

Art

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Black and

White and

Red All Over

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YEARS

furnishing 'a substantial contribution to a new art history'. Overall the volume is rather Balkan-centred, perhaps an effect of IRWIN's own frame of reference and a consequence of their preoccupation with their 'self-historisation'. They acknowledge the 'subjective and quixotic' nature of the *East Art Map*, which they are keen to describe as an artists' project, even though it has been written almost entirely by academics. Nevertheless, its very bulk means that it will rest on library shelves for a long time, as the sole one-stop referent in English for the history of postwar art in socialist Eastern Europe as a whole. As such, it will serve to canonise the individuals and groups who find themselves between its covers, albeit within a history newly made visible. In fact, it is much deeper, more multi-faceted and fascinating than that.

These two books have been needed for a long time, even before they were thought of. Neither book disappoints, but neither is considered by its author or editor to be the last word. ■

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■ Eros

Mark Harris

Charles Harrison, *Painting The Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, 291pp, illus, hb, £41.00, 0 226 31797 8.

Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, 240pp, illus, hb, £29.95, 0 500 23821 9.

Alyce Mahon, *Eroticism & Art*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 334pp, illus, hb, £20.00, 0 19 280187 2.

When I once remarked to Charles Harrison that 'Out of Actions' (an exhibition of residue and documentation from performance art) invited reappraisal of the history of postwar painting, he said he felt the opposite. All that accumulated detritus only strengthened his conviction that the real achievements in painting remained work on durable two-dimensional surfaces. That he restates his belief at the outset of *Painting the Difference* cautions the reader that Harrison's operations will concern a forcibly delimited field: 'my understanding of painting is consciously conservative... the characteristic I wish to invoke is one in which an artist addresses a flat and delimited surface'. The rigour this brings to his analysis of a highly-selective group of representational paintings is never free of a marked defensiveness. It is as if Harrison has embarked on a fundamentalist scholarship that must guard its rear as it clears the path ahead – only that the path leads backwards, into a materialist revisionism where works are decontextualised to enable fresh analysis by scrutiny of pictorial devices and

facture. This occasionally pays off – sections on Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, Henri Matisse and especially Pierre Bonnard, are convincing and engaging. In such cases the arguments are carefully paced and unfold in good time. The analysis of other artists' works, however, can abruptly peter out in a kind of art historical cliffhanger as if Harrison might be leaving it to us, or a forthcoming book, to resolve the mystery.

Harrison wants to show how much more psychologically and politically complex are the depictions of women in some key Impressionist and early 20th-century paintings than is generally made out by their feminist interpreters, who readily classify these works as reinforcing gender stereotypes. Though social conditions are never far from his analysis, Harrison develops his arguments through an unusually disciplined focus on the relation of depicted subject to the treatment of picture plane and paint handling. His intention is that the selective analysis of formal properties serves to reveal their political agency. Authorising this approach is Harrison's conviction that advanced artists were unusually attuned to establishing the contemporaneity of their painting through registering progressive changes in the way that the appearance of women was being socially re-evaluated: 'the burden of my argument is that at the time when Degas was working, and where the representation of woman was concerned, sexual sentimentality and exploitation tended to be associated with technical conservatism'.

Harrison often concludes, with carefully assembled evidence, that these painters at their best were able to represent the complex emotions felt by women subject to continuous desiring scrutiny. To their advantage the book's arguments are patiently developed from a perceptive reading of the treatment of materials and pictorial effect that is rare in art historians. One of the pleasures of reading it is to follow how the book's many insights about specific representations become based on evidence of the materiality of the paintings. Unfortunately this commitment starts to unravel in the last two chapters which address later 20th-century work. These should really be the start of a second body of research, but Harrison wants to bring the book full circle to the source of his enquiry into 19th-century painting. And so it cursorily accelerates through Mark Rothko, past Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, taking in Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter before ending with Art & Language, for whom Harrison has been the perfect travelling explicator.

Exemplifying an endemic problem with art historical writing, Alyce Mahon's *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros* couldn't be more dissimilar from Harrison's book. Instead of the productive vortex of speculative aesthetics here is art history as enthusiastic list-making, where the notion of effective scholarship is the comprehensiveness of the strictly chronological inventory. I could concede some research value in having a survey of those landmark

Surrealist exhibitions that occurred after the movement's heyday in 1938, but why quit before the real job of analysing the aesthetic qualities of the works is even begun? In a promising first chapter Mahon claims that the parameters for her review will be a confluence of key Surrealist concerns, including Freudian concepts of the unconscious, an aesthetics of liberation, the legacy of social utopian movements, and radical innovations in the design of immersive exhibitions. Yet at no point are any of the hundreds of works Mahon enumerates evaluated qualitatively in relation to those concerns. As the gorgeous reproductions of *objets d'art* roll by, we wait in vain for arguments as to how certain Surrealist artworks most effectively carry forward an agenda of revolutionary aesthetics. Once started, Mahon cannot pause the momentum behind her intoxicated redemption of late Surrealism to discriminate between the vast amount of dodgy artefacts on offer and the few incendiary works that really count. Where Harrison can be forgiven for a refusal to let his theorising drift far from how paintings are actually made, Mahon reads only the superfluous of her selections as if they possessed the immateriality of projected images on a screen. Some of her research embarks on new scholarship, only to stop short of real achievement. Mahon's discussions of the impact of Charles Fourier's writings is long overdue but her analysis takes André Breton at face value to assume there was an uncritical assimilation by all Surrealists of these utopian erotic ideals. A valuable account of the significance of the *Main à Plume* resistance artists gets swept aside by the next tendency on the list while the lengthy descriptions of Jean-Jacques Lebel's actions suggest an important contribution to performance art but hardly rise above a heady journalism.

In comparison, Mahon's populist *Eroticism and Art* shows more innovative scholarship by her open enquiry into what constitutes images of sex. Though still chronologically organised, each chapter focuses on specific forms of erotic representation and effectively engages with appropriate theoretical contexts. Mahon does a pretty good job of providing the tools needed by readers who would take this research further, in spite of the inevitable abbreviations to a survey like this. Among the more unconventional inclusions are a discussion of Nazi sculpture in relation to Klaus Theweleit's work on masculinity, a discussion of the erotic representations of American regionalism, and an understated comparison between David Hockney's intimate paintings of his lover Peter Schlesinger and Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic portraits. In fact the book improves as it approaches the present day, with some of its best writing clarifying complex issues surrounding recent gay activist and African American art. ■

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