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James H. Rubin, *Why Monet Matters: Meanings Among the Lily Pads*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. xiv + 378 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-271-08620-0; \$49.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-09116-7.

Review by Bradley Fratello, St. Louis Community College, Meramec.

It is difficult to think of modern art more widely known than Monet's *Water Lily* paintings, relentlessly appropriated to sell greeting cards, calendars, screen savers, mouse pads and the like. Paradoxically, their breadth of appeal runs the risk of draining them of their aesthetic, cultural, and historical depth. The *Nymphéas* also regularly serve as centerpieces for well-attended exhibitions whose catalogs range from coffee-table books to more sustained explorations of specific groups of canvases that Monet intended as pairs or triptychs. Arguably, they strike a balance between exploiting the paintings' mass appeal and their art historical importance. [1]

James H. Rubin's beautiful volume, *Why Monet Matters: Meanings Among the Lily Pads* serves as an important counterpoint to the (over?) commodification of Monet's late paintings. Neither a coffee-table book nor a focused interrogation of a discrete cross section of the *Water Lily* canvases, the study positions the entire group of paintings at the center of a panorama of ideas and themes that have concerned historians of modern French painting for the last few decades. Rubin's work rescues these important objects from a potential draining of art historical richness that could result from so much kitschy reproduction. He declares his intention "to write the most original, comprehensive monograph yet published on Monet's great *Water Lilies*" (p. xiii). And with some qualifications, he succeeds in his mission.

Rubin organized the book as "a series of chapters focused on specific themes or issues...intended to build on one another, even though in certain cases they could probably stand on their own" (p. 13). To deploy an architectural metaphor, Rubin has placed an exquisite arrangement of flowers--Monet's painted ones--in a rotunda that opens onto thematic and methodological "galleries" into which readers can step in any order. An introduction and the first two chapters situate the paintings in their biographical and art historical context. They describe Monet's residence and eventual purchase of the home and gardens at Giverny, his design of the water lily pond, and the artist's prior development as an Impressionist painter in the name of grounding the *Water Lilies*--which dominated the last two decades of Monet's long career--in the painter's rich oeuvre.

Chapters three through eight comprise the sections of the book that "could probably stand on their own," engaging with a range of aesthetic, thematic, political, and philosophical issues that have been of central concern to historians of modern French painting for the past few decades.

Rubin thoughtfully addresses Monet's engagement with thematically rich subjects like water, light and flowers which, while on the one hand are universal, on the other hand offered particular inspiration at the last *fin de siècle*. Working after the heyday of Impressionism, which by the 1880s and 1890s had earned a reputation for almost slavish naturalism, the evocative works of Symbolists, the Nabis and even the Fauves delved into the poetic and dreamlike connotations of these timeless elements with aplomb.

Rubin links the *Water Lilies* to the sensual Rococo style that reached its pinnacle in the mid-eighteenth century and explores their resonance through the context of important philosophical movements that shaped nineteenth-century French culture and thought, from Auguste Comte's Positivism to Henri Bergson's Metaphysics to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Perspectivism. He contrasts Monet's deceptively peaceful, quiet images with the volatile and divisive politics of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France as well, when the nation boiled with anarchism, anti-Semitism, and the trauma of the First World War: the violence of which sometimes literally shook the ground beneath Monet's feet in his studio at Giverny. In short, Rubin transforms this group of paintings into a sort of cultural prism that he deftly shifts and turns to shine new light on important areas of study for scholars of the period.

Finally, Monet's legacy, and particularly his flirtation in the *Nymphéas* with abstraction, comes into focus in the closing chapter. Illustrating works by Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Sam Francis, Rubin underscores the debt mid-twentieth century abstract painters owed to Monet. In doing so, he demonstrates the painter's sustained relevance to the Modernist canon ("Modernist" capitalized to suggest the word's Greenbergian connotations). While they are of course the final aria of Impressionism, Rubin also presents the *Water Lily* paintings as evidence of Monet's continued engagement with the styles that followed it while he was still alive, and as a touchstone for subsequent modern painters to explore uncharted territory. In short, the *Water Lilies* are made to prove the conceit of the book's title: that Monet matters.

While Rubin has succeeded in offering the most comprehensive study of these important works--and while asking for still more might seem ungrateful--*Why Monet Matters* nonetheless feels diminished by its adherence to art historical conventions, methodologies, and lines of inquiry whose Eurocentric, canonical limits feel ever-more insufficient with each passing year. The so-called "global turn" in art history, and the humanities more generally, has been well underway for about a decade, and the need to decolonize the field has only quickened and gained urgency. Undoubtedly the concept, research, and writing of *Why Monet Matters* predate these dramatic shifts. Nonetheless, the growing need for an art history engaged in the processes of deconstructing Western canons, of giving voice to a more diverse range of artists, and of considering heretofore unexamined flows of aesthetic, cultural and philosophical traffic around the world makes their absence from Rubin's study of Monet that much more noticeable. His decidedly wide-ranging curiosity leaves an ever more diverse and globally-minded readership eager to explore an even broader panorama of approaches that today's art history has started to bring into view.

Might there, for example, be more to uncover by exploring the *Water Lilies*' resonance with East Asian philosophy? Rubin acknowledges--unavoidably--Monet's engagement with the Japonisme that swept through the West in the late nineteenth century, as well as the biological relationship between water lilies and the spiritually charged lotus. And while Monet was no Buddhist, for Rubin this fact signals an intellectual dead end. "For us to take [the *Water Lilies*] as literal

symbols because of their relationship to the Japanese lotus, however, would not fully be justified by anything specific that Monet said, other than expressing his admiration of the Japanese” (p. 161).

In other words, a lack of conscious intent on Monet’s part excuses a potential Buddhist interpretation of the *Nymphéas*. Confoundingly, Rubin’s work has long been a model for social histories of art that eschew the priority traditionally given to artistic agency. His career-long exploration of links among art, philosophy, music and histories of technology and urbanization demonstrates Rubin’s strongly held commitment to more broadly cultural readings of art and to academic interdisciplinarity. That he would identify a potentially rich avenue of exploration and then justify his turn away from it on these grounds is out of character for a scholar with such an exemplary reputation for breaking new intellectual ground.

Moreover, there are innumerable lines of inquiry that Rubin pursues for which there is little more evidence of intentionality. No case is made, for example, that Monet studied, admired, or intended to respond to the ideas of any of the European philosophers Rubin names: Kant, Comte, and Bergson among others. Conversely, the extensive holdings of Monet’s *Water Lily* paintings in Japanese collections suggest that Eastern audiences find much to admire and engage with in the canvases. The reception of these works by Japanese audiences, in short, offers a wonderful opportunity to transform the *Water Lilies* into a tool for an emerging, post-colonial art history.

Just as *Why Monet Matters* limits itself to art historical questions that have been well researched—if not always applied to the *Water Lily* murals—so too does Rubin end his consideration of their relevance to later twentieth-century art where earlier scholarship has already gone. The most recent works that Rubin compares to the *Nymphéas* are those of mid-century Abstract Expressionists and Post-Painterly Abstractionists. Their panoramic scale, deeply expressive color, and (often) lushly textured surfaces feel foreshadowed in Monet, as do their implicit, kinetic invitation to move toward and away from the canvases for linked, but distinct visual experiences that are equal parts intimate and collective. By ending his consideration of Monet’s legacy to modern art around 1960, Rubin bypasses any number of opportunities to invigorate the works with relevance to the late-twentieth century, to say nothing of the early twenty-first.

For example, Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s panoramic dreamtime paintings, like Monet’s, depict intimately known corners of the natural world that border on abstraction. Even more than the French painter, Kngwarreye’s ancestral connection to the Australian desert landscape carries personal, communal, and spiritual meanings. While Kngwarreye’s style derives from the long-standing traditions of her culture, they have often been compared to Monet’s late, panoramic elegies to his water lily pond.<sup>[2]</sup> Mark Bradford’s epically scaled mixed-media canvases are more often urban than idyllic and have been described as defying and humanizing the hyper-rational order that grids and maps impose upon our world.<sup>[3]</sup> They offer a twenty-first century reworking of what Rubin called “seeing with the body,” through which “feelings are closer to intuition and bodily instinct based on immediate experience rather than...ratiocination” (p. 191). One might relate the *Nymphéas* to Cai Guo-Giang’s “gunpowder paintings” as well. Cai’s interest in tensions between control and chance, geological time and instantaneity, and Eastern and Western influence would seem to offer another rich avenue for demonstrating Monet’s sustained relevance to contemporary global art practice.

Rubin never identifies a specific audience for *Why Monet Matters*. That said, its panoramic scope, extensive bibliography, and subtle considerations of such a wide range of themes would make it an excellent introduction to young art historians in a methodology course. And a student with a particular affinity for nineteenth-century French painting will find here an excellent guide to a broad range of the subfield's recent lines of thinking. In addition to exploring this important group of paintings, he exemplifies art's potential to illuminate not simply some singular narrative, but to participate in multiple histories. "*Why Monet Matters* revises the notion of the late Monet's isolation from his world...This book shows how an artist can work alone and produce unique work yet be deeply tied to the art, ideas and historical events of his period" (p. 13). Rubin's greatest success comes in modeling a curious attitude toward art that is less interested in completing our understanding of works than expanding it. As such, it sets the stage for an even richer, more global approach to Monet that will make both him and the *Water Lily* paintings continue to matter well into the future.

## NOTES

[1] As an example of the latter, see Simon Kelly, *Monet's Water Lilies: The Agapanthus Triptych* (St. Louis, MO: The Saint Louis Art Museum, 2011).

[2] See, for example, *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008).

[3] Kathryn Brown, "The Artist as Urban Geographer: Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu," *American Art*, vol. 24/4 (Fall 2010): 100-113.

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