The pioneering author and feminist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is the inspiration for this exhibition which brings to the fore a body of works, some unknown, by over 80 artists from the last 150 years. It seeks to show how Woolf’s feminist perspectives on identity, domesticity and landscape, have resonated with artists across time through their shared experience. How they too have sought to record the restrictions of gender, and in doing so to suggest alternative ways for women to be.

It was in Cambridge in the 1920s that Woolf first gave the lectures in which she urged female students of Newnham and Girton colleges to establish a ‘room of one’s own.’ Her trailblazing spirit – towards financial independence and creative and personal freedom – infuses this exhibition. With the aim of showing how Woolf’s writing is embedded within the works and histories of a lineage of women artists, the exhibition acknowledges and extols a wider creative community whose art rallies to and resonates with Woolf’s cry to rectify the ‘lop-sidedness of history.’

The original manuscript of ‘a room of one’s own’ which was given to the Fitzwilliam Museum by Woolf’s widower Leonard, only a few weeks after her suicide, will be on display and digitised for the first time. Also exhibited are variety of personal possessions, from letters to those who had close relationships with Woolf including her sister Vanessa Bell and Vita Sackville-West, to the teapot Virginia Woolf used every day that was decorated by her sister. Woolf herself visited Cambridge often, particularly during periods of recuperation and had strong Cambridge connections. Her father was a student of Trinity Hall and her brothers were students at Trinity College, as were her husband Leonard Woolf and brother-in-law Clive Bell.
But it was her blissful childhood summers spent at Talland House, St Ives while her mother was alive, that came to be where she identified happiness and her inspiration to write for the duration of her life. The house, and the ocean and landscape beyond are repeatedly used in her writing, which regularly depicts fundamental connections between the private self and subconscious, the role of domesticity and the home, and landscape and public life. The exhibition is structured into these themes.

THE SELF IN PUBLIC; presents contrasting ways in which women artists have chosen to portray themselves in public through self-portraits and portraits of friends, family and heroes. If historically women have been the object of the male gaze, this section challenges the assumptions we make from appearance and shows how women represent themselves on their own terms, using their appearance as a statement to address issues around gender, identity and equality.

THE SELF IN PRIVATE; reminds us of the world beyond appearance. Surrealism is shown as liberation for women to express the intangible. In all of her novels, Virginia Woolf consistently explored the relationship between her character’s physical bodies and their subconscious selves, between rationality and reason, and between desire and dissent. Surrealist paintings, automatic drawings, feminist collages and other abstract renditions of the subconscious are on display by artists who present an internal self at odds with the public expectations of their time.
Virginia Woolf: an exhibition inspired by her writings
2 October – 9 December 2018 | Fitzwilliam Museum

STILL LIFE, THE HOME AND ‘A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN’;
Woolf frequently identified the house as a symbol of Victorian repression, of patriarchal conventions and conformity – all of which she wanted to escape. This section depicts the multiple possibilities of the room – from isolation and separation to its reappropriation and the freedom and independence that this brings. The views from windows on display are both havens of imaginations and domestic prisons. Also shown are textiles made for the Omega Workshops and Bloomsbury Group ceramics.

LANDSCAPE AND PLACE; for Woolf, landscape and wilderness became metaphors for freedom and empowerment beyond the constraints of her times, where women could be free from social, financial and educational constraints. Artists in this section – from Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell to Laura Knight and Ithell Colquhoun, or more recently Mária Bartuszová and Nancy Holt, amongst many others – have explored and experimented with depictions of landscapes, portraying them variously as wild and open, safe and sheltering, or imbued with personal histories.

The exhibition is free and runs from 2 October – 9 December 2018, it is curated by Laura Smith and has been organised in association with Tate St Ives and Pallant House Gallery. An accompanying catalogue is on sale in the Fitzwilliam Museum shop.

-Ends-

Notes to editors:
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About the Fitzwilliam Museum
Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam’s collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission
OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

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