

Foa on Brown, ed. (2017)

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The publication of this series of scholarly essays on diverse aspects of Degas's work, practice, and critical and art historical reception could not have been better timed; it coincides with the centenary of the artist's death and with several major museum exhibitions that commemorated the occasion. The past few years have thus marked an important period in the history of Degas studies, and this volume makes a significant contribution to the recent broader reassessment of the artist's work and legacy.

The volume opens with Kathryn Brown's incisive introduction, which provides an excellent overview of some of the most influential texts and methodological approaches in Degas studies of the past forty or so years and then positions the individual essays that follow within this framework. The essays are grouped into three sections, the first of which is titled "Art in Context: Gender, Race, and Labour." Questions of gender have long played an important role in the criticism and scholarship on Degas, and they are central to several of the essays presented here. For example, Norma Broude compellingly reflects and expands upon her groundbreaking 1977 essay contesting long-standing claims of Degas's misogyny and convincingly argues for a fundamentally empathetic relationship between the artist and some of his depicted subjects. Other insightful analyses of Degas's pictorial explorations of constructions of femininity and masculinity include Mary Hunter's close examination of one of Degas's café-concert pictures and the significance of the figure of the waiter in late nineteenth-century Paris, and Anthea Callen's study of female spectatorship in visual imagery and culture of the period. Shao-Chien Tseng's essay on Degas's equestrian imagery and Marilyn Brown's illuminating text on the racial identity of the performer depicted in Degas's painting, *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, complete the first section.

The essays in the second section, which is titled "Making and Materiality," shed welcome light on certain aspects of Degas's wide-ranging experimentation with diverse techniques, media, and processes over the course of his long career. Marni Reva Kessler expands our understanding of the artist's relationship to photography in her thought-provoking close analysis of Degas's portrait of Princess Pauline de Metternich, and Patricia Failing takes the reader on a wonderful exploration of the artist's sculptural practice and the heterogeneous materials he used. Degas's monotype prints are the focus of two essays in this section: Jonas Beyer's interesting study of the particularities of the monotype printing process and the ambiguities in the resulting images, and Kathryn Brown's perceptive inquiry into the complex relationship between Ludovic Halévy's *La Famille Cardinal* stories and Degas's illustrations of them. "Writing Degas," the third and last section, focuses on different facets of the artist's late career and posthumous reception. Ruth Iskin offers a valuable historiography of the relationship between Cassatt and Degas and an analysis of the two artists' contrasting activities and reputations as collectors. Heather Dawkins's essay on Degas's late practice, grounded in theories of cognitive science, and Anna Gruetzner Robins's examination of some of Walter Sickert's writings on the artist's work conclude the volume.

Though this book does not aim to treat Degas's diverse body of work in a comprehensive manner, it nevertheless succeeds in giving the reader a sense of the main contours of the artist's oeuvre and its art historical reception, even as many of the individual essays offer close analyses of particular works. The reader will find countless insights into many of the artist's main motifs, from his portraits and equestrian images to his pictures and sculptures of ballet dancers, laundresses, bathers, brothels, and café-concerts. One also learns about many of the stages of the artist's nearly fifty-year-long career and the wide array of two- and three-dimensional media with which he worked. This important volume makes clear how fertile the field of Degas studies continues to be, thus providing a testament to the achievements of the contributors and the artist alike.

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