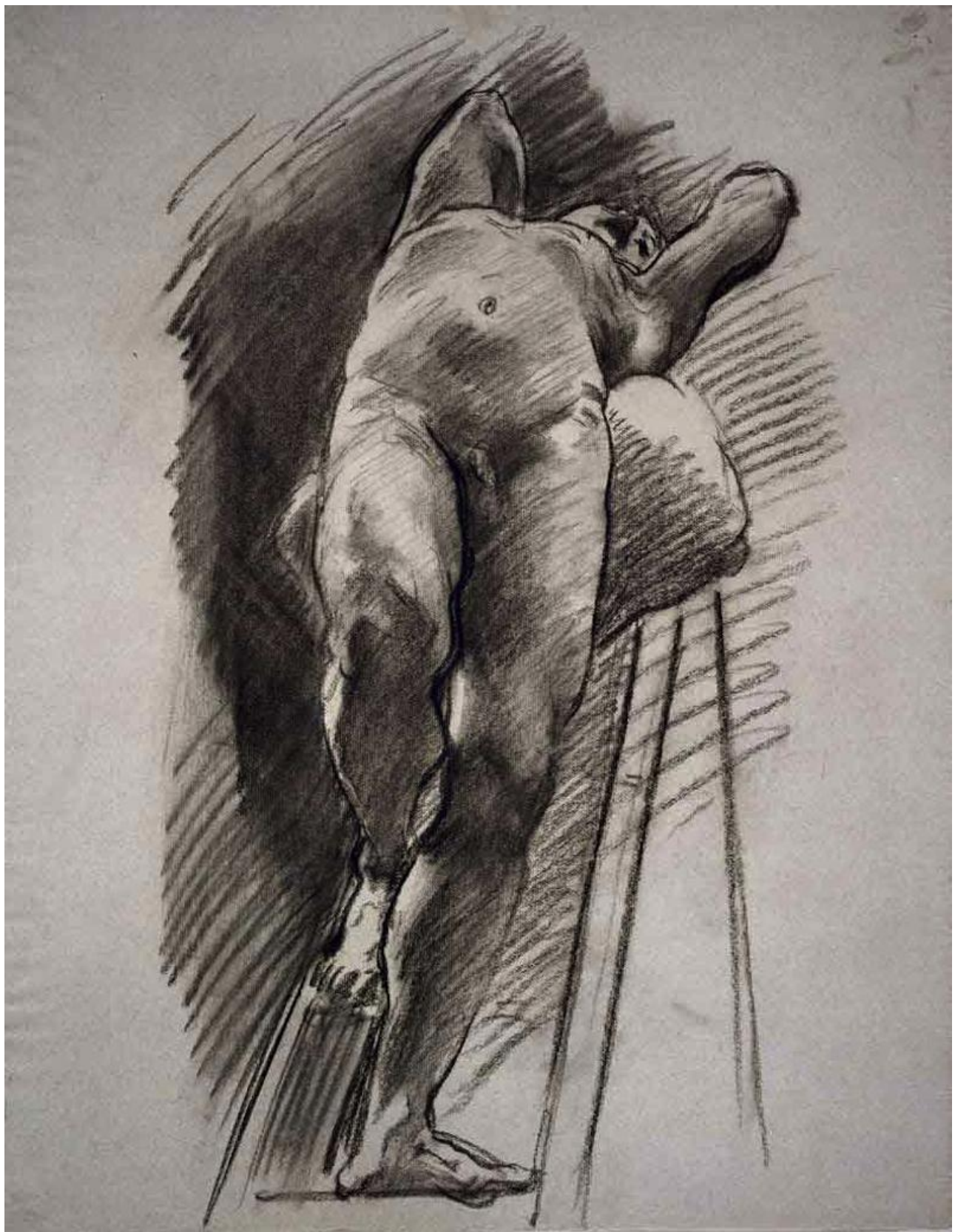


Fig. 7. John Singer Sargent, *Male Nude Leaning Back on a Ladder*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on faded blue laid paper, 62.3 x 47.8 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No.1937.9.27. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

While it would be reductive to identify these drawings as queer solely by virtue of the twists of the body or Sargent's unusual choices in vantage points, these strange bodily positions do further the discussion. Sargent's own orientation in space, closely viewing the model's body from below and above expresses an evident fascination in the dynamism of male nudes that did not extend to his public works or female studies. The model was asked to twist and bend into peculiar postures, holding his body in place for the eyes of an artist who seemed to delight in the play of light and shadow along these muscular forms. While many of the poses are not unfamiliar to the art historical canon, certain drawings, particularly those of Figures 6-8, echo more traditionally feminized positions, reminiscent of odalisque and Venus imagery. Rather than the traditionally active, warrior postures of the male nude, Sargent's drawings call upon the body in a deceptive form of rest; while seemingly languid and reposed, the model's unusual and exacting postures manoeuvre the body to great physical ends in the pursuit of visual pleasure. The exchange supported by the drawings, therefore, is one of a peculiar corporeal extension between men, even for an artist and his model.

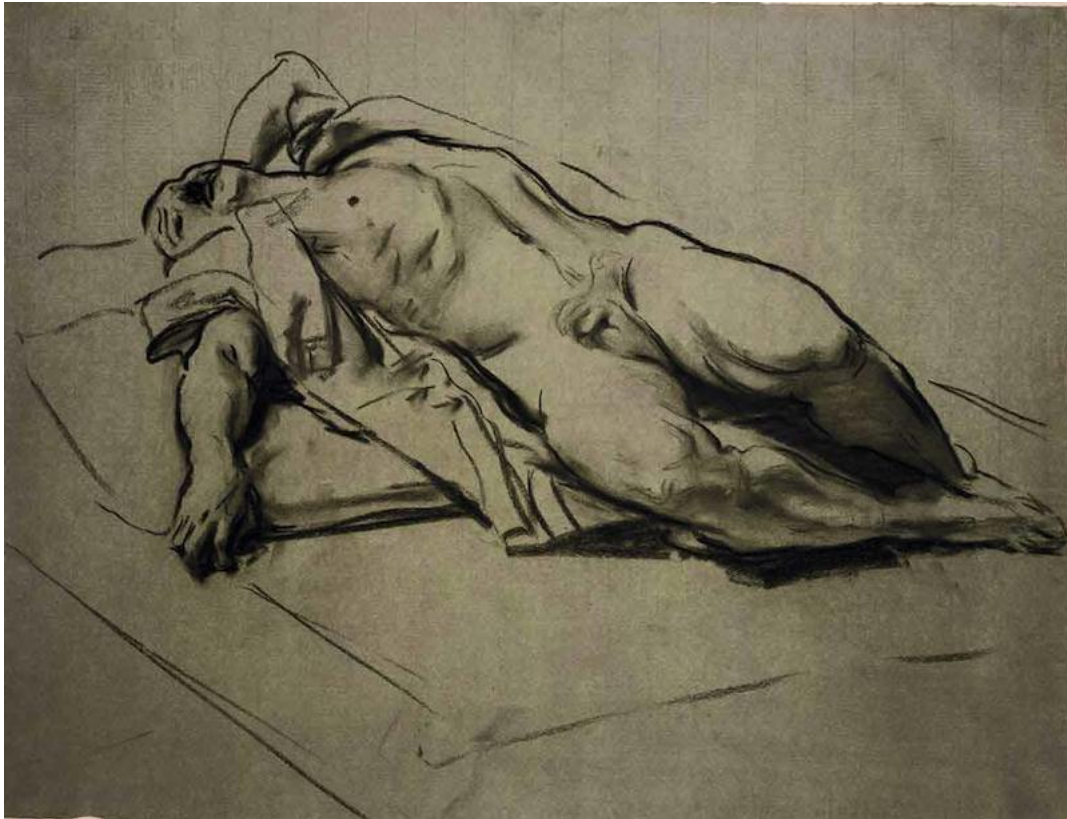


Fig. 8. John Singer Sargent, *Reclining Male Nude with His Left Hand Behind his Head*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on gray-blue laid paper, 46.8 x 61.7 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.20. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

Furthering this phenomenological enquiry in and amongst these spatially queer postures and responsive orientations, one can find further suggestions as to how Sargent's practice of looking was structured and enacted through his bodily movements. *Reclining Male Nude with his Left Hand Behind his Head* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 8), again depicting a twisted torso with exposed chest, vividly provides another example of the importance of line weight as a strategy for suggesting depth, tone, and interest. While darker, broader charcoal lines can evoke deep shadow and sense of gravity, such as in the rendering of the figure's right shin and forearm, these lines are also deployed to bring an emphasis to the outline of the body, most noticeably in the precise shape formed in the delineation of the figure's left side. Running from clavicle to ankle, this heavy mark captures the edge of the figure and brings it to sharp attention. This powerful line, darkened far in excess of the strict needs of light and shadow, could be an index of the artist's eye as it moved over his model. Through the practice of contour drawing, the artist was trained to enact his careful gaze simultaneously with the movement and mark of his drawing tool across the image's surface, thereby recording the path of both in the emergent sketch.

To view the drawings as an index of Sargent's gaze must be a rather tentative conjecture, yet it can nevertheless lend important suggestion as to how the artist may have favoured a certain practice of looking and describing the male body. In *Reclining Male Nude* (Fig. 8), as well as *Male Reclining on a Stairway* (Fig. 6), and *Male Nude Leaning Back on a Ladder* (Fig. 7) the dynamism of tone and line in the body's muscularity seems to be of greater visual interest and detail than that of the genitalia, which are only modestly sketched in – suggestively rather than explicitly rendered. If the heavy contour lines are indicative of a slow and concerted way of looking, then the wispy, more tonal line work suggests a quicker articulation and a lack of intense scrutiny. Sargent's eye, and perhaps his desires as well, favoured certain aspects of the male form over others. The hips, nipple, and muscular curve of the back seem to have been more compelling than the penis, which remains relatively unresolved throughout the album.

Indeed this departure from typically homoerotic imagery extends to the buttocks as well. In *Torso of a Male Nude with Arm Raised* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 9) and to an even greater extent, *Male Nude Seen from Behind, Arm Raised Over Head* (c. 1890-1915, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) (Fig. 10), the brawn of the back and arms are dramatically detailed through heavy tones and dark outlines while the model's backside is left in comparative neglect. Noticeably, the nipples and small of the back are again the most heavily

shadowed, even to the contrary of how one might expect the shadows to naturally fall along the form.



Fig. 9. John Singer Sargent, *Torso of a Male Nude with Arm Raised*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on blue laid paper, 62.1 x 47.4 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No. 1937.9.22. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)



Fig. 10. John Singer Sargent, *Male Nude Seen from Behind, Arm Raised Over Head*, c. 1890-1915. Charcoal on off-white laid paper, 61.8 x 48.3 cm, Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, inv. No 1937.9.24. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

The phenomenological account of Sargent's nudes is thus a profoundly queer one, though perhaps not in the straightforward homoerotic sense suggested by Fairbrother,⁷⁸ or the universal latent eroticism posed by Syme.⁷⁹ Instead, an attentiveness to the bodily practices of looking, movement, and posture suggest a rather specific fascination with the male form that deviates from both contemporary hetero- and homonormative expectations. A queer phenomenological exploration of Sargent's drawings therein uncovers more nuance than that of archival biographical conjecture and something of the specificity of his desiring approach to the nude.

As orienting devices, the drawings supported a sustained practice of contemplation and active looking within Sargent's private sphere in a way that probably needed to stay private to avoid disapprobation.⁸⁰ The drawings brought Sargent close to the nude male body, acting as something of an epistemological tool to enable the contemplation of its shapes and contours – some forms more than others. Yet, the drawings may have also been a distancing object, keeping his body far enough away from the model to render it and arresting the model's movements into inactivity in order to be depicted. As evidenced in the serial images of the slowly encircled figure, Sargent maintained a consistent radius around his model – close, but not too close. The drawings' destination in the album may also suggest an ambivalent proximity: there Sargent could return to them in pleasurable contemplation, yet there they were also part of a larger catalogue of aesthetic objects with their concomitant aesthetic distance.

To conjecture beyond this point would be to extend one's imagination beyond the limits of the available evidence and in defiance of an ethical acknowledgement that the experiences and orientations of art objects and historical figures are always in excess of what can be known or recovered.⁸¹ Indeed, such an approach even challenges the extent to which knowledge gained through other means can be upheld as valid. Sargent's queer departure from his presumed homoerotic gaze suggests that claiming the artist as gay would be not only anachronistic, but rather more reductive to the nuances at play in his

⁷⁸ Fairbrother, 1981, p. 71.

⁷⁹ Syme, 2010, p. 79.

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that Sargent was a contemporary of Oscar Wilde, so famously persecuted in his lifetime for his queer inclinations.

⁸¹ This does represent a significant limitation to the methodology proposed, and indeed its paucity of wider historical context suggests the need to supplement queer phenomenological analyses with other means of enquiry. My own research is made possible only through a larger body of existent cultural and historical scholarship which is perhaps under-acknowledged in the final result. Just as one might hold a high degree of scepticism towards the Husserlian ideal of bracketing out all prior understanding of an object in the course of phenomenological intentionality, the external scholarship on an artist, their period, and the formal qualities of a work are unlikely to disappear when turning to attend to the spatiality of body, nor should they. While an ideologically-laden vocabulary might be productively suspended in the course of this phenomenological analysis, it nevertheless brackets the study and directs the scholar's look. See Ahmed, 2006, pp. 29-44.

orientation towards the nude.

This phenomenological queerness, however, might also orient the viewer differently towards other visualities outside of the album, and indeed, figure drawing as a genre more broadly suggests a continued potential for queer possibilities. Bringing bodies together in spatial contact and contemplation while bridging the phenomenological act of looking with material indexicality, drawing the nude has the potential to be a profoundly disorienting practice. As Sara Ahmed notes,

Queer objects support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*. A queer object would have a surface that supports such contact. The contact is bodily, and it unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds, thereby creating other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen.⁸²

One can thus say that Sargent's male nudes are profoundly queer objects, both for Sargent scholars and for the artist himself. While this assertion lacks the political capital of the on-going practices of outing and claiming historical figures within a shared LGBTQ lineage, it is ultimately more respectful and honest to the artist, and enriching to the scholarly possibilities presented by such objects as a point of departure. In this way, a queer phenomenological art history that is attentive to orientations towards and through bodies and objects might present a way past the impasse of gay and lesbian scholarship, while offering innovative methodological frames by which to approach a range of queer subjects without recourse to a specifically queer canon. Attending to the indices of bodily orientations while also recognizing their limits, the queer scholar might therefore respond to contemporary affective and political concerns by coming to linger in the specificities and differences of the many faces of sexuality throughout history.

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⁸² Ahmed, 2006, p. 169.

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Illustrations

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