Comparative Media Arts Journal
Original Paper

Posing Modernity: A Virtual Journey

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Published in print: NA Published online: 2020

First sit comfortably. Snuggle into your chair and adjust your computer. You are about to view a 3-D modelization of the exhibition *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today, c*urated by Denise Murrell, Ph.D., at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University (October 24, 2018 – February 10, 2019), now available for viewing online.

This show highlights the central role of Black models at the beginning of modern art. Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* forms the point of departure for the exhibition (1863). When publicly displayed in 1865, Olympia's confrontational gaze outraged the public. Prostitution and sexual proximity were realities in Paris that the bourgeois Salon of the Académie des Beaux-Arts was not ready to acknowledge. Manet's raw and realist reclining nude courtesan presented a clear break from the established idealized canons of the nude. French critics were quick to label the work as immoral and obscene.

Less has been written about the Black servant handling a bouquet of flowers, presumably from one of Olympia's admirers. She is standing back against dark green curtains that downplay her presence. Her gaze is directed at the courtesan who dominates the composition. Scholars have barely acknowledged the servant's existence let alone her name: Laure. Laure has been understood as a racialized and therefore subaltern character in the collective imagination. In the French imperialistic context, her depiction as the maid of the white ruling class was part of the natural order – thus not worthy of critical investigation. More recently, British art historian Timothy James Clark (1984, 146) relegated Laure's presence to one that is purely peripheral,

along with the cat at the foot of Olympia's bed and other motifs. The lack of interest of the art world for Laure as both a model and a figure in such a canonical painting underscores its complicity in perpetuating white supremacist ideologies.

For the exhibition, Murrell has retraced the stories of Laure and other neglected models. Her corpus focuses on overlooked depictions of Black figures as active actors in the Parisian life. These counter-images contrast with the narrow stereotypes of passive exotified and eroticized 'others' pervasive in art history and popular culture. They disclose the daily reality of the newly emancipated Black community who strove to find their place after the abolition of slavery in France in 1848 – a powerful reminder of the critical participation of Black people, not just in artistic practices, but in every aspect of modernity.

I suggest you follow Murrell's chronological itinerary. Begin with Manet's close study of Laure (*Portrait of Laure* 1863), which transcribes her full individuality. According to the curator (2018, 23–26), the painting moves away from the dominant derogatory fine art tropes to announce a modern way of portraying Black people. In this new visual framework, Black figures are not depicted in their alterity to enhance their white counterparts, but as subjects with layers of complexities. Unlike in *Olympia*, Laure is not a secondary figure but the center of attraction. The plain background focuses the attention of the viewers on her presence. Discrete jewelry complements her beauty. There is a softness in the image accentuated by Manet's large brushstrokes. Laure is looking to one side. She seems lost in her thoughts. Her reflective pose invites the viewer into her internal world leaving us wondering what she is contemplating.

Then move to a corpus of Harlem Renaissance artists who inspired Henri Matisse during his visits to New York in early 1930s. Matisse's encounter with a modernist aesthetic that captures the experience of the Black urban middle-class and his visits to Harlem's jazz clubs greatly influenced his late artistic investigations. His portrayals of young Black women, such as Haitian dancer Carmen Lahens (*Carmen* 1946), reveal refined and empowered models far from his previous orientalizing works (Murrell 2018, 103). Finish your visit in the company of a

contemporary generation of African American artists who unapologetically work to reinvent the Black female muse.

From the bleak backdrop of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, online three-dimensional experiences seem bound to become more common. Half of the world has gone into temporary enforced isolation. Cultural institutions have closed for an indeterminate time to reduce the spread of the virus. Museums and galleries worldwide are looking for innovative ways to exhibit their works while respecting social distancing. There is more at stake than the long-term financial impact wrought by the lack of in-person visitors. It is important to maintain museums' and galleries' place in the social fabric. A key priority has been to continue to draw purposeful links between the public, the artworks, and the world at large. Virtual exhibition marks a new trend to connect to a global audience.

Educational outreach is another valuable aspect of the online experience. The digitalization of *Posing Modernity* transforms the exhibition into a permanent resource. The public can learn about the importance of Black people in the development of modern art, and in every facet of the social, political, and economic landscapes. The killing of George Floyd (May 25, 2020) by police in Minneapolis and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests worldwide for the end of police brutality, systemic racism, and structural inequalities demonstrate how online exhibitions such as *Posing Modernity* remain essential. Cultural institutions have a role to play in these pressing societal issues by showing how the past informs the present. Technology can be a powerful tool in effecting change.

Yet, it is difficult not to feel a sense of frustration when looking at these artworks via computer screen. But, while I missed attending the initial exhibition at the Wallach Art Gallery in person, I still had the opportunity of seeing its expanded second showing at the Musée D'Orsay in Paris: *Le Modèle Noir, de Géricault à Matisse* (March 26 – July 14, 2019). The contrast between these two experiences – one virtual and one physical – was striking. In my virtual encounter, there was no way to closely observe the texture of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux' sculpture

The Black Woman (Why Born a Slave?) (1872) or the traces of age in Nadar's photographs of the equestrienne Selika Lazevski (1891). The zoom function only produces a blurred image. I have found that I miss the physical and emotional proximity that I normally have with the artworks during a face to face encounter. Panning the scenography with my computer mouse is a poor substitute for the pleasure of strolling through the galleries. To view the artwork in person is only a part of the gallery experience. Art is about a shared and holistic experience that I approach with my five senses.

The fact that online exhibitions do not allow the viewer to engage with artworks through their senses is not a new issue. In 2011, a team of researchers from the University of Leicester (U.K.) asked selected participants to look at Sir John Everet Millais' painting, Ophelia (1852), with a mobile eye tracker (ASL MobileEve). The device allowed researchers to identify the points in space on which subjects were concentrating. Their purpose was to understand the difference between observing an original or a digital artwork. The findings of this study highlighted two salient points: participants in the laboratory who looked at the digital flat representation of Ophelia on a monitor tended to focus on Ophelia's predominant features — her face and her hands; on the other hand, viewers in situ at the Tate Britain Museum spent more time looking at the background and at the hidden details of the painting. The fixation pattern that emerged in real life allowed people to explore the artwork from a variety of viewing angles. For them, it was a visual as much as a corporeal endeavor. Additionally, in-person participants assigned greater importance to the physical materiality of the work. While in-person viewers could appreciate the subtleties of the brushstrokes, their counterparts in the laboratory could only see a representation. In sum, the study highlighted how the gallery experience fostered a wider and richer engagement with the painting.

Alone in front of my screen, my connection with the online version of *Posing Modernity* is more intellectual than either sensual, emotional, or communal. These disembodied artworks seem far removed from the meaningful experience I had in the museum. Face to face with the artworks, I was able to feel the weight of history in the present moment, and the transgressive

force of African American contemporary artists who are challenging the status quo. In this time of social injustice, hardship, and uncertainty, we need the power of art more than ever. Curators, artists, and cultural institutions will have to create innovative online forms of public engagement that have the capacity to move us. The coronavirus pandemic has inaugurated a new era that will require a radical reimagining of the artistic experience. Are we all up for it?

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About the Author

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