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Lucy Whelan, *Pierre Bonnard Beyond Vision*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. 232 pp. Notes, illustrations, and index. $60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780300258868.

Review by Simon Kelly, Saint Louis Art Museum.

In 1948, the year after Pierre Bonnard's death, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized a major retrospective of the artist's output, comprising more than 150 works.[1] It showed the full extent of Bonnard's oeuvre in the United States for the first time. One critic--John Alford, writing in *Art News*--highlighted the abstraction of Bonnard's practice, implicitly linking him to emerging forms of contemporary American art.[2] Yet the idea of Bonnard as connecting with, and indeed anticipating, avant-garde abstraction is not one that has prevailed in the subsequent literature on the artist. Instead, the dominant reading of Bonnard's work that continues to this day is that of a late Impressionist artist who continued, and perhaps culminated, an earlier Impressionist tradition rather than one who looked forward to the future. Bonnard's peers--notably Monet, Matisse and Picasso--have all been explored in terms of their impact on later art, particularly abstract art, but Bonnard's comparable role has generally been overlooked.

Lucy Whelan's book *Pierre Bonnard Beyond Vision* offers a significant intervention in the Bonnard literature and, perhaps even more importantly, the ongoing debate regarding Bonnard's role within the history of twentieth-century modernism. Drawing on her doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford, Whelan challenges the prevalent view of Bonnard's art as one of Impressionist naturalism and argues that his work moved far beyond a perceptual or phenomenological vision of the world. Instead, it was focused on "imagining the expansion of experience beyond the limits of visual perception" (p. 3). Bonnard's work thus embraced dream, reverie, and memory and, at times, arguably the strange and uncanny. Whelan's expansive reading presents the artist as a man whose work radically navigated the spaces between the natural and the abstract. In exploring this approach, the author focuses on Bonnard's later work from the years after 1920. She examines his output in different media (paintings, drawings, and photographs), ranging from bather imagery of his wife, Marthe, to startlingly raw self-portraits to intimate interior scenes of his home at Le Cannet on the French Riviera to incandescently luminous landscapes.

In recent years, there has been a large number of Bonnard exhibitions, mostly in France and the United States, and much of the best writing on the artist has appeared in the accompanying catalogues. Indeed, despite his lack of recognition within the avant-garde modernist narrative, it is notable that there have been major museum retrospectives at the Tate and MoMA in 1998, the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2006, and the Tate Modern in 2019.[3] Most recent has been the 2023-2024 show,

Bonnard's Worlds, at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC.[4] Bonnard evidently remains an artist who has great popular appeal. Whelan's approach is distinctive for her philosophically informed perspective and her close and astute readings of individual paintings, often drawing out fresh and inventive arguments.

Whelan's first chapter looks at Bonnard's approach to the world around him, examining his theory of art, based on his writings and recorded comments. Bonnard published relatively little in terms of public statements about his work (compared with his good friend, Matisse, for example) but his private letters and diary notes, most of which remain unpublished, offer fascinating insight into his practice. Seen as a whole, these affirm his belief in the impossibility of directly transcribing nature and the falsity of any belief that might promote such a view. For Whelan, Bonnard's description of his art as embodying the "adventures of the optic nerve" is, in fact, an implicit acknowledgement of the limitations of human perception (p. 21).

Chapter two explores Bonnard's interest in adopting unusual viewpoints and angles that seem to be unrelated to the artist's implied body. At times, his point of view seems to hover in surrounding space, and the disorientation for the viewer is heightened by the presence of bodily fragments on the edge of the canvas, sometimes of Bonnard himself and sometimes of Marthe. The result of such experimentation is to blur the boundaries between the natural and the abstract. Whelan makes the comparison with Monet's late work, and there is an important parallel to be drawn with Monet's experimentation with the effects of abstraction. In a 1909 interview with the critic Roger Marx, Monet talked of arriving at "the final degree of abstraction and imagination allied to the real."[5] Bonnard and Monet were good friends and Bonnard, who lived at Vernonnet, often visited the elder artist at nearby Giverny in the 1910s and 1920s.

The third chapter focuses on Bonnard's long series of nearly 400 paintings and thousands of drawings of his wife, whose birth name was Maria Boursin but who is better known by her adopted name of Marthe. Recent years have seen an overdue reevaluation of the importance of Marthe's agency in these works.[6] Marthe's working-class background was a source of conflict with the upper-class Bonnard family, although not with Pierre himself. Whelan argues that Bonnard's bather paintings of Marthe are a complex dialogue between painter and model that brings into play questions of desire and sexuality, with Marthe having a very active role in constructing these conversations. Interestingly, as is relatively little-known and as Whelan valuably explores, Marthe was a painter herself, producing work with similar domestic subject matter to her husband in "a distinctly naïve style" (p. 89). Marthe signed her works with the name Marthe Solange. In 1924, she organized a solo exhibition of 104 pastels and drawings in Galerie E. Druet in Paris, including a range of floral still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. Many of these are now lost, but five of Marthe's pastels are reproduced here; Whelan convincingly, and provocatively, suggests that Marthe's work may have informed the progress of Bonnard's own style.

Chapter four explores further the limits of naturalism as a means of understanding Bonnard, focusing on his landscape paintings. Bonnard described himself as having a "landscapist's soul" and produced large numbers of landscapes in his later years, informed by the daily walks that he took around Le Cannet (p. 99). This chapter involves a series of close examinations of individual paintings, and it should be said that, throughout the book, Whelan has a gift for lucid evocation of Bonnard's paintings and their physical materiality. Here, she focuses on the landscape *Paysage du Midi (Paysage de*

Normandie) at the Smith College Museum of Art, drawing out the figurative elements in this quasi-abstract composition and connecting these to Bonnard's early anarchist works of the 1890s. This reading reminds us of the artist's early, radical political interests and suggests that these remained present, or at least suggested, in his later pictures, which are sometimes read as manifestations of apolitical beauty. Bonnard's imagery of laborers in the fields of rural France (see for example the *Red Cow, Laborer*, from c. 1939) suggests an empathy for an increasingly marginalized peasant class in the face of growing industrialization.

The fifth chapter offers a riposte to Picasso's attack on Bonnard for creating paintings that were "a pot-pourri of indecision" because of the artist's constant alterations (p. 137). In so doing, Whelan foregrounds the significance of the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, particularly his *Time and Free Will* (1889), a copy of which Bonnard seems to have purchased in the late 1920s. In considering the question of free will, Bergson argued for the importance of behavior as being unpredictable, rather than determined, and Whelan suggests that this philosophical position informed what she describes as Bonnard's "aesthetic of indeterminacy" and his related penchant for re-working canvases, often over several years (p. 141). Such a reading argues for Bonnard as a more literate and philosophically aware artist than has often been the conventional view.

Chapter six establishes a further connection with Bergson, this time surrounding their mutual understanding of time. Whelan focuses on Bonnard's bather paintings and rejects the viewpoint of these as records of pictorial instantaneity. Instead, she sees these works as embodying accumulated lived experiences in a way that is comparable to Bergson's idea of pure duration or the organic melding of the past into the present over successive time periods. Bonnard's collected drawing studies can be seen as individual memories that underpin his more temporally complex paintings. Also noted here is the significance of Bonnard's distortions of the human body, an approach that again complicates his purported naturalism.

In her conclusion, Whelan sums up Bonnard's art as being "a fabric of signs interwoven with memory, imagination, and endless process" (p. 181). The reference to signs connects Bonnard's practice with that of Matisse, who used this term repeatedly to describe his own work. Matisse's semiological investigations questioned any supposed authority of nature, thus setting the stage for his own proto-abstraction. The allusion to Bonnard's "endless process" is perhaps also a reminder that there has been remarkably little technical analysis done of the artist's color palette and compositional pentimenti, which is surprising for a painter known for his radical use of color and interest in revision. Such future analysis would potentially reinforce Whelan's thesis regarding the complex, meditated, and evolutionary, rather than supposedly naturalistic, aspects of Bonnard's practice.

The reading of Bonnard in this book opens up considerable possibilities for exploring the artist's legacy. Whelan hints at this in the final page of her book in noting the impact of Bonnard's approach on Abstract Expressionists, including Mary Abbott, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Sam Francis. Such artists employed complex and indeterminate patches of color that made clear, if sometimes subtle, reference to the natural world. This connection would be a fascinating area to explore further. Mitchell admired Bonnard from her early school days in Chicago and, in an unpublished interview in 1988, talked about him as being "a lot better than Claude Monet."[7] Francis's engagement with Bonnard's translucent color was so visceral that he once spoke of his desire to literally taste and consume the artist's pictures.[8] Frankenthaler owned a Bonnard etching, *Untitled*

(Girl by the Window), which she had on view in her home, and a number of books on the artist.[9] Perhaps most intriguingly, Mark Rothko's experience with Bonnard's work in the winter of 1946-1947 at the Etienne Bignou gallery in New York was arguably the catalyst for his transformative shift into abstraction.[10] Many other abstract artists could be added to this list. One might, indeed, imagine an exhibition of Bonnard's impact on American abstract painting comparable to the recent shows on Monet and American abstraction. It is a strength of Whelan's writing that it encourages such potential future conversations regarding Bonnard's legacy. Her book is a deeply thoughtful and intelligent contribution to Bonnard's studies that has wider repercussions for our understanding of modernism. Picasso may have dismissed Bonnard, but it is worth remembering that, for Matisse, Bonnard was "the best of us all."[11]

NOTES

[1] The exhibition was a collaboration with the Cleveland Museum of Art, where it was shown in the spring of 1948. At MoMA, it comprised eighty-two paintings, thirty-one watercolors, twenty-eight prints, and six illustrated books. In addition, there were ten uncatalogued works.

[2] John Alford, "Bonnard's Art for Art's Sake," *ART News* 47 (Summer 1948):17.

[3] Sarah Whitfield and John Elderfield, eds., *Bonnard* (Tate Gallery, London, and Harry N. Abrams, 1998); Suzanne Pagé, ed., *Pierre Bonnard. The Work of Art: Suspending Time* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2006); Matthew Gale, ed., *Pierre Bonnard: The Colour of Memory* (Tate Modern, London, 2019). The 2019 show was a partnership with the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, and the Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna, and traveled to those venues.

[4] George T. M. Shackelford with Elsa Smithgall, *Bonnard's Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

[5] See James Rubin, *Why Monet Matters: Meanings Among the Lily Pads* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 272.

[6] Whelan herself has played an important role in this reevaluation; see her article, "New Light on Bonnard's Wife and Model Marthe," *Burlington Magazine* 162, no. 1406 (May 2020): 412-419.

[7] Email to reviewer from Sarah Roberts, Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs, Joan Mitchell Foundation, 9 December 2024.

[8] Sam Francis, "Bonnard, or Be Kind to Yourself Human Being," *Bijutsu Techo*, April 1968.

[9] Email to reviewer from Sarah Haug, Archivist, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, 23 December 2024.

[10] Bernice Rose, *Bonnard/Rothko: Color and Light* (New York: Pace Wildenstein, 1997).

[11] Marjorie Phillips, *Duncan Phillips and His Collection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 178.

Simon Kelly
Saint Louis Art Museum
simon.kelly@slam.org

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