

Book Reviews

Comptes rendu de livres

GREG DAVIES

Review of

Langford, Martha, ed. 2017. *Narratives Unfolding: National Art Histories in an Unfinished World*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. 454, B/w and colour photographs, index, notes and bibliography. ISBN 978-0-7735-4979-1, \$39.95.

Within the field of western art history, national identities have long played an important role in the forging of a central narrative focused on the development of art from the early civilizations of the Mediterranean world to medieval, Renaissance, and modern Europe, and America. Today, this conventional narrative—which has also generated the idea of the heroic male figure (Michelangelo and Picasso being but two examples) as a visionary and pioneer in the arts—is routinely called into question. Yet it is only thirty years since my introduction to western art history began with a revised edition of H. W. Janson's *History of Art*; a volume which had then only just set out to include a few women artists as a concession to the demands for a changing canon.

New approaches to global art history, largely informed by critical theory and interdisciplinary methodologies, have since done much to critique the monolithic, meta-narrative of western art history. Yet still, the foundations of the field remain troublesome. Evidence of this resonates in the recent controversy surrounding the Brooklyn Museum's decision to hire a white curator to oversee its African Art Department, or the mixed responses to the National Gallery of Canada's harmonized exhibits of Indigenous and Canadian art, presented in the wake of calls to decolonize our cultural institutions. The complex social and cultural concerns which inevitably surface in these situations draw upon a fundamental

and ethical question within the very discipline which empowers our art galleries and museums: to whom does this art belong? Those of us who are authorized to write and interpret its history are the custodians and curators of our public collections; the individuals entrusted with the power to determine what is seen, and in which context it is (re)presented. But from whence comes our authority?

Narratives Unfolding: National Art Histories in an Unfinished World ultimately tackles this question by critically exploring, as editor Martha Langford notes, “the legitimacy and function” of national art histories in our time. I should begin by noting that this is an ambitious project from the outset given the immense scope of the topic and the range of material from which the authors draw. Both the editor and the book's contributors should be commended for their efforts in seeking to meet this ambition.

The introduction, written by Langford, offers a particularly useful summary of the global historiography of the field in order to set the stage for the critical essays that follow. Students of both art and art history will appreciate this guide to the principal authors and texts which have been especially influential in the development of art history, both western and global. Those who teach or mentor within the field will likely value the author's organized presentation and thoroughness of thought, particularly in those

instances where the text might be introduced into course design.

The fifteen essays which follow cover a diverse range of subjects as one would expect of a volume dealing with global, national art histories, though there are notable absences here. Discussions on national art histories in South America, China, Russia, Australia or East Asia (Martin Beattie's essay treating the Fourteenth Annual Indian Society of Oriental Art Exhibition, being an exception) would be welcome. The geographic distribution of subjects offered does overlap, at times, as in the case of two essays addressing national art histories in Israel / Palestine and four essays casting a lens on Canada. Yet this overlap offers a welcome advantage here, presenting multiple perspectives on related subjects in a text in which diverse voices are essential.

A number of essays offer particularly nuanced discussions on the complexities of voice and agency in states where national identity seeks to marginalize, suppress or silence 'otherness.' This is touched upon with sensitivity in Ceren Özpınar's "Playing Out the 'Differences' in Turkish Art-Historical Narratives," which examines the critical reception of Armenian, Kurdish and women artists in modern Turkey. Using specific examples to illustrate the point, Özpınar articulates the struggle between nationalist factors as reflected in the art and art criticism produced within Turkey from the 1990s to the present day. The discussion touches upon issues that resonate through other essays such as Carla Taunton's "Embodying Sovereignty: Indigenous Women's Performance Art in Canada." Noting that "Indigenous women's performance art must be understood as belonging to a living archive that mobilizes Indigenous sovereignty, and connects to a transnational Indigenous art history," Taunton draws attention to the place of these performance works as acts of decolonization and sites of resistance. In this respect alone, they cannot be subsumed under a narrative of western, or Canadian, art history.

The broader subject of national art histories is occasionally addressed through case studies of specific works or exhibitions. Martin Beattie's previously-mentioned essay, "Problems of Translation: Lyonel Feininger and Gaganendranath Tagore at the Fourteenth Annual Indian Society of Oriental Art Exhibition, Kolkata, India," is one such example. Here, the author challenges the historical trope of European epicentrism in the narrative of modern art innovations. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory, Beattie explores the issue of translation and the resulting "third space" which ultimately subverts the authority of the "original." Placing a lens on the largely undocumented, 1922 exhibition mentioned in the title, Beattie points to Feininger and Tagore as two, outside translators of the Parisian *avant-garde* who saw alternative, subversive possibilities for cubism. Fionna Barber's "Race, Irishness, and Art History: Margaret Clarke's Bath Time at the *Crèche* (1925), Motherhood, and the Matter of Whiteness," similarly focuses on a single, unusual painting and a corollary oil study, both of which appear to address issues of racial and gender identity in 1920s Ireland. The text opens discussion on a topic of importance, though the author's emphasis on the use of visual imagination in the interpretation of the work remains somewhat problematic as a methodological practice. In the end, the speculative reading of the painting, which promises valuable insight into social matters of significance, still begs further evidence and confirmation of the artist's viewpoint.

Collectively, these fifteen essays open a door on a broad subject in need of much more intensive discussion. While focused in some areas, the perspectives offered are both stimulating and essential. For educators, arts administrators, and general readers with a critical interest in the history of art—especially western art history and its influence in the world today—this volume will provide valuable understanding and insight into some of the issues at stake.