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Nancy Ireson, ed., *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel*. Philadelphia and London: Barnes Foundation, in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2021. 159 pp. Illustrations, chronology, appendices, bibliography, notes, references, and exhibition checklist. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-913645-13-7.

Review by Lucy Whelan, Cambridge University.

The title of *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel* immediately suggests the appeal of Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) for contemporary viewers: she was not only a model and an artist, but just as importantly a rebel. The word “rebel” does not appear particularly frequently in this book, but the title nonetheless signals the reason why this book marks a significant shift in the scholarship on Suzanne Valadon. This becomes clearest, perhaps, when compared to the titles chosen for two earlier English-language studies, biographies from 1998 and 2017, *The Mistress of Montmartre*, and *Renoir’s Dancer*, neither of which exactly conjure an image of an empowered rule-breaker.[1] Feminist art historians have turned to the unconventional life and work of Suzanne Valadon at least since the mid-1980s, with Rosemary Betterton’s article on the artist’s nudes [2], but this book is arguably the first book-length study that promises on the surface to reflect the changing tendencies in both global feminism and curating since around 2012, particularly toward greater inclusivity, increased focus on present concerns, and an emphasis on female empowerment.

As an exhibition, *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel* is also significant as the first major solo show of the work of Suzanne Valadon ever to be mounted outside of France or Switzerland. Held in the fall of 2021 at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and subsequently at the Glyptoteket in Copenhagen, the exhibition united over fifty works created by Valadon between 1890 and 1937, although it is the catalogue, edited by the show’s curator Nancy Ireson, which concerns me here. In addition to two more conventional art historical essays by Ireson and Martha Lucy, both based at the Barnes, it includes a transcribed conversation between art historians Adrienne L. Childs, Lauren Jimerson, Denis Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock discussing Valadon’s depiction of the Black figure, and an essay by South African artist Lisa Brice that links Valadon’s work to contemporary artists. The catalogue also contains a chronology and extensive selected bibliography and exhibition list, compiled by Marianne Le Morvan, which offers a useful resource given the relative lack of substantive and scholarly writing on Valadon. Finally, it includes five pages of selected criticism by the artist’s contemporaries, translated into English for the first time. Alongside large colour plates of the fifty-four works in the show, the catalogue could not fail to be a welcome addition to the scholarship on this groundbreaking woman artist.

As this catalogue makes clear, Valadon seems to be a modern artist almost invented for our times, when interest around women artists—especially those who would seem to defy society and the conventions laid down by their male peers—has arguably never been greater. The illegitimate daughter of a poor laundress, she apparently defied the social odds and progressed from drudge labour in Montmartre, to modelling for the most important artists in Paris, to painting in her own boldly unconventional style. Even her name took part in this transformation: she was born Marie-Clémentine but adopted Suzanne professionally in the 1880s. Nonetheless, while Valadon's biography is broadly the subject of Ireson's introductory essay to the volume, Ireson by no means overplays the "rebel" narrative. To the contrary, she takes a balanced approach in portraying Valadon as an artist who above all sought to get by and forge some success by making the most of both her links to impressionist artists and interwar trends for figurative realism that resonated with her approach to the depiction of nudes. In fact, Valadon's gutsy refusal of supposed feminine decorum hardly comes up, as Ireson instead looks for grounded social explanations. Even when discussing how Valadon's critics found a certain "male brutality" in the artist's figures, Ireson simply emphasises the critical "desire to align the artist with her forbears" (p. 15).

The catalogue's assertion of Valadon as a rebel painter emerges somewhat more clearly in the essay by Martha Lucy, who explores how Valadon's remarkable nudes were informed by her own experience of working as a model. Lucy's point that Valadon's figures show an empathic understanding of the gazed-at body is convincing, especially in its touching example of Valadon's *Two Figures* (1909, figure 1), which depicts two models with swollen, purplish breasts, in a profoundly unidealized view of the maternal form. I would have welcomed a longer exploration of this approach in discussing this remarkable painting, finished twenty-six years after Valadon gave birth to her own son in December 1883. Valadon herself seemingly modelled both while pregnant and soon after her birth, but when she was painted by Toulouse-Lautrec in a work completed in 1884, her own breasts appear pale and flawless. The idea of maternity would scarcely enter the mind of Lautrec's viewer. Indeed, although Lautrec himself titled the painting *La grosse Maria*, meaning Maria big with child, in translation it has unfortunately taken on the title of *Fat Maria*.^[3]

Martha Lucy's more central and distinctive argument is that Valadon's figures seem particularly self-aware, "revealing the model...as an active and knowing participant in the artifice of art making" (p. 28). Here I am less convinced, and wary that this diminishes the ability of Valadon's paintings and drawings to offer a riposte and respite from the tradition of painting idealized female bodies designed to please the male gaze. While many of Valadon's contemporaries were interested in revealing precisely such artifice, I find myself more inclined to agree with art historian Patricia Mathews, whose feminist analysis found in Valadon's painted figures instead an unusual sense of "unselfconscious openness in front of another woman."^[4] This sense of ease in another's presence is particularly clear in works that include two figures, such as *The Fortune Teller* (1912, figure 10), and would also apply to the work chosen for the catalogue's cover, *The Blue Room* (1923, plate 40). Nonetheless, perhaps both interpretations can be simultaneously useful—the cognizance that Lucy describes can be seen in the enquiring expression of the model in *Nude Sitting on a Sofa* from 1916 (plate 31), who covers her breasts with her arms. For all that there is a certain homogeneity to Valadon's oeuvre, there is no catch-all formula by which to understand it.

The complexity involved in studying Valadon also emerges clearly in the discussion between five art historians around Valadon's depiction of the Black figure, and particularly in five works

created in 1919 that Ebonie Pollock helpfully proposes considering as a series of Black Venus paintings. In preparation for the exhibition, Marianne Le Morvan sought to uncover the identity of the model for these works but found no conclusive answer. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the resulting discussion of how to treat this unknown Black figure is particularly valuable for the ways it lays bare the uncertainties faced by historians in their research, that are usually hidden from view. The conversational format, including eminent art historians Adrienne Childs and Denise Murrell, shows the live and difficult nature of questions raised by avant-garde portrayals of the Black models that were made in the context of an inherently racist and colonial European culture. What it offers is not so much a set of conclusions as a welcome beginning to further research on Valadon's Black Venuses. This surely begins with Ebonie Pollock, whose BA thesis on this topic sparks the discussion, and it is refreshing to see student scholars involved and cited where their work has been instrumental. (It also reassures me that the absence of Lauren Jimenson's 2019 article on Valadon's male nudes from the bibliography was an accidental oversight).[5]

The rebel personality of Valadon is not new to the literature on the artist, which typically also emphasises the adversity of the artist's childhood. Such a narrative of defiance against the social strictures of her time, underlined by Ireson and Brice in particular, is not misplaced: Valadon's life was as remarkable as her works. Nonetheless I cannot help but reflect on the way this narrative is told in terms of sheer personality, rather than explained in terms of social and cultural contexts in ways that might help us understand the unexpectedly strident qualities of Valadon's work. In particular, the emphasis on class that Patricia Mathews rightly brought alongside gender in her 1991 essay seems to have been forgotten. Valadon's daring, sexually open works, so utterly without the feminine decorum or niceties found in the work of other women artists like Berthe Morisot, were largely enabled by her working-class background.[6] Valadon's class is also crucial in explaining her depiction of figures such as the model in *The Blue Room* (1923), who sits on a dishevelled bed, clad in pyjama-like trousers, with a cigarette hanging off her lip. Yet without particularly accounting for this factor of class, today's viewer, whose imagery of the early twentieth century is predominantly supplied by depictions of bourgeois life, will marvel at the modern attitude of this woman in stripy pyjamas. Yet it is not only the fashion for trousers in the early 1920s that is relevant here, as Lisa Brice suggests, so much as the different expectations of women within a working-class milieu, especially after the First World War when many women took jobs once held by men.[7]

It is possible, then, to understand even the most unexpected and strident qualities of Valadon's work with help from primary sources. The inclusion of a selection of criticism by the artist's contemporaries at the back of this catalogue is therefore particularly valuable. In fact, as their writing shows, Valadon found critical success in the 1920s not just in spite of her unconventional background, but also partly *because* of the trend for "an art that refuses to please, that aims to be disagreeable," and that sees the world "untainted by any given formulae" (p.149, quoting the critics Adolphe Basler and Marius Mermillon). Valadon was both an outsider and a product of her times, as the conversation around her Black Venuses also exemplifies.

This study of Valadon carries the mood of a revitalized study for a new era and is particularly laudable for its interest in her Black models. As an exhibition catalogue, its colour plates and varied essays will surely appeal to a wide range of readers (and so it is unfortunate that many of the pages are afflicted by a typesetting problem). While the book might have benefitted from taking a more critical approach to the idea of Valadon as a rebel, its title will surely attract many

people to look more closely at her work, meaning that there is undoubtedly more research on Valadon to look forward to in future.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Nancy Ireson, "Locating Suzanne Valadon"

Martha Lucy, "Painting from Both Sides of the Easel: Suzanne Valadon and the Female Nude"

Adrienne L. Childs, Nancy Ireson, Lauren Jimerson, Denise Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock, "Disrupting Tradition: Suzanne Valadon's 'Black Venus'"

Lisa Brice, "Suzanne Valadon: To and From the Blue Room"

NOTES

[1] June Rose, *Mistress of Montmartre: A Life of Suzanne Valadon* (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1998), Catherine Hewitt, *Renoir's Dancer: The Secret Life of Suzanne Valadon* (London: Icon Books, 2017). The latter study, *Renoir's Dancer*, is far more interested in Valadon's independence and rebellious nature than its title would suggest.

[2] Rosemary Betterton, "The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," *Feminist Review* 19 (1985): 3-24.

[3] *La grosse Maria / Fat Maria, Venus of the Montmartre*, c. 1884. Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal. This painting is also sometimes known as *Nu féminin*.

[4] Patricia Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 420.

[5] Lauren Jimerson, "Defying Gender: Suzanne Valadon and the Male Nude," *Woman's Art Journal* 40 (2019): 3-12.

[6] Mathews, "Returning the Gaze."

[7] The very specific kind of brightly coloured, silk pyjama trousers worn in the 1920s and seen in *The Blue Room* were widely perceived, not as masculine, but as "feminine and even feminist" according to Mary Lynn Stewart, *Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919-1939* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 175. See also Katina Bill, "Attitudes Towards Women's Trousers: Britain in the 1930s," *Journal of Design History* 6 (1993): 45-54, which discusses lounge pyjamas in relation to class at pp. 49-50.

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