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Orlando at the present time

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is an independent writer and art critic living in London. She is also the founding editor of Orlando, a publication dedicated to the visual arts and cultural criticism.

# Orlando at the present time

by Philomena Epps • 06.11.2018

'Yesterday morning I was in despair. I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: A Biography,' reads a letter from Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West in 1927. 'But listen', she continues, 'suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your heart'.<sup>1</sup>

A year later, in October 1928, Woolf published the book and dedicated it to her correspondent. Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicolson would later refer to it as 'the longest love letter in history', as the character of Orlando is inspired by Sackville-West's personality and sense of self, while other characters and plot lines are taken from her family history, marriage and relationships with other lovers. The story of Orlando is a satirical biography about a poet and nobleman who lives across three centuries, metamorphosing from man to woman. On seeing himself as herself for the first time Orlando remarks, 'Same person; No difference at all, just a different sex'. Woolf's implicit challenge to binaries and her transgressive approach to gender and sexuality has made the novel a significant reference point in queer and feminist theory. Additionally, Woolf uses the story as a metaphor for a country going through historical changes: Orlando's personal life is intertwined with shifts in politics from the Renaissance to the 1920s.



# ORLANDO

## A BIOGRAPHY

VIRGINIA WOOLF



THE HOGARTH PRESS, 52 TAVISTOCK SQUARE, W.C.1

Fig. 1 Original dust jacket for *Orlando: A Biography*, by Virginia Woolf. 1928. (Courtesy The Charleston Trust; exh. Wolfson Gallery, Charleston).

Charleston, the East Sussex home of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant – and, at certain points, the entire extended Bloomsbury group – launched its new galleries in September with an exhibition inspired by the novel, ninety years after it was published by The Hogarth Press. The small but comprehensive show considers both the historical significance of book and its contemporary resonance, with two new works commissioned from artists.

To illustrate the first edition of the book, Woolf and Sackville-West

selected paintings and staged photographs. The dust jacket reproduced a portrait of one of the influences on the character of Orlando, Vita's ancestor Thomas Sackville **FIG.1**, the statesman and poet who was given the family seat, Knole in Kent, by Elizabeth I. The original portrait was destroyed during the Second World War, and so it now exists only in this reproduction. Some of the original works illustrated in the book are on show, including Cornelius Nuie's large oil painting *The two sons of Edward, 4th Earl of Dorset* (c.1642–51; Sackville West Collection) which Woolf had cropped to show just the younger, Edward – who was murdered by Cromwell's army during the Civil War – to stand for the boy Orlando. Marcus Gheeraerts's *Mary, 4th Countess of Dorset* (Sackville West Collection) represented Archduke Henry/Archduchess Harriet, a character through which Woolf mocked Lord Henry Lascelles's relentless attempts to woo Sackville-West. This painting is paired with a photograph that Bell and Grant took of Sackville-West – her décolletage adorned with strings of pearls echoes the painting – inspired by the photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron (Woolf's great-aunt) and titled *Orlando on her return to England*. In other photographs Sackville-West is captured as *Orlando about the year 1840* and as *Orlando at the present time*, the final image in the book.



**Fig. 2** *Angelica as the Russian Princess, photographed in the south of France, by Vanessa Bell. 1928. Photograph, approx. 60 by 40 cm. (© Estate of Vanessa Bell courtesy of Henrietta Garnett; courtesy The Charleston Trust; exh. Wolfson Gallery, Charleston).*

Other works by Bell and Grant highlight their multifarious creative dexterity, so present in the fabric of Charleston House. Twelve octagonal dessert plates and two serving dishes painted by Bell in 1934 each illustrate a scene from *Orlando*. These ceramics make a nice counterpoint to Bell's and Grant's *The Famous Women Dinner Service*, created for Kenneth Clark in 1932, which is also on show at Charleston. Grant's Spanish dancer costume (which he wore for Quentin Bell's twenty-sixth birthday party in 1936) is an entertaining reference to the times when he, Woolf and other members of the Bloomsbury Group visited the queer clubs and drag bars of Berlin, the clientele of which were described by Eddy Sackville-West, Vita's cousin, as 'huge men with breasts like women



and faces like Ottoline [Morrell] dressed as female Spanish dancers'.<sup>2</sup> Bell's portrait of her daughter, Angelica, dressed as 'the Russian Princess' (1928, estate of Vanessa Bell courtesy of Henrietta Garnet) and the photograph it was based on **Fig. 2**, alludes to the passages of *Orlando* in which non-Western fashion is depicted as a liberated and androgynous contrast to restrictive European conventions. Woolf writes how 'the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex'.



**Fig. 3** *Oh!*, by Paul Kindersley. 2018. iPhone photographic print on vinyl, 190 by 55 cm. (© Paul Kindersley; courtesy the artist and Belmacz; exh. Wolfson Gallery, Charleston).

In a new installation, Delaine Le Bas – an artist with Romany heritage – responds to the part of the novel where Orlando lives in Turkey with a group of gypsies, marries a dancer called Rosina Pepita and fathers three children, which are then disinherited after the marriage is annulled. Le Bas has created a writing desk or dressing table, spilling over with open diaries, letters, framed photographs, clothing and ornaments, and surrounded by a series of nude photographs of herself inside Charleston and its gardens,

interweaving notions of family history, sexuality and identity. Rosina Pepita was inspired by Sackville-West's maternal grandmother, the flamenco dancer Josefa Duran. Vita was the only child of Duran's son, Lionel Sackville-West, 3rd Baron Sackville, but as a woman she was not able to inherit Knole when her father died in 1928, another subtext to *Orlando*.



**Fig. 4** *Our tears for smiles*, by Kaye Donachie. 2018. Oil on linen, 55.3 by 40.3 cm. (unframed) (© Kaye Donachie; courtesy Maureen Paley, London; Kaye Donachie).

Paul Kindersley's film commission, *The Image* (2018), is a cinematic, fairy-tale reimagining of Woolf's story that follows the journey of the androgynous thirteen-year-old character 'Oh!' through a debauched and intriguing wonderland. Oh! is helped and hindered by a pair of twins, mirroring Nuie's painting and the symbolic doubling of figures throughout the book. The large photograph *Oh!* **FIG.3** combines this with the allegorical qualities of the original dust-



jacket reproduction of Thomas Sackville's portrait, with the doubling of figures, and a homage to the dress of the period. Kindersley was inspired by photographs he found of Woolf and Bell staging dramas and dressing up as children and adults, particularly one of the family putting on a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he subtly referenced in the film, along with other diverse references to Czech surrealist film, folk tales, Vienna Actionism and female-led goth bands of the 1990s. As *The Image* is feature length, it allows gallery visitors to discover different parts of the story at different times of day, which mirrors the form of the novel in an appropriately fluid and shifting way.

While it is illuminating to see the historical works, especially when paired with contemporary interpretations and commissions, the exhibition is weaker when the curators have sought to fill in gaps that perhaps did not need filling. Some objects are related directly to interpretations of the novel, such as a video and costumes from Sally Potter's 1992 film adaption of the book starring Tilda Swinton, and there is a video from Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works*, devised for the Royal Ballet in 2017. Despite their melancholy beauty, Kaye Donachie's muted and evocative oil paintings of soft, androgynous faces, such as *Our tears for smiles* [FIG.4](#) feel far less relevant than some of the more incisive artistic interpretations of the novel. In contrast, the politics of Zanele Muholi's photographs [FIG.5](#), which radically confront LGBT and non-binary identities, race and representation, are so acute that their relation to Woolf's white, bourgeois trajectory required more explanation. These images work better on their own terms. In contrast, the separate display of Muholi's *Faces and Phases* (2006–ongoing) in The South Gallery – a series of portraits of lesbians and queer women in South Africa and beyond, which stems from a desire to both record history and create space for an underrepresented community – suggests potential, and less implicit links to the collective ethos fostered by the Bloomsbury Group at Charleston nearly a century before.

Ninety years on, *Orlando* remains an emblem of resistance, and also of joy, love and exploration. The multiple and diverse interpretations made of the book since then are a tribute to its ability to mean many things to many people, and reflect a central message of the story: the licentious questioning of one's identity and the discovery of an essential self is significant in the past, future, or present time.



**Fig. 5** *Somnyama Ngonyama II, Oslo, 2015*, by Zanele Muholi. 2015. Photograph, 86.5 by 60.5 cm. (unframed) (© Zanele Muholi; courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York; exh. Wolfson Gallery, Charleston).

**Exhibition details**

**Orlando at the present time**

Charleston, Firlé

8th September 2018–17th February 2019

## Footnotes

- 1** Woolf quoted in Laura Marcus, 'Writing Lives: Orlando, The Waves, and Flush,' in *Virginia Woolf*, Northcote House Publishers, 2004, p.116
- 2** Letter from Eddy Sackville West to E.M Forster, 1927; quoted in the exhibition wall text.



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