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Norma Broude, ed. *Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018. xiii + 306 pp. Plates, notes, bibliography, and index. £72.00 (hb.) ISBN 978150132515; £23.39 (pb.) ISBN 9781501342509.

Review by Allan Doyle, University of Arkansas.

The legacy of Paul Gauguin speaks to the politics of our present moment unlike any other nineteenth-century French artist. Even as blockbuster exhibitions circulate the globe and his works achieve record-setting prices, mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* ask: “Is It Time Gauguin Got Canceled?”^[1] Or, as a student put it more bluntly after a recent survey lecture: “If this guy is such a jerk, why are we still talking about him?” This student had read articles published by feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Griselda Pollock, which castigated Gauguin’s works and critical reception as evincing sexist and colonialist beliefs.^[2] Although Gauguin’s status within the modernist canon ultimately withstood these challenges, in the wake of the renewed criticism of white male primitivist ideology of the last several years, one begins to wonder if his time is finally up. Even if one were to set aside the question of whether scholars *should* devote more energy to such a politically and morally compromised artist, given the vast existing literature on the painter, one might just as easily question the payoff of doing so. Is there really much new to say about Gauguin anyway?

Enter Norma Broude’s *Gauguin’s Challenge*, a timely collection of essays that explicitly takes on the problem of what to do with Gauguin in the wake of feminist and postcolonial critique. The contributors to this outstanding interdisciplinary anthology provide ample evidence of the enduring relevance of the admittedly problematic painter by drawing upon new sources and/or employing new interpretive lenses. As Broude lays out in her helpful introduction, the included authors place a notable emphasis on the importance of his literary production coupled with close attention to the material properties of his use of a diverse range of media. Several authors also combine this materialist focus with a return to theoretical models derived from literary analysis that identify and mine moments of indeterminacy or paradox. A profoundly conflicted colonialist, Gauguin is presented here as a case study of the problem of intercultural appropriation and exchange; his is an example that is urgently relevant to our current moment not *despite* his problematic political status but *because* of it. If Gauguin can be saved from himself in this regard, it is because the self that he presents is as unstable as it is self-aware. The ostensibly secure subject position of the male colonial master is here revealed to be fissured by anxiety and manifestly riven by confusions of gender, class, and ethnicity.

The book is organized into three sections beginning with a group of chapters focusing on the painter's use of multifarious identities, followed by a second dealing with his involvement with Symbolism, science and spirituality. The final portion traces his reception and legacy in the work of later, non-Western artists including contemporary practitioners from Oceania.

Linda Goddard's "Gauguin's Alter Egos: Writing the Other and the Self," extends the pioneering work of Stephen Eisenmann, Lee Wallace, and Hal Foster that explored the French painter's fragile colonial masculinity.^[3] Goddard focuses our attention on the ways in which his literary works posit a range of authorial voices through strategies of citation, allusion, and pseudonymous authorship. His manuscripts combine printed and handwritten texts alongside newspaper clippings, drawings, watercolor sketches, and the like. Disjointed and fragmentary, they juxtapose various kinds of writings--both his own and those of others--alongside sketches, copies of artworks, and mechanically-reproduced images. The scrapbook aesthetic of his albums shows Gauguin's magpie-sensibility at work in a manner that is often obscured in published works. At times Gauguin acknowledges his sources, while at others he shows a singular lack of concern with attribution. Instead of condemning such appropriative strategies as plagiarism, Goddard finds no evidence of a desire to mislead. Instead, she concludes that the "variety of sources (whether intended as doubly authenticating, or mystifying) seems to be the *point*, rather than a guilty secret that is obscured" (p. 25). For Goddard, Gauguin's manuscripts demonstrate the conflicted and performative nature of identity. For example, she asks what we should make of his having written a dedication to his daughter, Aline, on the cover of one of his notebooks. Noting that dedicatees are not usually considered the sole reader of a text, Goddard argues that Gauguin's dedication signals his using his daughter as an alter ego rather than a presumed reader. Such devices enabled the artist to traverse sexual, cultural and racial difference in what she takes to be a sincere "working-through of his own, awkward position as an outsider to both the colonial and indigenous communities" (p. 33). For Goddard, rather than a melancholic loss of a unitary self, Gauguin's multifarious authorship demonstrates his knowing exploration of the performative nature of identity and the mutual imbrication of self and other.

Goddard's analysis of the artist's refusal of unified, heteronormative authorship is echoed in Irina Stotland's "Paul Gauguin's Self-Portraits in Polynesia: Androgyny and Ambivalence." Stotland examines the structure of sexual ambivalence in Gauguin's nine Tahitian self-portraits. Using the notion of "transcendent androgyny," she scrupulously traces the artist's use of this category by locating these works within a broader discourse of the period. At times representing himself in exoticizing drag, Gauguin repeatedly obscured the gender status of his subjects. Self-portraiture, she argues, enabled Gauguin to simultaneously embrace and disavow same-sex desire, engaging in a gender-fluid masquerade that subverted heteronormative structures of colonial power.

Gauguin's relationship to his grandmother, the utopian socialist and feminist, Flora Tristan, is the focus of Broude's own chapter. She investigates how the notoriously misogynist artist also drew upon Tristan's radical ideas advocating for the sexual and social empowerment of women in concert with a broader rejection of the restrictive standards of European femininity. Inspired by Tristan, Broude contends, Gauguin exhibited an "activist impulse" that engaged with contemporary gender politics (p. 82). The women that populate his Tahitian canvases like his *Two Women* (ca. 1901), a double portrait of a Tahitian woman and her niece, functioned as signifiers of a matrilineal society. These works testify to the artist's pursuit of "alternative forms of social organization that had privileged the female in pre-colonial myth and culture" (p. 85).

Neither moralizing critic nor apologist, Broude advocates for addressing the full complexity of Gauguin's relationship to the feminine. Doing so, she holds, allows us to challenge overhasty, binary critiques that align him with the patriarchal values that he openly denounced.

Dario Gamboni's contribution begins the second section of *Gauguin's Challenge*. Building upon his prior publications he calls for would-be interpreters to respect the artist's embrace of mystery and his rejection of iconographic explanations of his works. Gamboni underscores Gauguin's use of strategies of polyiconicity and ambiguity that demand the imaginative participation of the viewer. Furthermore, he argues that the logocentrism of traditional art history cannot do justice to these objects, which do not fit easily within the existing, teleological accounts of the development of modernist abstraction. Demonstrating an alternative approach with a close reading of *Above the Abyss* (1888), he notes that the negative space formed by the edge of a cliff may be identified as a portrait of the artist or two non-human heads. He links such polyvalent two-dimensional works to the painter's use of multiple "potential images" in other media, such as his ceramic vessels, which invite viewing from multiple vantages. Defending polyiconicity as a "universal mode of visual art," Gamboni holds up Gauguin as a challenge to Western art-historical methodologies that privilege textual sources and objective fact over subjective interpretation rooted in visual experience (p. 120).

The visual attentiveness demonstrated by Gamboni is coupled with close textual analysis in Alastair Wright's discussion of *Noa Noa*. As Wright observes, Gauguin's text ostensibly testifies to the artist's intimate connection with Tahiti, yet it also acknowledges a gap between the European and his adopted home that he metaphorizes as a kind of blindness. Informed by Paul de Man's deconstructive analysis of Symbolist poetry, Wright's close reading reveals how the lacunae and delays of Gauguin's writings foreground "language's inability to fully seize its objects" (p. 134). For Wright, Gauguin's fractured prose foregrounds the resistance of a material world in constant metamorphosis to signification. He further argues that the crude, deep cuts in the accompanying prints obscure as much as they reveal, presenting the reader-viewer with an inky occlusion of vision akin to blindness. For Wright, the insistent materiality of the reproductive matrix is like the material opacity of the linguistic sign that forecloses transparency and unmediated access to the real.

Martha Lucy examines Gauguin's primitivism in light of nineteenth-century theories of evolution and prehistory. As she shows, colonialist discourse equated geographic distance with prehistoric cultures that were considered to be locked in a state of perpetual infancy or fossilization. Viewed in this light, the naked women in fetal positions found on the tropical shore of *Day of the God* (1894) evoke the emergence of life from a prismatic, primordial ooze (p. 164). Lucy argues that paintings like *Tahitian Eve* (1892) and the *Noa Noa* prints betray a desire to recover origins and a melancholic sense of loss, symptomatic of fin-de-siècle evolutionary unease. Barbara Larson also situates Gauguin within the scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse of his day that have received insufficient scholarly attention, namely vitalism and contemporary brain science. Drawing on his "The Catholic Church and Modern Times" (1897), she connects Gauguin's works with a diverse range of sources from the occult to psychophysiological color theory. Notably, Larson provides a powerful reading of *Vision After the Sermon* (1888), and *Where do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* (1897) within the context of mesmerism and theories of the transmigration of souls, respectively. In the following chapter, June Hargrove provides further evidence of the crucial role of spirituality in Gauguin's work by viewing his late, Marquesan canvases through the lens of his own Theosophy-inflected writings. She identifies

William Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* (1860), as a prototype for *Marquesan Man in Red Cape* (1902). She discusses this canvas alongside his *Bathers* (1902) in regard to Gauguin's syncretic mix of Christian, Buddhist, and Maori beliefs.

In the final section of Broude's anthology, Elizabeth Childs reexamines Gauguin's relationship with his Polynesian lover Teha'amana, of whom few independently-verifiable facts are known. Childs speculates that the young teenager may have viewed her relationship with the middle-aged European artist as a strategic one that would yield social benefits for herself and her family. Taking note of the fact that Teha'amana declined to rejoin his household when he returned to Tahiti in 1895, Childs observes that it "seems likely she had used him as much in her own way, as he had used her; agency is probably not one-sided here" (p. 232). Her essay proceeds to offer two case studies of later women painters who adopted Gauguin as a progenitor including the German Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Hungarian-Indian Amrita Sher-Gil. The latter's *Self Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934) explicitly references Gauguin's portraits while representing herself standing in front of a Japanese screen. For Childs, she thereby "asserts strength in her own hybridity by referencing [the] tradition within modernism that grounded itself through the incorporation and reinvention of the foreign" (p. 241). Childs concludes with a discussion of the photocollages of Maori artist Kay George and Samoan artist Tyla Vaeau Ta'ufo'ou. The European male here functions as a muse and provides an empowering means to reflect on his complex legacy that remains a force in the visual culture of the Pacific region. Heather Waldroup's concluding chapter, "Re-Possessing Gauguin: Material Histories and the Contemporary Pacific" further explores the afterlife of Gauguin's work by contemporary Pacific artists Debra Drexler and Adrienne Pao.

As these necessarily brief summaries indicate, *Gauguin's Challenge* is a rich survey of recent scholarship that admirably shows this artist's relevance for our politically fraught present. This is attributable to his paradoxical and hybrid identity, his being both a colonial subject who vociferously bemoaned the impact of French imperialism, and a heterosexual male who simultaneously critiqued and benefited from patriarchy. The portrait of Gauguin's practice that emerges in these essays is that of a singularly complicated artist, one whose work calls to be read within overlapping aesthetic, political, scientific and social discourses. For a field that is currently questioning its own implicit Eurocentrism, Gauguin's fate may parallel that of Western art history itself. As Broude and her authors demonstrate, he provides an opportunity for moving beyond moralizing critiques that blind us to the complexity of objects, expanding areas of inquiry, and rethinking broader patterns of interpretation.

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Linda Goddard, "Gauguin's Alter Egos: Writing the Other and the Self"

Irina Stotland, "Paul Gauguin's Self-Portraits in Polynesia: Androgyny and Ambivalence"

Norma Broude, "Flora Tristan's Grandson: Reconsidering the Feminist critique of Paul Gauguin"

Dario Gamboni, "Gauguin and the Challenge of Ambiguity"

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Barbara Larson, "Gauguin: Vitalist, Hypnotist"

June E. Hargrove, "'All men could be Buddhas': Paul Gauguin's Marquesan Diptych"

Elizabeth C. Childs, "Taking Back Teha'amana: Feminist Interventions in Gauguin's Legacy"

Heather Waldroup, "Re-Possessing Gauguin: Material Histories and the Contemporary Pacific"

NOTES

[1] Farah Nayeri, "Is It Time Gauguin Got Canceled?" *The New York Times*, November 18, 2019. Accessed March 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/arts/design/gauguin-national-gallery-london.html>.

[2] Linda Nochlin, "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art," in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 136-144; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 312-19; Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

[3] Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997); Hal Foster, "Primitive Scenes," in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 1-52; Lee Wallace, *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003).

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