
H-France Review Vol. 21 (November 2021), No. 210

Allison Deutsch, *Consuming Painting: Food and the Feminine in Impressionist Paris*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. xii + 200 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-08723-8.

Review by Kurt E. Rahmlow, University of North Texas.

In *Consuming Painting: Food and the Feminine in Impressionist Paris*, Allison Deutsch considers how visual and linguistic imagery of edibles functioned in the development and critical reception of early avant-garde painting in France. The author's immediate goal is to demonstrate that the new painting provoked, in supporters and antagonists alike, an embodied experience of viewing that has been largely ignored by historians of modern art. She notes that this imagery—whether pictorial or literary—was “deeply gendered”; that is, it both drew from and bolstered prevailing conceptions of gender identity in its context (p. 8). Deutsch positions her study to contest the longstanding ocularcentrism of modernist art history—a trend that has ignored and devalued other forms of sensory experience and has, as she writes, “hindered our ability to examine the intertwining of visual and visceral and to interrogate the gender politics of the sensory hierarchy operative in nineteenth-century France” (p. 11).

In pursuing this route, Deutsch contributes to a growing trend within art historical scholarship that aims to destabilize, if not actually overturn, Clement Greenberg's influential characterization of modern painting as a purely visual art form. In his landmark essay on the subject, originally published in 1960, Greenberg defined the history of modern art as the process by which each medium was “rendered ‘pure’” by engaging in critical self-analysis. In Greenberg's narrative, each art form gradually (over time) eradicated any appropriation of rival art forms, so that it became “more conscious of itself”—in other words, truly “modern” painting, as an example, evolved to overtly focus upon the exploration of its own nature as a medium (in its flatness, its use of pigment, etc.).^[1] As a consequence, the Greenbergian painting exists for the viewer as a “strictly optical” experience, denying the viewer any awareness of corporeal involvement in the act of observation. Over the last half century, this conception has been embraced and extended by numerous authors, such as Michael Fried, in his well-known essay “Art as Objecthood” (1967), in which Fried rejects the “theatrical” process of viewing—that is, the embodied performance that takes place self-consciously, in an awareness of space and time—in favor of the “presentness,” or “grace,” of the purely immediate and optical one.^[2] But Greenbergian ocularcentrism has also been critiqued by numerous artists and writers. The Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd praised the greater authenticity and complexity of works that rejected medium-specific boundaries, while the feminist cultural critic Luce Irigaray identified the privileging of optical experience as a primary mechanism of sexism, remarking that it enables objectification, as well as an

“impoverishment of bodily relations.”[3] It is to the latter critique that Deutsch attempts to contribute, in particular. In tracing references to food, whether salivating or nauseating in its impact, Deutsch underscores the bodily character of the viewing experience. Without seeking to deny the evident primacy of visuality in nineteenth-century France, Deutsch offers her study to demonstrate the value of “marginalized...registers of experience,” and ultimately, to “interrogate the gender politics of the sensory hierarchy operative in nineteenth-century France” (p. 11).

Deutsch frames her study as an exploration of metaphor, both linguistic and visual. The author identifies linguistic metaphor as a robust device by which both detractors and supporters articulated their responses to early modernist painting. More specifically, the author focuses on the appearance of food-related imagery, as it appeared in critiques and encomiums of late-Realist and Impressionist work. At times, this means attending to the ways in which culinary art, as an increasingly authoritative cultural mode, informed critics’ responses to specific art works, as well as to new trends in painting, more generally. While Deutsch devotes lengthy and careful attention to close readings of linguistic texts, she does not neglect to analyze the art works themselves. Here, too, Deutsch uses metaphorical association as an avenue to considering the ways that paintings engaged with one another and addressed attitudes and trends within the wider cultural context. Along the way, the author uncovers and interprets a wealth of material drawn from the contemporary periodical literature, including exhibition reviews and illustrations from magazines on both the visual and the culinary arts.

Deutsch begins her study by examining early works by Édouard Manet alongside critical evaluations of that work, including canonical texts by Émile Zola. In chapter one, Deutsch discusses one of Manet’s few salon successes, *Le Bon Bock* (1873), and reviews its reception in the popular print media. She then traces references to food and culinary practice in Zola’s critical discussions of art, with a particular focus on Zola’s well-known celebrations of Manet’s work. Deutsch’s point in doing so is to demonstrate that the same texts that have been referenced to establish the ocularcentrism of Zola’s analysis might also be used to establish the vital roles that taste and smell played within that author’s rhetoric. Deutsch concludes with an extended analysis of Manet’s series of still life compositions depicting seafood from 1864, arguing—based on critics’ responses and the formal qualities of the works themselves—that these paintings prompted (and continue to elicit) extra-ocular sensory experiences.

In chapter two, Deutsch addresses allusions to flesh in paintings by Manet and Caillebotte, as well as in critical evaluations of late-Realist and Impressionist work. Deutsch begins the chapter by surveying reviews of Manet’s *succès de scandale*, *Olympia* (1863), paying particular attention to discussions of ripe and rotting flesh in that literature. The author then concludes the chapter with an extended analysis of Caillebotte’s *Veal in a Butcher’s Shop* (ca. 1882)—a lesser-known work (and a very curious one, at that, as Deutsch recognizes). Deutsch very cleverly reads the composition as a conceptual pendant to Manet’s earlier piece, one that plays, in particular, upon misogynist metaphors equating women’s bodies with meat prepared for sale.

In chapter three, the author focuses on references to “confections” (pastries and sweets, especially) in art critical discourse and works by Impressionist painters. Deutsch argues that confections frequently surfaced in depictions of feminine subjects in popular prints, especially caricatures, as well as in discussions of paintings depicting fashionable women. Deutsch shifts focus mid-chapter to consider how descriptions of the built-up, creamy, seemingly frosted surface of Impressionist art operated in reviews of those works, and she concludes with a discussion of paintings by Monet

and Caillebotte. Deutsch's final remarks of the chapter explore lines of similarity between Caillebotte's *Langouste à la Parisienne* (1880-82), a still life of a popular seafood dish, and images of Parisiennes in the visual culture of late-nineteenth-century Paris. Deutsch reads the painting as a commentary on constructions of femininity in that context—one that echoes images of fashionable women, and thereby unveils and upsets “the seamless transition...that moves from viewing to physical appetite and between alimentary and sexual consumption” (p. 111).

In chapter four, Deutsch focuses on Camille Pissarro, who was sardonically known among critics of the day as a “painter of cabbages,” and treats the artist's representations of women and men selling and harvesting vegetables. She begins by decoding recurring references to cabbages in art criticism, broadly speaking, before discussing the role that the vegetable played, more particularly, in the critique of Pissarro's work. She then examines the series of watercolor paintings that Pissarro created depicting Les Halles, the massive open-air market in Paris, before concluding the chapter by reading Pissarro's *The Gardener--Old Peasant with Cabbage* (1883-95) as a metaphorical self-portrait, one in which the laboring gardener stands in for the laboring artist, for whom “the pruning of cabbages...[symbolized] the progressive peeling away of the layers of experience, those fleeting, distracting, or superficially appealing aspects, in order to arrive at an essence or core” of a subject (p. 141).

Deutsch's conclusion centers on a brief and loosely related examination of Gustave Courbet's *The Artist's Studio* (1854-55) in the context of caricatures from the popular press, several of which echo the composition and themes of Courbet's ambitious and complex self-portrait. The shift in attention, turning back toward Realism, works against the more-or-less chronological trajectory of the study and threatens to undermine the unity of the project, particularly as the discussion abandons its focus on foodstuffs and cuisine. However, Deutsch does wind up the segment with a brief summary of her larger project.

Overall, Deutsch has drafted a well-informed, innovative, and substantive contribution to the critique of Greenbergian ocularcentrism. Deutsch offers incisive close readings (and especially re-readings) of critical texts, some of which have played a key role in writing the history of the early avant-garde. In particular, Deutsch takes Zola's oft-quoted remarks on Manet—in “Une nouvelle manière en peinture: Eugène Manet” (1867), for instance—in new and interesting directions, and her analysis is persuasive. As much of her work depends upon the close reading of linguistic texts, the author has provided the original French at key moments—where her interpretations hinge upon precise word choice—and she demonstrates a careful attention to the resonance of particular terms. Deutsch develops her arguments thoroughly and convincingly within more localized discussion. She uses her evidence well in supporting her assertions, and her analysis is both incisive and convincing. On a purely stylistic level, Deutsch's prose is relaxed and engaging, making the study a pleasure to read. Deutsch's visual analysis is equally incisive and convincing, and she offers a balanced treatment of canonical and lesser-known works.

Yet despite the evident strengths of the effort, Deutsch has struggled to craft a cohesive study. The issue is signaled in the book's title, which, in this reviewer's opinion, is not quite accurate in its description of the project. As noted above, Deutsch devotes her first chapter and half of her second chapter (in this four-chapter study) to re-considering early works by Manet. To be sure, there are later works by that artist that might easily be characterized as Impressionist on stylistic grounds, or perhaps in consideration of subject matter, etc., despite that artist's well-known antagonism to the label, but the works that Deutsch has selected, many of which date from the

early 1860s, are at the very least, debatable foci in a study of Impressionist Paris. Much the same could be said of the work that features in the conclusion (Courbet's *The Artist's Studio*), which dates from the middle of the preceding decade and, despite its idiosyncrasies, is generally discussed as a canonical example of Realist painting. More substantively, perhaps, analysis ranges somewhat tangentially at times within individual chapters. For instance, in chapter two, Deutsch extends a discussion of Zola's use of culinary metaphors to address his use of medical/anatomical metaphor at some length. Deutsch argues that the two contexts are linked through a mutual reference to "flesh." The author treats the latter as the "underside to the allusions to cookery that Zola so often elaborated, a twin discourse wherein the artist serves up, butchers, or dissects his model and the critic does the same to the artist" (pp. 57-58), but the link feels forced. And while Deutsch has attempted, over the course of the monograph, to explore the intersection of several structuring themes—allusions to senses of taste and smell, images of food, references to cooking and eating, and conceptions of feminine identity in the era—as part of a complex cultural matrix, Deutsch tends to address those themes by turns, rather than as component parts of an integrated study.

Finally, readers may be surprised to find that, in a project aimed at addressing the construction of feminine identity, the author largely ignores the contributions made by women artists. In a widely read essay, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Griselda Pollock has considered the more embodied nature of viewing that is evident in Mary Cassatt's and Berthe Morisot's work, but it would be well worth determining whether and to what end these painters took up culinary metaphor and invoked other forms of extra-ocular experience in formulating their own contributions to the new painting, perhaps in a full, stand-alone chapter.[4]

NOTES

[1] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 193-201.

[2] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967): 12-23.

[3] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74-82; Luce Irigaray, "Interview," as quoted in Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 50.

[4] Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50-90.

Kurt E. Rahmlow
University of North Texas
kurt.rahmlow@unt.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of

H-France Review nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172