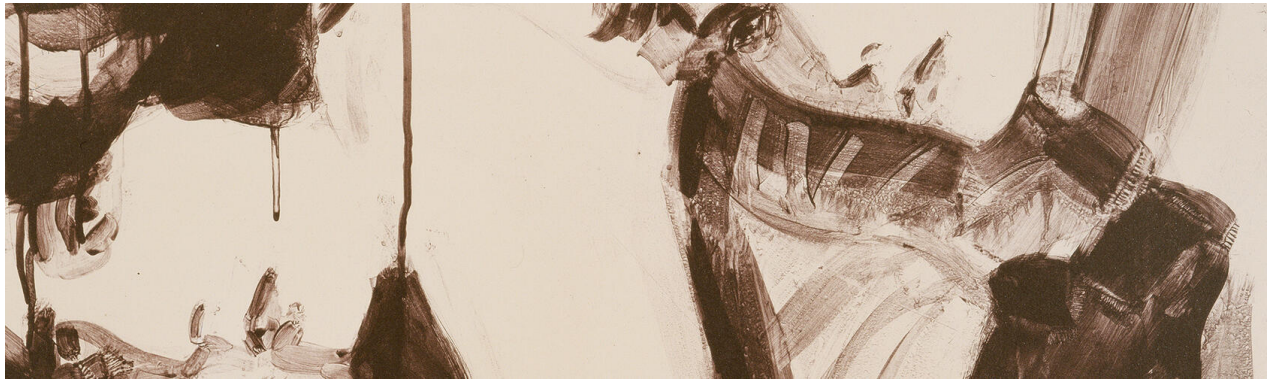


FRIEZE

Nicole Wermers: "What the Art World Misreads About Oscar Wilde"

By Lou Selfridge

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Main image: Elizabeth Peyton, *Oscar and Bosie*, 1998, two colour lithograph with pearlescent dust, 57.8 x 61.9 cm. Courtesy: © Elizabeth Peyton

A new London exhibition goes beyond the Victorian author's tragic life to celebrate his stylistic legacy

As I was rummaging through the bottom of my wardrobe at the end of last year, I found an old T-shirt adorned with the faces of several 'gay icons': Pier Paolo Pasolini, Keith Haring, Harvey Milk and – who else – Oscar Wilde. I had been carting the shirt from apartment to apartment since I bought it as a gay teenager living in semi-rural Scotland, where I suppose I hoped it would flag my status as an aspirant metropolitan homosexual. Looking at it so many years later, however, I couldn't help but cringe at how little I knew about these men. If anyone asked me what the shirt meant, I would give them only the most potted biography of each figure before saying: 'And they're all gay.'



Nan Goldin, *The Boy*, 2016, installation view, 'Inside', Reading Gaol. Courtesy: Artangel; photograph: Lorena Muñoz-Alonso

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Recent years have seen a number of exhibitions dedicated to Wilde, many of which have relied upon the same superficial facts that I would have recited at age 17: late Victorian writer, imprisoned for homosexuality. Particular emphasis has been placed on locations linked with the final years of the Irish writer's life: the group show 'De Profundis' (2023) saw a range of Wilde-inspired works displayed in the Paris hotel room in which he died, while the Artangel exhibition 'Inside' (2016) scattered artworks around Reading Gaol, the former prison where Wilde was imprisoned in 1895–97 after being convicted of 'gross indecency'. Curators and artists have been keen to point out the seeming parallels between 19th-century England's repression of homosexuality and the current political pushback against LGBTQ+ rights in the UK, US and elsewhere. When the comparison is made with nuance and historical accuracy, it can be productive – but oversized prominence is often given to Wilde's sexuality and the tragedy of his final years, spent in exile in the French capital, as if it is only these biographical details that make him relevant to audiences today.



Donna Huddleston, *Oscar and Nico*, 2026. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London; photograph: Katie Morrison

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This January, however, London gallerist Sadie Coles has curated 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime', a response to the Wilde short story of the same name (1887/91), with contributions from an eclectic list of artists ranging from Celia Paul to Anthea Hamilton. Unlike those exhibitions which have doggedly plumbed Wilde's biography to prove his significance to the contemporary political moment, Coles seems more interested in what Wilde is rightly famous for: a diverse and madcap body of work, spanning plays, novels, essays, short stories and poetry. There are still one or two weepy portraits of the writer on display, but most of the artworks instead evince a Wildean playfulness – such as a double portrait of Wilde and the singer Nico by Donna Huddleston (*Oscar and Nico*, 2026) and Nicole Wermers's *A Gay Crime* (2025), which places an impressionistic sculpture of four formally-dressed male figures atop a VHS box set of the 1970s British TV drama *Upstairs Downstairs*.



Nicole Wermers, *A Gay Crime* (detail), 2025, reinforced air dry clay, VHS tapes and covers, 41 x 54 x 23 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London; photograph: Katie Morrison

Where the exhibition excels, however, is in its inclusion of numerous works that have no direct connection to Wilde's biography or oeuvre, instead showing an affinity with his stylistic legacy. Perhaps the most successful in this vein is Sarah Lucas's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (2014), which features two chairs with pairs of stuffed tights attached to them, giving the appearance of elongated breasts. Lucas is a clear inheritor of Wilde's tradition, engaged in a wittily subversive artistic practice that manages to be both trivial and serious at the same time.

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Sarah Lucas, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 2014, tights, kapok, wooden chairs, wooden stool, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London; photograph: Jens Ziehe

Few writers are as fun as Wilde. Take his famous farce, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which features lines such as – to pluck a random example – ‘If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.’ In his written work, as well as in snatches of conversation recorded by contemporaries, Wilde proves himself one of the great wits and troublemakers of the 19th century – but you wouldn’t guess that from looking at many artistic tributes to him. Instead, most art responding directly to Wilde focuses on identity: the past three decades have seen an abundance of portraits of the aesthete, sometimes alongside a male lover and almost always looking forlorn or dejected – as in Elizabeth Peyton’s *Oscar and Bosie* (1998) or Marlene Dumas’s ‘Great Men’ series (2014–ongoing). I do not deny the beauty of these and many other works in the same vein, but there is a lack of wit and liveliness in the recent crop of artworks depicting Wilde that would surprise any of his readers.

In one of the best-known lines from *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), Lord Darlington suggests that ‘we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.’ In an art world deeply invested in identity politics, too much recent work has conscribed Wilde to serve as Grand High Homosexual: a symbol of historic oppression through which contemporary artists can indicate their experience of, or sympathy for, the suffering of LGBTQ+ people. However, as Coles’s exhibition proves, the best artists go beyond a reductive reading of the tragic elements of Wilde’s life – choosing instead to get in the gutter beside him and look up.

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Marlene Dumas, *Oscar Wilde*, 2016, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London;
photograph: Tate © Marlene Dumas

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