process . . . at the introductory level, at the passageway from undergraduate to graduate education, and at the frontiers of advanced research’ (pp. 352–3). It would be a mistake to interpret this as implying that the position of visual studies is properly ancillary to established patterns of study in the humanities. On the contrary, Mitchell’s point is that visual studies ought at each stage to be seen as foundational, not simply given the ‘pictorial turn’ in contemporary culture for which he argued in Picture Theory, but because ‘there is no way of getting beyond pictures . . . to a more authentic relationship with Being, with the Real, or with the World’ (p. xiv). At the introductory level, he suggests, visual studies would replace ‘what we used to call ‘Art Appreciation’” (p. 352). The point is telling. The protocols of art appreciation were based on the assumption of an essentially intransitive relationship between spectator and object. One knew what was to be appreciated: a more-or-less established canon of special things; and one knew what appreciation meant: it meant learning how to be in command of such things – that is to say how to make reference to them without risk of social embarrassment. In visual studies as ideally conceived – and as and when somehow made practical – the relationship between object and spectator is fully transitive and always open to question. The principal relevance of the canon is that it motivates inquiry into the mechanisms of canonization. As to ‘appreciation’, it is merely one among a range of performances that may be elicited by a given image from amongst the universe of images that constitute our ‘reality’. If there is one truth to be appreciated, it is that we are never in command of the desires that pictures represent or ‘have’, either in our ways of talking and writing about them, or in our unverbalized responses. If we were, their interest would be soon exhausted, and we would have no need to make more.

References


Charles Harrison


One of the central problems of and for representation is materiality, the physical constitution of the image by and as actual matter. Whether effaced or exaggerated, compliant or resistant, matter must be negotiated in creating
a two- or three-dimensional visual representation. In his study of the emergence and art-theoretical complexity of modern art, David Peters Corbett demonstrates how artists in England focused on the relationship between materiality and image as the site of their investigations into ‘the capacity of the visual to comprehend the world and reveal its realities’ (p. 6). In 19th-century England, the status of vision was under revision and pressure, and Corbett demonstrates how painters reconsidered their own praxis and theory in hopes of positioning painting in relation to the rapidly changing conditions of modernity. Specifically, scientific developments increasingly cast doubt on unaided vision’s ability to apprehend the complexity of the world. Microscopes and telescopes revealed a reality far more extensive than the eye alone could see, and science characterized human vision as unpredictable, limited, and mediated. Painters and critics resisted such positivistic accounts of vision, arguing that the creation and experience of the visual nevertheless offered a distinct and useful form of knowledge. Corbett historicizes this investigation, focusing on the painted surface as the arena in which succeeding generations of painters and critics debated art’s function. He argues that they attempted to characterize the manipulation of paint on canvas as a means toward a potentially unmediated, direct way of considering the world (or at least one’s visual experience of it). However Sisyphean the historic goal of ‘unmediation’ turned out to be, it nevertheless provides Corbett’s argument with a convincing catalyst (even if, at times, as a site of resistance) for art-theoretical advances in English art across the period from the Pre-Raphaelites to Vorticism.

The idea that painting might be able to present a sort of direct, unmediated experience of the visual itself allows Corbett to discuss, in his first chapter, the dual use of images and language in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, focusing on the changing responses to this issue from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Edward Burne-Jones. In his second chapter, he links this drive to unmediation to Aestheticism, demonstrating how artists such as Frederic Leighton and James McNeill Whistler developed the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ into a formulation of divergent theories of pure painting as offering a distilled brand of visual knowledge and experience. He concludes that Whistler, in particular, makes central the role of the artist in processing and repackaging the visual experience of modern life. Whistler’s bravura use of pigment, often with the suppression of recognizable content, becomes in Corbett’s analysis an example of attempted control of the modern world through the medium of paint. In this formulation, the artist’s persona becomes the filter through which the world is transformed into a direct, visual experience, metaphorically located in the materiality of paint on canvas in excess of representation. This focus on the filtering aspect of the artist’s persona leads Corbett to discuss Charles Ricketts and Oscar Wilde in the one chapter that seems the least consistent in the book. It is the only chapter not to deal with paintings, focusing instead on Wilde’s writings and Ricketts’ illustrations of them, and its argument, however interesting, seems tangential in many respects. It does, however, provide a tenuous link between the arguments built around Aestheticism and the hero of Corbett’s
story, Walter Sickert. In Sickert, Corbett finds a painter who more fully embraces the materiality of paint while using it to tackle the subject matter of modern life. He sees in Sickert’s surfaces a concordance of representation and materiality as well as a synthesis between certain aspects of Realism and Symbolism, revealing Corbett’s Sickert to be distinct from other versions of modern painting, both in England and elsewhere. The indiscernibility central to Sickert’s representations (both in terms of their mimesis and their subject matter) becomes the problem and promise of paint as an alternate form of knowledge more broadly. The concluding chapter is a wide-ranging and masterful analysis of Vorticism and its rivals as coping with the legacy of these issues, from Wyndham Lewis’s reaction against facture to a refreshing account of Spencer Gore as paradigmatic of the issues of modern art in England before the Great War.

As he moves between the long-term debates about the roles of visuality and painting, Corbett isolates a heretofore under-acknowledged discursive lineage about the efforts to make art modern in England. As the brief summary of its contents no doubt indicates, The World in Paint is, consequently, a difficult book. It contains both historical and theoretical acuity alongside occasional moments of over-reaching. At certain points, especially in the opening chapters, the issues around which Corbett circulates are elusive to the point of indiscernibility. (Most unfortunately, this is the case with the anecdote that introduces the book.) The central themes of his argument nevertheless emerge clearly and coherently when the book is taken as a whole. In fact, it is the progressive force of Corbett’s hypothesis that one might see as one of the few negative traits of this book. Despite the heterogeneity of the case studies that make up The World in Paint, the overall argument betrays a teleological ordering that privileges the issues that surround Sickert’s work and, with them, that most canonical of modernist criteria – the abandonment of strict verisimilitude. The early chapters, on the Pre-Raphaelites, Aestheticism, and Ricketts and Wilde, only truly come into focus after we reach Sickert and his bolder display of facture and materiality as painting’s potential. Overall, Corbett’s claims for paint’s ability to provide a site for the investigation into visuality are strongest when he deals with painters who allow the materiality of paint to interfere with representation. This in no way mitigates the accomplishment of the book. It does, however, mean that it is best read as a whole rather than piecemeal.

This is a relatively minor issue, one which is easily overshadowed by the significant methodological and historiographic advance Corbett’s analysis contributes to the study of art in Britain. The World in Paint reconsiders the trajectory of art’s relationship to modernity from the mid 19th century to the First World War, remapping the allegiances and affinities that have often gone uninvestigated. Corbett’s case for the complexity and variety of modern art in England is convincing and nuanced, but we would be mistaken if we took The World in Paint to be a book just about English art. Rather than being the kind of reactive revisionist book in which the author merely clamours at the gates of the canon, Corbett offers the subtler and ultimately more challenging possibility of reconsidering the definitions of
modern art and the methods used to study it from the unexpected but by no means impoverished perspective of art in England.

English art of the 19th and 20th centuries suffered from a set of historiographic prejudices in the discipline of art history. English art was perennially denigrated as being inherently derivative, late, or reactionary in comparison with the more well-worn tales of the birth and flowering of modern art in France. The canon of acceptable and benchmark artists in that dominant narrative remained more or less intact as the predominant methodologies of art history shifted from the connoisseurial to the contextual, both of which located transhistoric value (even if implicitly) in the relation of these works to a presumed evolution of modernist abstraction and/or social engagement. Works of modern art were identified by their relationship to this progress, and that which could not be easily seen as morphologically related to that evolution became more or less invisible in the taxonomy. (One can think of the ongoing difficulty some have had with considering Surrealism ‘modern’ because of some of its practitioners’ ‘return’ to illusionistic styles of painting.) Under the influence of this evolutionary perspective, supporters of English art in the 20th century often chose to cling, almost fanatically, to those moments when art and artists seemed to rival or at least approach the modern art central to the dominant art-historical narratives. Depending on who was doing the writing, the heroic figures came from Bloomsbury, Vorticism, Unit One, and so on, and they were set in stark contrast to the rest of artistic production in England which was caricatured as conservative, prudish, or merely unsophisticated. Advocates of suitably ‘modern’ English art paradoxically incorporated and implicitly reiterated the bias from mainstream narratives and deployed it, sometimes tyrannically, in parsing out the worthy from the unworthy.

Corbett’s book, however, does much more than paint a picture of English modern art to be proud of. He tackles the important tasks of reconsidering how we recognize ‘modern’ art and how we tell its histories. Corbett shows how stylistically divergent positions can be understood to be arising from shared, foundational issues, thus opening up the modernist taxonomies to alternative, though no less historically crucial, criteria. Surveying a period of more than a half-century of technological and social transformations, Corbett asks the pressing question of how the potentially outmoded practice of making painted images continued to find a place. By examining the discourses of visuality and the struggle with materiality, his book offers a set of analyses that prompt us not just to look at art in England with a more precise eye but also to consider more broadly how visuality interfaces with cultural modernity. He demands that we attend to the specific instances when they were negotiated in art and criticism, and his examinations of texts and paintings are composed of a wealth of detailed observations that cumulatively exemplify the importance of close, sustained looking and reading as fundamental tools for historical analysis. The smallest detail, he demonstrates, can sometimes reveal epochal concerns.
Corbett’s tactics are deftly deployed, but they remain, however, a risky gambit. No doubt, some readers are bound to make accusations of ‘formalism’. In the wake of contextual approaches to the history of art, a broad and often inaccurate notion of ‘formalism’ continues to be bandied about as art history’s Scarlet Letter. This is especially the case for the study of art in England, in which many revisionist histories attempt to justify English art solely in terms of the social and political context of late-Victorian or pre-War England. While it is hoped that such an approach will establish the value of English art, such singularly contextualizing approaches merely reinforce its marginality in terms of wider issues for art history – even as these revisionist accounts seek to prove that English culture offers a rich and complex field of inquiry (something historians of English literature have been able to repeatedly discuss without relegating their objects of study merely to illustrations of a context). Moving out of this impasse, Corbett demonstrates that the close attention to artworks, their representational strategies, and their material constitution is not the same as the ahistorical practice of abjuring content to focus solely on form. The World in Paint charts a discourse of the visual within art theory and practice and links it to wider issues for cultural modernity and social history without making it subservient to them. In so doing, it puts forth a model for understanding the detail and complexity of modern art.

Note

1. In this aim, Corbett’s book is part of a larger trend in recent art-historical writing to re-evaluate the position and theories of modern art in England across both the 19th and 20th centuries. See my literature review essay (Getsy, 2001) for a discussion. Since then, a number of other books have been published in this vein, including Corbett et al. (2002), Helmreich (2002), Hunault (2002), McConkey (2002), Fletcher (2003), Holt (2003), Wolff (2003), Getsy (2004a, 2004b), Reed (2004), Malvern (2004), Barringer (2005) and Barlow (2005). There are also articles too numerous to cite here that reflect this historiographic development, but of note are Prettejohn (2002), Tickner (2002), Nead (2004) and Peters Corbett (2005).

References


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