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This Dark Country

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for Catherine Faulkner

Contents

‘Often nothing tangible remains of a woman’s day. The food that has been cooked is eaten; the children that have been nursed have gone out into the world. Where does the accent fall? What is the salient point for the novelist to seize upon? It is difficult to say. Her life has an anonymous character which is baffling and puzzling in the extreme. For the first time, this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction; and at the same moment a woman has also to record the changes in women’s minds and habits which the opening of the professions has introduced. She has to observe how their lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world.’

Virginia Woolf, ‘Women and Fiction’

‘The study, the parlour, the kitchen: these rooms provide the settings for drama; they are where things happen.’

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

On the night of 28 March 1918, the economist Maynard Keynes, driven by politician Austen Chamberlain, arrived at the bottom of a muddy country lane in Sussex. Once the government-issue car had withdrawn into the darkness, Keynes retrieved a painting from his suitcase 'about the size of a large slab of chocolate'.[1] Worried by the artwork's weight, keenly aware of its value, Keynes did not want to risk any accidents on the short walk to the Charleston Farmhouse, where his hosts were waiting for him – amongst them Vanessa Bell – and placed it in a hedge for safe-keeping.[2] The previous day, while war raged on the Western Front, Keynes, a passionate art collector, had dashed to Edgar Degas's studio sale in Paris and purchased around twenty paintings with state funds.[3] As a 'personal reward' for his service to the British government, he bought four others using his own money, the star of which was the small, inauspicious parcel he later marshalled his friends to retrieve from the ground.[4]

The painting, *Les Pommes* by Cézanne, entered Vanessa's life as an aspirational symbol of political power: careful economic scheming and a cultural acumen acquired from the nation's most elite educational establishments brought about its acquisition, but the apples themselves, their presence and potential, transcended this narrow context. 'What can six apples *not* be?' her sister, Virginia Woolf, asked on first encountering the painting.[5] Vanessa's

response to a similar sense of the still life's possibility was to paint her own version, placing the apples explicitly in her own home. While Cézanne's fruit float against a backdrop of opaque colour, Vanessa's are arranged on a patterned china plate, sweet and uneven and shining, fragments of the surrounding interior pushing in from all sides of the frame.

The adjustments were subtle, but in making them Vanessa was asking new questions about the relationship between genre, gender, domesticity and work, and outlining how aesthetics might absorb the ephemeral idiom of the everyday. The result was a deceptively simple canvas dedicated to an alternative analysis of still life. Part of her proposal about the genre's intention and worth concerned emotion and connection – how they might be kindled into being. The thrill Vanessa felt on first seeing the Cézanne is transformed into a broader principle of creation and reception: painting as though seeing the apples' colour, shape and texture for the first time, alive to their intricacies and unanticipated awkwardness, she invites the viewer to see their own surroundings anew. In a dense, vibrant canvas rich with intimations of the private experiences that unfolded beyond it, space is wrested open for shared curiosity, surprise and pleasure.

I'd walked down the muddy lane on which the Cézanne had been hurriedly left, and I'd stood in the room where Vanessa had quietly reformulated that painting's terms, the extraordinary locations becoming quite familiar to me. I'd come to Charleston to research and identify previously unexplored papers and artworks, working in a space that had once been Vanessa's attic studio. During the warmer months it filled with wasps, ladybirds and spiders, and in winter it was submerged in an obliterating cold that left me wearing my coat and hat indoors until dark, watching my breath mist before the computer screen.

What I gathered from Vanessa's apples was not unique to her work. I'd been thinking about how women made art for years and had, through a process I didn't quite yet understand, become fixated on still life – never with some abstract sense of artistic merit, but with a belief in its capacity to produce and accommodate intimacy, an affective power other genres simply could not provide.

sweet and uneven and shining

Standing before another simple still-life canvas, I'd ask myself again what exactly it was that so held me. In part it was how recognisable these scenes were, how they answered a curiosity about the smallest and most basic components of how some women lived. I'd notice light moving through a window just as it did in a painting; I'd pick up oranges in the supermarket newly attuned to their appearance, trying to see what had so captivated an artist's attention.

In those moments I'd briefly feel my world pressed against that of those women. But identification was rarely the sole aim: the works were descriptive in ways I never could have anticipated. For they were always more than they appeared, these oranges, lemons, sparsely furnished rooms, saucepans, lilies, cups of tea; they were histories of women's lives compiled by way of the objects that bore witness. In still life I began to see a charting of spaces, objects and experiences tantamount to a map of the artists' most tender, troubling moments, and I pored over it, eager to piece together the narratives they held in so distilled a form. Still life took the rough,

raw material of a life and reissued it as compacted, densely coded dramas on the trials of intimacy and of needs hungering at the seams of quotidian concerns.

Through these works I discovered a loosely connected network of women artists who were united by their similarities in ambition, and their shared concerns about gender, creativity and personhood. Dora Carrington, in her often chaotic personal life, struggled to resign herself to the limited roles through which women drew meaning and fulfilment – the roles of daughter, lover and wife all proved problematic. And yet in her creative practice her disinterest in conventional models of success fuelled her playful and uncategorisable art. A high-society hostess dismissed by her contemporaries as shallow and sexless, Ethel Sands painted luminous canvases addressed to the protected life she had built for herself and her partner, each artwork infused with the powerful feelings she so resolutely veiled in her public appearances. For Gluck, gender was an experimental, consuming stylistic and epistemological practice tantamount to a dynamic work of art – subversive thinking which was applied to astonishing experiments in still life. For Gwen John, her art was an intense spiritual undertaking that encouraged explosive connections between painting, writing and desire; if there was a temple for her passionate faith, then it was the spare rented rooms she occupied in Paris and depicted repeatedly throughout her career. Nina Hamnett's paintings were as crucial to her vocation as her flamboyant social performances, each articulating something about the transgressive charge of lone women captivated by pleasure and excess – and indifferent to the promise of the family. Vanessa Bell, meanwhile, abandoned the certainties of a claustrophobic, privileged Victorian upbringing in a body of work that sought to visualise her daring revisions to the basic emotional components of domestic life.

Despite the different paths their lives took, these women were all either queer, or living awry to heteronormativity in some key sense; redefining what it was as a woman to experience love, friendship, coupledom and the family, and dedicating their lives to other women or to queer men. All were immersed within private

cultures resonant with the term 'queer' as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick seductively defines it: 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.[6] Living with queer possibility for each of these women meant dedicating themselves to alternative domestic arrangements, a conviction they sustained even when it meant compromise, or, in its outer extremes, when it risked causing them harm. These women understood with a deepening clarity what they would not accept: the traditional narrative arc of a woman's life; the passage from dutiful adolescence in service to their family to the enthusiastic usefulness of marriage and motherhood. In its place these women defined on their own terms what constituted a liveable life. Drawing on concrete experiences and long-cultivated fantasies, each woman addressed this sudden, electrifying responsibility through experiments in domesticity, attempts at greater financial independence, fulfilling experiences of love that coexisted with professional ambition, bids at self-education – and making art.

What united these experiments was a preoccupation with intimacy: how it felt, what it meant and where it might most passionately flourish. Each of these women wondered what it was to experience enduring love, dwelled over the compromises that might be made in motherhood (only Vanessa chose to raise children) and questioned the relationship between their most intimate bonds and their creative practice. These enquiries could be summarised in a single question: What kind of life, they asked – what kind of selfhood – would best nourish their art?

*

What were the horizons of a middle-class white woman in England in the 1900s? Girls were rarely sent to the same institutions as their male siblings; instead many were schooled in the drawing room by a governess who was unlikely to have been

conventionally educated herself. Young women learnt literature, languages and music, but all in small measure, because the real education was in domesticity itself: how to build an entire existence within a set of rooms, and how to embody the set of sartorial and psychological practices that constituted contemporary femininity; how to remain cheerfully fulfilled in days given over entirely to satisfying others. Without a proper education, there was little chance of pursuing a profession and few other choices besides economic dependence on men: the grinding weekly humiliation of asking for an allowance, and the uncertainty involved, never privy to the state of their own accounts; the subsequent alienation from their most habitual surroundings, knowing nothing in their lives was their own. Tethered in various ways to their father or husband, women remained in the home. What was expected of them was at least in part influenced by the middle-class Victorian feminine ideal, named by the poet Coventry Patmore in his verse novel: *The Angel in the House*. The Angel was sympathetic and charming and unselfish and pure and committed to her household and grateful for the little she had – happy in her absolute submission. Pleasing men was the highest ambition. The Angel never behaved with her own interests or needs in mind.

The respectable archetype of femininity was precisely what Woolf describes renouncing in her bid for artistic autonomy, a juncture that was as much about survival as it was the pursuit of her vocation. 'Had I not killed her,' she wrote, 'she would have killed me.'[7] As the new century progressed, more women were able to do as Woolf did, loosening their ties with an oppressive model of womanhood and seeking out a different kind of self. This was partly a result of their material conditions changing. In February 1918, after years of campaigning, female property owners over the age of thirty – women with a stake in power – were granted the right to vote, initiating a process of change that culminated in the establishment of equal voting rights for men and women a decade later. Through the fight for female suffrage, many women transformed how they saw themselves in relation to the social world, and, through access to political groups and campaign material, suddenly had

the language through which to express their dissatisfaction with patriarchal institutions, as well as their hopes for the future. Losses incurred during the Great War caused a population imbalance that created a surplus of unmarried women: without the deluge of prospective partners that came with coming of age, without proposals to consider and family pressure to endure, the expected course of many women's lives altered irrevocably. Women might now choose to live alone, or to cohabit with other women and, even if marriage beckoned, motherhood was no longer the inevitable outcome of any union. The declining birth rate, the rise of artificial contraception and an increased openness in public on issues of reproductive health meant that family sizes fell by a third between the 1860s and the late 1920s. No longer destined to spend years subjecting their bodies to one pregnancy after another, women had time to engage in forms of leisure and work that had previously been unimaginable. Educational reform meant female literacy increased from around 50 per cent in 1843 to almost 93 per cent in 1891.[8] As a result, women were entering professional life in greater numbers, taking on roles in schools, hospitals, offices and shops. Women were now making their own money, and without dependants, they were free to spend their disposable income on newly available pursuits, such as magazines, cinema, radio and sports. Even changes to women's fashion towards more androgynous styles radically altered public and private perceptions of gender and sexuality.

However, for all the personal, social and professional gains experienced by middle-class women in the new century, many restrictions remained, and the continuing plight of women artists reflected these partial freedoms. Women were painting, modelling for each other in their own studios, networking at parties, commissioning portraits, circulating advice and sharing their experiences, critiquing one another's work, even purchasing one another's paintings. But there were few concrete rewards accompanying these advances. Many still shared the verdict of Charles Tansley in Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, that: 'women can't write, women can't paint'.[9]

Partly this abiding belief in women's inferiority as artists was because of what they were permitted to paint. Still life, floral subjects in particular, became the remit of artists who, because of their gender, were denied access to essential lessons on anatomy. They excelled in these representations – women in drawing rooms across the country perfected the likeness of a single petal – but for artists who were serious about their craft and eager to professionalise, it was not enough. Accusations of amateurism could never be meaningfully thrown off if women remained unable to draw the human form, without which none of the higher genres (religious or history painting or portraiture) could be attempted. Despite entering art schools in increasing numbers, women found themselves painting more or less the same subjects as their forebears under the same aegis of politeness and religious dogma. Some advantages were enclosed within the practice of painting still life: for women without the time, money or confidence to hire models or occupy a studio, its subjects were readily available, and once domestic duties called, the objects were small enough to be stored (or concealed) with ease. They were convenient and they made artistic work possible in challenging circumstances, but still life largely continued to represent a form of failure, bondage and thwarted ambition. Women's skills flourished only to hit a wall, their impact on broader culture was negligible, and the paintings themselves were often forgotten about, or destroyed. As Woolf has Lily Briscoe remark of her own artistic efforts: 'it would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa.'[10]

Women remained under-represented in galleries, and if space was secured, then their work elicited lower prices than that of their male contemporaries and meagre critical coverage in the press. Like Gwen John and Vanessa Bell, they were overlooked in favour of a male sibling or partner; or like Ethel Sands, they were belittled as amateur by their peers; or like Dora Carrington and Nina Hamnett, they colluded in their own invisibility out of disinterest in the established symbols of success; or like Gluck, their gender nonconformity attracted more sustained attention than their art. Confined to footnotes of canonical accounts, remembered only as lovers or muses, women's work was not only denied serious attention in their time, but continues to struggle for status today.

*

In her 1971 essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Linda Nochlin argues that 'the white Western male viewpoint' has wholly determined the criteria by which we judge the value of art, casting greatness in its own image. Gender and genre were complexly intertwined in these assumptions. Still life by women had the additional problem of struggling for status within an academic hierarchy that established merit on a sliding scale in which it ranked below landscape and portraiture, and was eclipsed by religious and history painting. For most men the other genres had a clear ethical purpose, but what higher message did still life – the genre of painting dedicated to the representation of ordinary objects – carry? Rather than answer this question directly, women produced scores of paintings, and even without their sharp self-consciousness, their manipulations of the form, their inventiveness with tradition, their bulk was message enough in itself.

From its origins in northern Europe in the 1600s, still life by male painters occupied studios that reproduced elements of domestic space while wholly sanitising it of the ugly, lowly and uninteresting spectre of femininity. A few gleaming objects – no mess, no emotion, nor any trace of function. The planning and organisation of where things were bought, stored and eaten did not matter. Instead, food articulated wealth, or mapped the trade routes taken to the table; in darker moods, possessions spoke to the brevity of life. Painterliness was more of interest than purpose: note the stippled surface of a cucumber, the frills of cabbage leaves like petticoats, or the cut melon's study in contrasts.

For women in the early twentieth century, still life remained a medium through which to explore aesthetics and politics, but to this established repertoire they added an exploration of the uneasy relationship between the public and private spheres, gender and value, lived experience and aesthetic form. The domesticity these women's paintings took as their subject had once been an instrument of oppression, precisely the cause of their careers as

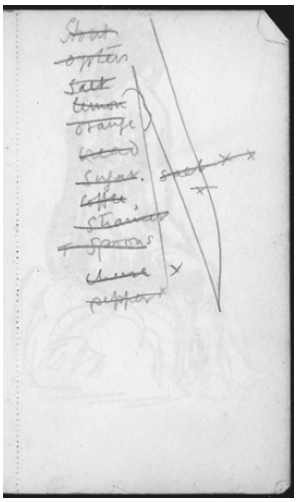
artists being curtailed. Yet on canvas, a kind of reversal occurred. The power to define the values of the home no longer came from without – the patriarchal institutions that wanted to preserve women's subservience – but from within. A new moral universe was founded, constructed by women and circulated by their creative work, with an emphasis on freedom of thought, hope and a suddenly boundless aspiration. At the same time, and through an innovation that their forefathers never conceived of, still life became a repository for daily experiences, a way of summarising the diverse parts that made up their lives.

Women's experiences, their defining passions as well as their more humdrum certainties, had been censored for centuries, and not just on canvas. Unless you were a woman undressed, you were invisible, and if you were a woman undressed, nobody asked: Where did this woman wake up? Where did she leave her cup with dregs of tea from the previous night? What did she hurriedly make for breakfast, conscious of the time? What thoughts possessed her as she pulled on a crumpled skirt, and buttoned her blouse? What talismanic objects did she touch before leaving the house, hoping for luck, a day blessedly different to its precedent? To produce paintings drawn from the rooms in which your entire life unfolded was to address these urgent questions.

*

In one of Vanessa Bell's sketchbooks, there is a shopping list in which each ingredient is stated – stout, oysters, salt, lemon, orange – and struck through with a line indicating their purchase.[11] The items are at once present and absent – the list functions both as a verbal still life and a kind of diagram of the inner workings of the form, celebrating the presence of things that have long since perished. Part of the magic of still life is an awareness of matter's ephemerality, how time has been halted or reversed on canvas, as well as a kind of mediumship in which obsolete objects are brought back to life, made to speak through the scored-through line. As

in Vanessa's list, in still life the food is there, but marked by our knowledge of its vanishing.



present and absent

What Vanessa's list also brings to mind is what still life conceals, or what the form always inadequately attempts to strike through. In Vanessa's household, those with the authority to write the list differed from those who paid for the shopping, and differed again from those who actually went to shops, bought the food, carried it home and were later tasked with cooking it. While their gender and sexuality may have positioned these women at the margins as artists, they each to varying extents benefited hugely from wealthy upbringings, and enjoyed class privileges that connected them however indirectly or unconsciously to institutions that promoted imperialist, nationalist and racist agendas.

Vanessa's marriage to Clive Bell, the son of an industrialist who had made his fortune from coal mining, meant she never wanted for money and kept servants throughout her life. Ethel Sands, the daughter of American socialites, and Gluck, the heir to the Lyons tea shop fortune, were wealthy enough to paint without the pressures of professionalisation. For these women, their relationship to possessions and accommodation was straightforward, each entering

their lives without friction, urgency or a sense of the conditional – all of which inevitably had a profound effect on their creative work in general and their still lifes in particular. Dora Carrington, by contrast, came from a suburban lower-middle-class background that provoked the derision of members of the Bloomsbury Group. She was dependent on the financial stability of her closest friends for her own. Gwen John rejected her own middle-class upbringing and spent her entire life in spartan accommodation, frequently unable to dedicate sufficient time to painting due to the necessities of wage labour. Nina Hamnett occupied a similar position, relinquishing the comforts of her childhood for a life that was as freeing as it was punitive, taking modelling and teaching jobs to stay afloat, occupying a string of squalid rented rooms until her death.

These women were all white, and with the exception of Gluck (who was Jewish), were all raised in ambiently Christian households, instilling in them a form of complacency which engendered casual racism – discernible in depressing public statements as well as private reflections – and in the case of the Bloomsbury Group, made space for anti-Semitism. While Vanessa and her circle were beginning to question the violence meted out by the British Empire, the brutal inequities of colonial power, their everyday behaviour often did not sustain these beliefs. In other words, these women's work was complexly intertwined with their experiences of marginalisation and privilege alike. These women were courageous, full of a bold conviction to live otherwise, but they were also conflicted and complicit; what was radical about their work was often undermined by their myopic politics and their enduring attachment to their privilege. Being around them for any length of time involved a keen attunement to this dissonance, to mortifying weaknesses and dazzling apathies, to the troubling, inscrutable and contradictory.

These women's lives did not yield the simple narrative of triumphant heroism that I perhaps unconsciously wanted from them when I began researching this book; they were (as most lives likely are) defined by their disappointments and errors of judgement as much as they were by their more palatable or radical interests and achievements. Yet it was out of this refusal to valorise,

a state of unease and punctured hope and complexity, that their work began to articulate more.

*

Some of the women described here pursued their vocation and ambitions under more trying circumstances. Perhaps they lacked class privileges or cultural capital, meaning they could not access the networks that would have encouraged their practice and could have made their work more commercially viable; or their aesthetic was out of step with modernism, modest in its aims or backward in its style, making it unremarkable to their peers and later invisible to art historians; or they had little interest in exhibition or sale; or they made drastic mistakes choosing a partner; or they suffered more keenly the grip that misogynistic ideology had over everything from the art world to the medical institution. Winifred Gill, Edna Waugh, Mary Constance Lloyd and Helen Coombe were all to varying extents unable to make new and radical lives out of the given norms: committed to their art practice with little external praise or success, they are almost always omitted from accounts of modernism. The fleeting presence of these women, shadowy counterparts to my subjects, could only ever be a partial antidote to their erasure from history. Their experiences should not, however, be forgotten. Their choruses of warnings belong here as much as the stories of success.

*

This is not a standard group biography largely because the writing of queer lives demands a queer form. With its emphasis on familial inheritance and personal coherence, channelled through the standard arc of birth, professional success, marriage, reproduction and death – what is known as the 'cradle to grave' approach – the traditional biography reproduces prescriptive ideas

about the self that have been forged through centuries of patriarchal thought. Such a form is certainly ill-suited to lives 'unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' – what Jack Halberstam describes as the 'strange temporalities' and 'imaginative life schedules' of queer time.[12] Instead of a single, decisive, comprehensive narrative, this book offers a series of moments in these women's lives in which the emotional issues and artistic practices that possessed them for decades were condensed.

Besides, so much of what I included was determined by the material at hand: some women left behind more than others. I wanted to somehow preserve the uneven texture of the available archive material, the simultaneous intimacy and evasiveness of the sources, as well as my attempts to write through its obscurities. Archival practices and historical narrative alike have long been shaped by the most powerful, and so the stories of those on the margins have been judged subversive and withheld, or dismissed as unimportant and indifferently erased. And so, for the potential biographer, to borrow José Esteban Muñoz's warning, 'queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence.' Some queer women only sought to hasten along their own disappearance, making themselves complicit with these practices, destroying all trace of their existence. With Muñoz's assurance in mind, other forms of interpretation emerged in my analysis of the material, and I learnt to put my trust in the alternative path they charted: speculation, fantasy, hope, empathy – emotional experiences united by possibility.[13]

I did not approach the archive with any a priori assumptions about these women's sexual identities; as Muñoz stresses, those criteria in the context are not only futile, impossible given the underlying motives governing the archive, but insensitive to all the diverse information, identifications, attachments and affects that can be drawn from obliquely queer material. Instead, documenting these women's lives has meant following Sedgwick's model for a form of close reading – or what she terms 'overreading' – which aspires to 'make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled'.[14]

Which is to say that I was always more interested in possibility than proof, and the practice of compassion and curiosity rather than the imposition of a pre-established narrative. I was not interested in using the artworks and archival material as direct transcriptions of these women's inner lives, texts capable of articulating definitive truths about their experiences, seeing them instead as mediums for thought that invited me to think and feel with them.

This loose and intuitive interpretative method had other motivations. I was reluctant to prescriptively align artworks with archival material, to transform them into explanatory frames for one another, in part because of the obvious dangers of reading women's art through their lives. While men are free to range outside the purely empirical, women remain penned inside the same interpretive cul-de-sac, forced to have their work confess only to their feelings. This is how women artists continue to be excluded from histories of aesthetic movements and dominant configurations of the canon: if read as a chronicle of their lives rather than an investigation into the universal principles or theoretical paradigms that shape artistic endeavour, then their work will always be considered marginal. To me this argument rests on a strict divide between personal experience and theoretical knowledge, a boundary which queer and feminist thought has revealed to be more porous and generative than once assumed, if not collapsed altogether – a tired and irrelevant relic of Cartesian dualist thought. I see no reason not to embrace both.

Throughout the book I read art through a lens that is attuned to affect and everyday narratives, the anecdotal and the privately mythological, making use of the documentation of those experiences in letters and diaries, as well as to more speculative and theoretical avenues, mining texts and objects for ideas that might not necessarily have been in mind during their conception. What interests me now is not the closely watched and carefully cited – the more concrete interpretative connections between life and art – but how emotion circulates, how feeling transcends particular people, places and periods, and makes itself known to others. Different questions began to drive my research: What occurs between people and paintings? What forms of recognition,

sustenance and resistance can a painting – even if only partially – propose to readers and writers, women and queer folk and whoever else finds a part of themselves met in the uncertain promise of a work? I offer the stories and images that make up this book as a coming together of some possible answers.

1

CARRINGTON

I could begin with Virginia Woolf's description of her, the woman who arrived in a flurry of chatter on the arm of an old friend one fresh spring afternoon, desperate to make a good impression, despite having hardly slept the night before – a party having captivated her attention and confounded her best intentions until well past five that morning. She was talking so much and so quickly her host could remember little of what was said in the days after, but did recall the gloom of the men sitting in the background, a contrast forged through the newcomer's lightness of spirit.

'She was apple red and firm in the cheeks, bright green and yellow in the body, & immensely firm and large all over.'[1]

I had to read Virginia's description of Dora Carrington a few times before I understood it, and saw that it was odd, but not exactly unflattering. The bold colours address Dora's charisma, her heightened presence, and they announce the possibilities Virginia invested in her youth and vocation. Dora is a bowl heaped with ripe fruit, less a woman than the subject of a still life. A way of asserting the primacy of her artistic identity, the remark also displaces her body into the botanical world, and in doing so asserts the irrelevance of femininity in defining Dora. Virginia understood – she was ambivalent about her body too. Dora surely shared her dreams of an androgynous mind.[2] Virginia would be more supportive of Dora's art practice than many in their circle.

Or should I say Carrington, the self she made when starting at the Slade. She dropped 'Dora', pulled breeches over her legs, regarded herself in the mirror (not enough), cut off her long plait of golden hair, enjoyed how it looked with her crooked nose and piercing blue eyes, and endured the stares.

Large, vibrant and solid: there is a muteness to Carrington here, as though she were a modernist sculpture, communicating solely through colour and form – an error belying her most compelling qualities, which Virginia later recognised, correcting herself. Carrington's letters were, she claimed, 'completely unlike anything else in the habitable globe'.[3] Whimsical and rapacious conveyors of everyday life, the letters are at once confiding and reticent, filled with spectacular performance and skilled evasion, as elusive and uncategorisable in tone as they are in style, strange amalgams of text and image, composed of sentences snaking all over the page, punctuated by doodles that corroborate or playfully undercut the written narratives. In them Carrington is herself, and she is absorbed in activity – illustrations follow her walking, reading, cooking, gardening, dancing, sewing – and vibrating with pleasure even when drawn at rest or asleep. In them Carrington is in the midst of transformation: she is a centaur, a purring cat, an elderly woman, a monstrous creature bent over in a rage. When Carrington wrote she rarely remained with the word alone; what she wanted to be and to say were always in excess of the phrases at hand. Words themselves are treated with a lightness, a lack of reverence; words are misspelled, their meaning altered to suit her aims, crossed out and rewritten, opened up and their contents dragged out; words are mined for their visual properties, equally drawn as they are written. Carrington was not bound by the strictures of the form: there is little heed to etiquette, nor to the obligation to accurately record events for posterity. Unsentimental, daring and incisive, the letters are sites of artistic experiment, powerful mediums of fantasy: in them Carrington both affirms the fundamentals of her character – its unbridled curiosity and soaring energy – and summons up a different, more complex self.

What did Vanessa Bell initially make of her?

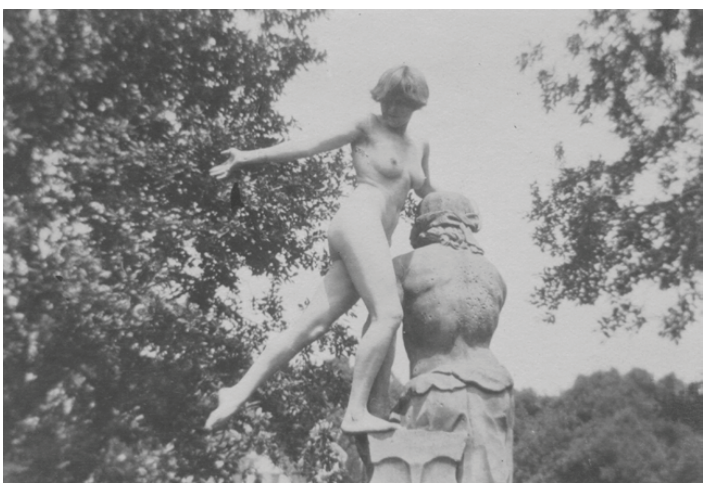
At first, not much: 'The short haired creature you may have seen at Ottoline's parties.'[4]

She was a frequent guest of Lady Ottoline Morrell. What did she think?

'She is attractive as a wild shaggy Exmoor pony is attractive.'[5] A nod to Carrington's adventurous spirit, her love of the outdoors, and like both Vanessa ('creature') and Virginia, Ottoline's remark is quick to state Carrington's distance from gender norms. Carrington slips out of her body and into nature, shifting from apple to animal and back again.

But it is true that Lady Ottoline was not exactly fond of Carrington. Disagreements about sex, fraught summits in the vegetable patches, gossipy dismissals in her memoirs. Ottoline wants to stress Carrington's inelegance, her crudeness, her wildness – qualities that made her unsuited to the social rituals that defined life at Ottoline's stately home, Garsington Manor.

Think of the often-reproduced photograph of Carrington as a living sculpture in Ottoline's garden. Trees part to declare her presence, and the perspective positions the viewer as though crouched below, observing a minor god revealing herself to her mortal subjects. Hair grazing her cheekbones, a helmet of polished stone; underneath it her body stretched with balletic ease. There is nothing solid about her: she is lithe and moving and soft. You can feel the air prickling her skin, the strain in her muscles, the ache she would experience later.



wild, shaggy, short-haired creature

Such confidence, such resilience and poise. And yet, 'She seemed at this time very unsure of herself,' observed Lady Ottoline. And? 'Although she was apparently very frank, I felt that she was really excessively timid and afraid of being sincere,' she went on.[6] The ambivalence Ottoline observed had a clear source. What compromised Carrington's self-confidence and comfort amongst friends and strangers alike was precisely what the photograph so closely identifies her with: her body.

Let's ask Mark Gertler, who loved Carrington for over a decade.

'A beautiful flower encased in a form of gold.'[7]

An image that evokes an earthiness and glamour, a heady blend of nature and artifice, it is lovely – if a little too conventional for the woman Carrington was. But this was not all Mark had to say about her. All the bitter, coercive accusations he directed at her once she tired of his attention. I won't reproduce them.

Remain with the judgement of women. Nina Hamnett was so struck by Carrington that she emulated the key parts of her self-styling: the shingled haircut, the men's trousers, the air of disregard. By her breathless, admiring account, 'she was one of the first women in England to cut off her hair and was very much stared at as she never wore a hat'.[8]

What about Lytton Strachey, who Carrington loved passionately for nearly two decades?

I wanted to find a single sentence that could account for Lytton's relationship with Carrington. Some blazing analysis – smuggled into a letter, a dedication in a book, a remark remembered by a friend – the essence of their passion distilled into a few charged words. I'm still looking. The letters charm, and there is affection there, but there was always a cautiousness in Lytton's tone, a facetiousness whenever real affection arose, what Carrington in a darker mood described as his 'unreality and coldness'.[9]

For Lytton Strachey's biographer, their bond was mostly practical, with Carrington a generous, doting and necessary disciple of his genius.

'His housekeeper, his confidante, his nurse, his messenger, his loving friend.'[10]

Such a dim view of her possible use. This was the same woman who won a coveted scholarship to the Slade, who, as a student, then repeatedly won acclaim for her work: four prizes over the course of three years.

I knew how I liked seeing Carrington. Carrington on a motorbike traversing the Sussex countryside – did she ever take the bike out there? – or speeding around Regent's Park, for she definitely did that, 'tearing quicker and quicker', forging a path through shocked pedestrians.[11]

'But to look at? Was she beautiful?'[12] Bunny Garnett asks the question at the beginning of his introduction to her letters, answering them gleefully in the negative. What else matters?

As a corrective to Bunny's lack of imagination – his inability to see the passions that shaped Carrington's life and self – settle next to her in bed as she read Dorothy Wordsworth's journals, moved by her spiritual intensities, or Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, pausing to note down sentences that reminded her of a lover.[13][14] Listen to her sermons on John Donne, who recurs throughout her correspondence as an artistic touchstone, or William Blake, his visionary worlds that chimed so closely with her own, and who she spent years aspiring to imitate.[15] Or stand with her admiring El Greco and Goya. To be beside Carrington then – and at times reading her letters it felt possible – craning my neck towards a scene of drama cloaked in shadow.

Take the motorbike back to its garage, and instead place Carrington on her white pony, Belle. A muddy pair of jodhpurs, late afternoon, trotting along the crest of a hill, watching storms break in the distance.

Best to ignore the conclusions drawn in a recent review of her letters: 'Intensely manipulative and deluded.'[16] Accusations laced with cruelty – to say nothing of the eagerness to pathologise; they recur in accounts of these women's lives. Like so many of her peers, Carrington's talents and their place within a broader cultural movement have been obscured by tired misogynistic tropes. Digs at her character and her appearance, speculations about her mental health: these claims do not even pretend to engage with

Carrington's art, and merely reflect society's deep and pernicious hatred of women, especially those who – unmarried, unproductive, unwilling to compromise – dare live in opposition to social norms.

Carrington remained on the margins as an artist in part because of how her upbringing in suburban Bedford distinguished her from her refined, metropolitan Bloomsbury peers and – no doubt relatedly – because the artists that surrounded her could not see the value of her work, which meant she was reluctant to exhibit. History has all but forgotten her art; Carrington never appears in surveys of the modernist period.

I could begin with a painting.

'Since I last wrote I have been starting some work,' Carrington told Mark Gertler in 1915. 'I am just going to do a still life, in green, yellow, & orange, of apples, & some little orange pumpkins.'[17] The still life, which strikingly echoes Virginia's description of Carrington, endured only as a description, and as such it was typical. The tension between the visionary and the concrete, what existed in her letters and what unfolded in her life, was the engine that at once drove Carrington forward – so much of who she was developed in the boundless possibility of imaginary worlds – but which as a professional prevented her from ever achieving much commercial success. Whether they were only ever hypothetical, or whether they belonged to a canvas that was lost or destroyed, the apples capture the contrary forces that made up Carrington's identity: the woman who was idealistic, robust and fiercely creative, and the artist who found the particulars of her practice – the actual making and selling of work – impossibly dull and restrictive.

Female Figure Lying on Her Back

From her early years as an artist, no still life survives. Carrington's earliest known works are nudes completed in the period after she enrolled at the Slade in 1910. A woman is in the midst of an

awakening: with sheets meticulously rumpled beneath her, she raises her arms as though stirring from sleep, and it is her skin that registers the transformation, moving through rose and yellow and milk, the colours of rising dough. Her cheekbone and shoulder and breast are echoes of each other, soft half-circles highlighted by a shivering white light, effects which lead the eye to her navel, the palette's buttery centre, the warmest spot. Amongst all this beauty, touches of awkwardness: the blunt rendering of the one visible foot, the clumsy foreshortening of the arm held aloft; the thigh fixed at an uncomfortable angle, and her face turned from the viewer. Whatever emotional process we are witness to in this work, the feelings that drove Carrington as she painted it, these upsets in the execution and arrangement of the composition suggest that there is more anxiety to it than is at first revealed.

an awakening

Carrington arrived in London the year that Woolf claimed 'human character changed'.[18] What she meant was that the world was transforming around her, across social and cultural forms, and reshaping the selves of her peers in the process. The assertion was a little puckish, self-consciously broad and rhetorical – which humans of what social class were meaningfully affected? – but Carrington's character certainly found itself broken and reborn.

She was free from her parents. Her father she loved with a simple fervour she sustained until his death, but adolescence was spent plotting an escape from her mother, nagging at Carrington for what seemed like years from a tiny sludge-coloured lounge in Bedford. Her mother was a set of lace curtains. Her mother was an indrawn breath. Her mother was a pile of folded cotton dresses on Carrington's bed. Her mother was a cupboard in dark glazed wood. Her mother was anxious, run aground by private disappointments, like many women of her generation – she had been a governess, married late to an older man whose higher social standing wrought subtle agonies from her for decades – meaning her love for her daughter was doomed to be expressed only as harried interference. Her mother would miss her.

Though no such correspondence survives, Carrington probably wrote her parents polite and functional letters from the respectable hostel they had chosen for her on Gordon Square. Less clear was whether she signed these letters with the name she dropped nine months in, writing the D, the O, each letter in turn, with a tentative hand.

In her first weeks in London, Carrington met Barbara Hiles, Ruth Humphries, Alix Sargent-Florence and Dorothy Brett. They would transform one another as women and artists. Their hair was the first bit of femininity they could shed, and they wore it as short as possible, doing the work of shingling themselves, each inch taking them further from their mothers and closer to the future, earning them the nickname 'the cropheads'.[19]

They dined at the Eiffel Tower Restaurant, later immortalised as the meeting place of Vorticists in a 1961 painting by William Roberts. Roberts fills the restaurant with men, crowding the women out of the door and into the margins of the artistic production the painting records, obscuring how, for many women, amongst them the writer Nancy Cunard, the restaurant was, as she put it, 'our carnal-spiritual home'.[20] Carrington and her friends felt as much, and they held the coupes of champagne that Roberts dyes a noxious yellow, an opaque and lurid colour which is nothing like alcohol, as though he had the patrons ingesting paint, insisting

that art itself was the intoxicant. The women talked amongst the potted ferns and the simply laid tables until it grew late, and if they didn't end up dancing in the rooms of the painter Augustus John, there was always somewhere to idle away a few more hours before dragging themselves home.[21] After years deprived of serious conversation, conscious always of tempering their emotions, never asserting their opinion one way or another, forever striving to be judged acceptable by their audience, these women were now free: to be loud, impassioned, impulsive, inquisitive. They accepted invitations to dances at Lady Ottoline's house, and bathed in the old fish pond in borrowed swimsuits the morning after.[22] They stirred on hard carriage seats on a train to Scotland, listened to the shrieking of the horns in the dark, and later ran in their nightgowns amongst the elms by moonlight.[23] They discussed their admiration for Albrecht Dürer at the British Museum, striding through the galleries towards the print room, excited to spend an entire afternoon studying the Old Masters.[24] They drew one another, and critiqued the results. They went home to their interconnecting hostel rooms and dreamed about the future.

Carrington checked her purse to find her allowance dwindling. As for her friends, their anecdotes were optimistic and frictionless, and took place in lavish country estates and European cities, presuming Carrington had some familiarity with the glamorous, nomadic lifestyles of young women of their class. Carrington could talk about her childhood in Bedford, but in her letters she hesitates over the realities of life there, embarrassed at the banality of town hall dances and arguments while shopping in town with her mother. Carrington took commissions and pupils to stay afloat, but it was rarely enough. The holidays meant packing a bag and returning to Bedford. Her lack of freedom could be summarised in a daily ritual implemented by her domineering mother. Intercepting her daughter each time she left or re-entered the house, her mother would ask for every last detail of her afternoon, attempting to expose even the smallest transgression, with Carrington answering with perfunctory monosyllables as she marched grimly up the stairs.

Dour summers were worth it for what Carrington experienced each autumn on returning to the Slade. Observe Carrington on a low stool before her easel, and the notoriously exacting Slade instructor Henry Tonks stalled before one of her drawings. He would have studied her pencil drawing of a woman, her thighs outlined in thicker charcoal, a show of where the woman places her weight, darker where the work of stillness deepens, and light pencil hovering over her shoulders which gives form to their trembling, all of her poised between control and release, a hint at the tension and pleasure of the Life Room.

These drawings show the preliminary investigations into anatomy that underlay the making of *Female Figure Lying on Her Back*. The painting is in fact a composite of drawn and painted matter, ideas and deeds, failures and successes, as it represented a revision to an earlier nude that Carrington had painted over, efforts which succeeded in securing her second prize for Figure Painting in 1912.[25] Another nude, completed the following year, and which won Carrington first prize in the same category: the woman has roused herself, the bed is gone, and she is standing with her hands on her hips, her back to the viewer, light nudging her shoulder – but she will not flinch – her face still unknowable. Together the works disclose a loose narrative of growth and endurance: what the young artist has overcome and cast off, what comforts or assistance she has learnt to live without, how she has reoriented herself in her chosen space, and amongst those developments, what parts of her self will not be ceded.

Decades later Vanessa described these nudes with unusually enthusiastic praise as 'remarkable', 'really very good'.[26] Carrington's time at art school was at once a significant coming into self, and an auspicious start to a possible career.

ideas and deeds, failures and successes

Incredible to think when looking at these works of the disgust Carrington felt towards her own body at that time. 'Hanging flesh', was how she saw it, merely 'female encumbrances'.[27] Judging from her letters until the end of her life, those feelings would endure. That rush of horror and alienation – where did it go? One nude has her face obscured entirely, while the other reveals little more than a silhouette. These gestures appear to lend privacy to the nude's staged exposure; they are an extension of sympathy for the women, a collapsing of the distance between subject and object so commonly preserved in the history of the nude. However, over time, I came to suspect these erasures marked the presence of shame: the women turn from our gaze, anticipating its violence, bracing for the inevitable blow.

Less straightforward friendships blossomed with men. Mark Gertler, elfin and confident in their class photo at the Slade, staring seriously into the camera. Carrington is half-smiling with her arms gracelessly at her side: the deliberate inelegance of the pose announces that she is no longer a girl being steadily pressured into the cage of normative femininity, but her own woman, an artist foremost. This distinction would prove a problem for Mark.

an artist foremost

Mark's portraits are sympathetic, interested, softly probing the selves they represent, and suggest a deference for women profoundly at odds with the relationship that developed between him and Carrington. She was flattered, impressed by Mark's work, but was soon alarmed at the fervour of his desire, the doggedness with which he wanted to possess her, responding to his commands with good-humoured dismissals that are suffused with anxiety. What the letters between the pair perhaps trace most vividly is the naivety with which Carrington accepted Mark's attention, her subsequent failure to protect herself, and her willingness to renew her trust in him no matter how much it was exploited. A disastrous encounter in his studio, or an argument over dinner, the same ugly subject arising again and again: her refusal to sleep with him. Each time the familiar row flared up the letters stopped, but it was never long before they started up again, their tone contrite; met with Mark's silence, they plead. Painted in 1916, one of Gertler's most celebrated works is of a carousel. For all its dark, frightening power, its remark on Europe's descent into chaos during the Great War, it is also an oblique but startlingly accurate vision of the repetitive and fruitless machinations of his emotional life with Carrington. Declarations and accusations; fights and reconciliation; groundlessness and