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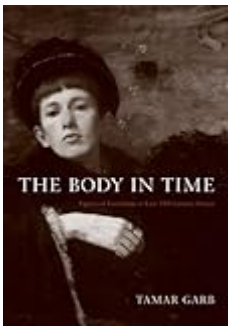
**Tamar Garb.** *The Body in Time: Figures of Femininity in Late Nineteenth-Century France.* The University of Kansas Franklin D. Murphy Lecture Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. Illustrations. 96 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98793-4.

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## Reading "The Body in Time"

Tamar Garb is a highly accomplished art historian and professor of art history at University College, London, who was invited to present a series of lectures in Kansas in the spring of 2005. *The Body in Time*, published by the University of Washington Press in conjunction with the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kansas, is the result of those lectures. The book consists of three components: an introduction and two essays. The author writes very well, and uses, with occasional exceptions, refreshingly accessible language. However, because the work is the product of a series of lectures, it is, by definition, inherently limited in scope. This volume, ninety-six pages long, contains a scant thirty-three pages of text. Garbâs range is thus necessarily and understandably limited. In particular, from this historianâs perspective, the authorâs analysis occasionally suffers from a lack of historical contextualization.

The first essay, âTemporality and the Dancer,â is an investigation of Edgar Degasâ nearly obsessive work on ballerinas. As Garb makes clear, Degas began painting and sketching female dancers in the 1870s and continued doing so until the early 1900s. Garb does an outstanding job of chronicling the evolution of Degasâ approach, suggesting that he began as a realist hoping to capture the hard work and grinding routine that went into the dancersâ oft-idealized performances, and ended as something of a symbolist, using the dancersâ bodies to present his own meditations on their eroticization. While attentive to this progression, Garb also demonstrates continuities in Degasâ work. In particular, she offers insightful commentary on the artistâs attempt to make his presence explicit in his paintings or sketches, often by picturing the dancers from unorthodox or awkward vantage points, thereby making viewers conscious of the artistâs gaze. As Garb puts it, Degasâ oeuvre demonstrates that âhistory shapes the bodyâ (p. 7). In short, this essay is thoughtful and its analysis appears sound.

That said, as a historian I found this first piece frustrating. The author too often represents her excellent material in isolation from the historical context. For example, Garb briefly discusses the privileged and largely male audiences who took in the Paris ballet, but leaves

the reader in the dark about the historical trajectory of the art form. Was the eroticization of the ballerinas part of the âembourgeoisementâ of high culture, for instance, or was it a more longstanding tradition? Similarly, while she demonstrates the influence of symbolism and of his friend, poet StÃ©phane MallarmÃ©, on Degasâ thinking, Garb does not try to connect his evolution to wider social or political trends. Should we read Degasâ paintings as responses to the emergence of the âfemme nouvelleâ? Did the emergent mass consumerism of the Bon MarchÃ© and similar enterprises, staffed by working-class women and catering to the middle class, influence Degasâ view of female sexuality or the feminine? Finally, Garb does not attempt to demonstrate the significance of Degasâ work. General readers will doubtless want to know, at the very least, whether subsequent artists were influenced by Degasâ methods and projects. I wondered, for example, whether Degasâ querying of the dancersâ sexual objectification was a theme that other artists pursued afterward. This essay, in other words, already interesting, could have been truly excellent with a little more historical depth.

In contrast, the second essay, âPortraiture and the New Woman,â at once provides a highly rewarding examination of female portraiture in the late 1800s and sets it expertly in the relevant context. Here, Garb investigates the at times tortured attempts of accomplished female artists to escape the bounds of traditional femininity and portray themselves and each other as strong, emancipated women. As Garb correctly observes, the fact that some, including Marie Bashkirtseff, found it very psychologically difficult to break with traditional femininity speaks to its power. The author discusses how, to put themselves forward as deserving to be taken seriously, women artists abandoned the traditional tropes of female portraiture, including soft phantasmagoric backgrounds, for the âseriousâ realism of male portraits. Most impressively, from a historianâs point of view, Garb includes an enlightening discussion of the chronological evolution of female portraiture, and outlines the hostile responses of male critics to the emergence of the femme nouvelle. Male critics, perhaps unsurprisingly, relied on popular conceptions of gender to castigate modern women and emancipated female artists in particular, as unnatural, unattractive, and generally manly. Moreover, Garb not only sets the appearance of liberated nineteenth-century women artists in Paris against the backdrop of the then burgeoning womenâs rights movement, but she also adds color to her narrative by discussing the connections of some of her subjects, including Bashkirtseff, to the womenâs suffrage campaign. Precisely because of its keen attention to historical context, this essay is an absolute pleasure to read. I can easily picture myself assigning it to undergraduate students.

The decision not to include at least a short conclusion was unfortunate. While the introduction makes an effort to tie the two essays together, arguing that âthe figure of femininity as vehicle ... remained central to [Degasâ and the portraitistsâs] aesthetic positions,â the connection between the two essays remains underdeveloped (p. 6). In a conclusion, for example, Garb might have argued that the two phenomena she examines originated in and were responses to the same historical context. That the various artists chose to represent their respective projects through âthe figure of femininity,â thus becomes an interesting point of historical conjuncture. Perhaps there was something peculiar to the âbelle Ã©poqueâ that produced this conjuncture, or maybe Garb feels that feminine figures continue to be used in this fashion. Either way, it would have been interesting to read her insights.

The publisher also deserves praise. This is a sublimely attractive book. The artwork is exquisite and well presented, and the cover art was well chosen. The front cover features Ellen Day Haleâs assertive *Self-Portrait* (1885), while on the back one finds some of Degasâ ballerinas hard at work. These selections encapsulate the theses of the two essays, and look awfully nice to boot. Within the book, one finds forty-one different figures, mostly artwork, and yet the cost remains an affordable $24.95. In an age when most academic presses are cutting costs by eliminating or reducing figures and skimping on cover art, this is commendable.

In conclusion, Garbâs *The Body in Time* is a mixed success. It is fluidly written and engaging, but at times needs further historicizing, particularly in the first essay. That criticism aside, however, there is much to like in this book. Garbâs insights on the femme nouvelle, in particular, are noteworthy, and scholars of gender and modern France, or of gender and modern art, will find them well worth reading.

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