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Janet McLean, ed., *Impressionist Interiors*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin 2008. 152 pp. Notes, bibliography. \$17.50 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-1-904288-30-5.

Review by Frances Fowle, University of Edinburgh and National Galleries of Scotland.

Christoph Asendorf has identified the nineteenth century as “the century of the interior.”<sup>[1]</sup> Certainly, it was an era when art and design began to merge, when the “decorative” became a central concern and when Aestheticism gave its name to an entire artistic movement. However, to date, much of the emphasis in Impressionist scholarship has been on the landscape and the city. Recent exhibitions have privileged such outdoor themes as “Impressionists by the Sea” or “Impressionist Gardens.”<sup>[2]</sup> Yet, while Baudelaire famously urged the painter of modern life to seek inspiration in the bustle of a city street, Stéphane Mallarmé countered that “the chief part of modern existence is passed within doors.”<sup>[3]</sup> No critic championed the domestic interior more enthusiastically than Edmond Duranty. In *La Nouvelle Peinture*, he advised the artist to portray the sitter as a product of his own environment and the apartment as a reflection of its occupant. “In actuality, a person never appears against neutral or vague backgrounds. Instead, surrounding him and behind him are the furniture, fireplaces, curtains, and walls that indicate his financial position, class and profession. The individual will be at a piano, examining a sample of cotton in an office, or waiting in the wings for the moment to go onstage, or ironing on a makeshift worktable.”<sup>[4]</sup> Duranty is clearly describing the work of Edgar Degas, whose portrait of the critic (Burrell Collection, Glasgow) aptly illustrates his thesis, portraying him seated in his study and surrounded by books, the tools of his trade.

Taking Duranty’s observations as its point of departure, it is the impressionist interior that is the focus of this exhibition catalogue and of the two essays by Hollis Clayson and Suzanne Singletary that accompany it. The individual entries are by Janet McLean, who is also the author of the short and very accessible introduction. The interior is predominantly a “domestic” space and, while the catalogue includes café scenes, places of entertainment and work spaces, the majority of images concern the domestic interior, what Griselda Pollock has described as the “spaces of femininity.”<sup>[5]</sup> Pollock highlighted the limitations imposed on women in Parisian society and identified the domestic sphere as a predominantly feminine space, while cafés and other exterior spaces constituted the urban domain of the male artist. More specifically, when it came to the division of space within the home, the drawing room was the domain of the woman, while her husband might preside over more “masculine” interiors, such as the study or the dining room.

Recently Clare Willson has discussed the Impressionist garden, especially in Germany, in terms of an extension of the home, an additional exterior room, in which the family took meals and entertained. It was also a Kindergarten, a space in which children were able to develop through play.<sup>[6]</sup> In “Threshold space: Parisian modernism betwixt and between (1869 to 1891),” Hollis Clayson develops this idea further, discussing the Impressionist interior in terms of a “liminal” spaces or “thresholds”—a drawing room giving on to a balcony, an outdoor café or an omnibus—spaces which are “neither fully inside nor outside” (p. 16). In the first part of the essay, Clayson discusses four works which represent the drawing room as a “space of femininity,” as well as offering a view on to the exterior world. The drawing room in these works is not a social space, but a secluded sanctuary, a place of solitude. Not surprisingly, her examples include two interior scenes by women

impressionists: Berthe Morisot's 1869 portrait of her sister Edma (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and Mary Cassatt's *Young Girl at the Window* (1883-5; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington). Clayson revisits Pollock's theme of feminine confinement, arguing that that there is a tension in these works between exterior and interior, but while Cassatt's model is "physically trapped," Edma appears more content with her lot, achieving "self-actualisation through day-dreaming" (p. 17).

Clayson also discusses two luminal interiors by Monet and Renoir, arguing that these works should be viewed in their socio-political context. Monet's *Meditation* (1871; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) was painted in London, where Monet and Camille had taken refuge during the Franco-Prussian War, and should be read as "a female allegory of longing for the volatile outside world" (p. 18). Similarly, Renoir's extravagantly decorative *Portrait of Rapha Maître* (1871; private collection) should be considered in the context of the Paris Commune and the street-fighting which was happening beyond the confines of the floral interior.

She goes on to address the tensions that arise in interiors where men and women are forced to co-exist. Caillebotte's *Interior, Woman at the Window* (1880; private collection) is a case in point, where the restless, inquisitive female figure acts as a foil to her more complacent husband. Similarly, in Manet's *Interior at Arcachon* 1871 (Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown), the space is clearly divided into male and female zones. Throughout the essay, Clayson's close reading of each work is very evident, no more so than in her analysis of this painting and, as her enthusiasm for Manet's handling of paint takes over, Clayson's normally complex prose gives way to impassioned appreciation. In one paragraph, the words "lively", "liveliness", "animation" and "animated" appear six times in the space of three short sentences.

In the end, this is less a closely developed argument than a series of separate discussions of ten modernist works which are united by their engagement with what Clayson terms "the liminal zone." At times this liminality serves as no more than a starting point for analysis of a particular work. Her discussion of Degas's lithograph *Mlle Becat aux Ambassadeurs* (1877-8; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is concerned less with the tension between interior and exterior than with the identification of two lighting systems: gas lamps and electricity. Nevertheless her examination of each work is thorough and scholarly, drawing on an impressive range of sources and, in some cases, offering a new interpretation of these familiar images.

Singletary's excellent and carefully researched essay, "Le Chez-Soi: Men 'At Home' in Impressionist Interiors," switches the focus to the relatively unexplored area of the male domestic space. In Impressionist art, male sitters generally occupy traditionally masculine spaces, such as the study, the billiard room or the smoking room and, as the essay suggests, are often engaged in a solitary pursuit such as writing, listening to music or simply day-dreaming. Singletary uses the essay to highlight the implied double meaning of "interior," signifying the inner self, as well as an interior space. Her argument is underpinned by quotations from literary and musical sources, as well as art criticism.

Music in particular plays a major role in the examples that she cites by Whistler, Degas, Gauguin and Caillebotte. Works such as Gauguin's *The Painter's Home, rue Carcel* (1881; The National Museum of Art, Oslo) are "an incitement to dream" (p. 39). Drawing on Baudelaire—both his *Correspondances* and his essay in defence of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*—Singletary posits a synaesthetic reading of the painting, where sound (piano music) and smell (a bouquet of flowers) work on the imagination, moving the viewer "from the material to the immaterial realms" (p. 39). Silence, too, can be evocative and the confrontation between male and female, the underlying psychological dynamics of such interiors as Degas's *The Bellelli Family* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) or *Sulking* (c.1870; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) are explored in her essay.

Singletary suggests that the almost palpable tension in many of Degas's interiors arises from the incursion of a male into an identifiably female space and vice-versa. Only Morisot's *Eugène Manet on the Isle of Wight* (1875; Musée Marmottan, Paris) succeeds in subverting the norm, wittily inverting the traditional image of the female sitter imprisoned in her cage. Morisot's husband is seated in a hotel interior, a kind of neutral space, whereas the study was the traditional male domain. This is the location for some of Degas's most successful portraits, including the great pastel of Duranty and his two likenesses of the Italian critic, Diego Martelli. Manet, too, anticipates Duranty's recommendations in his *Portrait of Emile Zola* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), where the writer sits at his desk, surrounded by books, journals and prints, the room sharing an almost symbiotic relationship with the man who occupies it.

At times Singletary's definition of male presence is stretched somewhat, as in her analysis of Whistler's decidedly pre-Impressionist work *At the Piano* (Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati) where the artist's deceased father is symbolised by the presence of his grand piano. Nevertheless, the essay fuses together neo-Symbolist thought and Impressionist imagery in an interesting and thought-provoking way, revealing these works in a fresh light. Apart from four examples in this essay and only two in Clayson's, there is, however, little attempt to make a real connection with the forty-six works discussed in the main catalogue. The essays are offered as an adjunct rather than a considered response to the exhibition.

In the catalogue itself the variety of artists represented is extremely broad, stretching the definition of Impressionism to incorporate, on the one hand, friends of Degas such as Henri Gervex, James Tissot and Federico Zandomenighi (who certainly exhibited with the Impressionists) and, on the other, younger "Nabi" artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis. Vuillard insisted "I don't paint portraits. I paint people in their homes" and his *intimiste* domestic scenes represent "interiority" in both senses of the word.[7] However, as McLean herself points out, his association with Symbolist playwrights such as Maeterlinck, Ibsen and Strindberg, lend his paintings an unsettling, staged appearance, quite at odds with the immediacy of Impressionism.

Manet once wrote to Berthe Morisot: "you can do plein-air painting indoors, by painting white in the morning, lilac during the day and orange-toned in the evening." [8] It is perhaps not surprising that a woman artist emerges as one of the chief exponents of the "Impressionist interior." Its true master, on the other hand, was Edgar Degas, who preferred to paint indoors, due to an intolerance of bright light. One of Degas's masterpieces, *The Song Rehearsal* (1872-3; Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, Washington D.C.) is explored in depth by McLean. This picture illustrates perfectly the themes of both essays. The action takes place in a liminal space, the orange wall pierced by a panelled door. It includes female singers and a male pianist, but any narrative is subverted. It combines music, song, discordant colours, unfinished surface and asymmetry. It subverts all conventions, defies interpretation and remains one of Degas's most enigmatic works. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Degas who emerges in the end as the most skilful and prolific artist of the interior, reflecting his fascination not only with pictorial space, but with the psychological relationship between his sitters.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Janet McLean, "Impressionist Interiors: An Introduction"

Hollis Clayson, "Threshold Space: Parisian modernism betwixt and between (1869 to 1891)"

Suzanne Singletary, "*Le Chez-Soi*: Men 'At Home' in Impressionist Interiors"

#### NOTES

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- [1] Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: on the history of things and their perception in modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.119.
- [2] John House, *Impressionists by the Sea* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007); Clare A. P. Willsdon, *Impressionist Gardens* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2010).
- [3] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Impressionists and Edouard Manet' (1876), reprinted in Charles S. Moffett et al, *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886* (San Francisco, Cal.: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1986), p.30.
- [4] Edmond Duranty, *La Nouvelle Peinture* (1876), reprinted in Charles S. Moffett et al, *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886* (San Francisco, Cal.: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1986), p.44.
- [5] Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the spaces of femininity' in *Vision and Difference: femininity, feminism and the history of art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.50-90.
- [6] Clare A. P. Willsdon, *Impressionist Gardens* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2010), pp.166-7.
- [7] André Chastel, *Vuillard 1868-1940* (Paris: Floury, 1946), p.94.
- [8] Quoted in J. Wilson-Bareau (ed.), *Manet by Himself* (London: Time Warner, 2004), p.203.

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