Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide
a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Sarah Newman

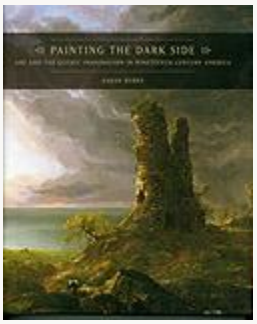
book review of

Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America by Sarah Burns

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 4, no. 1 (Spring 2005)

Citation: Sarah Newman, book review of *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* by Sarah Burns, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2005), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring05/painting-the-dark-side-art-and-gothic-imagination-in-nineteenth-century-america-by-sarah-burns.

Published by: Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art



Sarah Burns
Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America
Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004
326 pp.; 104 b/w ills; 15 color ills; index; $39.95 (cloth)
ISBN 0-520-23821-4

Sarah Burns's new book, *Painting the Dark Side*, aims to overturn what we think we know about nineteenth-century American art. Arguing that previous histories of the era have given too much weight to the sunny side of the story, to the grand and nationalistic landscapes of the Hudson River School and the heroic realist canvases of artists such as Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, she offers a corrective. Burns's nineteenth century is pervaded by the gothic, which she defines as the "art of haunting, using the term as a container for a constellation of themes and moods: horror, fear, mystery, strangeness, fantasy, perversion, monstrosity, insanity" (p. xix). Beyond the question of style, she understands the gothic to be a mode of pictorial vision that critiques "the Enlightenment vision of the rational American Republic as a place of liberty, balance, harmony, and progress" (p. xix). Consequently, her narrative is one that takes previously disconnected "oddballs" (as she refers to them), such as David Gilmour Blythe, William Rimmer, and Elihu Vedder, and considers them together. Burns also revisits iconic works by such well-known and well-discussed artists as Thomas Cole and Eakins, about which it might appear there is nothing left to say, and pulls them, too, down into the depths of the shadows she sees plaguing the era.

Of course much has already been written on the reputed dark side of many of these artists, especially on Albert Pinkham Ryder and the various oddballs in her account, as well as, quite richly, on Eakins.[1] But never has the gothic been discussed as a distinct theme in American art or been subjected to this type of coherent methodological treatment, as it has been in relation to the American and European literary traditions. Edgar Allan Poe is the frequently invoked ghost of Burns's study, and she summons his presence both as an artistic influence and as a reminder of how fully the culture of gloom infused the era. Her effort to create a cohesive, if not comprehensive, account is particularly heroic because so many of her chosen artists resist being classified in any way, let alone by shared ideals, artistic forbearers, or subject matter. Instead, Burns connects them by pervasive anxieties about the big issues of the day: industrial modernity and urbanism, women's rights, and most centrally, slavery.

The book is arranged into a series of eight case-study chapters on individual artists, each of which revolves around one or two key works. Burns groups her chapters into three broad thematic sections. The first, which includes "Gloom and Doom" on Cole, and "The Underground Man" on Blythe, centers on fears about nature and the underside of the modern city. The second section, encompassing "The Shrouded Past" on Washington Allston, "The Deepest Dark" on John Quidor, and "The Shadow's Curse" on Rimmer, deals with slavery and issues of race; and the third, which includes "Mental Monsters" on Vedder, "Corrosive Sight" on Eakins, and "Dirty Pictures" on Ryder, focuses on more personal concerns and pathologies. By taking a broad swath across the span of a hundred years, and by tackling such large issues, Burns tells a refreshingly grand story, one that is propelled by the formation of identity in response to a modernizing nation.

For Burns, the gothic is an outgrowth of the repressed fears and anxieties of those in power, rather than a means of expression of the disenfranchised, as it has largely been interpreted in the British literary tradition.[2] Even so, her artists are all outsiders in their own ways, plagued by the threats of financial insecurity, encroachments by blacks and women, and their own mental demons, and are thus unable to rest comfortably in the status attendant to their class, race, and sex. In arguing for the singularity, and outsider status, of each of her white, male subjects, Burns speaks to the pervasiveness of the anxiety of the "ruling class" as a whole at this time. By implication, almost everyone could plausibly think of him or herself as an outsider, everyone could consider himself wounded. She proposes that a guilty conscience and a tortured mind are a part of, and in some ways, fundamental to, modern consciousness.

Apart from its re-telling of the history of nineteenth-century American painting, *Painting the Dark Side* also offers a fairly radical methodological twist. Because of the decided strangeness of her chosen works—the ambiguous subject matter and the evocations of myth and danger that pervade them—Burns sees them as resisting the standard art historical tools, primarily social history, most often used to unlock the works of the period. The fundamental premise behind this assumption contains some flaws, as I shall discuss more fully in a moment, but the result is an ingenious hybrid approach which merges the biographical with the social. Burns succeeds in constructing individual histories in which the large events and forces of the era bear down upon the artists' minds and emerge—transformed, mediated, and eerie—on the canvas. Burns has always been interested in questions of identity, in the intersection between the personal, the social, and the artistic. But while her *Inventing the Modern Artist* (1999) probed the construction of artistic personae at the end of the nineteenth century, here she takes her biographical approach farther, and plumbs, speculatively, the depths of the artistic process. At its best, *Painting the Dark Side* weaves together a vast array of influences and allusions, bringing together economic, political and cultural events with the facts of the artist's life and mind as manifested in drawings, writings, and family histories. From this material, Burns makes speculative leaps, producing an often brilliant account of the motivation behind the making of a work of art.

It makes perfect sense, for instance, that Thomas Cole's anxieties about the future of the republic were wrapped up with those concerning his own place in it. We have been made aware of Cole's moralizing hand-wringing about the state of America's progress through the writings of art historians Alan Wallach and Angela Miller, but few scholars have linked these

tendencies to his constant familial and financial insecurity.[3] Burns, on the other hand, sees Cole's landscapes as "doubly haunted, by history and by the shadows of his own doubt and despair" (p. 18). Discussing his painterly fascination with ruins and ruminations on time and decay, she ties his crushing personal obligations to his horror of instability and societal disintegration. This horror extended to thoughts about his life's work, which he felt to be a Promethean labor that would surely be forgotten by a materialistic and amoral world. Burns's combining of social and biographical approaches offers a new understanding of Cole and his work, but it also slyly revises our notion of the American landscape painting tradition. She writes into its history the artist's personal anxieties, which were intertwined with his fears about the new chapter of civilization. While Burns doesn't debunk Cole's position as the founder of the national school of landscape, she plants within that tradition the seed of gothic displacement. What was once peripheral is made central.

In similar fashion, Burns discusses Eakins's relentless pursuit of the nude figure in his work as the product, in part, of an unhealthy and pornographic fetishization of the body. She places his personal pathologies at the heart of his obsessively scrutinizing artistic methods, which are here carried to their logical, if far-reaching, conclusions. Using *The Gross Clinic* (1875) as her starting point, Burns implicates Eakins's work, medical practice, and photography as part of the rationalist, "dissecting" ethos of the era. She concludes that the painting, which in its time evoked such grisly practices as grave-robbing and vivisection, combined the imagery of butchery with art. Its uneasy mixture of scientific rationality and uncontrollable pain were a clouded reflection of Eakins's own personality, which swung from the methodically rational to the wildly adolescent. "Much like the blood welling up out of the gashed thigh of the patient in *The Gross Clinic*, Eakins in art and life overflowed and aggressively pushed against established limits" (p. 219). As with her interpretation of Cole, Burns invokes the "dark side" to enhance our understanding of how these works were perceived in their own time, but also of the motivation that led to their production.

Burns is at her best when discussing the artists' reckonings with slavery, which she calls "the keystone of [her] gothic arch" (p. xix). She writes that "the institution of slavery and, more generally, racial oppression and violence have haunted and disfigured history and society alike," and her account bubbles with the fears and shame that such racism visited upon the country (p. xviii). In her chapters on Allston, Quidor, and Rimmer, she draws on the theoretical work of Toni Morrison and Teresa Goddu to unravel the connotations of "darkness" in American culture, "a continuum of blackness bearing all the connotations of evil, danger, and mystery" as well as a significant segment of the population (p. 102). Her chapter on Allston's *Belshazzar's Feast* draws upon the artist's personal history as a southern slaveholder, descriptions of contemporary slave rebellions, and formal analysis to masterfully account for the fantastically failed work of art.

Allston was never able to complete his grand-scale painting, a depiction of the prophet Daniel telling the evil ruler of Babylon of his kingdom's imminent destruction. He hid the canvas from view for twenty-six years as he systematically destroyed and reworked it; when he died, it was still unfinished. Burns interprets *Belshazzar's Feast* as a tableau of displaced guilt: "The subject served as an arena for staging, at some safe distance, a fearful drama of guilt and impending catastrophe that in terms any more transparent would be intolerably threatening" (p. 97). The core of Allston's guilt, according to Burns, was his slave owner past,

which provided the funding (the "blood money") for his artistic career, and that he was compelled to keep hidden from his circle of northern abolitionist friends and colleagues. Allston went to great lengths to distance himself from his birthplace, refusing even to visit his family. Burns links this distancing to his repression of the "savagery" and "sensuality" he associated with slaves, as well as to his exaggeratedly purified and idealized formal style. The motif of concealment is crucial for understanding Allston and *Belshazzar's Feast*, in Burns's view. His dishonorable personal history, as well as "his overwhelming fear of revenge and retribution for holding an entire race in bondage," had analogies in the painting's portrayal of the imminent end of a decadent society, and lay partly behind his obsessive need to hide it from view (p. 79). But as the years wore on, and the work remained unfinished, the locus of guilt, and the painting's symbolism, shifted, encompassing Allston's own shame about the painting's lack of completion. Burns expertly peels apart the picture's overlapping layers of guilt and signification. What results is a close reading of a life driven by fear of exposure, and of a painting that was its sublimated and refracted product. She makes palpable the weight of the work that Allston made, and unmade, and to which he became a self-imposed and self-described slave.

Most often, and most especially in the Allston chapter, the power of Burns's carefully accumulated evidence is commanding. Occasionally, however, although the vast range of material she assembles illuminates her chosen works and period, it does not hang together as a cohesive argument. One example is her discussion of Vedder's individual turn of mind and his use of drugs as an inspiration for his imagery. Such threads eventually become lost amongst her later, somewhat tangentially connected focus on the artist's anxiety about femininity and the role of the "new woman." All of these elements help us better understand the motivation behind Vedder's visionary scenes of Medusa and the desert perhaps, but they are not necessarily linked, and Burns doesn't argue persuasively that they are.

This is never a serious problem with the book as a whole, because her discussions on nearly every topic are compelling. A slightly more critical issue is that while Burns offers convincing case studies for the gothic impulse in the nineteenth century, she never quite reconciles what larger story she is trying to tell. It is not clear if she perceives the gothic as an overlooked theme in paintings both major and minor, a subversive form of art that existed in opposition to the dominant modes of representation, or a combination of both. I suspect that Burns would agree with the latter, although on occasion she argues one position against the other as a straw man. In her chapter on Blythe's images of urban dystopia, she writes, "That such an identity could evolve just when artists of the Hudson River school were celebrating the uncorrupted pastoral countryside and virgin wilderness is significant. Blythe, nonconformist and maverick, fashioned a dark complement and alternative to that bright vision" (p. 74). This analysis comes just after her persuasive account of Cole's rural, and more "mainstream," gothic, and so is less convincing for it.

Perhaps the book's biggest flaw stems from the fact that, although Burns argues for the ultimate enigmatic irreducibility of each of her images, she remains in some ways tied to a model of art that can be, in her words, "decoded" (p. 135). Partly as a result of her prioritizing of iconography above all other aspects of the paintings she examines, she seems unable to embrace fully the implications of her argument: the inherent mediation of all images, and not just the gothic ones that are obviously draped in mystery. To this end, Burns resists

allowing her often beautifully constructed language to evoke such ambiguity, feeling the need to spell out each work's particular enigma. An example is her discussion of Rimmer's *Flight and Pursuit*, (1872), which she distinguishes from two of his drawings. She claims that unlike the two previous works, "*Flight and Pursuit* is highly ambiguous in its narrative and symbolism. We can decode the first two down to the last detail.... There is no mystery, no space for uncertainty: they mean what they mean, and their symbolism is perfectly legible. *Flight and Pursuit*, by contrast, is anything but clear. Its story is a knot that stubbornly resists attempts to pick it apart" (p. 135). Through her writing, Burns consistently searches out the ambiguity of each image, nailing down its location if not its precise meaning. About Vedder, she writes that his works "are not *literally* about the destabilization of power relations between men and women, any more than they are direct, unmediated statements of personal resentment.... The path to Vedder's [imagery] was circuitous.... Myth permitted the utterance of things that were otherwise inexpressible...." (p. 185). By this point in the book, Burns's readers are quite willing to follow her rich and evocative argument, but the author herself, with her empirical art-historical bent, seems a bit uncomfortable with any untethered analysis. The result is that she occasionally overstates the case for ambiguity.

Yet, these criticisms are small in the context of a book of often astounding reach and originality. At its best, *Painting the Dark Side* enlightens its readers not only about its artists, paintings, and period, but also about the intricate workings of the artistic process, an avenue largely unexplored in contemporary histories. Burns's readings, often speculative, are always illuminating. They cause us to look again at the often unexamined, cherished myths that remain deeply engrained in American culture.

Sarah Newman
University of California, Berkeley
smn[at]uclink4.berkeley.edu

Notes

[1] On Eakins in particular, see Jennifer Doyle, "Sex, Scandal, and Thomas Eakins's Gross Clinic," *Representations* 68 (Fall, 1999), 1-33; Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); David M. Lubin, "The Agnew Clinic," in *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Eric Rosenberg, "Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* as History Painting," in *Redefining American History Painting*, ed. Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 174-92.

[2] Burns distinguishes her American gothic from the English gothic literary tradition initiated by Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliff, and "Monk" Lewis.

[3] See Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in William H. Truettner, Alan Wallach, and Christine Stansell, ed., *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, exh. cat., National Museum of American Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), and Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).