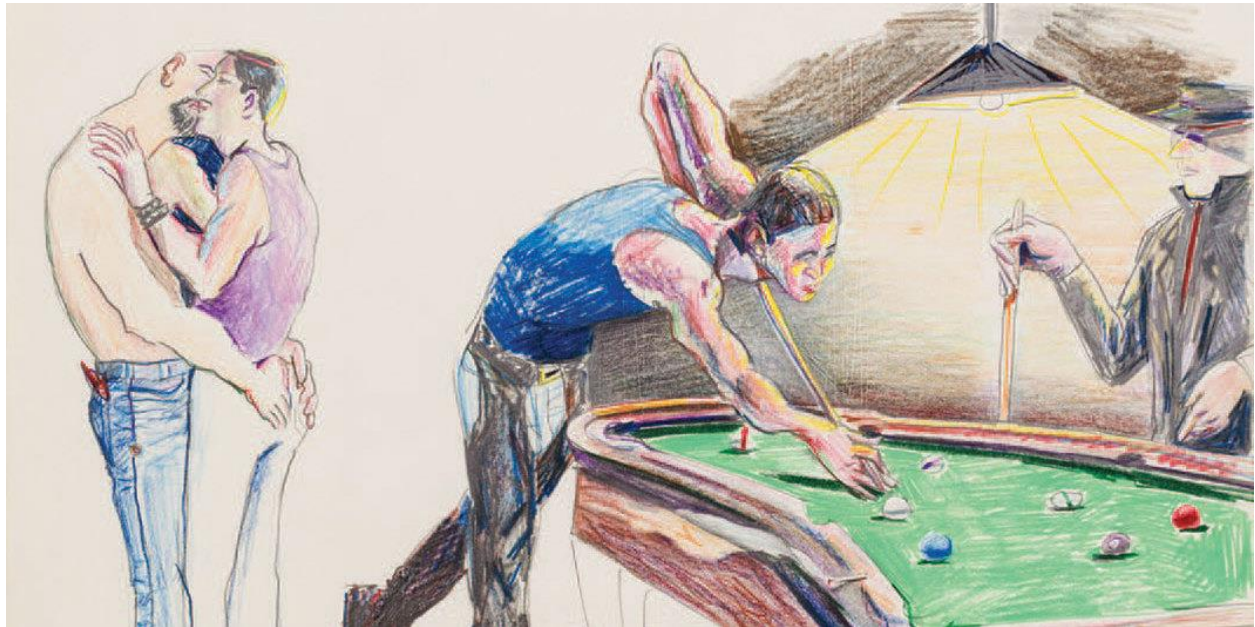


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Patrick Angus at Long Beach Museum of Art

Andy Campbell | October 2019



Patrick Angus, *Untitled (Pool Hall)*, date unknown, crayon on paper, 14 x 17"

In Patrick Angus's painting *Flame Steaks*, 1985, a dozen men sit apart from each other in a dark bar. Outside, it is still daytime, and two men lean invitingly on opposite sides of the street, cruising together yet apart. Inside the establishment, one man combs his hair back while another spreads his legs (he wears mauve jeans), letting his hands dangle around his crotch in an artfully unpracticed manner. The only other bits of color in this otherwise muted scene are in the lit cherry of a cigarette, a pair of red shoelaces, the wisp of a red hanky peeking out of a back pocket, and two large yellow signs advertising (what else?) FLAME STEAKS. Angus's reputation (if he has one in recent art-historical memory) is as a painter of the sexual milieu—lively gay bars, porn theaters, and bathhouses—in which he directly participated. Some of his best paintings in this particular genre, which we might pragmatically and playfully dub "sex scenes," were on loan to the Long Beach Museum of Art from the collection of David Hockney, an artist who had a clear influence on Angus's development in both style and subject. It seems the admiration was mutual.

However, this retrospective, the first to be organized on the West Coast (where the artist spent most of his life), attempted to expand this limited view of Angus's work, particularly by including lesser-known series and dozens of drawings that, unlike their painted counterparts, evoked a sense of ease and spontaneity and encompassed a wide range of subjects (women!). *Untitled (Five Standing Figures)*, 3/23/79, 1979, for example, appears to have been sketched from direct observation: The torn edge of the paper indicates that it once belonged in a spiral notebook. Five people attend an unspecified social gathering; one woman holds a martini glass, another a cigarette, but neither speaks. Angus reinforces the awkwardness of the scene by isolating the figures, creating a Brechtian tableau of suspended sociality (reminiscent in some ways of the alluring compositional weirdness of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting). In other drawings, Angus took the opposite tack, flatteringly capturing his models in his studio or in their own homes. Such is the case with *Betty Sleeping*, date unknown, in which Angus's exacting line work and kinetic coloring amount to a tender portrait of his mother.

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Given the exhibition's aim to bring renewed attention to the artist, it was disappointing that the installation undercut the work. Some of the curatorial missteps were fairly benign, such as grouping a clutch of Angus's cityscapes in the same room (one or two would have been fine, but a whole roomful sapped an otherwise ebullient arrangement of its energy), or hanging a sequence of verdant landscapes above an inexplicably deep platform. Most egregious, though, was the placement of Angus's sexually explicit drawings and paintings behind a privacy wall emblazoned with a content warning and an overly large calligraphically rendered red letter R, forcing a question: Did the curator really give this part of the show an MPAA rating? Whoever's decision it was, the problem with this dippy (and reactionary) installation was that, beyond framing Angus's explicitly sexual paintings within a visual and symbolic language of heightened moral panic, it represented a botched opportunity to position painting as a node of gay male social life and creativity. That is a shame. A picture of a naked dancer shaking his dick at his client may be lewd on its surface, but Angus's sustained attention to these sites and relations demands that we also take them seriously as ways of living. There's nothing more adult a museum can ask of its audience.