

SEPTEMBER 2022

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



## THE TASTEMAKERS STRIKE BACK

Nicolas Ghesquière, Ann Getty, Christian Bérard,  
Deeda Blair – and a whole galaxy of leading lights



# diary

Material concerns, the Max Clendinning factor, late developer, full-on Grant, plus Amy Sherlock's listings

## Michael Armitage

WHITE CUBE 144-152 Bermondsey St, London SE1

A fig tree led to a U-turn for Michael Armitage. In 2010, soon after his graduation from the Royal Academy Schools, London, the Kenyan artist chanced upon Lubugo bark cloth in his native Nairobi. Produced by the Baganda people of neighbouring Uganda, who for centuries have stripped the outer coating of a *Ficus natalensis* and pounded it into a pliable fabric, it's been used to cultivate a cloth that kings wear at coronations and with which the dead are dressed in burial ceremonies.

Armitage, whose early training was completed at the Slade School of Fine Art, had been searching for something that would immediately situate his work in an East African context. Having suspended the bark cloth from the wall in initial experiments, the artist realised he was drawing too much attention to it. As with the woven palm-leaf mats he had previously trialled, the fabric became a fetish, a crude gesture Armitage deemed 'repulsive'. An epiphany arrived once the material was simply stretched across the frames of a canvas. Often dense with punctures and stitches (a result of the production process), Lubugo bark cloth replaced the standard cotton ground on to which Armitage had been painting.

In the decade or so since, this unique textile has become a foundational component of the artist's vast paintings, equal to their characters, colours and compositional elements. And there is a synergy between surface and image. The vivid scenes depicted by Armitage of life in Kenya – narratives of harmony, mythology, tradition and protest – are situated within a historically resonant material that is itself symbolic of distinct cultural shifts in the artist's homeland (Armitage first encountered Lubugo bark cloth in the form of placemats that lined a tourist market).

The London exhibition presents a new series of paintings produced over the last three years, which continue to consider the liminal spaces between past and present. Sacrificed animals, whose bodies transmute into segments of solid colour (*Amongst the Living*, 2022), appear next to a sparse composition based on the decapitation of Koitalel Arap Samoei, a famed leader of the Nandi people (*Head of Koitalel*, 2021). Meanwhile, the dissonance of political rallies, richly evoked in *Curfew (Likoni March 27, 2020)* (2022), is counteracted by the dreamy hallucinations of teen boys, whose visions of flamingos take centre stage (*Three Boys at Dawn*, 2022).

The majority of these works were painted *en plein air*, a long-standing ambition that Armitage was finally able to realise after lockdown restrictions left him with extended stays in Nairobi. Reacting more directly to his surroundings, on this occasion, the artist found himself reflecting on the ways in which East Africa's landscape has been depicted by others, both home and abroad, to varying effects. As the artist has remarked: 'How much can a cliché inhabit what you're looking at?' The narratives explored by Armitage, emitted through the unexpected surfaces of his paintings, propose another world. MICHAEL ARMITAGE runs 21 Sept-30 Oct, Tue-Sat 10-6, Sun 12-6 ■ ALLIE BISWAS is co-editor of 'The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960-1980'

*Witness*, 2022, oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 1.7 x 2.2m











## Max Clendinning: Interior Eulogies

**SADIE COLES HQ** Davies St, London W1

Schooled in Italian Classicism, cutting his teeth on postwar British Modernism and swinging through 1960s London with presciently Postmodernist aplomb, architect and designer Max Clendinning rode the crest of many architectural waves. His ability to harness the power and perspective of each made for an idiosyncratic aesthetic that, to this day, defies categorisation. Pop? PoMo? Minimalist? Each has been proposed, yet none truly settled.

Born in Northern Ireland, Clendinning originally trained as a painter before qualifying as an architect in 1953. Over seven

decades he created such a richly layered palimpsest of buildings, interiors and objects that his cultural legacy has, as yet, only partially been fulfilled. While many contemporaries, including David Mellor, Terence Conran or even Ettore Sottsass, evolved into successful brands, the protean nature of Clendinning's pursuits kept commercial celebrity at bay. Except for a limited series of innovative furniture made for retail in the 1960s, most pieces were one-offs or prototypes. A small, fervent fanbase now harbours the rare few that come to market. And, despite conservation

Plywood, painted aluminium, rubber and glass, for Race Furniture; Ralph Adron, curtain for his and Max Clendinning's own home, dyed rayon panels, 1966-67

campaigns, only a few of his buildings survive, notably his timber-shell Oxford Road station in Manchester (1960), now Grade II-listed, and his 1982 façade for Christina Smith's The Tea House in London. Nonetheless, Clendinning, with his lifelong partner, set designer Ralph Adron, bequeathed a world of well-documented interior concepts and environments that, even if only extant on paper, may now become fertile territories of rediscovery.

Curated by design consultant Simon Andrews, this exhibition assembles previously unseen furniture and sculpture in an immersive environment of original mural designs. With loans from private collections, including Ralph Adron's own, Andrews hopes to assert Clendinning's currency by sharing an impression of his rigour and determination. 'Clendinning was trained in Modernism, but not restrained by it. He followed his own means of expression, not pandering to contemporary precepts of good taste. His was an unbridled eccentricity; it is extremely liberating.'

Andrews has long supported Clendinning's work, chancing on it as a teenager. A feature on the north London home he and Adron shared revealed an unprecedented yet skilful mix of their space-age furniture and psychedelic murals integrated into a Georgian framework. In a restless pursuit of renewal, the couple employed their place as a platform for wild, experimental ideas. The ever-evolving tableaux had photographers including Norman Parkinson hiring the house as a shoot location, ensuring the space was one of the most consistently published interiors of its era.

A 1984 *Wol* article on the house and Clendinning's (then) 30 years of work suggested that, were he 'grander and older, he would be the grand old man of design'. Even now, labels like 'grand' and 'old' belie the practitioner's radical yet resolved merger of popular culture with contemporary architecture and progressive interiors.

**MAX CLENDINNING: INTERIOR EULOGIES** runs 13 Sept-1 Oct, Tue-Sat 11-6 ■ **LIBBY SELLERS** is a London-based design historian, curator and writer



## Lord Henry Gordon Lennox: An Aristocratic Amateur

**GOODWOOD HOUSE** Kennel Hill, Chichester

Lord Henry Gordon Lennox, third of the fifth Duke of Richmond's five sons, was not taken altogether seriously. His proficiency as a 'camera artist' in the 1850s, photography's early years, has never been recognised until now and he remains one of those enthusiastic gentleman amateurs making pictures purely for themselves, never regretting (or expecting) a wider audience. Admittedly, his father was a hard act to follow. On Wellington's staff in the Peninsular War, he took a musket ball in the chest at Orthez. Later, he was an aide-de-camp to the Iron Duke during Waterloo.

Lord Henry aimed his sights lower, becoming Honourable Member for Chichester. *Vanity Fair* damned him with faint praise: 'Whenever he has found an opportunity of doing statesman's work in the public eye, he has acquitted himself well.' Then it simply damned him: '[He is] favoured by Nature with a graceful figure and presence, and a feminine gentleness of manner, known for amiability of intercourse, and suspected of literary ability.' *Vanity Fair* showed him with a well-maintained head of hair and distinguished, perhaps waxed, moustaches. His unmarried status (he was 61 before he wed) and a close friendship with Benjamin Disraeli, 17 years his senior, raised eyebrows. From their correspondence, 'Dizzy' appears besotted. The journal's catty observation gave readers a clue to his extracurricular activities.

As we now know, his artistic inclinations veered towards the pictorial rather than the literary. The two large albums on display at Goodwood House reveal a photographer of rare sensitivity, striving for informality at a time when sitting for long exposure times was disagreeable. Further, to take up this new art was time-consuming, costly and, unless an expert chemist, hit-and-miss.

His subject matter is what might be expected of a member of the Victorian leisured classes: estate workers with the tools of their trade; gamekeepers and their catch; nannies leading charges in homespun carts. One *en plein air* image is strikingly avant-garde, at least for the times: five figures arranged upon and beside a bench, managing to look in different directions all at once. A group shot certainly, but its constituents are transformed into five quite separate and serious people being entirely themselves and something else as well. Perhaps only a great photographer could achieve this.

What more do we know? He served under his patron, Prime Minister Disraeli, as First Secretary of the Admiralty and was his 'spy' there when Disraeli was chancellor. Whether he kept up his love of photography remains to be discovered. **LORD HENRY GORDON LENNOX: AN ARISTOCRATIC AMATEUR** runs until 31 Oct on Goodwood House open days ■ **ROBIN MUIR** is a curator and writer on photography





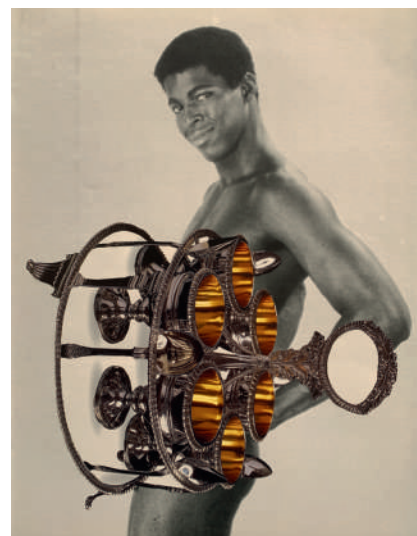


## Very Private?

CHARLESTON Firle, E. Sussex

In 1916, the artist Duncan Grant moved with fellow artist, sometime lover and lifelong collaborator Vanessa Bell and her family to Charleston, East Sussex. Together, they lavished the 17th-century farmhouse with a complete and original scheme that incorporated murals, ceramics and painted furniture. The influence of the look on interiors can be felt today: see Lyndon Harrison's domestic murals, or Luke Edward Hall's 'Matisse in the Home Counties' aesthetic (*WoI* May 2022). But what about the art?

If Adrian Searle's 1999 *Guardian* headline calling the art of Bloomsbury 'A Warning from History' feels a tad overdone, it's hard to argue with his assessment that much of Grant's painting mostly just 'domesticated' the vision of more significant artists (Cézanne, Bonnard, Picasso) 'for home consumption'. That said, a new exhibition at Charleston offers a fresh perspective on Grant's



legacy through a rarely seen aspect of the oeuvre: his erotic works on paper. With a title taken from a note Grant scrawled on the envelope in which he entrusted these sketches to artist and collector Edward Le Bas in 1959, *Very Private?* includes a selection of 40 drawings of male nudes by him from the 1940s and 50s. At one point assumed destroyed by Le Bas's sister to protect her brother's reputation, the works will be exhibited in public for the first time, after their donation to the Charleston Trust in 2020.

Of course, in the Britain of 1959, sex between men was still a criminal act. Through his lifetime, the homoerotic charge of Grant's art saw his public commissions criticised and censored. His muscular, neo-Byzantine 1911 *Bathing* was lambasted as morally corrupting, while the tender, rousing murals in Lincoln Cathedral (featuring a lover, Paul Roche, as the risen Christ) were locked away after their completion in 1958, only reopened to view in 1990.

Grant's art soars precisely when it channels his private passions: when sexual desire is (almost) out in the open. In a selection of his erotica published by Gay Men's Press in 1994, he achieves a rare fluidity of line and a sense of the body's weight. Grant was a fan of ballet, and his best erotic drawings have a dancer's vigour and grace. They also betray a fixation on interracial love: half the works in the book feature Black bodies and men of colour: active, equal-opportunity playthings, sometimes, unsettlingly, as cartoon studs. He had several Black lovers, and his 1960s portrait of the Jamaican Pat Nelson, say, has an easy dignity. But his erotic attachment to dark skin as a kind of 'forbidden fruit', to quote Grant's biographer Frances Spalding, is sometimes hard to swallow.

This exhibition will, I hope, engage these knotty dynamics, with Grant's work alongside contemporary responses by Somaya Critchlow, Harold Offeh and new works by Ajamu X, who has for decades probed the imagery of Black queer masculinity. A grave consideration of identity, gender and otherness might feel at odds with Grant's airy masques; then again, what is 'very private' is often inseparable from matters of pressing, all-too-public interest. **VERY PRIVATE?** runs 17 Sept-12 March, Wed-Sun 10-5 ■ MATTHEW MCLEAN is a writer and editor based in London

Top left: Duncan Grant, *Untitled Drawing*, c1946-1959. Top right: Linder, *Untitled*