The Body and the Light

Rupert Bunny and the Queer History of the Grimwade Collection

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Speculative Nuances

"The song becomes the painting, the painting becomes reality."
- Zsigmond Justh

In Paris, on a cold February night in 1888, a costume party held at a residence in the Boulevard du Temple is in full swing.[1] Amidst the swirl of desire and debauchery, a guest arrives at the party. A tall, blonde-haired boy in his mid-twenties. As he moves through the throng of drunks and the powdered muses of the *demi-monde*, all eyes turn towards this mysterious guest. He is dressed as an angel, his body sheathed in a semi-transparent white voile. Among the guests that night is Zsigmond Justh, a young, wealthy, and notably homosexual writer, who later wrote of this angel "He looked splendid, prevailing over all the guests." On that chilly February evening in fin-de-siècle Paris, Justh described the Australian painter Rupert Bunny. Within this scene, one of the many forgotten parties of *fin-de-Siecle* Paris, Bunny appears more like a fictive player in one of his paintings. Whilst this scene tells us about the world Bunny mixed in during his Paris days, it also raises the central enigma of his character and the unspoken questions of his history.

An enigmatic and paradoxical quality has always existed at the heart of Rupert Bunny's work. His work was operatic, forceful and theatrical. Yet, continually throughout his life, he was described as self-effacing and intensely private.[2] It is this distinct space between Bunny's sprawling scenes and his reserved nature that allows his oeuvre and history to be re-evaluated today, considering the unspoken aspects of his identity. As Deborah Edward's notes in *Rupert Bunny: Artist In Paris* (2009), "there

[1] This is based on diary entries from the diary of Zsigmond Justh, kindly provided to me by Catherine Edwards.
[2] Colette Reddin, *Rupert Bunny Himself* (Melbourne: Independent, 1987) 32.

exists a series of ‘speculative nuances” in Bunny’s life, where, despite being married to his former model Jean Morel for forty years, Bunny had many close male companions and relationships that can be understood today as being Queer.[3] To designate some strict label when it comes to Bunny’s sexuality is not the intention of this research. Rather, when conducting a queer reading, embracing ambiguities allow for a new-found understanding of fluidities and social prerogatives that enabled unique relationships to occur. As Deborah Edward notes, if we are to consider the era's most prominent homosexual men Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust “liaisons with and love of women do not exclude homosexuality.”[4]

Living in Paris during the end of the nineteenth century, Bunny was at the centre of a period where perceptions of gender and sexuality were shifting. It was during this time, through the familiar figures of Proust, Wilde, and Montesquieu that we saw the image of the ‘modern homosexual male’ emerge, where their homosexuality was not viewed merely as a sexual disturbance, but as a social and aesthetic identity.[5] Yet, closely aligned to the formation of Queer identity in the nineteenth century was the burgeoning of increased hostility, born from societal scandals and increased social purity movements.[6] Just as our contemporary associations of Queerness were formulated during the late nineteenth century, so too were the pervasive social hatreds that stultified queer existence in the twentieth century.

The two works of Rupert Bunny in the Grimwade Collection will form the basis for an initial Queer reading of Bunny’s oeuvre. Bunny’s *Mother and Child* (c.1910) and *Sketch for a Scene in the Botanic Gardens* (1932) are small, intimate paintings, seemingly divorced from the common mythological preoccupations of Bunny’s oeuvre. These works exemplify the fascinations of Bunny’s mid to late period and are indicative of his treatment of the human figure and their relationship to space. Painted in the years

[3] Deborah Edwards, *Rupert Bunny: Artist in Paris* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2009) 23.
[4] Ibid, 23.
[5] Catherine Lord, et al. *Art & Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 2019) 53.
[6] Jeffrey Weeks. “‘Sins and Diseases: Some Notes on Homosexuality in the Nineteenth Century.” *History Workshop, no. 1* (1976): 213. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288046.

following Bunny's return to Australia, Sketch for *Scene in Botanical Gardens VIII* (c.1933) is emblematic of Bunny's renegotiation with an Australian subject matter in the final decades of his life.[7] In addition, *Mother and Child* (1910), painted when Bunny was living in London, shows Bunny's skill of intimate portraiture. Though the works might not appear immediately 'queer,' this essay will argue that these two works in the Grimwade collection connect to broader societal conceptions of Queerness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

No sufficient research has examined Bunny's queer connections. It might seem unusual to explore aspects of Queerness in such works, especially when they seem devoid of common classical imagery that might make for a clearer path for a traditional Queer reading; one is a verdant coda painted in the final years of his life. The other is a mid-career society portrait of a mother and child – both of whose identities are unknown. Yet, these works are crucial to furthering the Grimwade collection, as it show that within the relatively conservative collection, there are secret histories of Queerness. This research doesn't pretend to be comprehensive in its focus. Instead, I hope that this paper can provide an initial framework for how we might view queer themes in Bunny's work. Through Bunny's enduring subjects of landscape and human form – the body and the light – his work lives on, inspiring new conversations about his brilliantly discursive life and work.

[7] David Thomas, *Rupert Bunny* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1970) 96.

Bunny's Women

The Queer Art of the Female Realm

Figure One. Rupert Bunny, *Mother and Child*
1910
Oil on composition board
Grimwade Collection, The University of Melbourne

A critic, reviewing an exhibition of Bunny's work for the Sydney Morning Herald in 1911, wrote that his paintings of women "express a remorsefulness, an absence of passion, a peaceful remoteness from the 'sturm and drang' of modern life."[8] Whilst this review appears vaguely patronising in its misogynistic characterisation of the 'absent' woman, it demonstrates that Bunny's ability to capture the female realm has been a continual strength throughout his career. Unlike many nineteenth-century male artists whose engagement with the female realm seemed dominant and oppressive, Bunny's

[8] Thomas, *Rupert Bunny*, 66.

portraits of women are strong and independent. They are characterised by a forward posture, a dominant, a look of knowing and assuredness in the eyes of the subjects.

We see these qualities in Bunny's *Mother and Child*, where the painting harbours a mix of power, grace and the immediacy of a domestic moment. From the carapace of the silk garb, an image of a mother and child emerges. Bunny is aware of the duality between rest and assertiveness, in the the gentle curl of the woman's hand, as well as the relaxed yet dominant focus of the subject's eyes. *Mother and Child* captures the essence of Bunny's stylistic forway in the 1910s, where, following his marriage to Jean Morel in 1902, he turned away from large-scale mythological works and instead embraced elegant domestic scenes.[9]

The codes of this stylistic adventure into the domestic world can be observed in Bunny's *Portrait of the Artist Wife* (c.1914), a penultimate ode to the gentle scenes of home. In this casual painting, Jean Morel is painted face on. Her gaze is fixed firmly outwards, her arms are interlinked, resting on the edge of the table. There is something transitory, fleeting, and intensely personal about this painting, as though Rupert Bunny glanced up from eating a slice of toast, and was greeted with the image of his wife at the breakfast table.

A similar feeling is evinced in *Mother and Child*. A sensation of casualness, where the quality of the abandoned sun-hat, flung from the child's head or the ghostly flower induces a feeling that this was dashed off hastily in the moments following an afternoon promenade. Such innocuous details achieve a sense of repose in the painting, where the messages of rest and embrace are connoted through an unhurried or unworried construction. As analysis reveals, the work was not laboured under with an under-drawing but completed alla-prima.[10] There is a sense of trust in these works, where the eye never feels predacious; there never feels a sense of perversion. Rather, it is the natural quality of Bunny's observations that makes the work feel real. In this way,

[9] David Thomas, *The Life and Art of Rupert Bunny: A Catalogue Ressonais* (Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2017) 79.
[10] Robyn Slogett, et al. "Rupert Bunny: Structure and Surface" *AICCM Bulletin 19* (1993): 14. doi:10.1179/bac.1993.19.1-2.002.

the female realm also becomes a queer realm, where the confines of late 19th-century patriarchy are abandoned for the acceptance of the female space.

Why is it that some paintings of women completed by male artists seem to escape the dilemma of the male gaze? In *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision,* Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall observe that the Western hierarchy of Gender was predicated on the contrary gendered roles where "men look [and] woman are observed."[11] Like Bunny, there was a continual variance in Degas' depictions of women, where the issue of gaze and the power of observation is malleable across his works, and we see this opposition between 'the watcher and the observed' renegotiated. Writing on Degas' pastel monotype *Women in Front of a Cafe* (1887), Hollis Clayson argues that the ambiguity of this work has been falsely seen as a means by which Degas locates an "innovative form for commodified women. "[12] However it is the very obscurity of the female form that elides a true and positive representation, where Degas' absent portrayal results in a case where 'ambiguity [enables] fixity."[13] Pollock and Clayson's argument of ambiguity as central to the oppression of the female form, as opposed to the clarity of truth raises a further layer to Bunny's engagement with the female realm, where the perspicuity of the body and consciousness of the subject allows for a true, less predacious capturing of form.

The painting of women and female spaces becomes a queer act where the usual barriers of heterosexual desire are eroded and instead, an exchange of experiences and associations can occur. To better understand the Queer process of painting women, it helps to examine the analogous figure of John Singer Sargent. The iconic painting *Portrait of Madame X* (c.1883), captures the young socialite Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau, the wife of a prominent banker. The common dialogue surrounding the work picks up on the seemingly bizarre tone of the painting — a certain ghost-like quality that makes it appear unnatural and strange. We must however confront the assertion

[11] Griselda Pollock, et al, *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*. (California: Pandora, 1992) 106.
[12] Ibid, 66.
[13] Ibid, 68.

that the work only appears strange because the history of Western art seldom showed women in this way. As Sidlauskas astutely notes, “Sargent not only painted a women who had already painted herself, he also posed her although she was accustomed to choosing her own carefully calibrated positions for social display.”[14] What Sidlauskas identifies is the fundamental dynamic between the queer realm of trust in a painting and an understanding of the continual social modelling understood in a woman's life. But what further connects Bunny and John Singer Sargent is their lived experience of artists who, if not overtly homosexual, moved in social circles that defied the sex-segregated and hetero-normative standards of the nineteenth century.

A question continually arises when viewing this work as to who the subjects are and the nature of the painting's creation first is that the work isn’t a direct commission, but a genre work collated from sketches produced by Bunny, possibly of the maid and her child, who worked in the artist's home in 1904.[15] It had been two years earlier in 1902 that Bunny and Jean moved to London, marrying on the 1st March 1902 and settling in their home at 1 Langham Chambers, Portland Place.[16] This marked a productive period in Bunny’s work, where he refocused his brush on portraits and family scenes. Thus, it is fitting that this work, a graceful ode to motherhood aligned with the interests of Bunny during this period. Attached to the mystery of the subject is also the suggestion that the painting was never completed by Rupert Bunny, but rather his wife, Jean Morel.[17] This theory, as proposed by the art historian Laurence Course raises an interesting dilemma that forces us to reevaluate the working relationship between Bunny and his wife.[18] Whilst primarily known as Bunny’s model, Jean Morel was also a talented painter who trained in France. Morel first exhibited her work in 1884 at the Société des Artiste and later at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.[19]

[14] Susan, Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s ‘Madame X.’” *American Art 15, no. 3* (2001): 11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109402.
[15] Sloggett, “Structure and Surface,” 22.
[16] Thomas, *The Life and Art of Rupert Bunny*, 110.
[17] Sloggett, “Structure and Surface,” 20.
[18] This assertion is based on notes and research papers held in the State Library of Victoria, and is referenced by Robyn Sloggett in her paper Structure and Surface (see 7).
[19] Thomas, *The Life and Art of Rupert Bunny*, 79.

Based on Course's research notes and spoken records, it seems Morel played a more dominant role than just the artist's wife, assisting in large-scale mythological scenes. Whilst it is difficult to determine the validity of Morel's involvement with this painting, it does open the work to a more nuanced relationship between artist and muse.

In my view, the work can be seen as a portrait *personne anonyme*; a portrait of somebody, but no one in particular. Echoing the meagre scholarship available on this work, I agree that it is not likely a commissioned portrait, and instead an amalgam of sketches Bunny made of women, with the subject bearing familial resemblance to his wife Jean Morel. In some ways, we can view the work as a mythological piece, where the mother and child are not real people, but talismanic of love and connection.

There are several factors about the work that also gives clues as to the nature of its creation. I believe that this work was completed in the Summer of 1909 -1910 when Rupert Bunny stayed at the Villa Lilli at St Georges De Didonne, a popular resort town in Royan frequented by the Belle Epoque.[20] Among the paintings produced over that Summer, Bunny continually returned to images of mothers and children. Resplendent in summer garments similar to those in *Mother and Child,* a common motif runs throughout the paintings in the Royan series — the red rose, which is also located in the painting in the Grimwade Collection.

Mother and Child is remarkably similar to several works produced in the Royan Series. For example, *Under The Trees* (1910) shows a relaxed beach scene, where in the foreground, a mother tends to a toddler as she chases after a red ball. Other works in the Royan series, such as *Le Bel Après-Midi, Royan* (c.1908) reconstitutes the mother and child motif in an outdoor scene. The most striking example of the red rose appearing again is in *Last Fine Days, Royan* (c. 1908). Held in the collection of the New Castle Gallery, the painting shows an outdoor scene of various holidaying men and women reclining on the shoreline. Emerging from this scene is a single woman, who gazes out

[20] Thomas, *Rupert Bunny*, 58.

at the audience. Emerging from the silk of her bosom is a red rose, the same rose clutched by the child in the work in the Grimwade collection.

There are several facts about the work that substantiate the theory of its creation, or inception, emerging from the Summer spent in Royan. The most obvious being the summer garments worn by the subjects, as well as the common subject matter of the mother and child that appears in several of Bunny's other works during this period. In addition, technical imaging of the work shows that very little underdrawing took place, suggesting that the work was completed largely alla prima. The matter of identity falls away, where the subject is not just one person, but a combined figure based on various sketches Bunny created. The painting, with its languid attentiveness, evokes that curious feeling of de ja vu – the resemblance of the woman, the child to someone, but not one in particular.

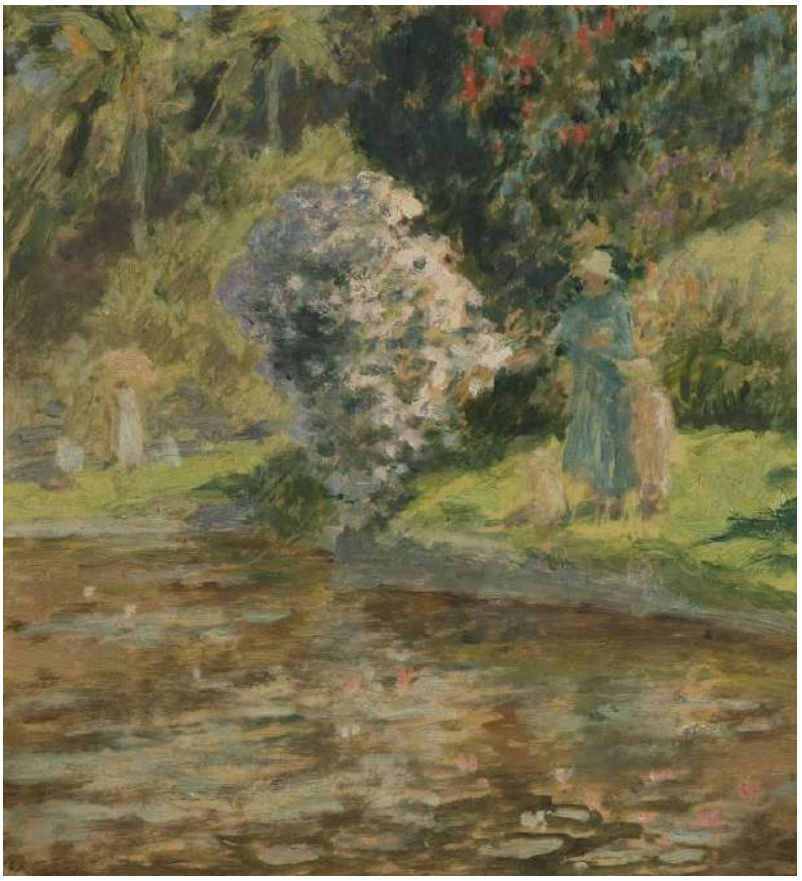

Figure Two. Rupert Bunny, *Sketch for Scene in Botanical Gardens VIII*
1932—33
Oil on Cardboard
The Grimwade Collection, The University of Melbourne

In 1932, after nearly half a century abroad, Rupert Bunny returned home to Australia. Having lost his wife and on the verge of financial ruin, Bunny held a silent optimism that his return could mark a successful third act. This silent hope was evinced in a letter written to his sister Hilda before his arrival, where Bunny wrote "There is a chance for me out there, now that they acknowledge me as their best artist."[21] Yet despite Bunny's confidence, the work produced during the last two decades of his life was largely maligned. It seemed that his halcyon days in Paris were behind him, and now he was

[21] Thomas, *Rupert Bunny,* 96.

forced to confront an Australian subject matter. It was during this period that Bunny produced *Sketch for A Scene in the Botanical Gardens, (c1932)*.

Rupert Bunny's 'Sketch for a Scene' (1932)is a painting of renegotiation. Whilst it might appear as a typical post-impressionist scene, with the common associations of the theatrical garden, the summer light and the familiar figure of a mother and child reflected in the murky pond — we are actively observing Bunny processing the world before him, each stroke serving as a line in a broader dialogue of return. As Daryl Lindsay noted, speaking of a series of French landscape sketches completed in the 1920s, "Small as they are, these little pictures, so unconscious of any school of thought, so personal and individual in approach and treatment, are not merely sketches. Each in its way, in composition, colour and sense of scale is completely satisfying and has all the content of his larger work."[22] Lindsay's reflections on the work identify the mesmerising quality of the painting, whereby in some way, this small work harbours the history of Bunny's previous fascinations and stylistic forays — each brush stroke an ode to everything that came before.

The relationship between body and nature, where the painted interpretation of the natural world is disturbed by human presence, corrupts the singular 'passive' narrative of the landscape, instilling it with associations, meanings and new desires. To understand how Bunny's landscape works might be read as queer, we can use a framework proposed in the study of Queer Ecologies First proposed by sociologist Catriona Mortimer Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Queer Ecologies studies the intersection of nature and sexuality, understanding how the environment has shaped narratives of homonormativity, homophobia and how the sexual practices have influenced human engagement with the environment.[23] We must in some way try to understand not only Bunny's singular impulse for painting this work, but the societal associations of the scene he presents, how the landscape has been influenced by

[22] Ibid, 84.

[23] Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) 10.

sexuality, and how the scenes of nature impacted sexuality. Though it was completed in the 1930s, we can trace Bunny's impulse for landscapes back to the nineteenth century, when the architectural codes of his paintings predicated on bodies in nature emerged during his travels with Zsigmond Justh in Hungary, first travelling as a guest of Zsigmond Justh in the summer 1893, where he stayed on the Justh family estate Pusztaszenttornya.[24] For Justh and Bunny, young homosexual men, the landscape presented a world of freedom and curation, where the ability to exist unbridled by the expectations of 19th-century homophobia would have been essential. Yet, as part of a queer ecological reading, Bunny's planting of women in the landscape is an act of separation. Thus, we see a 'push and pull' effect where the implication of the body in the landscape is an act of appealing to society, a vanner of propriety that conceals the taboos and mores that nature allows, that in nature can be seen as *natural.*

The impulse of creation born from detachment is pervasive across Bunny's work. As David Thomas notes, "A characteristic feature of Bunny's landscapes is an awareness of man and his civilising ordering influence," detailing how the act of dominance of stylisation is one of Bunny's most enduring forms of detachment.[25] His paintings have never been entirely real, and harbour a central humorous abstraction, which extends over into a self-created reality. The looseness of Bunny's work creates a bouncing movement, a musical quality. The bloated refinement of how paint is placed on canvas. The chalky lines, the slightly unfocused eyes of Bunny's brush synthesises to a glittering gestalt. Surprisingly, it is in landscapes absent of bodies that we see the struggle for dominance and detachment. In 1922, Rupert Bunny took residence in a country house in Sevres, France. It was in this environment he returned to the landscape for the first time since the turn of the century. The time spent in the French countryside provided an environment for which Bunny could renegotiate with the landscape. In some ways, refocusing his eye on the light was the first step towards Bunny's late style and his eventual return home to Australia.

[24] Thomas, *The Life and Art of Rupert Bunny*, 89.
[25] Thomas, *Rupert Bunny,* 82.

Landscape painting is never a passive act of rendering especially when the body is involved. As David Bell notes in his essay "Queernatureculture," contained within *Queer Ecologies*, "The very idea of nature itself is not natural — nature is cultural," indicating a process for viewing paintings where, if nature is not natural, neither are paintings of nature.[26] When viewing Bunny's *Sketch For A Scene in the Botanic Gardens* we begin to see how nature and culture collide through the visual architecture of bodies imposing on nature. The scene in this painting is not a natural world; this is a park, where a mother and child clad in silk and cotton stand before a man-made pond. Just like the very concept of 'nature,' it immediately becomes clear that the concept of landscape painting of the nineteenth century has never been concerned with a sense of purity in the landscape, but rather the concerns of the culture that idolises it. When considering Bell's concept of the unnatural, or the queer ecological concept of the 'nature/culture divide,' we might wonder what a natural scene would look like. Perhaps this unburdened landscape might coalesce with the unclothed body — the unsheathed male body. Central to the dichotomy of Queer landscapes is the problem of the "naturalness of sex, but also the publicness of nature," where these public spaces, hostile in their openness, inadvertently become zones of queer desire.[27] This picturesque scene of a mother and child in the day could by nightfall become a popular beat, showing the duality of space, the multiplicity of popular culture, and the subversive implications of homosexual sex. If we consider the queer history of Melbourne, the late nineteenth century saw the development of a visible ‘ ‘homosocial male urban subculture’ in Melbourne.[28] Moreover, the attention of the public to cruising zones and beats had increased following the emergence of reporting about homosexual acts being performed in these areas. Writing in *Kamp Melbourne of the 1920 and '30s: Trade, Queans and Inverts* (2017), Wayne Murdoch notes this sudden visibility of the gay male subculture was "evidenced by complaints to the police regarding homosexual meeting

[26] Mortimer-Sandilands, *Queer Ecologies*, 143.
[27] Ibid, 143.
[28] Wayne Murdoch, *Kamp Melbourne of the 1920's and '30s: Trade, Queans and Inverts* (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) 10.

places and/or beats," and the early 1920s, "the tabloid press was openly reporting police arrests."[29] When considering the public hostility surrounding Queer identities in Melbourne in the 1920s and 30s, Bunny's work takes on a new meaning. It seems to me, upon an initial viewing, so saccharin in its polished representation of polite society. Whilst it is easy to indulge the fantasy of Bunny reading about such reports in the tabloid press, this subversive history of the painting proves that behind these quaint scenes exists some strand of the world Bunny knew in Paris. Just as the subjects of the painting stare into a murky pond and are greeted with their reflection, Bunny sees some part of his own history reflected in the tales of Melbourne's burgeoning *homo-socia,* and their exploits. In 2016, Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens featured the interactive and immersive performance piece Ecosexual Bathhouse by the Perth-based collective Pony Express. Cultivating an intersection between "scenography and iconography of a gay bathhouse," the work considered ecosexuality in the context of increasingly mainstream queer identities.[30] The location seemed a fitting venue, especially considering its history. As I write this section, it has become clear to me how little scholarship has been paid to questions of queerness in landscape painting, particularly historical works. Reflecting on the importance of Queer Ecologies, Greta Gaaard notes that "Heterocentralism charges queer sexuality with being "against nature," where in some way, landscape painting becomes stained with a brush of a culture — a heterosexual culture.[31] What can be said of queer narratives in such works? Certainly, the body plays an essential role.

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[29] Ibid, 10.
[30] Pony Express, "Ecosexual Bathhouse." *CSPA Quarterly, no. 17* (2017): 14 https://www.jstor.org/stable/90012821.
[31] Greta Gaard, "Green, Pink, and Lavender: Banishing Ecophobia through Queer Ecologies, Review of Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Eds." *Ethics and the Environment 16, no. 2* (2011): 117 https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.16.2.115.

Conclusion

Languid nymphs and portraits of society dames. Misty beaches, golden mornings. Operatic tableaus and muscled gods. These are the fictive players and associations in the discursive oeuvre of Rupert Bunny. Living in Paris for nearly fifty years, Bunny spent his career trying to fasten his vision to the surf and swell of changing society trends. Yet, what has not been considered is the queer legacy of his oeuvre. By focusing on two works in the Grimwade collection, this research has argued that the fascinations, practices and modes of Bunny's work can be read as Queer. Regarding his painting *Mother and Child* (1910) I argued that the work can be read as queer through its embrace of the female realm, where the usual codes of nineteenth-century sex-segregated society were abandoned for images arresting in their realness. Furthermore, when considering *Sketch for a Scene in the Botanic Gardens* (1932) I applied a framework adopted from Queer Ecological theory. By considering the *nature/culture* divide of the park as an evocative of cultural dominance, Bunny's quaint image of a park becomes a subversive talisman to longing.

There are many avenues yet to be considered. This research acts as a 'first step' of sorts in approaching Bunny from a queer perspective, and I hope that I can continue further research, particularly in regards to Bunny's various relationships and the homo-social patterns of Paris in the nineteenth century.

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