

Self-portrait 1972. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 20.0 cm.

RADIANT AFFINITIES

The Life and Work of
Cornelius McCarthy



Peter Dobson



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Preface

When Cornelius McCarthy first contacted Galerie MooiMan in May 2008, asking whether it would be possible to exhibit in our gallery, he told us he wanted to find a gallery outside the United Kingdom for his artworks. We immediately saw that his work was special and suggested that some of his pictures could be included in our next Homogenda (gay men's diary) which was in production at that moment. He gave us some pictures from his Odalisque series. In August of the same year he also sent us some drawings (see page 179).

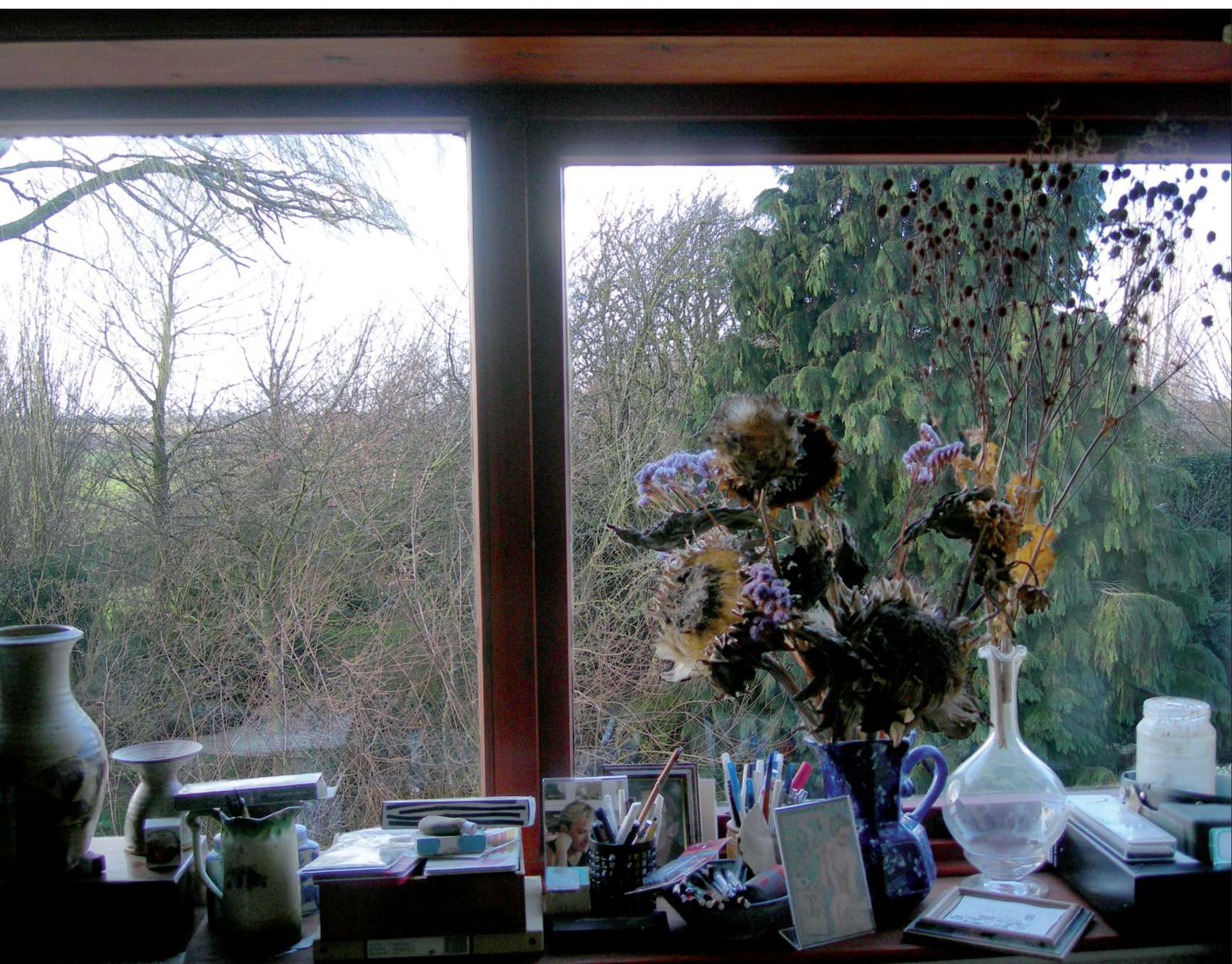
In January 2009 we were invited to Willow End, the artist's home in West Norfolk, to collect more of his artworks. It was during this visit that we realized what a good painter he was. We very much admired a large oil painting, *Two Figures – Tunisia*, which was hanging in the sitting room. This visit to Willow End was the beginning of a friendship as well as a business relationship.

In 2010 we were organizing an exhibition entitled "Grenzenloos Mooi - Beauty without Borders". We visited Cornelius's partner Alec Ayres and asked him if *Two Figures – Tunisia* could be part of the exhibition in May/June 2010. He agreed. The painting is now part of our personal collection in Groningen. Since that time Galerie MooiMan has exhibited and sold a number of Cornelius's best pictures.

In May 2012 Alec Ayres asked us to Willow End to make a computerised overview of the many artworks in the archive there. Working with Peter Dobson we documented more than 650 pieces, all different and very interesting to see. In the future we hope it will be possible to complete this overview. In the meantime we decided to publish Peter's full-length biography of Cornelius. We believe it will help to make this artist better known and we are sure it will bring him new admirers.

Jan van Stralen, Galerie MooiMan

Working on the Cornelius McCarthy archive at Willow End, May 2012. Photograph by Sandro Kortekaas.



12 - 1 Window in the studio at Willow End, looking north over the garden, March 2007. Photograph by Nebojsa Zdravkovic.

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Maturity: Willow End 1999 - 2009

'The imagination is much more than the imaginary. It embraces the whole existence of man. For we do not only respond with feeling or admiration, but participate, through the symbols offered by a work of imagination, in a potential society which lies beyond our grasp.' - Jean Duvignaud: *The Sociology of Art*.¹

Tom Holmes was right when he said Cornelius took the social responsibility of the artist seriously, and that this was what led him to paint so honestly and sometimes so challengingly.² Whatever compelled him to engage with the enormity of the Troubles or the AIDS epidemic, it involved a moral imperative, not only to re-interpret traditional Catholic imagery but also to interrogate the role of religious faith itself, trying to move beyond institutional fear and bigotry, and imagining a politics of empathy and reconciliation. And staying true to his own nature despite the prevailing attitudes to his sexual orientation meant that his art, implicitly if not always consciously, tended to subvert certain ideas of propriety. Female nudity has long been an established part of the Western tradition in painting. Homo-erotic themes, on the other hand, although present, remain largely disguised or repressed. Cornelius's naked Christ or uninhibited male lovers still have the power to shock because they make no concessions to this convention. Representing the *whole* gamut of masculinities and relating them to religious and political issues is still contentious. The drive to resolve personal conflicts and to achieve some sort of psychological balance may be behind pictures like *Wrestling with an Angel*, but his vision ranged further than suffering and sexual politics. It sought to re-integrate the body and the spirit (often thought of as binary opposites) and included an altruistic, humanitarian dimension. His *Bacchanalia* paintings, for example, seem to embrace a utopian spirit in which the dancers celebrate their physical identities and feel their connection with the earth, with seasonal rhythms and one another. These pictures had their real-life origins in social gatherings at Willow End: there was, after all, something utopian in the strong sense of community that friends experienced there. If anything the new garden enhanced this feeling. It had begun as a creative project but it soon assumed a communal, 'therapeutic' role. Visitors loved to join in the work, digging, weeding, as well as relaxing in the fresh air or strolling under the trees. And after only a few years it really did begin to resemble an ideal space, a version of Arcadia with glades

1. Jean Duvignaud: *The Sociology of Art*, 1972, p. 20
2. Interview with Tom Holmes, August 2010

of silver birch and vistas of dramatic East Anglian sky. Before long these elements, together with the local landscape, became the settings for a whole series of innovative paintings.



12 – 2 Jim in a Robe, no date.
Coloured pencils on card, ± 28 x 16 cm.

Cornelius continued to paint Jim, although now of course he had to rely on photographs and drawings he had already made [12 – 2]. He also returned to sketches of Johnny and other London models, but now he placed them together in groups outdoors surrounded with stylised garden foliage, or bathing in the nearby river, with a Fenland church and colour-washed cottages reflected in limpid water [12 – 3]. And his style changed to accommodate this new preoccupation with light and space. He started to experiment with his own version of 'Divisionism' or optical mixing technique (perhaps derived from the work of Signac and other French Neo-Impressionists he had seen) overlaying the surfaces with a mosaic of small spots of colour and creating a painted texture which unified the design and increased luminosity. Here again Cornelius was finding a way of reconciling foreground and background, marrying the illusion of depth with the



12 – 3 Four Boys Bathing, 1999. Pastels on paper, 45.8 x 57 cm.

reality of the flat canvas. With their figures in static classical poses, seen beneath a tracery of leaf patterns and contrasted with luminous reflections, these compositions sometimes have the woven, decorative effect of old tapestries [12 – 4], yet at the same time a feeling of open air and distance. Occasionally there is an underlying elegiac note, intensified by evening light or



12 – 4 Woodland: Paolo and Gerry, 2000. Gouache on Arches paper, 30.5 x 23 cm.

a pale sky. Sean appears alone in several garden scenes, pensively regarding an ornamental urn or emerging from shade into sunlight. Baz, a new model more compact and darker than Johnny, inspired a number of studies in a different mood. The figure is seen in an interior, standing or sitting in front of a richly decorated screen, lit obliquely by shafts of warm sunshine from outside [12 – 5]. The muted colour schemes – gold, pink, brown and olive – and the subdued glitter of shadow and reflected light evoke sensations of exterior heat and dazzle experienced in an enclosed space. Later pictures show Baz in the open air, bathing with companions, drying himself by the water or almost engulfed in a downward fall of sunlight.

At around this time (in 1999 or 2000) Alec and Cornelius made their third visit to the United States, where their friends Ben and Jenny Lemlich took them on an epic twenty-six-day journey



12 – 5 Baz on Cloth of Gold, 1999. Gouache on buff card, 22 x 16 cm.

from Washington all the way to San Francisco. Ben, a retired army colonel, arranged for them to stay in accommodation for ex-servicemen, and sharing the driving with his wife, followed an itinerary which allowed them to see the major art collections on the route. Their visit to Cleveland also included time to see the Playhouse Theater production of *Winter Journey* by Clifford Odets, a play in which Alec had appeared at the South Essex Technical College in 1956. In Chicago they visited the Art Institute and Alec got himself lost in the Public Library (reputed to be the largest library building in the world), while in a St Louis gallery Cornelius was delighted to discover a Caravaggio they had not seen before. After staying in an old frontier fort near Boulder City they took the ferry across the Colorado River into Arizona, marvelled at the Grand Canyon, and began crossing the desert on the way to Southern California. They were fascinated to see such large cacti flourishing in this arid waste, so much so that when they halted for a 'comfort stop' Alec tried to examine one at close quarters. The spines seemed

to sense his presence and leant towards him; some got themselves embedded in his hand. They were quite easy to shake off, but everyone was a little worried: what if they were poisonous? Further on they came across a diner, apparently in the middle of nowhere, with a single truck parked outside, and went in for a drink. The bar-tender reassured them: there was no danger – it was the way the plant propagated itself. By-passing Las Vegas they continued into California and camped in the Joshua National Park, surrounded by exotic palms and tall grasses. There were more cacti here too, but this time Alec gave them a wide berth. Soon afterwards they completed the last stage of their three-week trek and reached San Francisco.

Cornelius's next exhibition at the Adonis Gallery opened in March 2000. It showed just how much the light and landscape of East Anglia had permeated his work. Several of the paintings are on a large scale and demonstrate the luminous effects he had been experimenting with.



12 – 6 Chris, Johnny and Jim, 2000. Oil on canvas, 112 x 127 cm.

There is a sense of grandeur in many of the designs, as if his long study of mural painting and his vivid recall of the Byzantine mosaics he had seen had coalesced at last to produce a hybrid technique where shimmering surfaces and carefully considered colour relations unify statuesque figures and landscape settings, far horizons and foreground detail. In conception some of these pictures are probably the nearest Cornelius ever got to the breadth and scope of the great fresco cycles he so admired, even though none of his was painted on a wall or formed part of a unified decorative scheme. One of the largest and most ambitious is *Chris, Johnny and Jim* (2000) [12 – 6].