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book review of

Picturing War in France, 1792–1856 by Katie Hornstein

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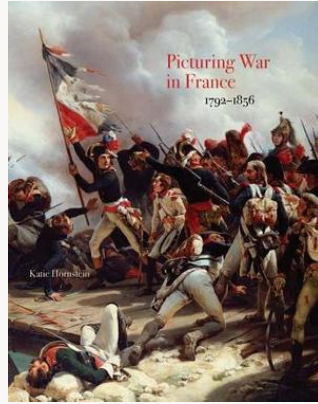
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Katie Hornstein,
Picturing War in France, 1792–1856.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017.
197 pp.; 100 color and 46 b&w illus.; index.
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One question raised by Katie Hornstein’s *Picturing War in France, 1792–1856* is this: Why are there so few studies on this subject? The transformation of warfare that began in the French Revolution has always been a major topic of scholarship, and no one would dispute the fact that war comprised one of the most prominent and frequently depicted subjects in visual culture during the nineteenth century. And yet, few art historians have found the conjunction of pictures and war in this period worthy of their attention. This book offers the most complete account to date of visual depictions of war in France from the Revolution to the Crimean War, but it is much more than a visual survey of war. It also addresses such questions as how viewers used martial imagery to contemplate and negotiate their relationship to the nation, how new modes of visual culture and new understandings of warfare informed and shaped one another, how war became an image of, and metaphor for, politics, and how representations of war blurred the distinctions between official and unofficial, public and private, and established and emergent forms of visual culture.

The book’s first chapter surveys the enormous transformations war imagery underwent during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes, when the conduct of warfare itself changed radically and war imagery took on far greater prominence. War was now, in Clausewitz’s words “the business of the people” as opposed to the concern of kings and aristocrats (12). It was fought by citizen-soldiers and engaged society more completely, becoming “total war,” the phrase used by David Bell to characterize the Napoleonic wars (13). Modern developments such as mass conscription and a growing franchise transformed the nature of people’s engagement with war. Hornstein analyzes how these changes affected various types of pictures, from Revolutionary engravings of battles, maps of campaigns and caricatures, to topographic battle paintings (especially those of Louis-François Lejeune), and the official history paintings of the Empire. Popular media responded to the public’s desire to follow and participate in, at least visually, the military actions they read about in bulletins and newspapers. Authenticity and accuracy were highly valued, as was a sense of experiencing the dramas and horrors of battle. In contrast, more culturally esteemed

formats—namely, history painting—offered moral commentary and a sense of the larger purpose of war, or at least an explanation of its course.

The Restoration commissioned pictures of its own military successes, as soon as it had some to celebrate, but it was the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that continued to fascinate French people even after Napoleon himself was removed from the scene. Admiration for such pictures entailed a reordering of what the Bourbon government prioritized at the Salon: this is a prime example of what Hornstein sees as a tendency for the public to assert its own interests in the face of images of war. If conservatives and royalists tended to associate the Napoleonic wars with horrific violence, those on the Left looked past this and instead identified the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars with the nation. Hornstein further argues that the popularity of such paintings was partly the result of people's desire to see themselves participating "in the great deeds of their own lifetimes" (60). Napoleonic subjects were also popular in the ascendant medium of lithography, where the plight of veterans found a special place.

Hornstein ends the second chapter with a complex but very convincing interpretation of Horace Vernet's *The Crossing of the Arcole Bridge* (1826; private collection). Essentially, she argues that the image of Bonaparte leading a charge served a group of elite, liberal intellectuals as a metaphor for the ability of leaders to create consensus. This group was interested in theories of governance that suggested ways of finding consensus among various oppositional parties under the Restoration and of rendering France governable. In Hornstein's view, Vernet used the image of Bonaparte convincing his soldiers to charge as an opportunity to explore "the dynamic and potentially disappointing process of producing group accord, representing power as an interdependent relationship between a figure of authority and a collective of individuals" (72–74). This section of the book is a tour de force because of the ways in which it teases out the stakes of the painting through a close examination of the painting itself and its critical reception.

The third chapter focuses on the July Monarchy, which funded battle painting to an unprecedented extent through a patronage program focused on the Musée Historique de Versailles and which included the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars as part of its effort to represent itself as the logical and legitimate culmination of recent French history. Hornstein's account emphasizes the blandness of many of these paintings, particularly in the anecdotal, unheroic, up-close form given to them by Vernet, as well as their potential drawbacks as propaganda, because they placed France's greatest military glories in the past during a period of relative peace, when the government was criticized by some of its opponents for promoting the unheroic ideals of industry, mercantilism, and profit. Jean-Charles Langlois's panoramas are presented as far more vital, extending the narrative, illusionistic and authenticating strategies of Lejeune's topographic paintings of the Empire and Restoration and further eroding the boundaries between art and entertainment. Some of the innovations introduced by panoramas were adopted by Vernet when he turned to another official commission: three enormous paintings of the Algerian war. Hornstein unambiguously points out the racism, sexism, and bigotry in these works, but she nonetheless emphasizes their innovation and their willingness to adopt strategies that first appeared in the panorama.

The final chapter examines representations of the Crimean War, which Hornstein treats as a watershed moment in the history of representations of war. Newspaper illustrations and photography emerged as important new sources of martial imagery during the Second Empire. The former was already prominent in the July Monarchy, but Hornstein asserts that two important aspects of it become apparent only under the Second Empire: its tendency to fragment accounts of war, as well as the penchant of editors to vaunt the authenticity of their draftsmen's work while continuously promising more accurate and up-to-date illustrations in the next issue. Both Lejeune's and Vernet's methods for picturing war had tended to fragment battles, depriving them of a central action and an overarching moral. Photography exacerbated this effect, and it also gave rise to the fantasy that it might produce an archive of all the visual details of a war, which, taken together, would describe its totality. Hornstein explores the photographs of the Crimean War produced by Jean-Charles Langlois, Léon Méhédin, Henri Durand-Brager, and Pierre Lassimonne. While the market for photographs of the war was not sufficiently strong to allow for substantial sales of prints from photographs, the medium played a critical role in the development of painting and panoramas.

One of Hornstein's central claims in this chapter is that warfare itself had changed significantly by the time of the Crimean conflict. Among other things, war was now industrialized: rifles and new types of artillery allowed for combat across great distances. Battles tended to be more diffuse, dispersed over large areas and lengths of time. The scale of warfare dwarfed individuals and made battlefield heroics seem less significant. For Hornstein, it is the paintings of the now almost completely forgotten Henri Durand-Brager that best capture the changed nature of warfare. One of my favorite parts of the book is her development of these canvases, which anticipate the innovations we often associate with paintings of World War I. In contrast to Durand-Brager's success, the more traditional Adolphe Yvon, who attempted to continue the form of large-scale battle painting developed by Vernet, struggled with the fragmented nature of warfare. Ironically, his painting *The Capture of the Malakoff Tower* (1856–57, Musée des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon) was more enthusiastically received in reproductions, many of which were photographic in nature, than as a painting, a sign of the ascendancy of mechanically reproduced imagery.

In her conclusion, Hornstein briefly considers the twilight of battle painting in the period prior to World War I through a reflection on Edouard Détaillé's *The Dream* (1888; Musée d'Orsay, Paris). She then offers a defense of her decision to focus on figures like Vernet, whose art has been denigrated, since their own day but especially since World War I, as bourgeois, official, kitschy, degraded, or dead. For Hornstein, Vernet, Lejeune, Langlois, Durand-Brager, and Yvon—as well as the reactions elicited by their art—deserve our interest partly because they reveal a forgotten, unstable, and unpredictable politics related to war. War imagery, she argues, was so popular because it offered a chance for ordinary people to grapple with and define the national discourse on war. Furthermore (and to simplify Hornstein's account somewhat), these images demand our attention as much as any other prosaic, common object that reveals the historical and aesthetic circumstances that produced it. There are some complex disciplinary questions begged here, but whatever conclusions one might draw in relation to these arguments, it seems clear that *Picturing War in France, 1792–1856* embodies and extends some of the key developments in the recent study of nineteenth-century art. It broadens the group of artists discussed in art history, including in particular

artists who had significant reputations in their own day but have since been forgotten, by demonstrating their interest for a deeper understanding of history and visual culture. While artistic questions remain central in the book, they are often set aside in favor of political, social, or other questions that are treated with equal interest. And the book participates in the growing tendency to disregard the barriers separating elite modes of picture-making from more popular ones, and new visual technologies from older ones. This is not a book in which cultural products are classed as high and low, or residual and emergent, and defined through the oppositions or tensions between them. Far more often changes in the perception of war traverse the media and genres that cultural hierarchies tend to divide. The most pressing questions for Hornstein are about how the visual culture depicting war was changing overall.

Finally, this book is not an idealistic account that asks readers to imagine a world without art or war, nor is its primary goal to protest the racist, jingoistic, or sadistic aspects of the images in question. Hornstein is too fascinated with the muddiness and complexity of the nineteenth century for that. She takes seriously popular, middle-brow, and mainstream attitudes toward art, and finds both important lessons and irresolvable questions in them. For example, her account dramatizes a tension at the core of public debates on war in nineteenth-century France between, on the one hand, rational, compassionate, or critical understandings of war, and, on the other, those that were more irrational, chauvinistic, or blindly celebratory. Visual depictions of warfare changed radically over the course of the century and played critical roles in defining individuals' relationships to the nation, history, politics, and many other things, but it is difficult to draw conclusions about whether, overall, the increased publicity of martial imagery whetted or dulled the appetite for war. Hornstein respects the complexity of her subject, and the result is a deeply fascinating book.

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