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Susan Waller

book review of

*Model and Supermodel: The Artist's Model in British Art and Culture*  
by Jane Desmarais, Martin Postle, and William Vaughan, eds.

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*Model and Supermodel: The Artist's Model in British Art and Culture*

Jane Desmarais, Martin Postle, and William Vaughan, editors

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006

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The trope of the male artist and female model—particularly the woman who posed for the nude—is a commonplace of modern fiction and art, and has featured prominently in art historical discourse. The model has been constructed both as the beloved muse who inspired masculine genius, and the passive object of the active, scopophilic male gaze, but recent scholarship has begun to suggest alternative approaches. Some scholars have sought to recuperate the model's agency, proposing that the model's role went beyond serving as a compliant still life arranged for the artist's inspection. Others have begun to explore how a change in the familiar gender pattern, the introduction of racial or ethnic difference, or a model's professional experience might inflect the artist/model transaction.<sup>[1]</sup> This volume presents eight essays and two interviews that explore aspects of the artist/model relationship in Britain from the eighteenth century to the present, and broaden this expanding area of scholarship. The collection is an extension of papers presented at two symposia organized in 1999 in conjunction with the exhibition *The Artist's Model from Etty to Spencer*, curated by Martin Postle and William Vaughan, and presented at York City Art Gallery; Kenwood London; and Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham.<sup>[2]</sup> If the exhibition focused primarily on painting, the essays enlarge the frame of reference to include fictional, performative, and photographic aspects of the pose. Although the editors disavow a revisionist impulse, the collection suggests avenues for future exploration.

Martin Postle's "Naked civil servants: the professional life model in British art and society," examines the working experiences of the men and women who made a living posing in teaching academies and in private studios. Drawing from artists' memoirs and letters, he provides rich and detailed information on the nitty-gritty of day-to-day work as a model. Since British institutions—unlike their French and Italian counterparts—relied on female models as early as the late eighteenth century, moral issues emerged early on in public discourse. The women who posed were subject to scrutiny, and Postle documents their relegation to private studios after the middle of the nineteenth century because of public

opposition to their presence in teaching academies. He suggests that their equivocal social position has remained a persistent problem into the twentieth-first century despite efforts to organize associations, such as the Register of Artists' Models, that would foster a professional identity and improve working conditions.

Elizabeth Prettejohn in "The Pre-Raphaelite model" explores the singular studio practice developed by the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who were committed to preserving the likenesses of particular models within their paintings of historical and imaginary subjects. The importance of the personal relationships between these artists and their models has long been noted. Unlike earlier authors, who have often emphasized the intimate, sexual aspects of the exchange, Prettejohn provides a more balanced view by suggesting that the artists' attentiveness to their models' identities may have originated in the social and political climate in the late 1840s, and by focusing on the men who posed. She notes that the fusion of "real models" and "imaginary subjects" in Pre-Raphaelite work has long provoked a mixed response and perceptively uses Freud's notion of the uncanny—the disquieting effect produced by something simultaneously familiar and strange—to explore the discomfort that numerous viewers experience when confronted by this apparent disjunction. Since it is more common within the Western tradition for the model's identity to be subsumed to the requirements of the composition, the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to a contrary practice might, she suggests, help explain why their work is often ignored in art historical discussions of the modernist canon.

Jane Desmarais surveys French and English fictional narratives of artists and models in "The model in the writer's block: the model in fiction from Balzac to du Maurier." Since the artist/model exchange was a popular trope in nineteenth century literature, her accounts are necessarily brief summaries rather than extended analyses.<sup>[3]</sup> She distinguishes between the English preoccupation with the ancient myth of Pygmalion, in which art is transformed into life, and the French Realist tendency to view the model as a modern social figure. This distinction provides the framework for her more developed discussion of George du Maurier's novel, *Trilby*, in which the heroine, Trilby O'Ferrall, is transformed from artist's model to operatic diva by the mesmerist Svengali. Desmarais suggests that the heroine's progress from "working girl" to "beautiful Muse" combines the two dominant narratives to expose the ambiguities of the model's position as passive object and active subject. The novel's ultimate denial of Trilby's agency is typical, Desmarais suggests, of a fundamental conservatism in *fin de siècle* literature and art.

Alison Smith's essay, "Modelling Godiva: the female model as performer in Victorian England," returns to the model's ambiguous position within British culture to argue that although the female models were social outcasts, some were able to leverage their performance on the model stand to craft a public persona, and to capitalize on their celebrity to secure some social mobility. Through a study of the women who performed as Lady Godiva in the popular festival held at Coventry, Smith explores the links between the festival, the artist's studio, *tableaux vivants* restaging familiar contemporary works, and the theatrical performances of *equestriennes*. The women who mobilized the notoriety generated by their performances as Godiva included both theatrical performers, who occasionally posed for well-known artists, and women whose career trajectory took them from the model stand to the stage. Smith's essay demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach,

exploring the links between the theater and the studio, might do much to recover the sense of the model's agency that is missing from many fictional and visual representations.

Reena Suleman's "Still Lives: the art of Edward Linley Sambourne" provides a case study of Sambourne's practice, which entailed substituting photographs for live models in order to sustain a demanding career as an illustrator for *Punch*. Her summary of Sambourne's early career and nineteenth-century journalistic procedures provides a useful contextualization of a profession that—despite the growing interest in the study of visual culture—is not widely familiar. She limits her discussion primarily to the photographs of Sambourne's family and servants, rather than those made from the women he hired to pose nude at the Camera Club.<sup>[4]</sup> The links between the home and the studio, the domestic and the artistic, were surely widespread in the nineteenth century, but have not been carefully investigated: this context might provide the basis for an alternative to the eroticized exchange between artist and model. The photographs Reese includes as illustrations are fascinating and amusing, but for those unfamiliar with Sambourne's *oeuvre*, a sample his drawings for *Punch* would have been illuminating.

Michael Hatt examines the relationship between Henry Scott Tuke and the young boys who posed for the *plein air* paintings he produced on the Cornish coast in "A great sight': Henry Scott Tuke and his models". By focusing on the homosocial exchange, Hatt shifts the artist/model transaction away from the familiar heterosexual interaction. He uses Tuke's engagement with Uranianism—the Victorian term for man-boy love, whether chaste or overtly sexual—to provide a context for the paintings of naked "lads" swimming and boating, which Hatt characterizes as Utopian fantasies of a homosocial idyll played out in the eternal present—a kind of Never-Never Land in the fishing village of Falmouth. While Hatt underlines that the models' youthful purity served as an erotic stimulus, he argues that Tuke, who eschewed professional models, maintained a resolutely avuncular relationship with the local boys who posed for him. Examining Tuke's painted surfaces, he suggests that artist's preoccupation with the nuances of colored light on skin served to sublimate his desire: looking itself became an erotic experience. In the process Hatt also introduces issues of class and race through considerations of the difference between Tuke's middle class background and his models' working class origins and the Anglo-Saxon associations evoked by the models' milk white skin-tones, which signify their innocence.

William Vaughan, in "Overexposed? The model in British figurative art from Sickert to [Lucien] Freud," argues that with the rise of realism in the nineteenth century, the individuality of the model displaced the notion of the model as exemplar that had prevailed within the traditional academic paradigm. He begins with the female model in the work of Walter Richard Sickert, who was influenced by French Realism in general, and Degas in particular, and Stanley Spencer, who preferred to pose intimate associates rather than professional models. The primary concern of the essay, however, is the complicated work and practice of Francis Bacon. Vaughan carefully distinguishes between Bacon's statements, in which artist emphasized that he did not work from the photographs that littered his studio, and the contradictory evidence of his drawings. It isn't unusual for an artist to disavow a reliance on photography, but Vaughan points out that in other ways Bacon's practice was unique: the images he relied on were often commissioned photographs of friends and lovers who presumably would have been available to pose. Bacons' use of

photographs, thus, is shown to be both a means of managing both his lack of training and the intensely intersubjective, but not necessarily sexual, nature of the artist/model transaction.

Catherine Wood, "Paper dolls: the found model in contemporary art" examines recent artists' substitution of photographs and images drawn from consumer culture for live models. She argues that such artists as Julian Opie, Graham Little, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Kirsten Glass, Jun Hasegawa, Gary Hume, Muntean/Rosenblum, Mark Leckey, Ben Judd and Alessandro Raho embrace the pervasive presence of "the image world" to explore the role of glamour, fashion and branding in shaping consciousness. She suggests that any sense of the live model's individuality, as examined in Prettejohn's and Vaughan's essays, is displaced by simulation: the mediated skin of the model masks the models' identities.

The volume concludes with two interviews. Painter Peter Blake talks with Colin Wiggins about his work in the life studio, beginning with his instruction in the 1940s and continuing through recent participation in a weekly open studio. Susannah Gregory, a former model, talks with Jane Desmarais about her experiences posing for life classes, individual artists, and the sculptors working for Madame Tussaud's wax museum. These two conversations bring a first-person perspective to the practice of the pose, and resonate with other recent studies.<sup>[5]</sup>

Since the volume is organized in a chronological sequence and a number of the essays provide thematic surveys rather than narrowly focused case studies, several themes reoccur throughout the collection, including the impact of Realism, the importance of photography, and the equivocal status of the female model. This contributes to the richness of the anthology, so it is disappointing that the limited number of reproductions—40 black and white and 13 color illustrations—don't adequately represent the range of works discussed. Presumably this was a cost issue, but fortunately it detracts only minimally from a collection that presents suggestive new ways to approach a familiar topos.

Susan Waller  
Associate Professor, University of Missouri-Saint Louis  
wallersu[at]umsl.edu

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## Notes

[1] See for example: Dawkins, Heather, *The Nude in French Art and Culture, 1870–1910*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86-114; and Colin Ford, "'Mountain Nymph' and 'Damnèd Villain': Posing for Julia Margaret Cameron," *History of Photography* 27, 2 (Spring 2003), 60–65.

[2] Martin Postle and William Vaughan, *The Artist's Model from Etty to Spencer*. Exh. cat. (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, Ltd., 1999). This exhibition was preceded by Ilaria Bignamini and Martin Postle, *The Artist's Model: it's role in British art from Lely to Etty*. Exh. cat. (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Press, 1991).

[3] For a more extensive discussion of the artist's model in French literature, see Marie Lathers, *Bodies of Art: French literary realism and the artist's model*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

[4] Other aspects of Sambourne's practice were explored in a special issue of *The British Art Journal*, 3, 1 (Autumn 2001). See in particular, Martin Postle, "Hidden Lives: Linley Sambourne and the female model," 20–27, and Reena Suleman, "Out of the ordinary, Linley Sambourne and the amateur model," 28–35.

[5] For a sociological study of the model in contemporary culture, see Sarah R. Phillips, *Modeling Life: art models speak about nudity, sexuality and the creative process*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).