



THE ART OF SOCIAL CLIMBING

SOCIETY What happens at a party of A-list lesbians? Stephanie Theobald introduces the exclusive world of the lesbian art elite – the inspiration for her new novel, *A Partial Indulgence*

I'm not the obvious candidate to write a novel about the art world. One Saturday night in the mid-90s I found myself at a house party thrown by one of the 'A-Lesbians'. I'd learned about the 'A-Lesbians' from my New Zealand friend, Wendy, who used to gripe on about them every time we met up for yet another grubby Saturday night at the Candy Bar. This particular 'A-Lesbian' was an heiress. She produced movies with Rose Troche and was a known collector of art.

Dorothy Berwin's West London mansion was filled that night almost exclusively with women, including the lesbian Channel 4 big cheese of the time, Jackie Lawrence, the Guardian caricaturist, Nicola Jennings, and a formidable Vita Sackville West look-alike who produced the Vanessa Feltz show. The fizzy wine we were drinking was real champagne served from glass flutes (as opposed to cava in plastic cups), guests were seated elegantly on sofas (as opposed to cross-legged on the floor) and there wasn't a single kd lang poster in sight.

I took a morsel of sushi from a platter proffered by a waiter, sat down on one of the settees and fired up a joint. Nobody

seemed to mind about the spliff. It was only when I flicked some ash into a handy nearby ashtray that someone pointed out that the 'ashtray' was, in fact, part of Dorothy's new holocaust installation art piece.

By 2004, in a weird twist of fate that illustrates the saying that you should watch what you wish for, I found myself working as society editor of British Harper's Bazaar with 'A-list' parties coming out of my ears. I started out covering things like dinners at Claridges, where I'd watch Sam Taylor-Wood do her party trick of turning her napkin into a chicken, or I'd borrow Saffron Burrows' lip gloss and dare the cocky straight men to put it on.

One day, I was sent to New York to cover Diane Von Furstenberg's Christmas party, only I missed it because I'd been distracted by a bacchanal down the street. Knock me down with a feather if Dorothy Berwin hadn't gone and moved into a massive TriBeCa loft and was now a big noise in the New York art world. The 'A' parties I was going to now were either hetero or gayboy-heavy, so going to one thrown by a rich dyke couple (Dorothy had found her soul sister: an heiress art consultant with her own gallery) was an extra treat.

The scene when I arrived was very

Invasion of the big-haired bisexuals
Stephanie schmoozes with Saffron Burrows

Great Gatsby-meets-*The Well Of Loneliness*. There were displays of lilies and parrot tulips (the Bette Porter-style girlfriend, Dominique Lévy, had recently told the New York Times that 'we both only like white flowers'). Guests (a lot of artists and collectors) lounged on furniture made by Jean Prouvé and Marc Newson and rooms were crammed with artworks by Cindy Sherman, Takashi Murakami and Tim Noble and Sue Webster.

British neon artists Tim and Sue are a rum pair. I remember watching Tim press a burning cigarette stub into the naked skin of his arm at one Serpentine summer party. 'Look!' he said, his face stretching into a gargoyle grimace. 'I'm a member of the cinder club!'

It reminded me of a New York art film I'd had a brief part in, in the late 90s: *The Anita Pallenburg Story* by Laura Cottingham and Leslie Singer. The film is set in the 1960s and focuses on the Rolling Stones. The Stones are played by lesbian artists and the underlying joke is that while 60s rock stars revered artists like Andy Warhol, the artists of our day are all desperate to be like rock stars and behave accordingly.

Keith Richards was played by one of



Over in Britain, the dyke art brigade might not yet be a mafia but it is a growing force

my favourite artists who also happens to be a lesbian, Nicole Eisenman. It was apt casting because Nicole was addicted to smack at the time. Thanks to a stay at the Betty Ford Clinic she's off the stuff now ('It was entirely worth being a drug addict to get to go there') but her work remains orgiastic, druggy, perverse, and seething with a mad energy that ridicules both popular and dyke culture. I find her more naturally 'shocking' than Tim Noble although Tim's girlfriend and artistic collaborator, Sue, is interesting. Sue has that cute androgynous look, is famous for her carousing abilities and her flexi-sexual behaviour. When bored at an art opening she will grab one of her female cohorts – fashion designer and DJ Pam Hogg or owner of east-side film club Today Is Boring, Tree Carr – and give them a tonguing for the benefit of the paparazzi.

Still, I knew I'd been to too many parties when champagne started to smell like vomit. By 2005, the art world had become truly decadent in the original sense of an inexorable decay that is both horrible and fascinating and I knew that it was time to start the novel.

I've called it *A Partial Indulgence* and it stars a toff art dealer, Charles Frederick

de Vere, who starts off as a charismatic bon vivant but is gradually destroyed by luxury which, by YBA days, has become oppressive and even deadly. Other cast members include Carmen, the Latina chambermaid from Claridges who reinvents herself as a gallery hot-shot and Cosima, the half-feral aristocrat artist whose heroine is Medusa.

Cosima is a gifted though unrecognised artist partly because her artistic vision is at odds with a world whose strings are pulled by men – gay and straight. As 1970s lesbian artist, Harmony Hammond writes in her 1984 book, *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art, and the Martial Arts*, when beauty and female power get combined in myth, the result is usually called, 'a monster, a vampire, a witch, a lesbian, a mad woman, Medusa, a woman gone wild.'

Laura Cottingham, who now lectures on art at Columbia University, says, 'There are still very few lesbian art dealers and lesbian art collectors, so that lesbians face steep obstacles in the commercial arena as a result'.

Still, Cottingham points out that Catherine Opie, known for her portraits of S/M, transgendered and drag friends, was honoured with a retrospective at the

Guggenheim earlier this year. Meanwhile, over in Britain, while the dyke art brigade might not yet be a mafia as such, it is a growing force with figures like the only lesbian YBA-er Scottish artist Anya Gallacio shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2003; Sally Tallant, head of programmes at London's Serpentine Gallery and her girlfriend, Tamsin Dillon, director of Platform for Art; Sarah Weir, head of art and culture strategy for the Olympic Delivery Authority; Erin Manns, director of exhibitions at Victoria Miro and Lisa Panting and Malin Stadl, directors of Hollybush Gardens art gallery in Bethnal Green.

Meanwhile, over in the art mainstream, insiders are wondering nervously how the landscape will re-shape itself after the economic melt-down. My feeling is that artists (who have historically thrived on adversity) will fare better than the bankers. Nicole Eisenman points out that for true artists, money doesn't enter into it: 'My work is the place in my life where I can be truest to myself. When I'm not making images, I'm a shaky little leaf.'

• *A Partial Indulgence* by Stephanie Theobald is published in April by Sceptre (£12.99). www.stephanietheobald.co.uk

It's all so Bazaar
Harpers' hardworking society editor with singer Roisin Murphy (L), Betty Gets It by Nicole Eisenman (R)

PHOTOS: BEN ELWES FOR HARPERS BAZAAR