

Hunter on Cogeval et al., eds. (2015)

Cogeval, Guy et al., editors. *Splendours and Miseries: Pictures of Prostitution in France, 1850–1910*. Musée d'Orsay & Flammarion, 2015, pp. 308 + 300 illustrations, ISBN 978-2-0831-7274-0

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In January 2016, the artist Deborah de Robertis walked through the Musée d'Orsay's crowded exhibition, *Splendour and Misery: Pictures of Prostitution, 1850–1910*, and undressed before Manet's *Olympia*, his famed 1863 painting of a naked prostitute. In addition to adopting *Olympia*'s pose and accessories, de Robertis strapped a camera to her head to record the crowd—who watched and clapped as security guards struggled to cover her body before the police charged her with indecent exposure. Throughout the performance, she criticized the museum for exhibiting images of naked sex workers and artists' models without acknowledging the experiences of the women portrayed. Some may describe de Robertis's performance as self-promotion (she achieved notoriety for exhibiting her genitals under Courbet's *Origin of the World* in 2014). Yet to dismiss her performance as crass would ignore what the performance made evident: the necessity to re-examine the significance of an exhibition about prostitution open in Paris between September 2015 and January 2016. Through the use of a camera, de Robertis was making explicit the politics of display and looking by turning the gaze back onto the spectators and, by proxy, the institution.

To begin, the exhibition is a spectacular tour-de-force that unites a phenomenal group of paintings, prints, pastels, photographs, and ephemera depicting or related to prostitution. The curators must be applauded for amassing major artworks and rarely exhibited images and objects; their intricate knowledge of private and public holdings (and their ability to borrow them) is exceptional. Seeing Édouard Manet's *The Plum* near Edgar Degas's *Absinthe Drinker* and then turning to see works by Félicien Rops, Jean-Louis Forain, and Jean Béraud is exciting and rewarding. The breadth of the show—from Constantin Guys to Pablo Picasso—is impressive, and fulfills the curatorial aim of showing the centrality of prostitution in the development of modern painting. Depictions of working women, dancers, lone drinkers, and skillfully dressed *Parisiennes* fill this large exhibition. Indeed, if one did not read the wall texts closely—a difficult task in the packed crowds—one could think almost all women were prostitutes. In a room filled with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of brothel life (rarely displayed together), visitors climb onto a velour settee and, with bottoms in the air, examine calling cards, brothel tokens, and other sex trade trinkets in the attached display cases. The spectacle of experiencing the exhibit is enhanced by the two rooms blocked off with curtains that are only accessible to those over age eighteen: filled with professional and amateur pornographic photographs and films, visitors cram together to view provocative sex scenes. The room containing Henri Gervex's infamous painting *Rolla*—showing a naked prostitute on an unmade bed—is made palpable through its juxtaposition with an ornate bed with white satin sheets, while in another area a “chair of delight” (allowing a male client to penetrate two women in quick succession) is next to paintings of courtesans.

The exhibition touches on the misery of prostitution—evinced by the reference to Honoré de Balzac's novel, the display of a medical wax model of a syphilitic face, and statements about the “burdens of being a woman”—yet the emphasis is undoubtedly on splendor. Red walls, gold picture frames, crimson carpets, canonical paintings and hordes of visitors create a vibrant atmosphere. The wall texts cast sex work in a positive light by presenting prostitutes as artists' muses; posing under streetlights in garish dress is seen as an active contribution to the modernity of avant-garde painting. This approach assigns agency to the depicted female figures, but barely touches on the well-known feminist investigations that have researched the sad realities of prostitution and that have explored how these artworks, though tied to cultural contexts and the nineteenth-century documentary impulse, are informed by male artists' fantasies, fears, and ambitions. While the display of material culture adds to the exhibition's historicism and originality, the unproblematic celebration of sexualized images of vulnerable women and the emphasis on formal innovation is flawed and somewhat outdated. The exhibition's lack of in-depth engagement with the politics of sex, class, race, and gender is odd given that the majority of scholarship on nineteenth-century images of prostitution over the past forty years has been, to varying degrees, political (i.e. T. J. Clark, Tamar Garb, Hollis Clayson, Eunice Lipton, Carol Armstrong, Charles Bernheimer, Linda Nochlin, Jann Matlock, and others).

The exhibition catalogue, however, contains original arguments and expert overviews of well-known primary and secondary material that help rectify some of the generalizations and oversights of the exhibition itself. Richard Thomson's introductory chapter addresses the complexity and fluidity of interpreting images of prostitution, aptly arguing that, “imagery was as subject to the fantasies, omissions and denials of the *mentalités* that engendered it” (28). The densely researched chapters—written by eight different authors from different academic fields—address prostitution not only through visual analyses of artwork, but also investigations of history, politics, literature, economics, and public health. All of the authors situate the images in relation to

historical, cultural, and literary contexts (these chapters are rich in history, not theory). This makes the catalogue a good go-to book for general readers and academics looking for broad yet scholarly accounts of prostitution from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, primarily in France, but also with some reference to other European nations. Various chapters provide useful updates on the theme. For example, Marie Robert's essay on prostitution, photography, and pornography offers a novel analysis that moves beyond the study of art to discuss how pornographic images were made, viewed, and policed, and Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski's chapter on textual representations of prostitution (in novels, illustrated magazines, and songs) is a nice counterpart to the more visually focused approaches. As expected from a Musée d'Orsay exhibition catalogue, this one is well designed and exquisitely illustrated with 300 images. The paper used is matte rather than glossy; this is superb for the reproduction of prints, photographs, drawings, and pastels, but does not always do justice to the paintings. Nonetheless, the accumulation of images in this book is remarkable and will give those who could not visit the exhibition a sense of its breadth and grandeur. The variety of images reproduced—from amateur pornographic photographs to illustrated sheet music—encourages viewers (and readers) to look at the well-known paintings of prostitutes differently, as the exhibition and its catalogue situate them within a wider visual culture.

De Robertis's artistic performance provides another type of updated lens through its call for a re-examination of art's relationship to obscenity and prostitution, though retrospective in its nod to 1970s body art. The exhibition was, after all, open and advertised throughout Paris in the months before and after the violent attacks in Paris in November 2015, when the Islamic State described the city as the "capital of prostitution and obscenity." The politics of sex work and sexual imagery—past and present—requires thoughtful analysis, especially when representations of naked women and sex workers (real and imaginary) are publically displayed in a prestigious institution. As de Robertis explained to *The Guardian*: "The museum is perfectly happy to use nudity when it comes to encouraging people to come to the exhibition ... I don't understand how you can have this kind of exhibition if you are not prepared to go to examine nudity in the real world." This beautifully produced blockbuster's blindness to the contemporary moment—in terms of artistic practice, art historical scholarship, local and global politics, and the realities of sex workers—ultimately filled this reviewer with an underlying sense of misery despite many moments of relishing the exhibition's splendor.

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