

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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Seeing Queerly

By Faye Hirsch

A controversial exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery examines gay identity in American art, from early, circumspect representations to the frank images of today.

Ward [David C. Ward, co-curator of the exhibition] told me in a conversation that they did not wish to end on the sad note of AIDS, and that is understandable. All the more reason, then, to have included maquettes or drawings for Patricia Cronin's memorial of herself and her partner, the artist Deborah Kass, embracing in bed, nude and forever young, which was unveiled at Woodlawn National Cemetery in the Bronx in 2002. (Both artists are alive and well.) Cronin's 3-ton monument is remarkable, a very public affirmation of lesbianism and, in addition, a joyous alternative to the sober images death that saturated the art world during the AIDS crisis and are very well represented here. It should have been in this show.

Perhaps the only answer is a sequel – at a major museum, again, one hopes – focusing on the new queer identity in contemporary art, which is much less bound to stereotypes of gayness, and ever more heterogeneous and unpredictable in its manifestations. Until then, "Hide/Seek" offers a good historical survey with its own subtle twists. Hopefully the curators will have proved sufficiently clever to foil any further efforts by today's culture warriors to censor a timely show.