

4 SAINTS IN 3 ACTS - A SNAPSHOT OF THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE 20 OCTOBER 2017 – 11 FEBRUARY 2018

Press release: 7 August 2017

The Photographers' Gallery presents *4 Saints in 3 Acts - A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde*. It is the first exhibition worldwide to focus on the photographic dimensions of the ground-breaking American modernist opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*. With a libretto by **Gertrude Stein** and a score by **Virgil Thomson**, it premièred at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut (to mark the opening of Pablo Picasso's first solo exhibition in America), and subsequently transferred to Broadway, as the first opera to open there, on 20th February 1934.

Defying the form and content of traditional opera, bringing together some of the leading names in performance, design and photography and featuring an all-African American cast, *Four Saints* came to epitomise a unique experimental moment and was considered a seminal work of the trans-Atlantic American avant-garde.

Photography played a central role in the productions' development, creative process and documentation and this exhibition brings together over 80 photographs, from cast portraits to stage and behind-the-scenes shots and includes previously unseen work from such leading photographers as **Lee Miller**, **Carl Van Vechten**, **George Platt Lynes** and **Thérèse Bonney**. The production further boasted choreography by Frederick Ashton and strikingly innovative cellophane stage designs from surrealist artist Florine Stettheimer and reflected a complex interdisciplinary intersection of white and black, queer and straight, avant-garde and mainstream subcultures.

A crucial element of the success of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was the ground-breaking employment of an all-African American cast, recruited from the choirs and nightclubs of Harlem and coordinated by choir director Eva Jessye to perform Stein's demanding text. The portraits of Jessye and several cast members by Miller and Van Vechten in particular offer unique glimpses of a largely unknown community of Harlem-based classical music performers. They afford insights into the importance of the African American contribution to the opera's popular success. A number of the cast, for example, then went on to

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star in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, which was inspired by the original *Four Saints in Three Acts* production.

Curated by Patricia Allmer and John Sears, this new exhibition, and accompanying publication, *4 Saints in 3 Acts - A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde* (pub. Manchester University Press and The Photographers' Gallery), captures the multitude of aesthetic and political dimensions of this significant avant-garde work, through the lively impulses of photography at play during this time. Alongside rare, unseen and intriguing photographic works by major American photographers of the 1930s, there will also be a range of other materials and ephemera on display that explore the uniquely collaborative aspects of the production and highlight the opera's pivotal role in fusing several important international dimensions of American cultural modernity.

4 Saints in 3 Acts - A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde opens at The Photographers' Gallery on 20 October 2017 alongside *Instant Stories: Wim Wender's Polaroids*, which brings together the unseen and unpublished Polaroid work of Oscar-nominated filmmaker Wim Wenders (b.1945, Germany).

-Ends-

Press information:

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Notes for Editors:

Patricia Allmer is a leading scholar of surrealism. Her books include *Lee Miller: Photography, Surrealism, and Beyond* (MUP, 2016), *René Magritte: Beyond Painting* (MUP, 2009), and edited books such as *Intersections: Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism* (MUP, 2016), and her major curatorial projects include *Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs* (The Photographers' Gallery, 2014; Prestel), and *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009; Prestel). She is Senior Lecturer in art history at the University of Edinburgh.

John Sears is a freelance writer and curator specializing in modern English and American literature and art. His books include *Stephen King's Gothic* (University of Wales Press, 2011) and *Reading George Szirtes* (Bloodaxe Books, 2008). He co-curated and co-edited *Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs* (The Photographers' Gallery, 2014; Prestel).

The Photographers' Gallery

The Photographers' Gallery opened in 1971 in Great Newport Street, London, as the UK's first independent gallery devoted to photography. It was the first public gallery in the UK to exhibit many key names in international photography, including Juergen Teller, Robert Capa, Sebastião Salgado and Andreas Gursky. The Gallery has also been instrumental in establishing contemporary British photographers, including Martin Parr and Corinne Day. In 2009, the Gallery moved to 16 – 18 Ramillies Street in Soho, the first stage in its plan to create a 21st century home for photography. Following an eighteen months long redevelopment project, the Gallery reopened to the public in 2012. The success of The Photographers' Gallery over the past four decades has helped to establish photography as a recognised art form, introducing new audiences to photography and championing its place at the heart of visual culture.

4 Saints in 3 Acts - A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde publication

4 Saints in 3 Acts - A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde is accompanied by a publication from Manchester University Press. Edited by the curators and featuring their introduction and essay contributions (on photography and literature, respectively) alongside reproductions of the exhibited photographs and ephemera with several additional images, the book includes a Foreword by Anna Dannemann of The Photographers' Gallery, and essays by leading international academics exploring various dimensions of the opera's historical and cultural significance.

Visitor Information

Opening times: Mon – Sat, 10:00 - 18:00; Thu, 10:00 - 20:00; Sun, 11:00 - 18:00

Admission: free until noon (Mon - Sun) and then £4 / £2.5 concessions

Address: 16-18 Ramillies Street, London W1F 7LW

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Image 1
Lee Miller
Bruce Howard as St Theresa II in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, c. 1933
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Image 2
White Studio, Photograph of stage set for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1934.
© Archives/Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art



Image 3
White Studio, Photograph of stage set for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1934.
© Archives/Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art



Image 4
George Platt Lynes, Dancers from *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1934.
Courtesy of The Kinsey Institute
© George Platt Lynes Estate



Image 5
Lee Miller
Edward Matthews as St Ignatius, *Four Saints in Three Acts*,
New York Studio, New York, c. 1933.
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Image 6
Scene from the theatrical production *Four Saints in Three Acts*
at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1934.
Photo by White Studio
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