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Matthew Affron, ed., *Émilie Charmy*. Exh. cat. Fralin Museum of Art, Charlottesville August 23, 2013-February 2, 2014, The Arts Club of Chicago, February 27-May 17, 2014 (Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia: Charlottesville, 2013). 120 pp., color plates, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-9835059-5-2

Review by Julie M. Johnson, University of Texas at San Antonio

Émilie Charmy (1878-1974) painted interior genre scenes populated with women in rococo salons. In some scenes the women wear high-necked long dresses, and read or play cards. In others, the women lounge or stand, wearing nothing but black stockings. She also painted decorative landscapes, erotic nudes and portraits. Charmy disrupted genre conventions with a painting style that was expressive and Fauve-like, on the “knife’s edge of abstraction and description,” as Sarah Betzer writes in her essay, “Inhabiting the Modern: Charmy, Gender, and Genre” (p. 44). This exhibition catalogue, produced to accompany the first U.S. retrospective of the artist’s work, does much more than bring another neglected woman artist to our attention. Edited by the show’s curator Matthew Affron, the three essays by Affron, Betzer and Rita Felski have much to offer scholars interested in sexuality and representation, art historical methods, women artists, and debates on the spaces of domesticity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Each essayist seeks a different framework in which to read the artist’s work. Curator and catalogue editor Affron provides a biographical essay with a discussion of key works and analysis of art critical commentary on the artist. Betzer reads Charmy’s representations of nudes in salon-like interiors as engaging in dialogue with a “distinguished lineage” (p. 51) of artists who depicted domestic interiors, and for whom the interior was a “theater of artistic combat” (p. 45). Charmy’s erotic nudes present a “challenge” to feminist theories of difference for Rita Felski, who tests theory against her encounters with the objects, ultimately championing models of spectatorship that include the possibility of wonder (p. 63). Together the essays provide a glimpse into some of the most useful methods and innovative strategies for writing about women artists.

The catalogue opens with Affron’s chronological treatment of the artist and her milieu. Along the way we learn that there is much to be discovered in the life of Charmy, who prospered in the interwar years and was well integrated into the Parisian avant-garde. Charmy lived in Lyon with her parents from 1898-1903, moved to the Paris suburb of St. Cloud in 1903, then rented a studio in Montmartre and later moved closer to the city center. From 1903 on she exhibited her work at the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d’Automne in Paris. Berthe Weill saw her work at one of these exhibitions and became her art dealer in 1905, introducing Charmy to the Parisian avant-garde (p. 19). By 1913 Charmy had become an integrated member of the French avant-garde, sending her work alongside Matisse and Duchamp to Chicago and New York with the Armory show. Affron discusses key works, exhibitions, and the art criticism of Charmy, providing translations and historical context to explain how the “parameters of Charmy’s reputation and career” were set (p. 31). She was alternately seen as the heir of Fragonard, more for his aesthetics of the brush than for his frolicking nudes (p. 30) or as an artist

who “sees like a woman and paints like a man...a strange and powerful painter, who catches hold and seduces us” (p. 31). In 1921 Colette described her nudes as happening “in moments of productive frenzy when Charmy is no longer anything but the masterful servant of feminine flesh” (p. 31). Affron explains how the framework of gendered language presented “a set of ideas with a long history in ancient rhetoric, neoclassical art theory and Kantian aesthetics” that could be (and were) “weighted in one direction or another” for the artist (pp. 31-32). He concludes with a consideration of her *Self Portrait in a Mirror* (c. 1950-55), so thickly encrusted with paint that the record of the artist’s touch shifts “the descriptive and mimetic mode that one ordinarily associates with mirrors,” toward a “different order of authorial presence” (p. 33). Rather than masking or disguising herself, he writes, Charmy faces herself in the mirror and on the canvas, leaving “a surface of paint that bears the material traces of the artist’s subjective response to what she sees and feels” (p. 33).

In a close reading of key works from 1897-1900, Betzer examines how Charmy disrupts the genre of the interior scene, reworking the subject matter of Boucher, who was himself playing with genre conventions. Leaving out narrative detail, Charmy populates an interior domestic space with primping nudes in her *Salon* of 1900. Betzer situates the painting in a tradition of models in interiors—from *Les Poseuses* of Seurat to Degas’s *Madam’s Nemeday*, a brothel scene—to clarify just how disruptive Charmy is of the genre. Instead of placing her nudes in a *maison close*, as does Degas, or a studio, as does Seurat, Charmy “frustrates” narrative closure with her well-furnished interior, which is decidedly not a studio, but a rococo salon (p. 53). Betzer successfully compares Charmy’s pictorial strategy with Manet’s disruption of the Venetian pastoral in *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*: “Like Manet before her, Charmy created in *The Salon* a picture in which the female nude at once signals artistic ambition and undoes the seamlessness of the representation. Among other things, this internal disruption guarantees that the picture will be scrutinized as a pictorial construct” (p. 51). Charmy, writes Betzer, “brings into contact the domestic interior, the artist’s studio, and an army of naked women suggestive of a brothel” with a “heightened degree of artistic self-consciousness and a newfound muscularity of address” (p. 53). Betzer considers the implications of the artist’s interrogation of domestic space in the context of contentious debates on private and public spheres, discussing feminist contributions from Janet Wolff to more recent evaluations of how stable the “public” and “private” were.<sup>[1]</sup> She joins recent scholars who have questioned a “rigorously dichotomous model of urban and domestic, and its absolute polarization of male and female experience” (p. 46). Referring to the “classic account” of Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” Betzer remarks that “the enduring power of this model may be seen in Gill Perry’s writing on Charmy’s life and work” (p. 55, n. 25). Perry, who pioneered work on Charmy and other French avant-garde women artists in 1995, argued that Charmy’s nudes are “not overly sexualized or eroticized” because she is distancing “herself, and the viewer, from a representation of woman as a sexual commodity” (p. 57, note 45).<sup>[2]</sup> Betzer, on the other hand is “unconvinced by the argument that it (referring to the *Salon*) is a picture drained of eroticism” (p. 57, n. 45). In Betzer’s reading, it is in fact *because* Charmy alludes to previous depictions of “sexually frank nudes” and the space of the brothel that the *Salon* “merit(s) consideration as nothing less than a manifesto painting” (p. 53).

Rita Felski presents Charmy as a “challenge” to feminist theories of difference. Rather than relying on psychoanalysis as a foundation for her investigations into modernity, Felski prefers a dynamic, phenomenological approach that takes into account the role of the spectator—not just the original audience—but all of the new encounters that are generated between spectator and work. Felski writes clearly and breezily provides an overview of major feminist ideas relevant to the topic, from Toril Moi to Amelia Jones, making this an essay potentially useful for art historians to assign and discuss in the classroom. Felski opens her essay by briefly explaining that poststructuralist theorists (Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva) view sexual difference as “built into the deepest levels of language, desire and the psyche”; therefore the “role of feminist critics...is to diagnose and deconstruct the ‘phallogocentric’ logic of language as well as visual imagery” (p. 60). The feminine, in this scheme, “should be understood as a practice of dissidence, a haunting surplus...a disturbance of existing orders of meaning,” she writes,

citing Griselda Pollock (p. 60).<sup>[3]</sup> While Felski concedes the viability of such an approach, she laments the box it represents: “even if the box in which we place women’s art is adorned with a variety of stylish theoretical terms and honorific phrases (alterity, subversion, radical negativity), it is still a box” (p. 60). She has long preferred instead “thick descriptions” that are more “historical and cultural” than “semiotic or psychoanalytic” and that take into account the dynamic situations in which images circulate (p. 61).<sup>[4]</sup> Felski regrets the “limits of conventional theoretical vocabularies” (p. 64) and has reservations about approaches that fail to “do justice to messy, ambivalent, and affectively charged responses of male and female viewers,” preferring the method of Amelia Jones who draws on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to the artwork (p. 63). In this brief essay, then, Felski tests the theory with her experience of the work, reminding us that theory is not science, and that a work of art and our encounter with its materiality (wonder) generates its own form of knowledge, not frozen into the time in which the work was made, but open to new encounters. To solely see a work as a reflection of the artist’s difference, as Felski concludes, is to box in the artist, in ways that “men have long escaped” (p. 64).

The three very different approaches in this catalogue intersect in agreeable ways. Betzer’s essay, in fact, gives us a good idea of what Felski’s appeal to art historians to examine women as actors and participants in the making of modernism might look like, in that she presents Charmy as a person who is thinking through genre and subject matter, and interrogating art tradition in her studio practice, rather than unconsciously presenting difference as she experienced it, as the popular psychoanalytic model or “nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres” (p. 46) would seem to have it. Furthermore, Betzer situates her argument within recent scholarship on the rise of the domestic interior and how men and women sustained and experienced it as a productive site of modernity. Instead of viewing her as an interrogator of genre and gender norms, however, previous critics discussed Charmy as either masculine or feminine, or both, as Affron describes. Is it possible then, that some contemporary gender theory boxes women in, as earlier art critics once did? Felski’s thoughtful essay would seem to suggest this is a distinct possibility. There are many more connections to be made among the three essays as well as discussions to be had in the context of other scholarship on gender and space. Gill Perry, for example, has continued to work with themes of domesticity and gender—now with a focus on the home as a theme in contemporary art—and as such, is yet again pioneering an important new field that will surely draw the attention of future scholars.<sup>[5]</sup> Beautifully written throughout, the catalogue is a useful source not just for research libraries, but also for students in classes with titles like “women artists” or “gender issues in art,” and for those who would discuss art *as* a form of knowledge that often challenges theory, if one is willing to embrace the ambiguity, paradoxes and open-endedness of visual works of art.

## NOTES

[1] Betzer singles out the work of Elizabeth Wilson and Deborah Silverman as especially productive in this regard, and mentions a growing number of scholars—among them Sharon Marcus, Lynda Nead, Greg M. Thomas, Christoph Asendorf, Hollis Clayson, Susan Sidlauskis, Katherine Kuenzli, Aruna D’Souza, Tom McDonough, and Charles Rice—who are reinterpreting how men and women experienced the spaces of modernity. See also Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen, eds., *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Routledge, 2014). To add to this list, Carl Schorske, Beatriz Colomina, and Tag Gronberg present Vienna 1900 as a site in which private space was on public display, and interiority was the dominant aesthetic tendency, indeed *the* terrain for interrogating modernity. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980); Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity, Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1994); Gronberg, *Vienna, City of Modernity, 1890-1914* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

[2] Gill Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: Modernism and ‘Feminine’ Art 1900-1920s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 34, as cited by Betzer, p. 57, n. 45.

[3] Griselda Pollock, "Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 41.4(2010), p. 802, as paraphrased by Felski, p. 60.

[4] Felski's interest in the circulation of images is compatible with Michael Warner's interrogation of what constitutes a public. Warner's model allows for the fact of multiple publics and counterpublics that are created through a variety of media and dynamic situations. It is less hegemonic, more materially and historically specific than the Habermasian model of the public sphere. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, Mass.: ZONE, 2005).

[5] Gill Perry, "Dream Houses: Installations and the Home," in Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Perry, *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art* (London: Reaktion, 2013). For an early collection of essays on domesticity and modernity see Christopher Reed, ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

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