

Paul P. Friendly in the Knife-edged Moment

5 June – 28 August 2022
Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens

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Oakville Galleries gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, along with our many individual, corporate and foundation partners.

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Friendly in the Knife-edged Moment is a solo exhibition of work by Paul P., taking place at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and bringing together work made over two decades by the Toronto-based artist. The exhibition includes recent examples of his well-known series of portraits appropriated from source material found in the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. Shown alongside these and set against views of the park and lake outside are a number of ink and watercolour drawings of gardens, statuary, and seascapes, which are almost entirely exhibited for the first time.

The exhibition title is taken from a 1946 poem by Jocelyn Brooke, an English author and soldier, who pursued a deep amateur passion for botany. The poem describes a chance encounter with a soldier dismantling bombs at the end of World War II. Sweating and stripped to the waist as he worked on a country path, “preparing the ground for peace”, he smilingly asks Brooke the time. For Brooke—who found the war offered unexpected relief from a restrictive conventional life in which he struggled to find his footing—this was a rare moment of sensual connection, in what he perceived to be an otherwise sad and dangerous terrain, a “summer threatened by peace”.

This poetic encounter works as an apt simile for a subject that runs through much of P.’s work: the capturing of a persistent queer presence through history, often only made known through highly subtle acts of disclosure. The ink and watercolour drawings, in particular, conjure a time and place in which implicit, coded cultural and aesthetic languages were necessitated by the criminalisation of homosexual desire. Late

summer blooms, a dancing faun and the shadowy outlines of *bricole* poles in a twilight Venice lagoon, these intensely Romantic images are charged with the veiled innuendo of queer symbology. They are the sites and ciphers of refuge and fantasy, of tragedy and longing that have been passed down through time from Classicism to the beginning of the twentieth century and beyond.

This period of the turn of the twentieth century through the 1920s plays an important role in P.'s work. His formal style, for example, can be thought of as reconciling the contrasting approaches of two late Victorian painters who shifted effortlessly between portraits and landscapes: the muted colour arrangements and vague yet evocative environments of James McNeill Whistler, with the high-keyed materiality and panache of John Singer Sargent. Within their era homosexuality was shifted from an act to a personality, and in each case their art can be aligned with a differing facet of representation: Whistler with aestheticism and dandyism and Sargent with optimistic, subdued sensuality—artifice versus natural splendour.

The work of these late-Victorian reformers opened up possibilities for the permissiveness of later generations of artists and writers, such as England's Bright Young People, an inter-war phenomenon in which queerness was flaunted by a privileged few as an insolent act directed at their elders. P. turns his thoughts directly to this group and the positions they occupied in queer history. His research also searches out lesser-known writers (Brooke among them), who were active

at this time when queer identity was flourishing within an era of criminalized homosexuality. This juncture, in which the language of implicit and explicit self-identification overlaps, is where much of P.'s work resides. Stretching from the turn of the century and into the "roaring 20s", it is a period marked as much by its oppressive attitudes as its radicality and aesthetic highpoints.

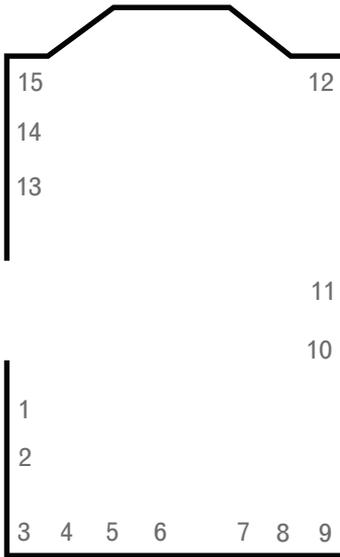
The 1970s (the decade in which the artist was born) is another period to which the work often turns, particularly the portrait paintings, which are sourced directly from the ephemera of that time. Like the turn of the century, this was an ideal moment of freedom and liberation, a "golden age" that came just after the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and just before the advent of the AIDS crisis. But despite such looking backwards to the past, P.'s work is also deeply rooted in our current moment. Still coming to terms with these recent histories, still suffering from a continuing AIDS crisis (the pandemic, which continues to occur alongside COVID-19), our path forward is tenuous. We make progress in some areas of equality while in others we slide backwards and regress.

Serendipitously, the timeframes P.'s works refer to are also relevant to the place of the exhibition. Gairloch Gardens, the gallery where the exhibition is presented, is an early twentieth-century home, contemporaneous to Brooke's formative botanical endeavours. Like Brooke, the man who built Gairloch Gardens was also a soldier, who was returning to civilian life after the tragedies of World War I. Furthermore, the designs for the house were based on Spade House, which is in

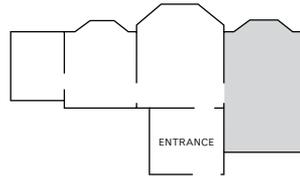
Folkestone, Kent—the chalk hills beloved of Brooke, where his books and poems are invariably set and where his botanical quests took place. Time, place, background, and foreground; each weaves into the other then in this exhibition. Brooke's *The Military Orchid* eventually became his best-known work: a book that is not just about botanical obsession, but also the search for self. This exhibition is presented in a similarly allusive way, as subtle allegories expressing the politics and aesthetics of longing.

North Gallery

In this gallery we see a selection of Paul P.'s flower paintings, which he has been making from early on in his career. Depicting blowzy, pink and white summer flowers—perhaps carnations or roses—and the famous flower stalls of Paris and Venice, these pretty, delicate watercolour and ink drawings carry an important sub-text that goes beyond mere aesthetic appeal. Reminiscent in style to works from the turn of the twentieth century, they recall the floral motifs that became part of a private, aesthetic language at that time, one that hinted at illicit expressions of same-sex desire. Relevant to P.'s work is also the sense of transience embodied in these summer blooms. Like his portrait paintings, they conjure a sense of poignant evanescence, the feeling of trying to hold on to summer's golden beauty before it fades away.



North Gallery



- | | | | |
|----------|--|-----------|---|
| | | 8 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2018
ink on paper |
| 1 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2011
watercolour on paper | 9 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2018
ink on paper with collage |
| 2 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2008
watercolour on paper | 10 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2009
watercolour on paper |
| 3 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019
watercolour on paper | 11 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2011
watercolour on paper |
| 4 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019
watercolour on paper | 12 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2011
watercolour on paper |
| 5 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019
watercolour on paper | 13 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2005
watercolour on paper |
| 6 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019
watercolour on paper | 14 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2005
watercolour on paper |
| 7 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2016
ink on paper | 15 | <i>Untitled</i> , 2005
watercolour on paper |

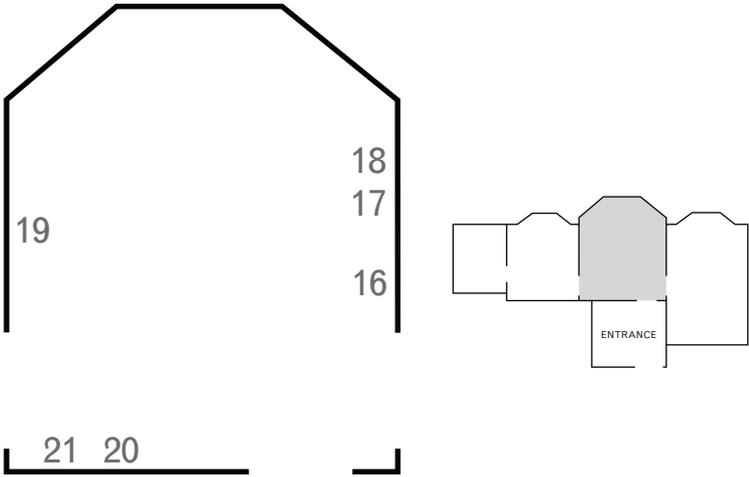
All works courtesy Cooper Cole, Toronto; Maureen Paley, London; Queer Thoughts, New York.

As well as flowers, P. has made ink and watercolour drawings of statuary in museums and public parks. Here we see a number of views of Eugene Louis Lequesne's 1851 *Dancing Faun*, sketches which the artist made over time in the Jardin des Tuileries, a public park in Paris, where he was based for many years. At times outlining the sleek contours of this mythological deity and at others sliding into a colourful haze of semi-abstraction, P. points again to the undercurrents of queerness that run through nineteenth-century art—suggestive presences that were often framed within the respectable narrative of Hellenic references or the classical nude.

Central Gallery

This grouping largely shows the works for which Paul P. is most well-known: closely-cropped portraits of men painted from photographs and ephemera found in the ArQuives (formerly known as the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives), which he has been sketching and painting since 2001. The source material he uses mostly dates to the 1960s and 1970s, a period of gay liberation in North America and Europe that occurred just before the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Painted in a deeply Romantic style, these elegiac images commemorate a lost generation of youth and a moment of happiness and progress that was to be tragically undone by the catastrophe to come.

Central Gallery



16 *Untitled, 2020*
oil on linen

17 *Untitled, 2020*
oil on linen

18 *Untitled, 2020*
oil on linen

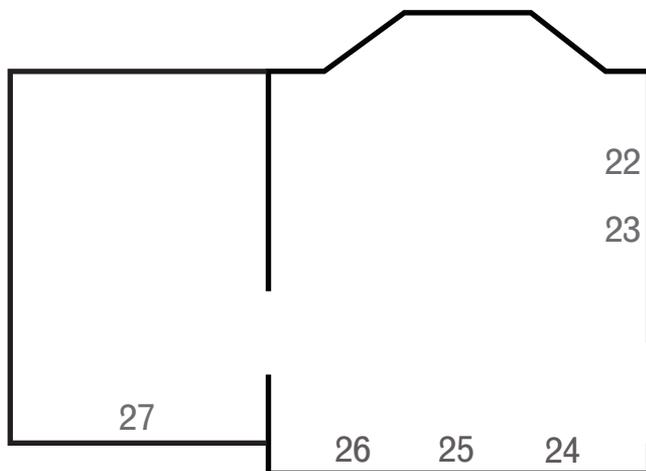
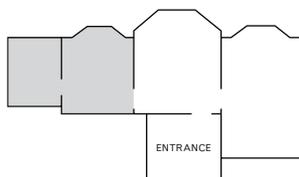
19 *Untitled, 2020*
oil on linen

20 *Untitled, 2016*
watercolour on paper

21 *Untitled, 2009*
watercolour on paper

All works courtesy Cooper Cole, Toronto; Maureen Paley, London; Queer Thoughts, New York.

South Gallery & Salah Bachir Gallery



22 *Untitled, 2010*
watercolour on paper

23 *Untitled, 2016*
watercolour on paper

24 *Untitled, 2009*
watercolour on paper

25 *Untitled, 2011*
watercolour on paper

26 *Untitled, 2016*
watercolour on paper

27 *Untitled, 2001*
oil on linen

*All works courtesy Cooper Cole, Toronto; Maureen Paley, London;
Queer Thoughts, New York.*

South Gallery, Central Gallery & Salah Bachir Gallery

P. has also painted numerous watercolours of shorelines and seascapes. Often capturing a particular half-light moment at dawn or dusk, these atmospheric, almost-abstract paintings show sea views in Venice, Italy, its namesake Venice Beach in California, and Fogo Island in Newfoundland, where the artist undertook a residency in 2016. While they are geographically distinct, these sites are linked through their histories in a number of ways. Venice Beach and the city of Venice, for example, have both held particular meanings to queer sub-cultures in the past: as refuges, as nerve centres, as watery havens known for their quality of light. Each in its own way carries a particular charge in the cultural imagination, where they have long been narrated as sites of sensuality, decadence, liberation, escape, or far-flung, Romantic isolation. The glowing, shadowy, protean qualities these paintings of water and light evoke also function in themselves as ciphers for the veiled innuendo of the turn of the century, the “golden age” of the 1970s. In the last gallery, an early work of P.’s shows a colony of bats catching the light as they fly into a sunset vista.

EQUINOX

Walking on the Autumn hillsides
Above the ruined town,
The grey skies oppressing
The mind with weight of sadness,
The country unfolding, hill
Upon piled-up hill, the vineyards
Heavy with fruit, but the farms
Untenanted or unfriendly;
Walking the rain-wet paths
By the orchards, the pink houses,
The Jewish burial-ground—
At the turn of the hedged pathway,
A soldier stopped me, grinning—
White teeth and ginger tash—
Wanting to know the time;
A Sapper on bomb-disposal,
Sweating, stripped to the waist,
Friendly in a sad country:
Preparing the ground for peace.
And walking on in the rain
Through the windless Autumn country,
I held Time in my hand—
The caged and static moment,
Poised between Summer's ending
And threat of starveling Winter;
The hour of transition,
An epoch's climacteric—

The time of migrations
And the tribal movement;
War's easy summer climate
Unsettled now by rumour
Of leafless, difficult peace;
Our age's equinox
Coming with the soft rain,
The young grass in the hedgerow
And the Sapper's naked smile
In an unfriendly country.

And I shall remember
In stripped and winter future
This rain and the hedged pathway,
The moment held in the hand:
The soldier's smile at the frontier
Friendly in the knife-edged moment
Dividing the two climates:
Our Summer threatened by peace
And War becoming Winter.

— *Jocelyn Brooke, first published in Penguin New Writing 28, ed.
John Lehmann, July 1946.*

Oakville Galleries is located on Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The treaty lands are covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, namely the Head of the Lake, Treaty No. 14 (1806) and Treaty No. 22. At the same time, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and at Centennial Square is uniquely situated along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and Sixteen Mile Creek. These waterways are unceded territory and the Mississaugas have unextinguished aboriginal title to all water, beds of water, and floodplains contained therein. As an institution, Oakville Galleries recognizes the importance of establishing and maintaining meaningful and respectful relationships with the original inhabitants and keepers of the land, and we are grateful for the opportunity to operate on this territory.

Oakville Galleries would like to thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the open conversation around truth and reconciliation.