

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## The Trouble with Renoir's Nudes

*Renoir: The Body, The Senses* makes some attempts, vain in my opinion, to present Renoir as a politically progressive artist, even a closet feminist.

David Carrier August 3, 2019



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "Young Woman Braiding Her Hair" (1876), oil on canvas, 22 1/16 x 18 1/8 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection (all images courtesy The Clark Institute)

WILLIAMSTOWN, Massachusetts — Magnificently installed in the spacious, well-lit basement galleries of the new Clark Center, designed by Tadao Ando, one could hardly imagine a better showing of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's nudes than *Renoir: The Body, The Senses*, the museum's centenary memorial to the artist, who was born in 1841 and died in 1919.

The exhibition offers a very full tracing of Renoir's entire career, with paintings, works on paper and sculptures. I particularly admired the group of red chalk drawings from 1884-87 — studies for "The Great Bathers," a painting not in the exhibition — which were mounted in a semi-enclosed

gallery. And there are useful comparison works, female nudes by Pierre Bonnard, Peter Paul Rubens, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Suzanne Valadon.

The exhibition title is slightly misleading: while all but two of these Renoirs are of female nudes, the sense of primary interest to him, the useful catalogue explains, was the sense of touch. A painter friend paraphrases Renoir to the



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "Bust of a Model" (1916), oil on canvas, 21 5/8 x 18 1/8 inches, Musée national Picasso-Paris

effect that, "had it not been for women's breasts, it is unlikely that he would have become a figure painter."

The exhibition's announced goal, which is achieved, is to demonstrate how Renoir successfully carried this very traditional French motif, the figure of Venus, into the world of Impressionism. If, then, the cumulative effect is initially slightly monotonous, that is perhaps because his "Young Woman Braiding Her Hair" (1876) already reveals much of his skill, but perhaps not as much as manifest in his "Bust of a Model" (1916) or in the various other later pictures; it's interesting to note

that the woman depicted in "Blonde Bather" (1881), a memorial of his honeymoon in Naples, is not unlike his later models.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "Blonde Bather" (1881), oil on canvas, 32 1/8 x 25 3/4 inches, Clark Art Institute

Now and again, to speak frankly, we critics have our awkward moments when find ourselves unsure about how to respond generously to visually magnificent exhibitions. Many, perhaps most of us, are willing to enjoy paintings of women by Pablo Picasso notwithstanding his obvious sadism; or by Gustave Courbet, allowing for his frankly salacious eroticism; or by Paul Cézanne, for their oddly gawky formal qualities. And nowadays we admire Lisa Yuskavage's perversities, for after all she is an ironical woman-artist. She has a marvelous essay in the *Renoir* catalogue; I wish that the curator had been bold enough to include her paintings in the show.

The trouble, then, with Renoir's female nudes, buxom stout young women, is that, the way he painted them, they look so ... what's the word I'm looking for? Vapid? The intelligent, always lucid catalogue is, not surprisingly defensive, and makes some attempts, vain in my opinion, to present Renoir as a politically progressive artist, even a closet feminist.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "Bather Arranging Her Hair" (1885), oil on canvas, 36 3/16 x 28 3/4 inches, Clark Art Institute

In his justly much criticized account of the nude, Kenneth Clark argues that Renoir took the figure of Venus, which "had been cheapened, falsified, and fragmented" and discovered "how to give the female body that character of wholeness and order which was the discovery of the Greeks and combine such order with a feeling for its warm reality.

He thus was, Clark, argues, very self-consciously extending tradition in a surprising way. Clark doesn't take his discussion of the female nude further into the present, but with the aid of the catalogue of an earlier exhibition at this

same museum, *Impressionism. Painting Quickly in France 1860-1890* (2000), it's possible to do that: consider, for example, in "Study. Torso of a Woman in the Sunlight" (1875-76), one of the works from that show, the lovely floating background, which is found in many other Renoirs. Here, surely, Renoir anticipates the loaded brushwork of Willem de Kooning.



Edgar Degas "After the Bath, Three Nude Women" (c.1895), pastel on paper, 25 1/8 x 31 3/4 inches, private collection, Fort Worth, Texas

Maybe, to make another link to modernism, it's the high pitched, cheaply decorative colors, so very Warholian!, that initially keep me from responding seriously to these Renoirs. And yet, you need only compare Cézanne's "Three Bathers" (1879-82) or Degas's "After the Bath, Three Nude Women" (1895), both displayed in the current show, to Renoir's works of the same era, "Bather Arranging Her Hair" (1885), for example, to recognize the highly distinctive qualities of Renoir's art.

Where Cézanne composes his women and the landscape alike, often with short strokes of color, and where Degas arranges his three women in ungainly poses, with (in one case) the legs cut off by the left edge, Renoir sets his models in filmy land- and seascapes. Here, as elsewhere, the dissolving, quasi-abstract backgrounds play against the solidity of his female figures. Is this what he meant when he said, "Sculptors are the lucky ones [. . .] when their forms are



pure, they become one with the light existing in nature like a tree"? Perhaps this statement helps explain why, in collaboration with Richard Guino, he made the bronze "Venus Victorious" (1914).



Paul Cézanne, "Three Bathers" (1879–82), oil on canvas, 21 5/8 x 20 1/2 inches, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henri Matisse, 1936, © Petit Palais/Roger-Viollet

How paradoxical, still, that these very visual pictures have become so hard to appreciate. Not just because they raise obvious issues of political correctness, but because they are highly repetitive. It was a relief, I confess, to look away from the Renoirs to the comparison pictures by other artists. How strange that these seemingly straightforward artworks, with no obvious iconography or symbolism, raise such concerns. And how embarrassing that I had to have recourse to the two books listed in my note below in order to begin to respond sympathetically to this show. But I believe that some such analysis is called for if at

this time we are to understand and, perhaps, even to enjoy these problematic pictures.

Note: *My quotation comes from Kenneth Clark, The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form (1956); one key idea, the link with de Kooning, is purloined from Richard Brettell, Impression. Painting Quickly in France 1860-1890 (2001).*

Renoir: The Body, The Senses continues at *The Clark Art Institute (225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts)* thorough September 22. The exhibition is organized by the Clark Art Institute and the Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, Texas).

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