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book review of

Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art by
Charles Harrison

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Charles Harrison *Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 291 pp., 130 b/w ills.; 50 color plates; index. \$45 ISBN 978-0-226-31798-4

The release of a soft cover edition of Charles Harrison's *Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art* provides an opportunity for fresh appraisal as well as consideration of the book's critical reception since its original publication in 2005. And this is a book that deserves renewed attention. With *Painting the Difference*, Harrison seeks to redirect feminist critiques of modern art by rehabilitating the female nude as a necessary, even palliative, motif. Feminist art historians have it wrong for the most part, in his view. Their accounts contend that modernist depictions of the female body never escape cultural assumptions tied to sexual identity. On the contrary, Harrison finds that avant-garde paintings of women can transcend ideology. Like others who have used Clement Greenberg's theory of the avant-garde as a springboard for a historical account of modern art, Harrison seeks to divine the limits of modernism. This is, by necessity, an ambitious undertaking. Though the book's scope is far-reaching—its twelve chapters encompass modernist images of women from the 1860s to the present day—Harrison anchors his argument in nineteenth-century painting. It is in relation to artworks by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt that the thesis put forward in *Painting the Difference* stands or falls.

Harrison makes his case through recourse to formalist analysis. Avant-garde painting, he explains, developed during the nineteenth century under the sway of two formal impulses: the compression of pictorial space and the confounding of the figure-ground distinction. Echoing Greenberg, he argues that these changes alert the viewer to painting's status as representation. Yet, Harrison maintains, these tendencies were not simply a manifestation of Western art's inexorable advance toward pure abstraction; they are a consequence of a self-reflexivity fundamental to modernism. Aggressive compression of perspective is symptomatic of a need to collapse the social, psychic, even somatic bounds between self and other. This, then, accounts for the importance of the female nude in modernist painting. Driven not by a desire for mastery over the "Other," artists such as Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, and even Mark Rothko at times engage women's bodies as catalysts for self-conscious, empathetic encounters. For heterosexual male painters and viewers, representations of a woman's nude body—when depicted frankly, without appeal to artistic conventions that impose aesthetic and emotional

distance—held the greatest potential for empathetic exchange. "I believe that it was first and foremost in pictures of women that artists in the later nineteenth century generally learned and practiced techniques both for the representation of self-consciousness in pictured figures and for the stimulation of self-consciousness in engaged spectators" (36).

This is where he breaks with scholars like Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock: their critiques suggest that male artists' depictions of the female nude can never escape the power imbalance arising from sexual identity. "Though I do not mean to argue against the fact of an unequal distribution of power that sustains Nochlin's analysis, I think it may be shown that the assumptions in question were less secure than she implies, at least insofar as they bore upon the critical development of painting during the period in question" (5). Exploitation, Harrison explains, is not always driving male artists' or viewers' engagement with the female nude. Exceptions to an admittedly prevalent-voyeuristic visual practice exist, and it is the exceptions that matter for the history of modernism. Aesthetic success, in fact, depends upon surmounting dominant stereotypes and overcoming social conventions: "All other things being equal, I would have to acknowledge that a painting that caters unreflectively to voyeurism is likely to be aesthetically deficient" (97). In other words, avant-garde art, by its very definition, refuses to facilitate easy consumption of reassuring social stereotypes, whether about class or gender. What is more, avant-garde painting activates a dynamic exchange between the artist and his model: "The picture plane ... serves as the medium for a critical exchange of self-consciousness across the barriers of both sex and class" (34). To support this thesis, Harrison turns to artworks he takes as exemplary of this aesthetic-emotional transaction. It is at these moments that *Painting the Difference* dazzles: Harrison's sustained and imaginative, if not always ultimately convincing, formal analyses of paintings confirms his commitment to building an argument on the visual evidence rather than on published criticism, statistics, or other documentation. In the end, art stands in judgment of the art historian: "any description of a work of art, however rhetorically elaborate it may become, must in the end be answerable to that work's formal and technical properties as minimally interpreted" (108). Harrison's assertions derive from intense and prolonged visual contemplation. "This is because much of what we need to understand...is already available from the painting itself, where there is a pleasure and immediacy in the learning that is quite unlike the acquisition of statistical information and the acceptance of well-supported historical generalization" (33). At every turn, Harrison's methodological formulation insists on the relevance of pleasure in regarding artworks even as it discounts the value of dry statistics or contemporary criticism. Pleasure in looking, in fact, is in large measure what Harrison seeks to recuperate with *Painting the Difference*. For instance, just because some of Renoir's images of women "do indeed picture the exploitable female as a potential object of consumption," does not prevent others from promoting a very different sort of visual exchange. Paintings like Renoir's *Les parapluies* "allow us to experience in imagination what it is like both to look *and to be looked at* like this" (35). The capacity to elicit this empathetic response in the viewer distinguishes, in Harrison's view, successful avant-garde works from the hackneyed images of their contemporaries.

To effect this empathetic exchange, the viewer must embody a fictional identity as an "imaginary spectator." In other words, along with experiencing the image as a representation, the viewer must also be able to project himself into an imaginary relationship with the figures and space conjured in the painting. Some artworks, through formal as well as thematic strategies, enable the viewer to assume the role of both a real and an imaginary spectator by asserting the presence of an unseen participant whose position might be fictively occupied. A

familiar instance of this occurs in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bérgère*, where the woman behind the counter gazes inquiringly out from the painting as if regarding a patron. Her impassive stare suggests that she is attending to a customer, someone who must occupy the very place in which the viewer stands (though assumption of this fictive identity is confounded for some by the face of a white, mustachioed, and top-hatted man reflected by the mirror behind the bar). Similarly, in *Les parapluies*, Renoir renders "the spectator both an imaginary occupant of the social world described, and an active imaginative agent in its conduct" (30). This experience, Harrison assures his readers, need not devolve into exploitation on the part of a heterosexual male viewer. On the contrary, it can be "edifying irrespective of the sex or gender we [the viewers] may actually occupy, even if we may not all be given quite the same work to do" (35). Here, Harrison makes the perceptual leap upon which his argument unsteadily rests: by looking at certain avant-garde portrayals of women by a handful of male artists, a self-critical viewer can "experience in imagination what it is like to be looked at like this." The problems with this premise are myriad, of course, collapsing as it does the ontological status of a self-conscious viewer with that of a representation of a fictive "woman." No matter how long or attentively a viewer regards *Les parapluies*, the divide between looking and being looked at cannot be surmounted. That *Les parapluies*—with its elegant bourgeois mother attending two charming and beautifully turned-out young daughters, its crush of middle- and upper-class men with umbrellas, and a slightly beleaguered looking, but utterly graceful shop assistant—might permit the "critical exchange of self-consciousness across the barriers of both sex and class" seems strangely naive coming from a scholar who avows that "there is no absolute symmetry between men and women in the powers involved in social life or in representation" (xi). Perhaps this is because *Painting the Difference* is meant to be read not strictly as a work of art history, but also as a personal meditation on representations of the female body.

Self-referential moments surface throughout *Painting the Difference*, and some of Harrison's most ambitious encounters with artworks emphasize the degree to which he seeks to identify with his subject. A particularly illustrative example of this occurs in his discussion of Degas's monotype *Woman Reclining on a Couch*, 1885 (fig. 1). This dark—in passages, even murky—image shows a naked woman lying on her back, her head toward the left side of the image and her feet reaching toward the right and away from the viewer. She is viewed from a position hovering above and behind her right shoulder. Her right arm rests limp along her side, betokening the figure's torpor. The woman's hair obscures her face, though both breasts—remarkably, given the disposition of her torso—are visible. Below them, a soft, rounded belly gives way to a shadowy pubic area and legs bent slightly at the knee and splayed. Her pose, in fact, resembles that of the draped nude in Albrecht Dürer's *Artist Drawing a Nude with a Perspective Device*, 1525, but rendered as if seen from the corner of the table opposite the draftsman, looking down and across the model whose covering has been removed. Degas, ignoring such lessons in Renaissance perspective, compresses the scene dramatically. A bulbous vase hovers at the far left of the composition, suggesting a shallow foreground between the model and edge of the picture plane. Despite the viewer's ability to discern the top of the woman's head and despite the articulation of space between the reclining figure and the viewer, Harrison argues that the imaginary spectator in this work is the woman herself:



Fig. 1, Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas, *Woman Reclining on Her Bed*, c. 1885. Monotype in black on ivory laid paper. The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. [\[larger image\]](#)

"This is a body seen from the virtual position of its own head. And what would it mean for the male spectator to occupy that position? To look down the body of the other as if from with its own imagined self-consciousness? What would it feel like to look like that? At the time when Degas made his monotype it was highly unlikely that it could be seen to *pose* any such question. But it does not follow that it did not" (125).

Consistent with his stated methodology, Harrison contends that the absence of contemporary criticism, or other documentation that might support his interpretation, matters less than the fact that he is able to draw such an interpretation from the work itself. Yet his analysis of *Woman Reclining on a Couch* deviates sufficiently from details plainly observable in the work that one wonders why Harrison felt compelled to proffer this artwork as the linchpin for his extended treatment of Degas, which in turn serves as the literal as well as rhetorical center of his book. Why did Harrison *need* to make this artwork conform to his thesis? Following Harrison's own dictate, I would argue that the answer rests within the work itself. Its emphatic reversal and undressing of Dürer's *Nude with a Perspective Device* proposes another imaginary spectator: the artist, stylus poised, seated at the feet of the model. The view afforded in this case would be rather like the one Harrison claims first prompted him to pursue his study of the female nude in modern art: his sight of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World*.

Harrison acknowledges in the preface as well as the conclusion his book's indebtedness to a 1992 series of artworks by Art & Language, which placed viewers in the position of visually "discovering" or "unveiling" Courbet's *Origin of the World* (xii-xiii, 255). Long associated with Art & Language, a conceptual art collaborative based in the United Kingdom, Harrison documented in a previous publication the group's intervention with Courbet's famous depiction of a woman's nude torso viewed from between her legs. Here, he described his own ambivalence toward the sustained encounter with the painting that Art & Language's process provided. "The studio filled up with large pictures of cunts. For a while, it was these...that claimed autonomy of a kind...This is the autonomy of pornography and of kitsch, or of their complacent convergence. Against the charges such experiments tend to attract, irony offers no very plausible alibi. You just have to work with the shame."^[1] Returning to Courbet's image in *Painting the Difference*, he insists that *Origin of the World* is "an image of the female in full command of her own sexual attributes." It cannot be taken seriously as pornography due to its striking composition and painterly facture. "To view the *Origine du monde* as an object of fantasy is to fail to see it as a painting" (75). Failure? With this language, Harrison suggests that holding the fantasy at bay requires an act of will. In other words, because avant-garde

depictions of the female body are first and foremost paintings can their appeal to fantasy can be muted. This is a familiar saw: "I do not paint women, I paint pictures."

Harrison ultimately wants to recover the pleasure in regarding arresting modernist paintings of women posed in such a way as to maximize their sexual appeal and putative availability. But to do this, he must overcome his own uncertainty about the social and cultural consequences of representing women in this way. In other words, he must demonstrate that feminist art history has it wrong. Matisse's *Odalisque with Red Culottes* (1921) does not presuppose "an imagined man looking with pleasure at a half-naked woman" (188). What prevents the painting from sparking such a fantasy? According to Harrison, the work's rich facture, its bored-seeming model, and its obvious deployment of Orientalist tropes reveal the work's artifice, preventing the viewer from perceiving the half-nude, reclining figure as a sexually available odalisque. "This is not really picture of a slave girl in a harem at all. It is manifestly a setup" (188) Given the tendency of popular pornography to rely on hackneyed "setups" (curious schoolgirl, stern nurse, etc.), Matisse's quotation from the standard repertoire hardly supports Harrison's argument that *Odalisque with Red Culottes* "makes the materials of male fantasy a part of its critically examined content" (189). Curiously, Harrison concludes his argument on the painting's resistance to fantasy by citing Matisse's own defense of his Orientalist reclining women: "I paint odalisques in order to paint the nude. But how is the nude to be painted without being artificial? And also because I know it [the odalisque] exists. I was in Morocco. I saw it" (190). Matisse's ambivalence here—the image is pure fantasy; the image is exact truth—echoes Harrison's own irresolution about the efficacy of his rehabilitation of the female nude as represented in modernist painting.

The placidity with which Harrison's bold arguments regarding the insufficiency of feminist criticism *vis à vis* modernist representations of women have been absorbed in most published commentaries on the book testifies to the quietude of feminist criticism today, at least in the mainstream art journals. Of the reviews in print at the time of this writing, only Peg Zeglin Brand's account offers a sustained critique of Harrison's claims regarding feminist art history. [2] That Harrison expected—perhaps even intended—to provoke a debate about the efficacy of feminist critical practice is certain. "I hope...that the argument I have to offer will be seen as a contribution rather than a counter to the feminist project" (xi). Offering this on the first page of the book, Harrison signals his anticipation of some skepticism regarding his thesis. Provocation, as the Art & Language enterprise has shown, can help to drive an argument, whether visual or verbal. Harrison certainly understands this, and *Painting the Difference* should, in my view, be understood as an extension of or, at the very least, in reference to, the group's conceptual interventions with modern habits of visual consumption. Here, though, the practice under examination is feminist art history as much as it is the experience of looking at modernist depictions of women.

Painting the Difference proceeds from a question with which feminist art historians have been grappling for decades: how does one account for the modernist preoccupation with the nude female body? Harrison finds most existing feminist accounts of the significance of the female nude wanting. Prevailing interpretations of modern painting derive, he explains, from a narrow feminist "litany," rehearsed vacuously by students who, forty years ago, would have just as faithfully parroted the tenets of Greenbergian formalism. The new litany, as Harrison has it, holds that "...painting has had a central part to play in the entrenchment of patriarchy,

specifically through the naturalization of the male gaze. It is no accident that the birth of modernism in painting coincides with the rise of the female nude as a paradigmatic genre, thus not only locating male pleasure in contemplating images of passive womanhood at the center of artistic culture, but serving to connect that pleasure to new forms of freedom associated with the establishment of the bourgeois social order" (248).

Insisting that ideology is *always* in operation, the feminist critiques with which Harrison takes issue assert that Degas's images of bathers are as imbricated in contemporary beliefs about women's sexuality as are Bouguereau's, even if the aesthetic response to these conditions are radically different. Harrison caricatures this position, however, distilling the varied perspectives and methods of feminist art history. In this way, he betrays the fundamental conservatism of his project. Feminist art history, he suggests, demonizes the gaze of the male artist and spectator, thus leveling masculine, heterosexual visibility. According to this analysis, feminist interventions resemble those of visual culture, in which "everything gets to be good of its kind" (257).

In Harrison's account, feminist art historians' critical engagement with avant-garde treatments of the female nude has dampened the triumphalist conception of modernism. Arguing on behalf of the fundamental exceptionalism of modernist art, Harrison finally insists that the ideological pressure operating on culture generally may not be seen as effecting avant-garde practice.

"In Modernist theory the meritorious work of art was by its nature exceptional. It was not simply exceptional in strictly aesthetic terms, whatever they may be; it was exceptional in being modern—or modern in being exceptional.... We are in danger of assuming that once the work of art has been located within its cultural context and embedded within a discourse, the task of discriminating description is over. It may not be. I would argue that it is through the difficult enterprise of description that the limitations on theoretical frameworks are most tellingly exposed" (257).

What Harrison delivers in the end, then, is not so much a critique of modernist treatments of the female body, but a reenactment of this relationship. Like the artists he addresses, Harrison finds in the female body a vehicle for advancing claims about the capacity for modernism to surmount social, cultural, and aesthetic norms. To do this, he makes similar assertions about avant-garde images of women, which likewise transcend contemporary ideologies to serve as reassuring proof of modern artists' fundamental humanity, and their desire for empathetic identification with the other.

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Notes

- [1] Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 137. Katerina Reed-Tsocha notes the relevance of Harrison's earlier writing for *Painting the Difference* in her review of the book in *Art Journal* 67, no. 4, Winter 2008, 123, no. 1.
- [2] Peg Brand, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 2, Spring 2007, 244-46.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas, *Woman Reclining on Her Bed*, c. 1885. Monotype in black on ivory laid paper. The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)