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Ann Kennedy Smith, *Painted Poetry: Colour in Baudelaire's Art Criticism*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2011. 241 pp. Bibliography and index. \$51.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03911-094-0; \$51.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-3-0353-0105-2

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Of all his literary and art critic contemporaries, Baudelaire was the most outspoken and categorical in taking sides for Delacroix the Romantic “coloriste.” It thus seems a given that Baudelaire would place color front and center in his analyses of Delacroix, as well as in his writings on Romantic painting in general, but Ann Kennedy Smith’s *Painted Poetry* questions this seemingly obvious connection by asking at the outset “how seriously we can take the approach of a poet such as Baudelaire to such a painterly matter” (p. 2). Smith contributes a promising point of departure within the context of word and image debates, and particularly within Baudelairean studies, by removing color from the “baggage” of its symbolic, theoretical, and political connotations.

Demonstrating how Baudelaire deconstructs what had become a Romantic cliché and instead considers color as material that is laboriously analyzed, prepared, and combined by the artist, Smith traces how he came to view color as reflecting the faculty of the creative imagination itself. Smith thus does herself a disservice when reticently remarking in the introduction that “it might appear strange to separate one element of painting from the rest” (pp. 2-3), because, in adeptly sifting through the bulk of Baudelaire’s writings on art with this focused lens, she suggestively highlights Baudelaire’s study of artists’ *use* of color instead of pigeonholing color as a school or *prise de position*. Smith convincingly shows in *Painted Poetry* that, in the evolution of Baudelaire’s Salon writings, color remains material and contingent but nonetheless reflective of a universal, synthesizing creative process that determines all original works of art.

Smith lays a lot of groundwork in chapter one by providing an overview of the Academy’s wariness and even scorn of the role of color in the seventeenth century, and how this suspicion continued to leave its mark as a “critical ambivalence” (p. 46) even in the color-receptive writings of important nineteenth-century art critics such as Thoré and Gautier. Readers with even a basic knowledge of art history and aesthetic theory might not discover anything new in Smith’s thorough exposition (though her incorporation of lesser known yet important nineteenth-century critics such as Quatremère de Quincy and the Fourier-inspired Desiré Laverdant is an important exception), but the chapter nonetheless serves as a great contextual aid to those less familiar with the “story” of color in French art.

Above all, the first chapter leads Smith to accentuate the bold and original aspects of Baudelaire’s earliest writings on art. Similar to David Kelley before her, Smith shows how the poet-critic steps back in the *Salon de 1846* and forms a more thoughtful and cogent approach to art and to color in particular, not simply to claim that Delacroix was the leading artist of the age, but to show *why* he held this distinction.[1] Likewise, Smith herself steps back and shows Baudelaire not merely praising color because Delacroix was a ‘coloriste’, but traces how, in the chapter “De la couleur,” Baudelaire placed himself in the position of the painter and studied how color could be utilized effectively to achieve an original work of art that captures the “vigorous and ever-changing drama” of nature (p. 60). After

reading through the mock landscape painting that Baudelaire narrates into motion in “De la couleur,” Smith compellingly suggests how this painting came about, citing the critic’s “close observation of the intricacy of tones and reflections,” his “technical vocabulary,” and his “vocabulary of physics and chemistry” (p. 61); the chemist and color scientist Chevreul’s general influence in the century; and finally, the conversations that Baudelaire most likely would have had with painters in his circle (including Delacroix). It might be pointed out that Smith’s conjecture regarding the extent to which Baudelaire would have been informed by Delacroix’s thoughts on color is a bit discredited with citations (p. 81) from Delacroix’s journal that date from 1853 and 1857, well after the appearance of Baudelaire’s first Salons and even after the *Exposition universelle de 1855*. This suggests that Baudelaire may have informed Delacroix when it came to color. Smith is convincing, however, in her claim that, even for such a Romantic-inspired poet and theorist such as Baudelaire, “the concept of a science or a set of rules that govern colour is presented as fundamental to artistic expression” (p. 86). Even more crucially, Smith shows the extent to which Baudelaire single-handedly and potently “endowed colour with the intellectual validity and formal importance which had eluded it for so long, usually in favour of draughtsmanship” (p. 86), and thus (we can extrapolate) pointed the way to Impressionism and the emergence of abstract forms of painting. Instead of serving as a mere means to representation, “colour could now be presented as making demands upon the painter” (p. 87).

However, Smith is sure to nuance her discussion of the role of science in Baudelaire’s art criticism in chapter three by pointing out how his rhetoric evolves about a decade later in the *Exposition universelle de 1855*. Referring to Baudelaire’s writings on Ingres, and how they evolve from reluctant praise to downright scorn, Smith explains this shift by citing the poet’s “increasingly polarized position towards dessin-based art” (p. 91). It was not necessary for Smith to devote such a lengthy subsection (“Ingres and the neo-classical tradition”) to this claim, as a few introductory sentences and citations or footnotes would have sufficed, but she again succeeds in highlighting how the stakes were high as Baudelaire expressed his lone voice concerning the supremacy of color within a regime-sanctioned and thus conformist context: “The government may have wanted to call a truce between colourists and draughtsmen in French art in 1855; Baudelaire, notably, did not” (p. 106). Delacroix, in other words, was not Ingres’ equal; instead, he succeeded in harmonizing line with color, while Ingres languidly relegated color to a subservient, almost afterthought role.^[2]

It is here that we arrive at the crucial hinge of Smith’s study: color for Baudelaire, in fact, was not color at all, but a marker for the way in which the artist harmonizes line with color to evoke the synthesizing faculty of the imagination. The artist can even eliminate color entirely, as long as the *suggestion* of color is still present. In the Romantic (which for Baudelaire meant eternal) tradition of Delacroix, sketchers of modern life capture the “exact” and the “souple” simultaneously (p. 119). Here, Smith provides excellent citations of Baudelaire’s writings on Daumier to illustrate her argument, but the section on Meryon is very brief by comparison and needs more development. Also, it is curious that she passes over Baudelaire’s evocative allusion in the *Salon de 1859* (included in the important section on Meryon) to Victor Hugo’s chromatically neutral drawings, which would have bolstered her running argument that the lack of color in a distinctly Romantic work of art is the mark of the imagination—and thus poetry and all forms of art—*itself*.^[3] Yet, she ends the chapter on a strong note in her discussion of Guys by concluding that color and line were on equal planes for Baudelaire by the time he published *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* in 1863, because he deemed both “equally abstract concepts” (p. 130).

In chapter four, Smith keeps the thread of her study going by showing Baudelaire continuing to assault clichés bound with color in order to reveal its more potent effects, what Baudelaire himself in the *Exposition universelle* called “la volonté agissant sur l’imagination” (p. 163). Baudelaire, she argues, eschews a literal or systematic form of color symbolism (red = passion, blue = sad) and looks for ways for color to suggest “deeper spiritual currents” that let emerge “the abstract force of the colours themselves” (p. 144). Smith, for example, explains Baudelaire’s predilection for the color combination red-green by tracing how it goes beyond subject matter and instead triggers a reaction of the nerves

and “makes demands on the spectator” (p. 155). As the concept of color morphs from crude pigment and a simple means to literal representation into the abstract realms of light and space, viewing a painting by Delacroix—or a drawing by Daumier, Meryon or Guys—is akin to listening to the metaphysical strains of a Wagner opera.

Smith proceeds in chapter five to present the *Salon de 1859* as the culminating synthesis of all preceding elements of Baudelaire’s writings on color. Centered on the imagination, Baudelaire’s final *Salon* definitively wrests color from its mimetic function and shows it as “part of a complex network of interchangeable signs” (p. 183). While color was front and center in the *Salon de 1846*, it is under the aegis of the imagination in 1859. Though she curiously does not say so explicitly, Smith’s description of how Baudelaire presents the workings of the imagination suggests that the artist’s creative faculty is a mediating palette (an “accumulating, synthesizing method”) on which colors are rapidly combined, layered, and reworked: “Baudelaire maintains that a painting governed by the imagination consists of a series of versions which are gradually built up” (p. 185). The adept use of this palette determines the works of all artists and poets that Baudelaire found worthy of praise, and Smith, addressing how Baudelaire’s concept of the imagination permitted him to translate between a multitude of art forms and genres, proceeds to make interesting reversals and even surprising connections: while Hugo is “visually reliable” and thus provides more faithful depictions of nature, Balzac is an *aquafortiste* à la Daumier who, with the simultaneous fierce precision and evocative suggestion of black and white, is “predominantly visionary” due to the demands he places on the imagination (p. 196).^[4]

It would have been well enough to end here, but, in her keenness to show the extent to which Baudelaire’s concept of color informed his aesthetic theory across his corpus as a whole, Smith proceeds to wander a bit too far afield from the course of her general argument towards the end of this final chapter by tackling an overly ambitious array of states of mind and cognitive faculties that Baudelaire explores in a number of essays (on art or otherwise). Unifying dream, intoxication and memory (and, by extension, color) under the umbrella of the imagination, she glosses all as a “stimulant” for the artist that produces similarly intense effects on the viewer. This awkward merging leads Smith to end her careful study almost rashly by linking Guys’ drawings featured in Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* to Delacroix’s canvases in the *Salon de 1846*: “The fact that Guys was not a great painter and master of colour hardly seems to matter, as it did not in the case of Daumier or Meryon, because colour itself is less important to Baudelaire than the artist’s ability to stimulate the imagination” (p. 215). It is understandable, given all the hashing and rehashing that has already been devoted to the subject, that Smith wants to offer an unequivocal way to address the vexing question as to why Baudelaire privileged Guys over Manet; but to suggest that it is unproblematic to equate Guys to Delacroix, or even Guys to Daumier or Meryon, opens a lot of room for argument. This reader remains convinced, in any case, that Baudelaire’s famous remarks on Guys represent more of a subtly ironic mourning for what modern art had been reduced to than a celebration of what it had become.

In *Painted Poetry*, Ann Kennedy Smith offers a coherent and well researched “fresh take” and certainly one of the most extensive recent studies on Baudelaire’s writings on art, and her bibliography is impressive and extremely helpful. She demonstrates an admirable command of her subject as well as the history of art and writings on art in general, and her book is particularly well suited for students who are beginning to explore nineteenth-century salon culture and the emergence of modernist discourses in art. The book, however, would have benefitted from a good dose of editing due to bulky passages and repetitive ticks that distract the reader (“later in this chapter” and “in the following section” were especially prevalent in various incarnations, and ironically often impeded her study from moving along). A second reading of the book is almost necessary in order to trim the author’s non-essential expositions and make her connections clearer.

Substantial editing concerns notwithstanding, Smith is to be commended for offering such a thorough and sensitive reading of Baudelaire’s art criticism, and above all for showing that there is still much to

be done when it comes to making deeper connections between Baudelaire's writings on color and his poems. Though she does not address these connections explicitly, her book certainly provides an essential foundation and alluring invitation for those who intend to set out to do so.

NOTES

[1] See David Kelley's critical edition of the *Salon de 1846* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

[2] It is confusing, however, when Smith observes that "the physical *presence* of colour has been excluded by Ingres, and thus, the imagination" (p. 109). Surely, color is present in Ingres' tableaux; what is more, the central tenet of Smith's argument (as we will see below) is that color does not necessarily need to be present to evoke the artist's imagination. It is more Ingres' *treatment* of color that is the target of Baudelaire's ire. Perhaps Smith meant to say that Ingres' treatment of color does not suggest the physical presence and thus any real sense of the subject in question.

[3] In a prose poem that clearly references color ("Et une gloire étonnante jaillit de cette complexité de lignes et de couleurs") as well as music in its dedication to Liszt, Baudelaire's "Le Thyrses" could stand as emblematic of Smith's entire study in its portrayal of line and movement's fecund duality: "Et quel est, cependant, le mortel imprudent qui osera décider si les fleurs et les pampres ont été faits pour le bâton, ou si le bâton n'est que le prétexte pour montrer la beauté des pampres et des fleurs?" (*Le Spleen de Paris*, in *Œuvres complètes*. Vol 1. Ed. Claude Pichois. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975.).

[4] While Smith references light as representative of Baudelaire's synthesizing theory of color and of the imagination as a whole, much has been said of the chiaroscuro effects in Hugo's poetry and how his evocation of light and shadow transcends any sense of a literal or mimetic use of color. See Claude Millet's "Noir, blanc, couleurs" in *L'Œil de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2004).

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