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Ségolène Le Men, *Courbet*, Abbeville Press: New York, 2008. 400 p., illustrations. \$135 U.S. (hb). ISBN 078-92097-72.

Review by Paul Galvez, Ohio State University.

At moments of critical reckoning—usually, in art history, accompanied by landmark exhibitions—certain books appear that put the contradictions of a subject into sharp relief. I do not think it will be long before scholars come to view Ségolène Le Men's imposing tome, *Courbet*, as just such a book.

Originally published in French by Editio- Éditions Citadelles & Mazenod in 2007, the year of the great Courbet retrospectives in Paris, New York, and Montpellier celebrating the 130th anniversary of the artist's death, and now released in English by Abbeville, *Courbet* is that rare coffee-table monograph that is also an up-to-date, ambitious scholarly study of its subject (as is already signaled in the choice as its author of Le Men, professor of art history at Paris X-Nanterre and author of countless articles on nineteenth-century art). If the merits of a book could be measured numerically, the way a boxer or model is assessed on the basis of height and weight, the stats alone would impress. At seven pounds, \$135, with 309 color illustrations, it is clearly intended as a feast for the eyes. No book on the artist that I know of—not the *catalogue raisonné* or the recent retrospective catalogs—comes close to its visual splendor. Even before the text begins, in a span of roughly ten pages preceding the introduction, the reader is treated to no less than eight high-quality, full-page reproductions, ranging from details of famous works like the self-portrait *Man with a Pipe* and the iconic *Painter's Studio* to less remarked upon but no less enchanting passages from his landscapes and nudes. Art historians and all those keen to indulge their sense of sight will no doubt flip through *Courbet* with giddy abandon.

This sumptuousness furnishes us with something that has been sorely lacking in most books on Courbet: images that convey something of the sheer material force of his technique. This lacuna is all the more surprising given that the physicality of Courbet's art has always drawn commentary, from all corners of the ideological spectrum. Partly, this reflects the current state of affairs in the world of art publishing, where the sheer cost of rights and reproductions, even in this digital age, precludes the kind of serious historical inquiry that is the province of the academic writer. Destined for at most a couple of libraries and the desks of his or her colleagues, the serious art-historical study is rarely accompanied by the kind of visual evidence its argument needs and deserves. One feels this lack particularly in studies of artists, like Courbet, whose art depends for its veracity on things like texture and tonal differentiation, precisely those elements of picture-making ill-suited to inexpensive photographic rendering. Try capturing the furrows of a brushstroke or the palimpsest of paint with a camera and you will understand the difficulties of collapsing into a single color image the up-close detail and the far-view. With *Courbet*, Abbeville has indulged us, thankfully, with reproductions up to the task.

But I did say that *Courbet* is in some ways an exercise—a telling one—in contradiction. Another, perhaps more symptomatic, reason for the eclipse of the image in Courbet publications is the scholarship itself, which by and large is impatient with close readings of the formal structures of the painter's canvases. To understand why this is the case requires a brief look at the history of Courbet criticism.

An exile in Switzerland due to his supposed involvement with the toppling of the Vendôme column when he was briefly an administrator under the Commune, Courbet, had he lived to see it, would have been most pleased to see his critical fortunes change dramatically in 1882 when the critic Jules Castagnary organized a retrospective of his work at the École des Beaux-Arts. From there, Courbet scholarship took two basic paths. A series of committed individuals gathered the archival documents into monographs that are to this day indispensable to the study of the artist. Alongside this necessary ordering of the historical raw material stands a group of more focused interpretive studies all more or less evolving from a seminal article by Meyer Schapiro published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, “Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naiveté,” (vol. 4 no. 3, pp. 172-3). Abandoning the hagiographic and de-politicized image of the artist put forth by Castagnary, Schapiro resurrected Courbet’s radicalism as it was inflected in his adoption of low-brow visual forms such as the image *d’épinal* and in his turn towards the depiction of provincial characters in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution.

Collectively, the latter work is the foundation of the current orthodoxy in Courbet studies. A painter of social difference at a time when class identity was the motor of the major events of French society, Courbet stands in most art history surveys as that artist who best embodies the transition from a romanticized bohemia to a more recognizable avant-garde around mid-century. It follows logically that those enamored of art’s purchase on social reality—including, of course, those outside of the discipline of art history, like historians and certain literary critics—should gravitate to the great masterpieces of the Second Republic and early Second Empire, when the artist’s radicalism was in full bloom. With seemingly minimal effort, the contents of these paintings open on to the most urgent social issues of the day—the rise of the *petite bourgeoisie*, the influx of provincial labor into Paris, the radicalization of artistic practice, the pitfalls of a truly democratic Salon, the quick response of right-wing reaction. The complexity of the visual form is of a piece with the events to which they refer, all the while expressed in the deeply encoded conventions of the Western pictorial tradition: Dutch burghers à la Rembrandt recoded as beer-swilling comrades; family and group portraits of seventeenth-century inspiration now practiced at unheard of scale, with a cast of characters previously thought to be below the dignity of serious artists; folk imagery and popular songs elevated to the rank of grand neo-classical dramas, etc.

Le Men’s chapters unfold in lockstep with this narrative and are strongest, unsurprisingly, on the period between 1848 and 1855, the years generally acknowledged as the apogee of the artist’s realism. Chapter two, entitled “A Bohemian in Paris,” is typical of her approach. Although only concerning itself with about a dozen major works, this chapter sweeps across French visual culture of the time with an authority and breadth almost without parallel in the field of Courbet studies. In setting the stage for the major canvases of the Salon of 1849 and 1850 addressed in chapter three, “A Master of the Open Road,” Le Men goes beyond the by-now standard references to Henry Mürger’s *Scenes from La Vie Bohème* and Courbet’s collaboration with Baudelaire on the republican pamphlet *Salut Public* to include such factors as the salon criticism of Gabriel-Joseph-Hippolyte Laviron and Bruno Galbacci from the 1830s, Nadar’s interest in pantomime, and the role of female imagery in revolutionary visual culture. The comparative visual material is equally diverse and suggestive: Louis-Léopold Robert’s *The Arrival of the Harvesters in the Pontine Marshes* (1830), Jean-Victor Schnetz’s *Battle for the Hôtel de Ville July 28, 1830* (1834), to name just a few works seldom mentioned in the literature, both get their due.

By opening this veritable Pandora’s box of historical referents, Le Men ventures into territory seldom encountered in the mere survey or picture-book. But this conjuring act does not come without risk and the strain of harnessing so many divergent strands is painfully evident in the last chapter, “Glory and Exile,” where Courbet’s far-flung exploits are hard to pigeon-hole under any singular rubric. This is why the loose weaving together of the 1863 period in Saintonge with the later hunting pictures strikes one as arbitrary, especially considering that another key moment—the conception of the infamous *l’Origine du monde*—is uprooted to the previous chapter, even though chronologically it belongs to the last one.

One of the unfortunate side-effects of the desire to be comprehensive is that at times finer nuances and distinctions get lost in the array of facts. The artist's career becomes increasingly monolithic, with precious little room for idiosyncrasy and self-contradiction. For instance, that Courbet was addressing some new, alarming version of the "public" is a recurring leitmotif of the text. Yet one would like to know how the generic term "public" could encompass events as disparate as town fairs, migrant gypsies, urban leisure, barmaids, and country funerals, as if all those publics amounted to the same thing. Likewise, it seems imperative to distinguish the "popular" in the sense of old-fashioned, almost nostalgic rituals from newer forms of entertainment such as world's fairs and money-making private exhibitions. When does one come into conflict with other? Is there a shift from the former to the latter in Courbet's art? When could such a change be said to occur? Or are the two going on simultaneously? This is all the more paramount in that today's understanding of Courbet has turned from Courbet-the-revolutionary to Courbet-the-salesman, a character shift dovetailing neatly with the generational one from the leftists of the 1960s to the current generation of art world stars. To what extent is Courbet's radicalism being re-written as a strategy of one-upmanship in a nascent world of cultural spectacle? *Courbet* does not answer—or even ask—this question. But Le Men's study will nonetheless be a necessary starting point from which any new reading of his career must begin.

The critical assessment of the explosion of Courbet publications—including, of course, this one—during the 2007-8 retrospective year is still in its infancy. I have so far done my best to point out some of the interpretive stakes involved. But this does not mean that Le Men's volume does not offer new discoveries of a much more concrete variety. Access to the unpublished correspondence of Dr. Édouard Ordinaire, a friend of the Courbets residing in the nearby town of Maisières, has reaped dividends in the form of letters between the Ordinaire family and Jules Castagnary, Francis Wey, and Max Buchon, among others. One wonders what other gems lurk in the obscurity of this archive (not coincidentally, *Le Men* also brings to light the first serious discussion of the recently discovered *Gypsy Woman and Her Children*, perhaps the last of the realist period canvases still in private hands).

To return to the original contradiction with which I began this review – the one between word and image, roughly speaking: while magnificent pictures parade across the pages of *Courbet*, the text itself has remarkably little to say about Courbet's technique, as if the gap between the broad cultural swath cut by the author's narrative and the single arresting detail was too daunting to traverse. That there is qualitative and quantitative leap in the inventiveness of painting between 1840 and 1870, and that Courbet contributed, if not initiated, this formal development is beyond doubt. But the question is: how did major historical developments—acknowledged by all to be operative in Courbet's work—set up the conditions for this new kind of art-making? What is the relationship of broad cultural shifts to the minute, manual operations of painting? If it were simply a matter of pasticheing modern subject matter and overlooked formal codes from previous eras of art like the seventeenth century, a minor painter like Rosa Bonheur would warrant just as much attention as Courbet. As it stands, the emergence of the intense modern investigation of pictorial substance—what has often misleadingly in the past been called "form"—seems to arise, in this parsing of events, out of the blue, like Venus in her half-shell.

In art history this gap is often construed as one between the content of an artwork and those formal properties that are the physical vehicles for that content. Much of nineteenth-century art-historical scholarship of the last fifty years has striven to rectify a perceived imbalance, inherited from the founders of the discipline of art history, to privilege the primacy of form over content. Even if, as is often claimed by these would-be correctors, that it is the imbrication of form and content, and not simply the reversal of the dichotomy, that is their goal, these arguments, in practice, do no such thing. At best, they acknowledge the persistence of the grand opposition, while more or less holding their hands up and saying that they see no way out of it.

That this has happened to Courbet is one of the ironies of history, because no artist of the nineteenth century worked harder to undo a static notion of “form.” Inserting disputable content was just one admittedly, crucial maneuver. The other, less oft-mentioned but just as influential, is the artist’s attempt to reground the codes of representation in a basic foundation that had no connection to those currently on offer, neither in the studios of the major Salon artists nor even in imagery borrowed from the margins of society or the art-historical past. Nature—and, by extension, its pictorial corollary, landscape—provided Courbet with the means to create forms as if they were subject to the same rules as primordial Nature itself. This means that “mere” formal properties like viscosity and liquidity, texture and thickness, could be seen to belong to both the object itself and the stuff used to depict it. For instance, the power of his waves and rocks owe much of their experiential force to the fact that the viewer perceives the given motif as coming into being before one’s eyes, an effect downplayed, if not outright repressed, in conventional approaches to form-making predicated on careful preliminary study after the model and the build-up of layers into a smooth, mirror-like finish.

So accepted were these conventions that there was very little reason to write about them, given that this kind of learning was passed down in studios or at best written down in bastardized form in how-to manuals. For this reason, the archival traces addressing technique in any precise way are limited mostly to notes critics made after visiting artists’ studios. Or, observations of pictorial facts were overlaid with accusations of a pathological nature, moralistic barbs wielded as critical weapons against painters, like Courbet, that challenged prevailing aesthetic norms.

But if one considers the work of art to be its own kind of evidence, as a monument as replete with a given culture’s complexities as any journal article or handwritten letter, then Courbet’s paintings, particularly the landscapes, have much to tell us. Because in his most famous landscapes, like the *Source de la Loue* or the various wave paintings, the conceptual distance between the final image as it is perceived by the viewer and the material constituents of that illusion is reduced if not eliminated entirely. It is not a question of raising “form” to the level of the “content”—in this case, that of nature or landscape—but showing how *any* thing, natural or artificial, is itself always a piece of matter caught in just one of many possible states of being and therefore in one of many possible configurations of its “form.”

It is towards the end of *Courbet* that Le Men proposes an understanding of the interplay of form and matter that transpires in the landscapes. Her argument, much indebted to those of Jurgis Baltrusaitis and Dario Gamboni, is that there is demonstrable anthropomorphism in Courbet’s landscapes that allows one to divine all kinds of body parts and faces in even the most figureless of his scenes of nature. While there is attributed to Courbet one late landscape, *Fantastic Landscape with Anthropomorphic Rocks* (1873), that *does* harbor a head in profile on its left-hand side, one must surely ask if this one example can in any satisfactory way be a reliable guide to Courbet’s landscape production *tout court*? I, for one, have yet to find a face, hidden or otherwise, in any of his other landscapes. So either said phenomena have escaped my visual faculties (for which, if proven, I admit in advance a deserved *mea culpa*) or the frequent occurrence of this face-hunting is indicative of some deeper motivation on the part of its protagonists. That motivation, I would maintain, is the same hunger for meaning that drives art historians to flock to the realist Courbet in order to find secure moorings for the work of art in social reality. Deprived of these referents in the case of the landscapes, critics starved of hermeneutic nourishment provide for themselves the missing meal: actual human bodies buried in the landscape. This anthropomorphosis of the image, then, runs parallel to the dominant historiographic tradition outlined above, despite the disparity of its subject and approach. In both cases, a longing for semantic plenitude and indeed a lust in the case of the numerous comparisons made between Courbet’s grottoes and the female vagina produces an art history whose primary objective is to satisfy a perceived lack of meaning. But if what I have been saying about the form/matter dichotomy has any purchase on Courbet’s art, then it is precisely this transparency of the visual form to its “content” that his paintings seek to contest and undermine. It is therefore a disservice to the radicality of his art to claim that one

can so easily—*voilà!*—extract a hidden figure from its amorphous ground and thus deliver at a psycho-perceptual level the grounding in humanized reality that historians seek at an empirical one.

Paul Galvez
Ohio State University
prof.galvez@gmail.com

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