HARTS & Minds



BELLOWS AND THE BODY: THE REAL, THE IDEAL AND THE NUDE, 21 OCTOBER 2016-22 JANUARY 2017

Samantha Niederman

HARTS & Minds: The Journal of Humanities and Arts
Vol.3, No.2 (Issue 9, 2017)
www.harts-minds.co.uk

Article © HARTS & Minds
Image © George Bellows, 'The Life Class' (1917)

BELLOWS AND THE BODY: THE REAL, THE IDEAL AND THE NUDE
BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS,
21ST OCTOBER 2016 – 22ND JANUARY 2017

Samantha Niederman

*****

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts has organised an exhibition- 'Bellows and The Body: The Real, The Ideal and The Nude'- based on a recent acquisition, *Nude, Miss Bentham* (1906), a painting by one of the most important American modernists of the early twentieth century, George Bellows[1]. This exhibition focuses on the human body in carefully selected paintings, prints and drawings by Bellows and his contemporaries in the 'Ashcan School'[2] a group of artists who depicted gritty scenes of working-class life in New York City with a radically realist approach. Although the show is limited to one gallery, the walls are lined with captivating prints filled with nude and clothed bodies - some in prize-fighting action scenes and others in states of repose. Displayed in the centre of the space are magazines such as a *Harper's Weekly,* opened to commercial illustrations by Ashcan artists. In Bellows's *The Life Class* (1917) lithograph a naked, female model stands on a platform elevated over a studio filled with clothed men busy at work on their canvases. This print serves as an illustrative example of the juxtaposing between the passive, nude female amongst a sea of overlapping, twisting and active men in a life class environment. In the foreground, as an artist, with his back to the viewer, dabs his brush onto a colour palette, his triceps and biceps flex through his transparent rolled-up shirtsleeve, while two men kneel in a corner and another contorts, as if he is a coiled spring, in order to get a good look at the model above.

During a paper presented at a symposium held in conjunction with this exhibition, Dr John Fagg suggested a relationship between the nude Miss Bentham, the figure from the pivotal painting of this exhibition, with the body of the artist himself. Through gestural brushstrokes of ashen tones, Bellows expresses the nude's anatomy and psyche. With an indirect gaze, rosy complexion and defined muscles throughout, Miss Bentham covers her breasts and turns her body away from Bellows in modesty. Flesh with touches of red can be detected on her elbows, buttocks, knees and feet, the model's bones protrude and patches of thick impasto paint suggest rough, coarse skin on a body that sees little leisure and rest. As Fagg indicated, the repetitive positions of manual labour are reflected through Bellows's revolutionary articulation of Miss Bentham's body, signifying not only the anatomy of the model but also her socio-economic background of poverty. Fagg stated, 'Bellows paints Miss Bentham in a way that makes us see the world in her body and imagine her body in the world.'[3] Standing at six-foot-two, Bellows's, thin physique is present in his life size canvas of Miss Bentham, and in the remainder of his talk, Fagg drew attention to the artist's own body, illustrating the complicated relationship between artist and model and ideas of distance and attachment. With a series of athletic photographs, we see Bellows positioned in the center of his semi-professional baseball team with hunched, stooped shoulders, since he was often the tallest, and with long arms dangling awkwardly at his sides. Throughout his adolescence, Bellows was unable to manage his ungainly body, but over time he learned to utilize his size and stature to his advantage in his painting. The artist's strength and height is characterised through the monumental scale of his works and his rapid, profuse brushstrokes of his nudes were far different from the idealised, classical figure with characteristically perfect proportions. Through his art, Bellows is embodied as a vigorous, masculine figure.

Both the exhibition and the symposium highlight the significance of the study of the male and female nude in Bellows's and other Ashcan artists' works, presenting a fresh approach to this American modernist movement, which typically generates discussions on its frequently depicted crowded urban scenes with masses of figures moving and interacting in a fast-paced, modern way of life. These artists' interactions and initiations with the nude body occurred predominantly through their experiences in the life class, which was viewed as a sort of right of passage. However, federal censors such as Anthony Comstock, an Evangelical Christian, believed that artists studying from the nude was immoral and spoke out against this modern studio practice. Bellows came from a strict Methodist, mid-western, middle-class background, yet he and other Ashcan artists were able to overcome these repressive prejudices by focusing not just on the anatomy of the model but also by paying close attention to the musculature of the students' clothed figures as they painted and interacted with one another. In these prints, the encounter between artists and the model is raised to a dignified level of professionalism by celebrating the body- both clothed and nude.

Notes

[1] Publications on George Bellows include, David Peters Corbett, and others, eds, *An American Experiment: George Bellows and the Ashcan Painters*, (London and New Haven: National Gallery Company in association with Yale University Press, 2011); Donald Braider, *George Bellows and the Aschan School of Painting,* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

[2] There is a vast literature on artists of the Ashcan School. See, for example, Rebecca Zurier, and others, eds, *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*, (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995); Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2006); Ira Glackens, *William Glackens and the Eight: The Artists who Freed American Art*, (New York: Writers & Readers Pub., 1990); Bennard B. Perlman, *Painters of the Ashcan School: The Immortal Eight*, (New York: Dover, 1988).

[3] John Fagg, 'George Bellows's Body', *Bellows and the Body*, a one-day symposium held at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 4th November 2016. Unpublished, but can be heard on the exhibition's website: http://bellows.barber.org.uk/george-bellows-body/.

*****

Biography

Samantha Niederman is undertaking a PhD at the University of York, UK. Research interests include American and British modernism, Curating the Art Museum, and the critical examination of Feminist art history, but currently her research centres on the still lifes of Frances Hodgkins and Cedric Morris and will contextualize Hodgkins's overlooked influence on Morris and Seven and Five Society artists.