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Marni Reva Kessler, *Discomfort Food: The Culinary Imagination in Late Nineteenth-Century French Art*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. xxv + 291 pp. Figures, black-and-white photographs, color plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-5179-0879-9; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). 978-1-5179-0880-5.

Review by Allison MacDuffee, University of Toronto.

From Pompeii to Andy Warhol, depictions of food in art tell the story of who we are. In *Discomfort Food: The Culinary Imagination in Late Nineteenth-Century French Art*, Marni Reva Kessler examines selected works by Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Antoine Vollon, and Gustave Caillebotte. Kessler's subject is not still life in general, but pictures of edible things. Her method is to begin with detailed visual analysis and then branch out to biography, social history, gastronomy, landscape architecture, and other fields, always returning to the object again to look more closely. The wide-ranging evidence she consults includes art historical and historical studies, letters, memoirs, novels, cookery books, and works of literary theory. Kessler, a Professor of Art History at the University of Kansas and a specialist in nineteenth-century art, is the author of *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris*. [1]

Considering food in the context of profound societal change (industrialisation, urban transformation, food shortages, and war), Kessler writes that "edible things--whether real or represented--could be especially freighted sources of both comfort and discomfort" (p. xviii). Images that initially seem straightforward or pleasant can, on closer examination, become a source of unease. Interpreting these works historically, Kessler writes, "allows us to begin to construe some of the elements that combine to yield the images' seemingly contradictory effects" (p. xviii). Her aim is to "investigate certain renderings of food as material objects that have a relationship with their actual counterparts in the world..."(p. xxi). These works "evoke the promise of great pleasure and comfort. But each one, too, embodies and sparks a countervailing arc of discomfort" (p. xxv).

Each of Kessler's four chapters consider a different kind of food: seafood, dairy, fruit, and meat. Chapter one, "Édouard Manet's *Fish (Still Life)* and the Melancholy of the Mullet," introduces a main theme: these foodstuffs are not what they seem. Manet's *Fish (Still Life)* of 1864 (Art Institute of Chicago) apparently displays the ingredients of a delicious fish stew--two kinds of fish, an eel, oysters, a lemon, and parsley. But, as Kessler carefully shows, Manet's painting lacks many key ingredients needed for such a stew. Adding to our disquiet, the fish and eels (although dead) appear as if struggling, and the tablecloth is a damp, soiled mess. In sum, the painting inspires "loss" and "revulsion" (pp. 3, 6). Likening this still life to a crime scene, Kessler considers

it in relation to advances in forensic science and criminology and the rise of detective fiction in the nineteenth century. The fish, who “vacillate between life and death,” also inspire Kessler to consider the impact of the new Paris Morgue, opened in 1864. The morgue attracted many visitors, among them Manet’s friend Émile Zola, although we do know for certain if Manet went there too. After learning of how the morgue’s methods of display bore striking similarities to Manet’s fishy array, we are left, not looking forward to a fragrant stew, but thinking of death and post-mortem decay.

In chapter two, “Clarifying and Compounding Antoine Vollon’s *Mound of Butter*,” Kessler examines this 1875-1885 painting (National Gallery of Art, Washington) where the huge butter mound is accompanied by a knife and two eggs. To explore this image, Kessler considers food history, penal reform, and the ideas of Georges Bataille. In *Mound of Butter*, everything is volatile because butter is an “inconvenient and unreliable” model (p. 52). Keeping butter fresh was a challenge in the pre-refrigeration era, so cookery authors in nineteenth-century France suggested various techniques to counteract rancidity. Vendors adulterated butter and colored it to make it seem more natural and appealing. One alarming practice, as described by Zola in his 1873 novel, *Le Ventre de Paris*, was “amalgamation,” scooping up discarded fragments from the market floor to make one composite mass (p. 63). Kessler points out that Vollon’s butter, so perishable and unstable, embodies Georges Bataille’s concept of the formless, the *informe*. The mound also has a sombre resonance. Its resemblance to a severed human head calls to mind the late nineteenth-century debate over the practice of capital punishment, including the use of the guillotine. This human resemblance may be difficult for every reader to see. But Kessler’s main conclusion—certainly true—is that butter in Vollon’s painting wavers at the edge of representing itself or something else. To use Freud’s term, it is uncanny.

Chapter three, “Gustave Caillebotte’s *Fruit Displayed on a Stand* and the Ghost of the Lost City” provides a change of mood. Caillebotte’s 1881-1882 painting (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), with its splendid array of array of apples, pears, plums, and other fruit, is wholesome enough. But there is a shadow too, referencing Paris’s lost past. In a multifaceted argument, Kessler demonstrates the gridded complexity of Caillebotte’s shop display. She links it to the new spaces of Haussmann’s Paris and Caillebotte’s own paintings of these urban perspectives. Kessler shows how Caillebotte used “urban spatial terms” to organize the fruit (p. 109), calling to mind colored maps of the changing metropolis, and Nadar’s pioneering aerial photography. She also draws meaningful links to the growing of fruit and garden design. As an active landowner, Caillebotte laid out and planted his own gardens at his estates near Paris, employing the prevailing visual grammar of straight lines for the vegetable and flower beds and paths. But the *Fruit Displayed on a Stand* is not perfectly orderly. As Kessler notes, Caillebotte also destabilizes this display. Certain fruits are blemished and some are precariously balanced. In this, Kessler sees an echo of the lost pre-Haussmann Paris.

Chapter four, “Edgar Degas’s Beef and the Double Life of Édouard Manet’s *Ham*,” looks at portraiture and food with reference to themes of sadness, anger, destruction, and restoration. Although Degas rarely depicted food, he did include meat in the two works considered here: an oil portrait of circa 1866 and a photograph of 1895. In both these works, cuts of animal flesh “complicate the pictorial narrative” (p. 155). *Portrait of a Man* (Brooklyn Museum) depicts a melancholy, unidentified sitter flanked by raw meat: an uncooked roast of beef, a sausage and a bloody pig’s trotter. The complex, carefully staged gelatin silver print, *Edgar Degas et Albert Bartholomé dans l’appartement de Degas* (Bibliothèque nationale de France), depicts Degas and his

artist friend in a corner of Degas's apartment. By directing our attention to three art works displayed together in the apartment--Degas's mutilated double portrait, *Monsieur et Madame Édouard Manet*, circa 1868-1869 (Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art, Japan), Manet's oil painting *Ham*, circa 1875-1878 (Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums), and a Manet color lithograph--Degas references a famous incident of 1868 or 1869. In this incident, Manet took a penknife and mutilated the Degas double portrait. Kessler argues that Manet's painting *Ham* is a critical ingredient in Degas's "restoration" of the double portrait (p. 184). Referring to nineteenth-century medical illustrations and popular postcard images, she discovers significant formal rhyming between the meat-themed still life and the fragmentary depiction of Suzanne Monet.

These chapter summaries can only scratch the surface of this fascinating book. In *Discomfort Food*, Kessler's close and thoughtful visual analysis is a major strength. She considers the works in detail and engages the reader's interest with vivid language. For example, in chapter one, Manet's eel "slinks along like an innocent coming upon victims of an unseen crime..." (p. 12). Oysters "are massed in a quivering heap" (p. 1). Vollon's *Butter* has "creamy cushions of pale buttercup yellow..." (p. 47). She returns to certain works repeatedly, drawing out new aspects and identifications. Each chapter proceeds clearly and logically, and the documentation (endnotes and bibliography) is ample.

However, there were two places where I found Kessler's argument not completely convincing. In chapter one, where Kessler considers Manet's *Fish (Still Life)* in relation to the display of cadavers at the Paris Morgue, I did find the analogy relevant. However, perhaps this link can only be tentative until direct evidence of Manet having visited the morgue comes to light. With Vollon's *Butter*, I could not see the resemblance to a severed head that Kessler discerns. In both of these cases, I do not fault Kessler for pursuing her argument a bit further than I could follow, as there is so much to value in her ideas.

Discomfort Food opens a new approach in late nineteenth-century art studies. By viewing these works not within the tradition of still life, but rather in relation to real life, Kessler gives us a new perspective. This book would be ideal to assign to upper-year undergraduate and graduate students. Kessler's skilled blending of visual analysis and careful research is exemplary. In *Discomfort Food*, Marni Reva Kessler has written an absorbing and important book. Now, if I can only manage to forget all the horrible things they did to butter.

NOTE

[1] Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

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