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book review of

Mapping Degas: Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917) by Roberta Crisci-Richardson

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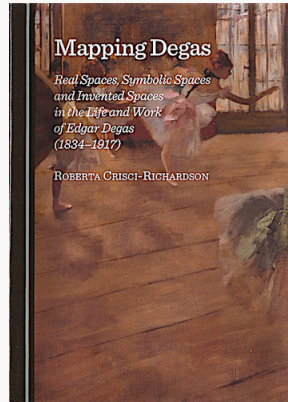
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Roberta Crisci-Richardson,
Mapping Degas: Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917).
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
384 pp.; 50 b&w illustrations; bibliography; index.
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Roberta Crisci-Richardson's recent biography of Edgar Degas (1834–1917) is based on her 2009 dissertation from the University of Melbourne as well as numerous articles related to the artist that she has published in a variety of journals. As the title suggests, *Mapping Degas: Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917)* proposes a “geographic and biographic approach to mapping Degas’s life and work,” investigating “the whereabouts, both actual and symbolic, of the artist” (184). The author maintains that her “resulting interpretation of Degas is that he was neither a classicist artist nor a conservative bourgeois, but an avant-garde artist of progressive ideals looking not to the Southern and classical models but to the art of Northern Europe, especially that of the [Dutch] Golden Age” (184). In supporting this basic premise, Crisci-Richardson organizes the book into geographic categories, including chapters on Italy and Normandy, but focusing on different aspects of Paris throughout most of the text.

Following an Introduction acknowledging the extensive number of existing publications on Degas, Crisci-Richardson delves into the artist's early life in Paris. Much of this is a well-researched compilation of current Degas literature, as is the following chapter on Italy. It is there, though, that the author introduces a recurring theme about the role of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art in shaping Degas's aesthetic. During the three years that the artist spent traveling and studying in Italy (1856–59), Crisci-Richardson notes that he developed “an appreciation of color as well as of a variety of artistic techniques, gained in the company of Gustave Moreau.[1] The second non-Italian thing he would bring to Paris was a taste for such artists as Rembrandt, Velázquez, Rubens, and most of all, Anthony van Dyck” (71). For Crisci-Richardson, this study of northern baroque masters refutes the accepted art historical understanding of Degas: “Against the vision of a Degas classicist, to which the history of art has accustomed us, it appears that it is this look northward, and the reference to the painters of the Northern Baroque that run through the painting of Degas from his beginnings, informing his avant-gardism with a distinctive symbolic geography” (80).

Chapter three continues the thread of northern baroque art with a discussion of Degas's early history paintings, and in particular with an examination of his attitude towards women. Crisci-Richardson notes that many of these images from the late 1850 and early 1860s focus on female subjects, ranging from the women in *The Young Spartans Exercising* (1860–62) to *Semiramis Building Babylon* (1860–62) and *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* (1863–65); these last two paintings deal with “exceptional and unmarried women who “demonstrate Degas's view of the irreconcilable nature of marriage and artistic vocation” (105). As a hypothesis, this offers a welcome correction to the persistently repeated notion of Degas as a misogynist, but unfortunately, the evidence that would make a strong, coherent case is not presented. Rather, the author becomes mired in lengthy explanations of politics at the courts of Louis XIV and King Ninon that would have been better placed in a note. As is often the case in the book, this was an opportunity to present a well-reasoned argument that was missed because of a lack of editing.

Following the chapter on history painting is a brief chapter on “Normandism,” a term that is used to describe the art that Degas created either in Normandy or about the themes of horses, beach scenes, and landscapes that reflected Anglophilia. The author points to the historical confluence of French and English cultures in this region, defining “Degas's Normandy as the space of a modern, progressive and positivist attitude, marking Degas's republicanism of the 1860s” (114). Horse-racing, for example, is perceived as an English sport, and “painting the racetrack and the attendant Anglomania not only expressed the modern in art, both in subject matter and technique; it also expressed Degas and Manet's liberal aspirations and their view of England as a society of free citizens, and, by implication, as a land free from institutional control over artistic life, which seemed to offer artists greater opportunities than Paris” (124). What is troubling about this approach to biography is the conflation of geography with broad social, political, and aesthetic issues that are often unrelated to specific places. For example, Degas's frequent trips to Normandy are a well documented part of his life, but that does not mean that his time there was specifically related either to Anglophilia, his political thinking, or his personal concerns about the status of artists' lives in contemporary Paris. No doubt he thought about all of these concerns regardless of where he was at any given time. As an aid to understanding how a particular place affected an artist, geographical mapping can offer important and insightful analysis when it is conducted with precision and clarity.

The next chapter, on Degas's iconography, shifts to an exploration of the artist's strategy for establishing his reputation by following the example set by Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) in his *Iconographie*, a collection of etched portraits that featured artists and collectors as well as other luminaries from the time.^[2] Crisci-Richardson points out that Degas referenced the *Iconographie* in his 1858–60 notebook when he copied van Dyck's etching of the painter Orazio Gentileschi, and there was also a 1759 copy of van Dyck's publication available at the Bibliothèque Impériale in Paris (143–4). In this thoughtful analysis of Degas's abundant portraits from the 1860s, the author convincingly demonstrates the possibility that the artist's reliance on portraits of his friends, colleagues, and even celebrities who were personally unknown to him, formed the basis of a strategy for establishing his own reputation as a painter. None of these paintings were commissioned, but were instead initiated by Degas as a method of establishing his own image within artistic circles in Paris. Notably, he most often painted family and friends, with a particular preference for musical

activities in domestic settings. According to Crisci-Richardson, “Degas’s voluntary portraiture in the 1860s was an autobiographical strategy to achieve visibility in the contemporary art world. . . . Degas’s early portraits and history paintings had been the receptacle of his preoccupation with such issues concerning the modern artist as marriage, social class and professional status. These concerns are also behind Degas’s iconography, a gallery of portraits built along the painter’s urban itineraries of social and artistic life” (160).

This leads directly to chapter six, “Taking the City,” which promises a discussion of “Degas’s takeover of the city, his appropriation of such spaces of Parisian avant-garde practice as the Louvre, the cafés and the rue Laffitte, and how, through the Impressionist installations of 1874–1886, private spaces were appropriated and re-invented by Degas and the other artists of the avant-garde as interior-like exhibition spaces” (182). In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, Crisci-Richardson reiterates another of her fundamental assertions, that the “preferred image of Degas in the literature is that of the son of a wealthy banker and the conservative young man who chose . . . to remain occupied well into the 1860s with Ingres, classical references recalled from his Italian tour, and history paintings, until he met Manet, the painter of modern life” (182). That this is not so is also repeated many times throughout the book. It must be pointed out that while the subject of Manet’s influence on Degas may be an open question, it has long been accepted that Degas’s family was not wealthy—and in fact, was barely making ends meet by the 1870s; Crisci-Richardson’s use of this ill-considered sentence construction occurs frequently in her text, resulting in the unfortunate association of a legitimate art historical question with a claim that is no longer relevant. Towards the end of chapter six is a detailed explication of the Impressionist exhibitions from 1874–86. Degas’s role as an organizer of the shows and his apparently unstinting efforts to encourage independent artists to participate reveals him to be a charming and sociable entrepreneur. Likewise, the design of the exhibitions as what might be described as quasi-residential spaces receives considerable attention in this section.

Chapter seven deals with the interior spaces of the Opéra Le Peletier, dance classes, and the figure of the ballerina.^[3] Crisci-Richardson revisits the theme of Dutch and Flemish Golden Age painting as an important influence in the images of dance classes where the multiplicity of reflections from mirrors and windows creates a kind of baroque illusionism. She also opens a discussion of the ballerina as representative of the artist in the context of avant-garde modernism. “The body/machine is a metaphor of art making itself, which is for Degas both an act of memory and reiteration, where his quoting of the Old Masters usefully replaces the uses of imagination and practice as bodily performance, because painters and sculptors work with their body” (240). Chapter eight follows up on this interest in the body, this time in terms of Degas’s concern, sometimes verging on obsession, with healthy food and activities.

Next up is a chapter entitled “Degas’s Avant-garde,” which begins with a biographical summary of the events surrounding the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, but concludes with a lengthy section on collaboration among artists who were exploring the medium of printmaking. Degas’s partnerships in this arena are well documented in much of the extant literature, but Crisci-Richardson investigates the possibility of anarchist political viewpoints in his prints. In dealing with the collaboration between Degas and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), the author cites Michel Melot’s comments that no one would surmise

from the visual evidence alone that Pissarro's prints of rural workers or vagabonds were overtly political; likewise, the same might be said about Degas's prints of urban workers such as laundresses or milliners or prostitutes (282). The artist's support of the Commune tends to support this reading, but the development of a clearer, more detailed argument would be welcome in the future.

The subject of Degas's political opinions, irrevocably joined with his highly visible anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfusard attitudes at the end of the century, is discussed in chapter ten. How does this square with the possibility of Degas as a "proto-anarchist" or socialist discussed in chapter nine? The facts as we know them are contradictory. The artist's entire oeuvre is focused primarily on the urban workers of Paris, whether they are cafe singers or ballets *rats*; and he has many long-standing friendships with Jewish artists, writers, musicians, and businessmen over the course of a least four decades. Yet in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, Degas seems to become an anti-Semitic, anti-Protestant, nationalistic reactionary. To explain this apparent contradiction, Crisci-Richardson presents a detailed historical overview of French social trends in the 1890s. France had been humiliated by the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and nationalism was widely embraced by the French public. Refugees (many of them Jews) were arriving in droves from Eastern Europe, presumably working for lower wages than native French workers. Social unrest in the form of strikes and uprisings in rural mining areas and factories underscored the plight of French workers as well as the need for regulation of unfettered capitalism. It is in the context of anti-capitalist politics that Crisci-Richardson positions Degas's anti-Semitism, claiming that it was precisely his support for French workers that led to his bigotry (297). She also suggests that there was another dimension to Degas's very public anti-Semitic posture; that although his political views were offensively genuine, he was also using this socially unacceptable stance to combat the invasion of the media into his private life. She cites the example of the Irish journalist George Moore who described Degas's negative and sarcastic attitude when asked for an interview (299). That Degas would choose to ensure his privacy by acting like a public buffoon is undoubtedly possible, but ultimately, it does not explain his choice of anti-Semitism as the tool for accomplishing such an objective. As with so much of this book, there are intriguing ideas suggested, but they need a clearer and fuller development.

Crisci-Richardson's biography of Edgar Degas reflects many of the virtues and challenges of contemporary art historical scholarship. The book is full of exhaustive documentation that offers the reader a compendium of information about both Degas, and the social and political context of Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century; it also provides copious notes and a bibliography that would be an ideal starting place for anyone who is seriously interested in the time period or the artist. Tucked into this structure is some thoughtful insight and analysis. However, *Mapping Degas: Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces and Invented Spaces in the Life and Work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917)* is a book that needed much firmer direction in terms of organization, language, and grammar. Caught between a decreasing number of academic presses and a desire to share new scholarship with other interested professionals, art historians (especially those just starting their careers) are often left with few options for publication. In the world where the choice often seems to be either internet self-publishing or vanity presses, the art historical community is ill served by a lack of conscientious publishers.

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Notes

[1] Gustave Moreau (1826–98) was traveling in Italy from early 1858 until September 1859. He and Degas traveled together to Pisa and Siena during this time. For a comprehensive biography of Degas, see Henri Loyrette, *Degas: The Man and His Art* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993).

[2] Anthony van Dyck began working on *Iconographia* while living in Anvers between 1627–32. The project began as early as 1631 and continued at least until 1637 when he was living in London. For a detailed discussion of this publication, see The Fitzwilliam Museum website at: <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/vandyck/etcher/printedportraits.html>.

[3] The opera house that many of Degas's paintings depict is not the familiar Opéra Garnier but its predecessor, the Opéra Le Pelletier, which burned in October 1873.