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book review of

Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense by Susan Sidlauskas

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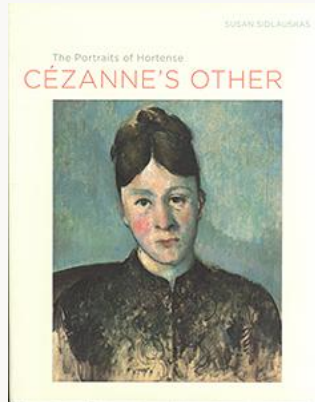
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Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense. Susan Sidlauskas Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2009. 320pp.; 18 color plates; 65 b/w. ills. \$49.95 (cloth) ISBN: 9780520257450

Susan Sidlauskas's fascinating book on Paul Cézanne's portraits of his wife, Hortense Fiquet Cézanne, shares some of the concerns of her previous book, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), including issues of inter-subjectivity, the mutability of identity, and the instability of gender, as well as a remarkable devotion to formal description. In the new book, she sets out to overturn a paradigm of estrangement, dehumanization, and inexpressive abstraction that she finds in most previous interpretations of Cézanne's portraits of his wife, arguing instead for a reciprocity of emotions, touch, and gender between subject and object, between the aptly, and less flatteringly, nicknamed *l'écorché* ("the skinless one") and *la boule* ("the ball"). Although I'm not certain that she completely overturns the model of "depersonalization," I don't think it really matters, because that paradigm was not always the cliché that Linda Nochlin's book jacket blurb sets it up to be.

Admittedly, Fritz Novotny rather reductively found a repugnant aloofness in Cézanne's work as a whole, and Kurt Badt saw his portraits as "sealed masks" attesting to his loneliness. But Meyer Schapiro, whose mid-twentieth-century observation that Cézanne reduced his portrait subjects to still life is quoted by Sidlauskas (94), also claims that such impersonal detachment is not constant, and that other less abstracted portraits have "a more pathetic, responsive humanity." He calls the Philadelphia Museum's *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* (c. 1890-92), "a tender image of ascetic feeling. It is as if he transferred to his wife his own repression and shyness."^[1] Sidlauskas bases much of her argument about inter-subjectivity on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "interworld." Yet at one point she likewise agrees with the French phenomenologist's characterization of the strangeness of Cézanne's people, who he said seem to be "viewed by a creature of another species,"^[2] an assessment she finds confirmed in the Houston Museum of Fine Art's *Madame Cézanne in Blue* (c. 1888-90) (126).

Though Schapiro doesn't particularly mention it in his book on Cézanne, his views of the artist and his portraits were part of a larger social analysis sketched in his earlier, seminal, and more

explicitly Marxist essay on "The Nature of Abstract Art," (1937), in which he sees late nineteenth-century painters as "groping to reconstitute the pervasive human sociability that capitalism had destroyed."^[3] The crisis of the alienated subject, of course, had been theorized in psychoanalytic terms by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, whose concepts of melancholy and alienation have recently been productively applied to analyses of Cézanne's "inhuman" portraits (including one of Fiquet Cézanne) by Young-Paik Chun,^[4] a study briefly mentioned by Sidlauskas. My point is that the paradigm of estrangement in Cézanne's portraits as a whole can be less monolithic and more historically and methodologically interesting than the author's rather inconsistent dismissal of it might indicate. Yet no one has ever looked more closely at the nearly thirty portraits of Fiquet Cézanne.

Sidlauskas recounts the contentious and denigrating reception history of the portraits of Madame Cézanne, critical responses that alluded to her indifference or aloofness, ranging from Roger Fry's misogynistic "sour-looking bitch" to D. H. Lawrence's objectifying "appleyness." Yet the author herself as often as not describes the images of Fiquet Cézanne as opaque, obdurate, impenetrable, mask-like, with claw, paw, or pincer-like hands, the latter designations certainly bringing the non-human to mind. While she may not fully overthrow the topos of Hortense the alien, she richly complicates it with her analyses of the artist's chromatic touch, making her extended reading of the Fiquet- Cézanne portraits more intellectually engaging than previous ones, with the exception of a shorter, but quite complementary study by Tamar Garb.^[5] Published in 2007, Garb's essay appears in Sidlauskas's bibliography and is briefly footnoted, but its arguments are unfortunately never really discussed. What Sidlauskas convincingly establishes is the very ambiguity of images that can suggest alienation through lingering illusionism while simultaneously registering subjective reciprocity with painted marks. It is when we take into consideration the paradoxical aspects of these pictures – as the author frequently does in addressing their emotional projection and withdrawal, their combination of detachment and tactile connection – that her thesis about Cézanne's radical reformulation of modern portraiture, a decisive break with mimesis and interiority that Fiquet Cézanne helped him to construct, makes sense. As an "other" who often became unrecognizable when her husband depicted her afresh with each sitting, she could become "a shifting force against which he could measure his mutating self" (17). As the contemporary Scottish physician Alexander Bain had put it in a book on emotion, the problem was that "no living being can penetrate the consciousness of another" (78). What remained, then, was the "complexus" – a term coined by turn-of-the-century French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot to refer to the instability of human personality – discovered through interpersonal reciprocity. This is the interstitial space between self and non-self that Sidlauskas explores, drawing upon nineteenth-century writings on psychology, neurology, physiology, and philosophy, as well as more recent theories of gender and cognitive psychology (along with the occasional analogy to Bill Viola, Chuck Close, or the Wicked Witch of the West), and her own formidable eye.

The introduction sets up the author's opposition to the idea of Fiquet Cézanne as "inexpressive," opting instead for the notion of the "interworld," in which "the materialized boundary between self and other, cast on a canvas surface" sometimes appears transparent and at other times "impenetrable as a wall" (14). The first chapter on "the counter-muse" traces the often misogynistic reception history of the portraits of Fiquet Cézanne, including the previously mentioned Fry and Lawrence (the latter of whom Garb mines for more haptic sensation and libidinal charge than Sidlauskas does) and the likes of Jack Lindsay on the

"stunned stupidity" of Madame Cézanne's lack of affect. Deploying comparisons with other artists, including Peter Paul Rubens, Edouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, and Edgar Degas, the author argues for the instability of perception as well as identity, a shifting multiplicity of selves (à la William James) generally not ascribed to female subjects in portraiture, but which Fiquet Cézanne is seen to perform. Without necessarily recounting the biography of Paul and Hortense's relationship in depth as Ruth Butler recently has,^[6] Sidlauskas maintains that the long periods they lived apart, as well as the fact that the former cut the latter out of his will, should not be read deterministically into the portraits. Overturning conventional domesticity, the couple maintained a painted "circuit of exchange."

The second chapter on "The Color of Emotion," which reworks an autumn 2004 article in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, reviews nineteenth-century thinking on emotions and color so as to apply them, along with more postmodern theories, in painstaking formal analyses. These often begin with the observation that although the depictions of Fiquet Cézanne "at first" appear impassive, closer inspection reveals that they are not inexpressive at all, and that, in fact, as she observes of the Philadelphia Museum's *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* with her hair down (c. 1890-92): "Cézanne paints his wife's face simultaneously as a mask and as a theater of revelations" (72). The author's exhaustive formal descriptions themselves are revelations. This accords with "the new formalism" in Cézanne studies, another example being Carol Armstrong's *Cézanne in the Studio: Still Life in Watercolors*, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004). Although one may sometimes recall Samuel Johnson's observation that none ever wished *Paradise Lost* longer, and although some fairly rapid name dropping (Paul DeMan, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault within two pages, 90-2) can occasionally seem to substitute for sustained argument, the rigorous formal dissection of colors pulsing on a face ultimately does successfully demonstrate the painter's intense exploration "of intimacy and distance, of knowing and not knowing" (85). Admitting that Cézanne may have misinterpreted his wife's emotions, the author, nonetheless argues that the portraits raise "the possibility of seeing *all* the emotions" (91, 100). Although this reader may not be completely persuaded that illegible emotions can in fact be "replete with expression" (69), I am finally convinced that the fluidity of subjecthood and the dissolution of boundaries between self and other can be conveyed through the mobility of color: "a reciprocity in which the portrait subject commingled with the artist's persona, while being re-projected through paint" (83).

The third chapter on "The Materiality of Vision" draws, as does Garb, upon Richard Shiff's extensive studies of Cézanne so as to apply his thematics of touch more specifically to issues of gender by evoking a return to a time of tactility before the body acquires language.^[7] This brings to mind not only Julia Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic," but also the recent deployment of Luce Irigaray's theories about feminine touching and bodily reciprocity in readings of Cézanne by both Garb and Aruna D'Souza in her recent book on the bathers.^[8] While calling elsewhere upon Irigaray's conceptions of gender difference and sameness, Sidlauskas here instead invokes nineteenth-century psychological and philosophical views about the phenomenon of the "double touch": "the recognition that when the body is touched it is also touching" (110). Inevitably, this brings her to Cézanne's own formidable ambivalence about touch, including Emile Bernard's famous anecdote about "the skinless one's" morbid fear of being touched by human hands, which the latter likened to *grappins*, that is, the multi-pronged grappling hooks used to anchor ships. Paradoxically, late in life the painter wrote his son about having the gardener Vallier massage his sore ribs. A discussion of Cézanne's

depiction of hands in the Fiquet Cézanne series indicates that even as they are often clasped in the vicinity of the genitals, they can both touch one another and refer metaphorically to grotesquely distended or knife-like *grappins*. The extremes of Cézanne's simultaneous yearning for contact, and anxiety about it, are likewise found in mask-like faces that overturn "expectations for legible facial expression while producing the *presence* of expression (or, at least, its potential animation) through contingent strokes of paint" (121). On the one hand, I don't completely follow how, barring her explosion, the Art Institute of Chicago's *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair* (c. 1888-90) can both "appear to be sealed inside, as if a tumescent skin has been stretched to bursting," and at the same time, allow for "all the permutations of intersubjectivity" (132). (Some closer details of the otherwise excellent color plates might help.) On the other hand, the description of the specter-like portrait with the same title and date in the Beyeler Collection, Basel, as a face that reveals the skull beneath the unprimed canvas skin, one whose "fragmentary application of paint...reminds us of the nothingness beneath the pigment" rings poignantly plausible (133).

The fourth chapter, "Towards an Ideal: Dissolving Difference," elaborates how the Fiquet Cézanne portraits, like the *Bathers*, exemplify Cézanne's "stubborn resistance to the standard binary opposition of masculine and feminine" (144). The author grounds the idea of gender as a fluid construct in nineteenth-century sexology, which increasingly explored bisexuality, androgyny, and hermaphroditism. Close looking at the "figure of the only woman with whom we *know* he had sexual relations" reveals gender bending tendencies in, for example, the Bührle Collection picture (c. 1879-82), which was in Gertrude Stein's collection, and probably inspired Pablo Picasso's 1906 portrait of her in the Metropolitan Museum. The main focus is on two other portraits in the Metropolitan Museum collection, *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress* (c. 1888-90), which is seen to graft the features of the masculine onto the feminine, and *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory* (c. 1891-92), which is read as eliding differences between the masculine and the feminine. Both are examined in light of Cézanne's "ambisexual" drawings of sculpture as well as "mannish" drawings of Fiquet Cézanne. In reading about drawings after Michelangelo, Pierre Paul Puget, and other sculptors, I wondered why Sidlauskas did not mention another sculptural source sketched by Cézanne that seems particularly pertinent to portraits of Fiquet Cézanne, namely a plaster cast of Francesco Laurana's *Beatrice of Aragon* (pencil drawing, c. 1884-87, now in the Kunstmuseum, Basel, Chappuis no. 671).^[9] In any event, the uncanny suggestion that in *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, Cézanne gave his own pointed brow, "a kind of signature identity" in his self-portraits, to the more masculine and seemingly bearded left side of her bifurcated face, the other half of which is more conventionally doll-like in its porcelain delicacy, leads to the persuasive hypothesis that the artist perhaps "hoped to 'merge' with his significant other through paint, rather than flesh to flesh" (180). Analogies drawn between *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory* and myths of Pygmalion and Galatea, as well as Apollo and Daphne, seem rather more stretched. Both the *Red Dress* and *Conservatory* portraits were exhibited at Cézanne's retrospective at the Salon d'Automne in 1907, where, as Rainer Maria Rilke described it in a letter to his wife, they were shunned by fashionable Parisiennes engaging in what Sidlauskas calls "identification-in-opposition," a term borrowed from film theory (175). Although Rilke's observations seem to reduce all women viewers to one mindless stereotype, Sidlauskas does open up the possibilities of female spectatorship in relation to the ambiguous gender of the painted Madame Cézanne.

The conclusion finds a hypothetical "marriage diptych" in a couple of late watercolors, one of which might or might not represent Fiquet Cézanne seated at a still-life table, and the other of

which might or might not be a pseudo-self-portrait of Cézanne posing in the clothes of Vallier, the gardener. A stronger summation of the interrogative argument of the book comes in the penultimate paragraph: "The artist asked: 'How does one sense, and represent, emotion – the affective life that emerges between one being and another? How does one conjure the endless variety of surfaces that link us to the world – or barricade us from it – without physically touching them? And how does one act upon, or simply comprehend, the difference between one's gender and that of the other, if in fact one decides to recognize that distinction at all?'" (211). Earlier, in the introduction, Sidlauskas makes a case for an "art history that is historically responsible, theoretically grounded, and visually convincing" (22). Her book is all of that.

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Notes

- [1] Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne* [1952], (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988 edition), 15, 70.
- [2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16.
- [3] Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," in his *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 193. Originally published in *Marxist Quarterly* (January-March, 1937).
- [4] Young-Paik Chun, "Melancholia and Cézanne's Portraits: Faces beyond the Mirror," in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 94-126.
- [5] Tamar Garb, "Touching Sexual Difference: *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*," in her *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France 1814-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), ch. 4.
- [6] Ruth Butler, *Hidden in the Shadow of the Master: The Model-Wives of Cézanne, Monet, and Rodin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), part I.
- [7] See especially Richard Shiff, "Cézanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *The Language of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 168 and n. 84.
- [8] Tamar Garb, "Touching Sexual Difference," 163; Aruna D'Souza, *Cézanne's Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2008), 59. As Garb points out (164), this kind of interpretation of Cézanne's touch is problematic because he was a patriarchal artist working in a patriarchal culture. Perhaps this is why Sidlauskas bypasses the issue.
- [9] The face in the drawing is oddly crossed out, probably by another hand (perhaps that of his son), but the partially effaced features nonetheless seem quite similar to those of another sketchbook drawing now in the Art Institute of Chicago from c. 1875-86 (Sidlauskas's fig. 49) of a dozing Madame Cézanne who is so androgynous that Adrian Chappuis identified the sitter as the Cézanne's adolescent male neighbor Louis Guillaume. See Adrian Chappuis, *The Drawings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), no. 656. My thanks to Richard Shiff for sharing his opinion of Chappuis no. 671.