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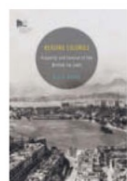
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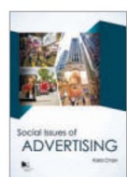
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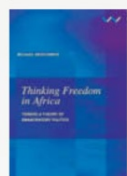


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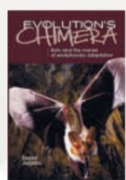
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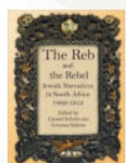


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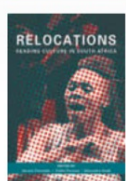
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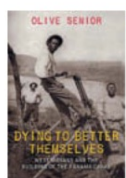


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ARTS

The other sister

Colour, vitality and control in Vanessa Bell's work

ALEXANDRA HARRIS

VANESSA BELL
Dulwich Picture Gallery, until June 4

Sarah Milroy and Ian A.C. Dejardin, editors

VANESSA BELL
208pp. Philip Wilson Publishers. £40.
978 1 78130 059 6

The Other Room" is a great big picture, almost 6 foot square; there's no missing it in this exhibition at Dulwich. Why had I missed it before? It belongs to a private collection, which may explain why it's not one of those images – like "Studland Beach" at the Tate, or "The Conversation" at the Courtauld Gallery, or the National Portrait Gallery's picture of Virginia Woolf knitting in an orange armchair – that have become part of the furniture around which we organize our ideas of Bloomsbury and Post-Impressionism. In fact, I discover, it was part of the furniture at Charleston, where Duncan Grant kept it prominently displayed for years.

The reason for its unfamiliarity is probably that "The Other Room" dates from the mid-1930s. It was painted around 1935 and exhibited in 1937. This is long after the period – from about 1910 to 1920 – during which Vanessa Bell is considered to have made her most significant work. Attention has always been focused on the years around the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions of 1910 and 1912, when an "art quake" shook the ground of British painting. She left behind the muted sophistication of "Iceland Poppies", with its cool urn and fragile poppy-stalks on a starched cloth, eloquent of John Singer Sargent's tutelage. She studied the Gauguins and the Cézannes that now hung in Grafton Street; most of all she studied the Matisse.

Her gift as a colourist came to the fore in explosions of blues, reds and greens, each hue modulated with every vigorous brushstroke. She could celebrate the vibrancy of a lemon branch by sweeping lines of bright blue around a pale grey-green to give a startling effect of citric pungency, sudden light, and energy unleashed. She strove for boldness and vitality, wanting her colours to keep moving on the still canvas. But she must make us feel, at the same time, the stillness of the picture, its status as a controlled composition with forces held in balance.

Under the cheerful green rosettes of a homely armchair are the forms of a classicist concerned with stable structures. When Bell paints the sea it is not as water in flux but as an evenly distributed weight of blue, defined by a white bathing tent on the beach that rises like a monumental standing stone. The "design" of a picture was of utmost importance to her, but the subjects she chose also mattered because she wanted to show that a nurse at the head of a tea table presented aesthetic challenges as compelling as those of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire.

A great deal has been written about Bell's

experimentalism in the 1910s, and much of her work from the period is readily on view, so it's hard to feel that a reassessment was, as the Dulwich curators claim, "urgently overdue". Part of the rationale for the show is, predictably, to let Bell "speak entirely for herself" rather than as sister, rival, collaborator, inspiration for her sister Virginia Woolf. This too seems questionable, since Woolf's acute responses to Bell (in personal letters, in essays about painting, in the fictional figures of Katharine Hilbery, Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay) have tended to draw attention to her achievements rather than obscuring them, and the Bloomsbury association has brought her huge audiences. Still, since the show has been put together with palpable conviction, pleasure and seriousness, most visitors will want to look carefully at what they are being shown by the Dulwich director Ian Dejardin and the curator Sarah Milroy (who was also responsible for Dulwich's exhibition of the Canadian modernist Emily Carr in 2015).

The opening flourish is a room titled "Among Friends", which gathers Bell's portraits of the Woolfs, Lytton Strachey and Duncan Grant among others. Despite the advertised goal of disentangling Bell from others in her circle, we find her immediately in Bloomsbury company. There's no real contradiction here: Bell herself wanted both to live "among friends" and to be alone, silent, concentrating. Most of us do – though in Bell the tension was pronounced, and particularly so in her relationship with her passionately loving and demanding sister. Is the ambivalence legible in the portraits? Bell's paintings of Virginia Woolf are famous for the blotting-out of facial features; blank pink ovals give little hint of the mobile, expressive, fine-boned features. This has often been read as a purposeful deletion, either in a self-protecting move to quieten an overwhelming personality or in a gesture to the impossibility of catching human character. I don't think Bell deals in psychological narrative quite like this; she is among the least narrative of all painters. She sees the head as a form among other forms, and sometimes it is less prominently defining than the sharp angle of a crossed knee or a quick, slender hand.

Much more enjoyable, to my mind, are the fluent landscape paintings which often feature a building to give solid geometry, whether it's Asheham House, or the haystack beside it, or boatsheds by the estuary near Chichester – which, in the refracting coastal light, glow with an opalescent palette of peppermint, turquoise, pink and grey.

What makes the exhibition feel fresh is the decision to include work from across the span of Bell's sixty-year career and to arrange the galleries thematically rather than chronologically. In a room devoted to still life, the 1914 "Oranges and Lemons" shouts with the boldness of the Post-Impressionist years, and cheers on the later painting just opposite, "Still Life with a Bowl of Figs" from 1953. It is not entirely successful, this picture, in its negotiation of plane and depth, but it is seductive and satisfying nonetheless, with its generous pat-

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"Nude with Poppies", 1916

tering and handling of chalky purple-browns.

Next to the figs is the "The Other Room", classed as a still life perhaps because life here is certainly stilled. Two of the three figures are so unobtrusive you only see them after a minute. The most interesting dynamics in Bell's earlier pictures are at work here too. There is the joyous colour, and the chattiness of patterned chair and bursting flower vase; there is the silent absorption of the figures, each in his or her own space and private world. There is the showiness (those ruched curtains belong in the theatre, the whole picture is a painted stage set) and at the same time the very opposite of show: here are people reading and thinking in a domestic room. The scale suggests both a decorative panel and a work of fine art with major ambitions: both suggestions are right. Bell followed Matisse in aspiring to the decorative. She followed Matisse perhaps too much, but we can see here what Milroy means when she claims that Bell herself was influential, and that (whether the connection is direct or indirect) David Hockney and Howard Hodgkin would not have been quite the same without her.

The Art of Bloomsbury staged by Tate back in 1999 was a landmark show and the catalogue is still essential reading. But for better or worse it enshrined an idea that work after 1920 might belong in a room apart, where the labels include the words "retreat" and "conservatism". Sarah Milroy agrees in principle, writing in the Dulwich catalogue that Bell would "align herself increasingly with the effortlessly pleasing style of Grant's late career". Bell in the 1930s, however, was still determined. When she read *The Waves* in 1931, she sought to understand the novel's achievement, and its effect on her, in terms of her painting. She had been working on and off for two years, she told Woolf, on "an absurd great picture":

and if I could only do what I want to – but I can't

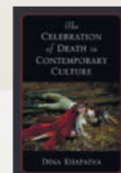
– it seems to me it would have some sort of analogous meaning to what you've done. How can one explain, but to me painting a floor covered with toys and all in relation to each other and the figures and the space of the floor and the light on it means something of the same sort that you seem to me to mean.

This was her tribute and her expression of intimacy: the sisters were still engaged in the joint project they had begun forty years before at Hyde Park Gate. Bell demurs, but she also asserts herself. She can't get her picture right, she says, but she is willing, she is anxious, to make a comparison with the literary masterpiece she has just read, to show that she is thinking on the same scale, and addressing the same technical challenges.

Bell's children were grown up by this time; she was no longer tripping over toys strewn across the Charleston floor. But it's typical that she was going back to a long-standing problem. In a sense she had been working at it for thirty years. In a well-documented catalogue essay, Hana Leaper argues that Bell had developed her own formalist ways of seeing long before Roger Fry had written about "important masses" and Clive Bell had articulated his quest for "aesthetic emotion". She was helped more than one might think by Sargent at the Royal Academy Schools. At the end of her time there, in 1904, she went to Italy and worked out what she thought of the Venetian masters. "They have much more idea of decoration", she wrote, "and seem to think nothing of personal character." All her life, on her own terms, she would answer to their example, which is perhaps what the Dulwich curators tacitly acknowledge when they hang at right angles, in the final room, two versions of "Studland Beach" from 1912 and an equally sober, deliberate, dignified self-portrait from 1958.

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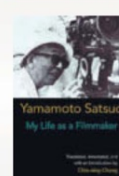
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