

“Lame Hip”, “Limp Wrist”

Homosexuality and Disability in Charles Demuth’s Experience in the New York Avant-Garde

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Scholarship towards Charles Demuth largely focuses on the formal development of his delicate watercolour work, his legacy in American art deco and the development of his precisionism/ cubist architectural landscapes style. Scholars and institutions like to forget that Demuth identified as homosexual¹ and that homophobia and discrimination were rampant in early American society and arguably even within the bohemian avant-garde circles where it was “tolerated”. Overtly homo erotic watercolour scenes surfacing after his death have made it impossible for scholars to ignore Demuth’s diverse desires from normative “compulsory” heterosexuality. Scholars have also alluded to Demuth’s variety of health problems as influencing his ability to interact fully within social circles, as well as influencing his art production. Diabetes, tuberculosis of the hip, his overall frail health along with his diverse desire from compulsory heterosexuality, will be used to demonstrate that these characteristics of oppression worked against Demuth even in the space of the New York avant-garde. I consider this work important to critically analyze and reconsider these sites of supposed sexual freedom. To couple this with abilist privilege that functioned in these spaces and broader society will trouble the notion of the avant-garde as accepting and radical drawing from Demuth’s experience.

Previously, scholarship on Demuth celebrates his “light decorative” formal quality often with a gendered connotation employing terms like “dainty, fragile, feminine refinement.”² Other

¹ Notably the Demuth Museum, whose website fails to mention Demuth’s marginalized identity as a queer artist.(<http://www.demuth.org/index.php?pid=8> (March 5 2014))

² Gedhard, David and Phyllis Plous. *Charles Demuth: The Mechanical Encrusted on the Living*. Santa Barbra: University of California Press, 1971. Print. 8.

scholarship either refuses a queer heritage or defines it as “abnormal”³ or “hidden”.⁴ In the wake of the revival of homoerotic works never exhibited⁵, scholars make the fault of asserting subject matter as “randomly sexual” such as flowers in still life or smoke stacks in architectural-landscapes being read as phallic.⁶

To define the space of the New York avant-garde as hostile, homophobic and un-accepting seems contradictory as it was the radical, bohemian epicenter of the US at the time.⁷ In broader society, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were a hostile period as sexology and medical scrutiny created a discourse of “sexual others.”⁸ Haskell considers the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde a fresh scar, along with Pennsylvania schoolteacher, Sherwood Anderson’s beating and near lynching as reminders of the violence and homophobia of society.⁹ Farnham employs an interesting metaphor in the title of her biography. The laughing masquerade mask worn in a 1915 New York ball is theorized by Duchamp as a “curtain of mental privacy” for Demuth. His friend Dr. Williams considers this in relation to Demuth’s tendency to hide his thoughts.¹⁰ If the avant-garde was a site of gender and sexual experimentation we should wonder why Demuth was reluctant to open himself to this supposedly radical space.

³ Farnham, Emily. *Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. Print. 4.

⁴ Gedhard, *Charles Demuth*, 10.

⁵ The homo-erotic sailor works done in the later period of his life were never exhibited in the artist’s life time. The work *Turkish Bath* also was originally not exhibited publicly (Weinberg, Jonathan. *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and the First American Avant-Garde*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Print. 24.)

⁶ Weinberg,. *Speaking for Vice*, 51-53

⁷ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 78, 103-4.

⁸ Weinberg,. *Speaking for Vice*, 5-7.

⁹ Haskell, Barbara. *Charles Demuth*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987. Print. 57.

¹⁰ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 8.

At age four a fall left his hip “lame” and he was bed-ridden in his pre-school years.¹¹ Speculation Demuth had tuberculosis in his hip turned out to be true and in the words of friend Marsden Hartley he carried a cane “for service not for show.”¹² Many scholars have reckoned these early threats to his health, allowed his parents to consider letting him pursue art instead of working in the family tobacco business.¹³ His “strange ambling walk”¹⁴ walk ruptured his dark handsome aesthetic described like a bullfighter with a slender frame, dark slicked hair and “raven” coloured eyes.¹⁵ One work of consideration in the abilist and hostile homophobic environment is the work *Fish Series No. 5* (fig. 1). At first glance the subjects of fish trapped aimlessly in an enclosed tank seem reminiscent of the bed ridden man in poor health unable to outwardly express his queer desire. However, in New York (roughly 1915-18) Demuth was in relatively good health—being between diabetic attacks of 1912-13 and 1919-21—and would frequent the aquarium at Battery Park to paint fish scenes. Eiseman considers after diabetic attack in Paris, Demuth’s palette turns somber, as he lives in “the shadow of death.”¹⁶ How then can we reconcile this imagery at a jovial time for Demuth in the experimental and lively New York Dada scene?

There is no denying an ominous mood in the piece with grey and black wash being the overwhelming features. The dark tones emphasize the two orange fish that seem to be highlighted by Demuth as outliers of a foreign and exotic nature to the rest of the murky

¹¹ Eiseman, Alvord L. *Charles Demuth*. New York: Watson-Guipill Publications, 1982. Print. 6-10.

¹² Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 40.

¹³ Ritchie, Andrew Carnduff. *Charles Demuth*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950. Print. 7.

¹⁴ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 21. Gedhard. *Charles Demuth*. 16.

¹⁵ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 9.

¹⁶ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*. 16. Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 109-123.

environment. Can we read into the two orange fish as a failed interaction and consider that Demuth seemingly never experienced an affectionate relationship¹⁷ in a time of queer hostility and heterosexual “normativity.” After having to leave Paris early in 1921 from the onslaught of a still undiagnosed disease, the discovery of diabetes hospitalized Demuth at a sanatorium for trial insulin injection treatments.¹⁸ At the sanatorium, he was also on an experimental starvation diet to regulate blood sugar which left him frail and weak.¹⁹ For a while after his hospitalization Demuth returns to still life and leaves figure work because of the exertion required in their production,²⁰ which specifically illustrates his artistic ability being dependent with his health. Demuth also had to abandon further experimentation with oil paint, and Farnham speculates carrying oils to the beaches of Provincetown was difficult with his “lameness” and thus preferred the ease of watercolour.²¹

Mansefield identifies that Disability Arts in the contemporary setting are motivated by what the normal viewer might consider the “difficulties” in manufacturing art works.²² For Demuth it then becomes noteworthy when his artistic production and medium preference shift drastically with his health and hindered mobility. To deny that Demuth’s health and ability did not play a monumental role in his access to media and subject matter would be a falsehood and these aspects require analysis and attention. Perhaps the subject matter itself speaks to a sort of

¹⁷ Weinberg. *Speaking for Vice*, 102-105.

¹⁸ Gedhard. *Charles Demuth*. 20.

¹⁹ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 139.

²⁰ Gedhard. *Charles Demuth*. 20.

²¹ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 41. Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 140.

²² Mansefield, Paddy. *Strength: Broadides From Disability on the Arts*. London: Trentham Books Limited, 2006. Print. xv.

internalized oppression. In a space of radical artistic endeavours and social experimentation, Demuth's conscious decision to depict and *exhibit* the tame and non-challenging subject matter of fish over the spaces of homo-social interaction of the public baths, nightlife and new urban environments in a time of good health are of noteworthy consideration. This abilist and homophobic framework begins to remove the facade of the New York Dada as an open space for social experimentation.

One can consider that other characters of the avant-garde like Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven seem similarly marginalized in what Jones considered the “heterosexist and patriarchal” space of the New York Dada.²³ Haskell considers heterosexual promiscuity as almost enforced by Freudian theory—which interested the Dadaists—but homosexuality found only a “tolerant atmosphere”.²⁴ Weinberg alludes to the question if homosexuality would have shocked the Dadaists, furthermore would it be *dismissed* as an experimental “bohemian behavior”²⁵ or a legitimate alternative to heterosexuality. To further consider the space of New York as unwelcoming for Demuth, a look at later erotic pieces can provide insight into the marginal experience. The piece *Two Sailors Urinating* (fig. 2) and the other erotic work from the 30s before his death in 1935, are often narrated as an obsession with ability and vitality in these sexual fantasies in a time when Demuth was deteriorating physically.²⁶ Perhaps this is better demonstrated in the piece *Three Sailors on the Beach* (fig. 3) as the variations of altitude and the

²³ Amelia Jones, “‘Women’ in Dada: Elsa, Rose, and Charlie” in *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity*, ed Naomi Sawleson-Gorse (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998). Print. 160.

²⁴ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 57.

²⁵ Weinberg,. *Speaking for Vice*, 200.

²⁶ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 139-140.

composition of the bodies stress a sense of ability and physicality required to participate in these genial fantasy scenes of sexual freedom and same-sex interaction. Demuth was widely labelled as homosexual for his impeccable dress, high voice, effeminate hands and what friend Susan Watt Streets referred to as being “limp wristed.”²⁷ But it still remains, if Demuth was labelled homosexual, the conscious decision to remain closed off from the group should be telling to the atmosphere of the New York Dada.

Demuth participated widely in the “low” cultural spaces of Harlem and other leisure sites based on his subject matter of acrobats, jazz and Vaudeville.²⁸ With specific attention to ability, Weinberg considers the tradition of Degas and Lautrec, and speculates Demuth’s fixation on performance at the circus and Vaudeville can be read that “the exertions of the performer (were painted) *as if* they were his own (emphasis mine).”²⁹ Haskell considers these Vaudeville spaces as being of interest because female impersonators drew a gay clientele to shows.³⁰ In a time when it was hostile to leave a permanent trace of queer desire the only “evidence” of a consummated sexual relationship between Demuth and speculated partner Robert Locher is a 1920 valentine watercolour of two men performing fellatio that is speculated to be Demuth’s work.³¹ Demuth’s work is often read into as being homo-erotic, while the pieces depicting overt sexuality do not attempt to hide or mask the sexuality as the bathhouse and sailor works I am referring to were never exhibited publicly. Demuth’s self-representation in a bathhouse scene

²⁷ Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 48.

²⁸ Farnham, *Charles Demuth*. 103-4. Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 21.

²⁹ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*. 14.

³⁰ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 53.

³¹ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 25.

(fig. 4) done while in New York and the decision not to exhibit the piece are to contextualize the hostility of the space. Firstly, Demuth depicts himself in the space of the bath house interacting with other patrons *without* his cane. Secondly, the conscious decision not to exhibit the work—considering that the bath house was a space of homo-social, but not necessarily homo-*sexual* interaction—should reveal Demuth had anxiety about the space of the Dada. Gedhard considers that Demuth’s queerness could have functioned as a “handicap” to employ the powerful connotation of disability.³²

Weinberg considers what the revival of these images mean to the normative heterosexual artistic gaze. “To watch unobserved beautiful women tending to their bodies is to be a connoisseur; to look with the same intent on the private functions of men is to be a pervert.”³³ Weinberg calls out the irony of queer desire to traditional art history. He also considers Duchamp’s readymade *Fountain* in relation to the work *Two Sailors Urinating*. “(the refusal to exhibit *Fountain*) revealed that a climate to tolerate difference is not the same as welcoming difference.”³⁴ The parallels between the artists continue with Duchamp turning the urinal into a work of art, and Demuth now positioning the viewer in the place of the urinal as the site to receive excretion.³⁵ Excretion is important as being theorized to be symbolic to acts of intercourse, but more importantly as a release from society’s restrictions.³⁶ These homoerotic

³² Gedhard. *Charles Demuth*. 16.

³³ Weinberg. *Speaking for Vice*, 212.

³⁴ Weinberg, Jonathan “Urination and Its Discontents” in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History* ed Whitney Davis, New York: The Haworth Press, Inc, 1994. Print. 236.

³⁵ Jonathan Weinberg, “Urination and Its Discontents”, 236.

³⁶ Jonathan Weinberg, “Urination and Its Discontents”, 242-42.

works never surfaced for the public, and were done on order.³⁷ Demuth's fascination with sailors in scenes of sexual interaction, in a variety of positions suggests a fantasy to these scenes he is unable to participate in or experience as lived reality. As an upper class man to engage sexually with lower class men would have been a "known sexual pattern" but it is unlikely given his physical condition near the end of his life.³⁸ These erotic depictions clearly show an imagined reality, unobtainable in an intolerant climate and a time when Demuth was waning physically. From the smug smile on the sailors' faces it seems obvious that these scenes are an ephemeral fantasy of homosexual desire and physical ability for Demuth even as a former member of the bohemian environment of the New York avant-garde.

To analyze Demuth's experience in the radical avant-garde as being characterized—or even defined by—his "forbidden sexuality" and limited mobility and varying health provides critical insight into the seemingly "tolerant" community. Demuth is a figure in American art who beckoned a new generation of American artists. I hope this work of scholarship begins to trouble the radical facade of the Dada atmosphere and reveal a space of intolerance and oppressive privilege. Demuth played a role in pioneering American modernism, but scholarship towards Demuth deserves to move beyond a formal analysis, diminishing his work and life to form, style and delicate brushstrokes. Scholarship needs to evolve to confront and deal with the marginalized social circumstances which characterizes his experience and thus influenced his art production to paint a picture more true of the artist's life.

³⁷ Eiseman, *Charles Demuth*. 22. To friend, Professor Darrel Larsen.

³⁸ Haskell. *Charles Demuth*. 207.

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- “The Demuth Museum,” date of last access 5 March 2014, <http://www.demuth.org/index.php?pid=8>

Plate List

Fig. 1

Fish Series No. 5
(1917)

Watercolour on Paper, 20 x
32.9 cm, The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York;
Alfred Stieglitz Collections



Fig. 2

Two Sailors Urinating (1930)

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 24.1 x 33.7 cm, private collection



Fig. 3

Three Sailors on the Beach
(1930)

Watercolour on paper, 34.3 x 41.9 cm, private collection

Fig. 4

Turkish Bath
(1918)

Watercolour on paper, 27.9 x
21.6cm, Kennedy Galleries,
New York

