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Kathryn Brown, ed., *Perspectives on Degas*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. xiii + 279 pp. 58 b/w illustrations. \$165 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-3997-0.

Review by Frances Fowle, University of Edinburgh.

Published to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Degas's death in 1917, the stated aim of this volume of essays is two-fold: to re-examine earlier scholarship, and to highlight new directions and discoveries. Degas research has been refreshed and transformed in recent years through improvements in technical analysis, but also as a result of consistent reappraisal of the artist through major exhibitions. Indeed the 2017 anniversary spawned some outstanding shows, not least the major retrospective *Degas: A New Vision* (Melbourne and Houston, 2016-17), the most significant survey of Degas's career in nearly 30 years. In Britain two scholarly shows focused on early collectors of Degas: *Drawn in Colour: Degas from the Burrell* (National Gallery, London, 2017-18) provided a unique opportunity to see twenty works from this much overlooked collection and *Degas: A Passion for Perfection* at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (2017-18) focused on Degas's experimentation with new techniques.

Although both collecting and technical experimentation are themes that emerge from Brown's volume, the essays are on the whole, less object-oriented than theoretically and historically driven, authored by predominantly anglophone academics (with the notable exception of Shao-Chien Tseng and Jonas Beyer). Indeed, like all impressionist studies since the 1960s (although the tide is definitely turning), Degas scholarship has been dominated by British and North American writers: Brown cites the ground-breaking work of John Rewald, Theodore Reff, Richard Kendall, Clifford Ackley, Richard Thomson and others. One might (and should) add the significant scholarship of the great French museum director Henri Loyrette, whose collection of essays *Degas inédit* (1989) arguably bookends the current publication. Female commentators have also, consistently, played a prominent role, and Brown highlights the important contribution of Jean Sutherland Boggs, Carol Armstrong, Griselda Pollock and others. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that this volume, in which eleven of the twelve essays are by women, reflects the current prominence of female academics in the Impressionist field, even if, at the same time--and possibly as a consequence--the essays display a preponderance of gendered readings, as well as a tendency towards psychological interpretation of the artist's oeuvre.

The book is divided thematically, into three sections, beginning with a series of essays that address Degas's works in the wider context of issues such as gender, race and "labour." Work is the focus of all five essays in this first section: from the labour of a humble washerwoman or

waiter to the sporting prowess of a jockey and the “performance” of a circus trapeze artist or café concert singer. Given the task of “revisiting” Degas, several essays adopt a historiographical approach, offering a useful (if at times somewhat self-reflective) analysis and revision of the secondary literature. This is, thankfully, balanced by passages of extensive, often compelling, visual analysis. Disappointingly, however, the decision by Routledge to include poor quality black-and-white reproductions negates this approach, potentially perpetuating the tendency by academics to engage in discourse around the works of art, rather than observing closely.

Norma Broude’s essay analyses Degas’s images of working-women and horses, taking as her starting-point Degas’s pastel drawing *Washerwomen and Horses* (c. 1904, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne). While lamenting that the socio-political agenda has been woefully downplayed in recent scholarship, Broude urges that such images should be read in the context of, “a culture rife with gendered stereotypes and parallels between women and horses as objects of domination” (p. 29). However she admits that the studies also reflect Degas’s empathy with horses and can be seen more objectively as “extensions of Degas’s life-long search for expressive bodily gestures...in his studies of the human figure” (p. 26). Shao-Chien Tseng’s thought-provoking essay broadens out the discussion to Degas’s racehorse paintings, which are considered in the light of nineteenth-century conventions around professional and amateur racing. Works such as *Scene from the Steeplechase* (1866, National Gallery of Art, Washington), *Racehorses before the Stands* (1866-68, Musée d’Orsay), and *Jockeys* (c. 1882, Yale University Art Gallery) are reinterpreted in the light of Degas’s supposed insecurity about his social class, as well as classical ideals of athleticism and masculinity.

Indeed, several of the essays in this volume interpret (and potentially over-interpret) Degas’s work in relation to personal anxieties about his background and position in society and/or his sexuality and physical prowess. Marilyn R. Brown, for instance, in her revelatory essay on the performers Olga and Kaïra, argues that Degas’s *Miss La-La* should be read in relation to the artist’s insecurity about his own mixed-race background and ambivalence towards his chosen model’s gender. This essay is astonishingly timely, given that Degas’s painting plays a major role in *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*, the exhibition currently showing at the Musée d’Orsay. Mary Hunter, in her extended analysis of *The Spectators*, likens Degas, “the self-proclaimed *working artist*,” to the “marginalized” and physically inferior figure of the waiter (p. 54). Meanwhile, Jonas Beyer sees the artist’s “psychological indecision,” that is, his supposed ambivalence towards women, reflected in the “unresolved” appearance of his monotypes of women bathers. Since Degas was supposedly “outed” as a full-blooded heterosexual by Loyrette in the 1990s, it is curious that the artist’s sexual ambivalence remains a focus of discussion.

A different approach is offered in Marni Reva Kessler’s essay which provides a phenomenological analysis of Degas’s *Princess Pauline de Metternich* (c. 1865, National Gallery, London). Kessler argues that, far from copying the *carte de visite* on which the portrait is based, Degas deliberately blurred the image, creating a living, organic equivalence of this eccentric figure, wife of the Austrian ambassador, who was notorious for smoking cigars and for her bawdy imitations of performers at the *café concert*. Kessler’s strangely compelling essay introduces the second section of the book, which focuses on “Making and materiality,” taking into consideration Degas’s forays into media other than painting. Both Patricia Failing and Jonas Beyer examine the artist’s experiments with multimedia. Failing’s essay on Degas’s sculptures addresses the knotty problem of establishing a chronology based on the artist’s use

of different media in his sculptures and their armature, taking into consideration recent technical analysis by the National Gallery of Art, Washington and the Norton Simon Museum of Art. Beyer, meanwhile, calls for the need to examine Degas's monotypes in relation to his experiments in other media, especially lithography and pastel. He describes his bather and landscape monotypes as "pictures in flux," existing somewhere between drawing and printmaking. Extending this analysis, Kathryn Brown analyses the *Famille Cardinal* monotypes, demonstrating how they stand alone from Halévy's text, running counter to the author's intentions. Whereas Halévy offers the reader a glimpse behind the scenes at the Opera, allowing him access to the intimate world of dancers and their consorts, Degas (as Brown reveals) consciously obstructs and confounds, deliberately excluding the viewer from this closed and secret world, and anticipating similar tactics in his later pastels and monotypes.

The final, shortest section, "Writing' Degas," ostensibly focuses on the way that art historians and artists (in the case of Anna Gruetzer Robins's essay on Sickert) have written about Degas. Ruth E. Iskin compares different attitudes to Degas and Mary Cassatt as collectors and supporters of Impressionism, highlighting the tendency among art historians to downplay and devalue Cassatt's role in the formation of American collections, despite evidence to the contrary. Moving from art collecting to psychoanalysis, Heather Dawkins's slightly disjointed essay examines the concept of the "extended mind," in relation to Degas's practice while he was living at 37, rue Victor-Massé and working on the *Bathers* series from 1890-1912. Reflecting on the writing of George Hagman, Dawkins proposes that the entire series, completed over repeated sessions in the cluttered yet unchanging space of the studio, was a repository for Degas's suppressed and conflicted emotions relating to his mother's death.

In the final essay in this volume Robins revisits a selection of lesser-known accounts by Walter Sickert of his meetings and conversations with Degas, and discusses the artist's preoccupation with Ingres in his pastel of *Six Friends at Dieppe* (1885, Rhode Island School of Design). Halévy reappears in a satisfying echo of Brown's essay; one of the most admirable qualities of this volume is the care taken by the editor to make links across all the essays, so that the book works as a coherent whole.

In the end, fascinating new information emerges from this volume. We learn that waiters in Paris were not permitted to grow moustaches until 1908 (Hunter, p. 63); that cartoonists such as Cham and Draner linked the corrupting influences of Impressionism with miscarriage or even sterility (Callen, p. 86); that the performer Olga could support a cannon with her teeth while suspended in mid-air (Brown, p. 102); that Degas used rope and even paintbrushes to construct the internal armature of his *Little Dancer* (Failing, plate 6) and that he sometimes used a plumb line to organise his compositions (Robins, p. 248). In the end, despite the vast body of literature devoted to this artist, and the numerous exhibitions, both past and currently in preparation, this latest publication provides important new perspectives on the artist.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Kathryn Brown, "Introduction"

Norma Broude, "Revisiting Degas: a meditation on women, horses, and nature"

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Shao-Chien Tseng, “Sport and embodiment: Degas’s racecourse scenes”

Mary Hunter, “*Garçon!* Waiters, labour, and performance in Edgar Degas’s *The Spectators*”

Anthea Callen, “The female spectator of modern art and the spectacle of medicalized femininity”

Marilyn R. Brown, “‘Miss La La’s’ teeth: further reflections on Degas and ‘race’”

Marni Reva Kessler, “Edgar Degas’s *Princess Pauline de Metternich* and the phenomenological swirl”

Patricia Failing, “Degas’s sculpture: the inside story”

Jonas Beyer, “Pictures in flux: Degas’s monotypes and some notes on their relation to other media”

Kathryn Brown, “Intimacy and exclusion: Degas’s illustrations for Ludovic Halévy’s *La Famille Cardinal*”

Ruth E. Iskin, “The collecting practices of Degas and Cassatt: gender and the construction of value in art history”

Heather Dawkins, “Degas and subjectivity: from psychoanalysis to the extended mind”

Anna Gruetzner Robins, “In his own words: Walter Sickert’s writings on Degas”

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