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Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964*. Farnham, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009. xii + 318 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$124.95 U.S. (cl.), ISBN 978-0-7546-5928-0.

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In 1964 the artist Robert Rauschenberg, an early exponent of Pop Art, became the first American to be awarded the grand prize for painting at the Venice Biennale, the oldest and most prestigious European contemporary art fair. Given his renunciation of the brush in favor of the semi-mechanical use of silkscreen transfers, and his concomitant embrace of the broadest possible range of images—deriving from sources as varied as daily newspapers, art history, and street photography—the selection proved a surprise to many Europeans and ignited a firestorm of controversy. Until then, the postwar prizes had generally been destined for the elderly masters of the prewar School of Paris—Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, Max Ernst, Jacques Villon—or their postwar successors such as Jean Fautrier and Hans Hartung. That same year, the influential New York art critic Thomas B. Hess published a polemical article announcing the final eclipse of the School of Paris and the definitive ascendancy of the innovative work being produced in New York (which for Hess still meant Abstract Expressionism, not the brash Pop upstarts). In scathing prose, he claimed that “the artists in postwar Paris seemed to stick and sink into the luscious colors, graceful lines, and cunningly interlocked forms that, a generation before, had been the local marks of excellence.”[1] By the mid-Sixties, critical consensus on both sides of the Atlantic agreed that cultural hegemony had passed to the Americans.

A new study of the critical and curatorial discourse surrounding the postwar School of Paris by Natalie Adamson, a young art historian at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, closes with this well-known moment of defeat, but demonstrates through a rigorously documented account the myriad ways in which it had been prepared over the preceding two decades through “a complex set of exhibitions, debates, and propositions about the viability of a national tradition, the principles (pictorial and ethical) of abstract painting, the policy of eclecticism, and the necessity to support a sense of authentic community.” (p. 249)

In other words, the triumph of American art that was widely perceived in both Paris and New York to have been emblemized in Rauschenberg’s award had much to do with arguments internal to the Parisian contemporary art scene, which necessarily turned the award into a referendum on the troubled state of French aesthetic affairs. *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* painstakingly reconstructs those arguments from yellowing journals and newspapers, the records of long-defunct galleries, and the testimony of ageing artists, dealers, and critics. The result aims to be a comprehensive account of the ways in which Parisian art criticism molded the frameworks within which painting could be understood, frameworks that were bounded by “artistic and political struggles over pictorial style, political engagement and national identity” (p. 13). The moniker “School of Paris,” then, did not so much name a determinate group of artists or singular artistic style, but instead was a term whose meaning was continually up for grabs throughout the turbulent years of the Fourth Republic, before finally losing its semantic resonance in De Gaulle’s Sixties.

The School of Paris is best known as an umbrella term for the international group of modern painters active in that city between the wars, a group that typically includes senior figures such as Matisse, Braque, and Pablo Picasso, along with younger artists known as the *maudits*--Amedeo Modigliani, Chaim Soutine, Jules Pascin, and Maurice Utrillo--whose life centered on the bohemian café world of Montparnasse. In general, their figurative paintings can be aligned with the post-1918 "call to order" that saw French artists renouncing avant-gardism in favor of a rhetoric of return to the Classical tradition; to their left stood not only the Surrealists, but also the non-figurative artists associated with the Abstraction-Création group.[2] During the interwar years, the School of Paris became *the* representative of the French *métropole* as capital of the arts, and in the wake of the liberation there was a concerted effort to revive that reputation across the perceived lacunae of war and occupation. These attempts are at the heart of the story Adamson has to tell. As such, her book may be considered the latest contribution to the reassessment of postwar French art, a subject long neglected in the Anglo-American academy; if the 1970s and early 1980s brought a recognition of the Cold War ideological parameters that had over-determined the writing of the history and criticism of art after World War II as one of the "triumph of American painting," the decades since have seen the slow emergence of revisionist studies, such as this one, reassessing artistic production in France (and Western Europe more generally) at the time.[3]

Adamson opens with a first chapter that outlines the nationalist, patriotic politics surrounding the elaboration of a younger generation of the School of Paris during and immediately after the war. In 1941, the painter Jean Bazaine organized an exhibition at the Galerie Braun in Paris that gathered the work of a number of artists, including himself, under the rubric "Young Painters in the French Tradition," which would become the core of the postwar Parisian canon. Stylistically these paintings offered a fundamentally regressive synthesis of Fauvist, Cubist, and Expressionist innovations--all dating to the years prior to World War I--while retaining a representational tie to the human figure and the landscape (a tie that would become increasingly attenuated over the following decade); their pronounced inspiration in the Romanesque painting and sculpture of the Middle Ages could however be read progressively, in the context of occupation, as a coded assertion of the continuities of a national tradition.[4] As Adamson demonstrates, these patriotic elements were seized upon following liberation by critics who replayed the nationalistic rhetoric of the earlier "call to order" and reasserted France's cultural hegemony. In typically stark tones, art historian Pierre Francastel wrote in 1946: "The School of Paris owes nothing to German culture and it will be, I am sure, the source of new formulas... that will allow tomorrow's art to escape the morbid grip of Germanism." [5] It was through these sorts of rhetorical maneuvers that the "Young Painters" were positioned as "*the* artists of France's Liberation," Adamson argues, "proof that a modern, recuperable tradition of painting had survived, though stigmatised as decadent by the Germans and by the Vichy collaborationist regime." (p. 48)

But the elevation of the "Young Painters" to this premier position, and their placement as heirs to the national artistic heritage, was based on two fundamental exclusions: of rigorously abstract art of the sort championed before the war by the Abstraction-Création group; and of foreign-born artists working within the School of Paris. These mutually reinforcing omissions are addressed in the second chapter of *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris*. In the same postwar years that the "Young Painters" were being championed as avatars of a distinctly French tradition, there was a resurgence of "concrete" art--the name favored by practitioners of a rigorously constructed, geometric abstraction--which from 1946 on was granted an important forum in the annual Salon des réalités nouvelles. For many supporters of the School of Paris, this non-figurative art was fundamentally foreign to the national spirit, and indeed its development in the 1930s was closely tied to émigrés and visitors such as Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and Alberto Magnelli. Its critics coded such work as the product of "a society characterised by alienation and anarchic decadence" (p. 105). But if some were troubled by the double foreignness of abstraction (as alien to a national tradition, and as produced by an international group of artists), others saw the cosmopolitanism of abstraction as confirmation of Paris' continued reputation as world capital of the arts. Critical debate focused on these competing claims: the postwar

School of Paris was, on one hand, “called upon to fulfil nationalist dreams of a cultural renaissance that could be set against other national schools,” while on the other hand “it was also expected to embody the ideal of a universal art for a newly globalised and radically modernized world” (p. 105). In the end, as Adamson demonstrates, the latter soon would prevail and an internationalist, pan-European definition of the School of Paris would take hold.

This did not, however, assuage anxieties about the role of art in defining a postwar sense of collectivity, and Adamson’s third chapter turns to this question, articulated around a widespread sense of a “crisis” in art’s relation to reality. This means, first, an examination of the rather short-lived French variant of Socialist Realism endorsed by the Communist Party. Only André Fougeron adopted this line wholeheartedly; more typical was the stance of Edouard Pignon, who while working within Party dictates, retained an expressionist influence from Picasso. Adamson discusses the contemporary response to their work, and adds a third figure, Bernard Buffet, whose postwar paintings—now widely dismissed in the art-historical literature—were wildly popular expressions of existentialist emptiness, desolation, and vulnerability. Unlike Fougeron and Pignon, he was not associated with the realism of the Communists, but with the so-called “Témoignage” group, which took up a form of poetic representational painting. Adamson concludes her survey of realist tendencies with a lengthy discussion of the role of the Catholic journal *Esprit*, whose art criticism sought a way out the vituperative debates over realism and the attendant “discourse of crisis” through support of an improvisational, abstract painting that was seen “to signify in a deep and authentic way to both the individual and to the social collectivity” (p. 153). But without a discussion of major figures such as Fernand Léger and Picasso, who both negotiated complicated relationships with the Communist Party and whose work—especially that of the latter, with his *Massacre in Korea* (1951)—was the source of heated controversy, her treatment appears incomplete and rather weighted toward a seemingly inevitable triumph of the “third way” between an art controlled by the Party and an art-for-art’s sake backed by journals like *Esprit*.

By this point in her book, Adamson’s larger argument has become clear: she is recounting the history of the discursive construction in postwar Paris of an abstract, seemingly apolitical art rooted in subjective perception—a profound redefinition of the School of Paris. Neither a national school nor a politically driven realist practice, the work that emerged victorious from these debates fit rather comfortably into the Cold War landscape, and ideologically at least its function was not so different from that played by American Abstract Expressionism—to whose fortunes it has often been contrasted.[6] The fourth chapter, “The Critics of the École de Paris,” rather slows the pace of this line of reasoning with its wide-ranging survey of writings, but it does at least briefly introduce the crucial figure of Michel Tapié (pp. 198–200), who coined the two most influential terms to describe this work: “*art informel*” for the kind of intuitive, psychic improvisation found in the work of Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages, or Wols; and “*un art autre*,” “an other art,” for the concomitant rejection of discipline and control that had previously been seen as the basis for School of Paris painting. The shockingly brief treatment of Tapié and his protégé, Pierre Restany—along with Adamson’s clear disdain for their writing, which she describes as having “snidely condemned the École de Paris as classicist and academic” (p. 200), when in fact they are the only critics of this period to whom art historians consistently return—are some of the most glaring shortcomings of the volume.

Adamson ends her book with a fifth chapter on the simultaneous elevation by the mid-1950s of the School of Paris—now understood as the artists of the *informel*—to the status of official representatives of the French state in cultural affairs and its critical demise as a new form of academicism. Although not stated explicitly, her argument seems to assert that Rauschenberg’s triumph at the 1964 Biennale was prepared less by the machinations of the promoters of American art (in equal parts governmental and mercantile) than by the internal divisions attendant upon the Parisian art world; in a sort of parallel with the political divides of the Fourth Republic, French art is understood to have been riven from within, and in this case no De Gaulle would appear as savior. In her recounting of this rather gloomy story of decline, Adamson hints at what she might consider an alternative critical account to be found in

writer Samuel Beckett's articles on School of Paris painters, most notably Bram van Velde. He wrote of a "mourning for the object" in this work (p. 271), which seems to entail a paradoxical embrace of failure as inherent to the creative process and which hence stands in opposition to the futile triumphalism of so much postwar French art criticism.

Adamson has done an impressive job in her reconstitution of the discourse of criticism in the initial decades following liberation, and future scholars of postwar French art will no doubt be indebted to her research. There are, however, aspects of this account that remain rather frustratingly incomplete. Focused as it is on debates around the definition of a "School of Paris" in painting, the book pays far too little attention to the actual paintings that were the object of such debates; ideally, the return to period criticism should bring us closer to the work itself, and help us to understand what could be seen and understood at its moment of original reception. Here, however, the writing of critics generally remains disconnected from the art, while the short, rather dry descriptions of paintings with which Adamson punctuates her text usually are untethered from her larger arguments. The book also fails to broaden its scope to include artistic practices that, if falling outside the strict bounds of the School of Paris, were however often far more influential than those to which she devotes her analysis: we hear remarkably little of such major postwar Parisian painters as Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, or Jean Fautrier, who have been the subject of important recent studies.[7] And finally we might note the absence of any discussion of the admittedly marginal groups that were seeking to create a space in Paris for a politically committed, avant-garde artistic practice outside the terms of Socialist Realism and the Communist Party—the line that extends from "*surréalisme révolutionnaire*" to Cobra to Guy Debord.[8] Despite these flaws, however, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944-1964* sheds much new light on this understudied moment in postwar art history, linking it with broader debates over national identity and international prestige, and giving us our most complex vision to date of the collapse of this once hegemonic cultural formation known as the School of Paris.

NOTES

[1] Thomas B. Hess, "A Tale of Two Cities" (1964), reprinted in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), p. 162. For an account of Rauschenberg at the 1964 Biennale, see Laurie J. Monahan, "Cultural Cartography," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 369-416.

[2] For accounts of the School of Paris between the wars, see Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

[3] Landmarks studies of the role of Cold War politics in the construction of a narrative of American artistic triumphalism include Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973): pp. 43-54; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): pp. 39-41; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). The most significant contributions to recent art-historical accounts of postwar French art—too extensive to list here—have been made by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and Sarah Wilson, and by their students; Adamson's bibliography inventories much of this literature.

[4] See also Michèle C. Cone, "'Abstract' Art as a Veil: Tricolor Painting in Vichy France, 1940-1944," *The Art Bulletin* 74 (June 1992): pp. 191-204.

[5] Pierre Francastel, *Nouveau dessin, nouvelle peinture, l'École de Paris* (Paris: Librairie de Médicis, 1946), p. 12 (my translation).

[6] Most especially and influentially in the work of Guilbaut; see his “Postwar Painting Games,” in *Reconstructing Modernism*, pp. 30-79; and “Disdain for the Stain,” in Joan Marter, ed., *Abstract Expressionism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 29-50.

[7] See for example Curtis L. Carter and Karen L. Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002); and Rachel E. Perry, “Jean Fautrier’s *Jolies Juives*,” *October* no. 108 (Spring 2004): pp. 51-72.

[8] See Serge Guilbaut, “1955: The Year the Gaulois Fought the Cowboy,” *Yale French Studies* no. 98 (“The French Fifties”) (2000): pp 167-181.

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