

FRANK FERRIE is in his second year on the MPhil/PhD programme at Birkbeck College. His thesis looks at reasons for the decline in commissioning of images of the *Madonna del Parto* (the pregnant Virgin Mary) in fifteenth-century Tuscany. Frank is particularly interested in 'transitional' phases between the late medieval period and the Renaissance in Italy and how the meaning and function of objects and images developed during such transitions. A key feature of his current research is the relationships between official Church doctrine and popular social and religious practices concerning images.

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Conference Review

Art and Desire

Association of Art Historians, 'New Voices' Student Conference,
University of York, November 7, 2009

Chaired by Peter Stilton (University of Bristol), Tamsin Foulkes
(University of Birmingham), and Suzy Freake (University of Nottingham).

Frank Ferrie



THIS CONFERENCE PROMISED MUCH for my research, in terms of directly relevant approaches and content.¹ Delegates' papers tended to concentrate upon subjects familiar to feminist art history such as gender issues, identity construction, the portrayal of the body, and perceptions of beauty. My thesis centres upon the reasons for the sharp decline in the commissioning of images of the pregnant Virgin Mary in fifteenth-century Tuscany. The paper I gave at this event argues that the reasons for this decline were related to social practices and discourses rather than, as some commentators have contended, religious controversy about a naturally pregnant virgin. The paper claims that images of the pregnant Madonna, popular in Tuscany in the fourteenth century, may have become confused with the contemporary fifteenth-century fashion for images of women with large abdomens, that is, women who promised the capacity to bear children, especially sons. It is about sexuality,

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virtue and idealism in images of the female body, and therefore well-suited to the conference rubric.

The conference was divided up into three thematic sections; 'Fleshy Bodies'; 'Desire, Beauty, Love'; and 'Subversive Sexuality'. This treatment brought together modern and Renaissance subjects and although intellectually stimulating, the arrangement was, at times, awkward to think about. For example, in the 'Fleshy Bodies' section, my Renaissance paper was grouped alongside Basia Silwinska's study of twenty-first century sculpture. This grouping seemed to make sense because both papers were concerned with actual perceptions of the body rather than the aesthetic concepts suggested by section two, 'Desire Beauty Love', or the subversive character of section three. However, when it came to the Q and A, at the end of our section, it appeared that the audience were confused by the juxtaposition of critical frameworks associated with each respective period. Despite the efforts of the chair, questioners were reluctant to link the two papers together. Perhaps this reflects upon the delegates rather than the organisers, who after all, were taking a progressive approach. I think a more conventional periodic arrangement would have worked better.

Keynote speech

The keynote presentation by Dr James Boaden typified the conference's spirit of open questioning. Boaden's paper, 'The Convulsive Nursery: Surrealism, Childhood and Sexuality' employed queer theory to understand artworks and their relationship with perceptions of reality, as well as social constructions. Boaden asked us to consider that the idealised and constructed child of nineteenth century literature was one 'without sexual taint' and often associated with the 'innocence' of nature. He claimed that Surrealism has been hitherto ignored in studies of child psychology. He discussed a number of Surrealist images by Salvador Dali, Dorothea Tanning, and Max Ernst, where a child confronts the strangeness of sexuality and adulthood, effectively making 'a child of the viewer'. He then looked at the notion of a dislocated 'eye' in the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1962). By investigating the open-ended meaning of, and between, such images and visual texts, Boaden suggests that we might undo some of the 'bindings' of adult constructions of child sexuality.

Discussing disturbing, perhaps repressed, memories of childhood, Boaden raised questions about André Breton's homophobia and Dali's denial of his own homosexuality. He talked briefly about the 'rebellion of schoolboys', rarely recorded by children themselves, the costumes Dali wore as a child, and the 'sexualisation' of the child actor Shirley Temple (see Dali, *Shirley Temple, The Youngest, Most Sacred, Monster of the Cinema in her Time* (1939)). Boaden ended with the suggestion that images such as Balthus's sexually ambiguous *Guitar Lesson* (1934) may reveal what has tended to go unnoticed in the illustrations of children's books.

Although Boaden's paper was well-informed and presented, I felt there were a lot of unanswered questions. Perhaps a sense of incompleteness is an inevitable part of any enquiry that seeks to shift traditional parameters and

touchstones. But there were also historical issues here. I wanted to know, for example, how the surrealist artworks discussed related to the politics of the movement and would have liked a broader contextual analysis; how did Balthus's approach relate to the 'convulsive' nature of the times in which he was living? There are too, the obvious moral dilemmas and technical challenges in researching subjects connected to child sexuality. Although such issues were raised briefly in the Q and A following his address, much of Boaden's research strategy remained opaque.

'Fleshy Bodies'

Basia Silwinska (Loughborough University) gave the first of the student presentations, an ambitious exploration of what she called 'the fragmentation of beauty' in sculpture. Her paper, 'The Eclipse of Gender', was potentially huge in scope: 'I want to consider the sculptured body with reference to the changing status of beauty, an enhanced interest in gender and the new androgynous sexuality'. She claimed that contemporary sculpture by Igor Mitoraj, Banksy, Dennis Pottami, Muriel Castanis, and Melissa McGill is symptomatic of a neutralisation of traditional notions of male and female desire. 'This "new desire" is reversed and confused: it no longer belongs to the feminine or masculine. It seduces both.' Silwinska discussed examples of contemporary sculpture that employed, sometimes in a sardonic or ironic manner, the perfection and idealism of classical sculpture, producing, 'excessively real bodies' that 'eclipse desire by their superficiality'. Questioning the 'penis' theories of Freud, she quoted Judith Belladonna Barbara Penton (amongst others), as emblematic of her theme: 'our bodies are tired of all the stereotyped cultural barriers, all of the psychological segregation.'

My own paper followed, 'The Desire for Conformity: Images of the Female Body as Vehicles for Social Control in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany'. Part of my current research employs a social art history methodology inspired by Megan Holmes's 1997 study of the breast-feeding *Madonna Lactans*. Holmes uses semiology and psychoanalytical theory, combined with a discourse analysis to consider the changing appropriateness of images of the bare-breasted Virgin as naturalism in art progressed in the fifteenth century. The conference was a good opportunity to experiment with these ideas, and the feedback I received was extremely helpful.

'Desire, Beauty, Love'

The next two papers were perhaps the most directly relevant for my own enquiry, the first, in methodological terms, and the second, in its relationship to procreation in fifteenth-century Italy. The paper by Katie Faulkner (Courtauld) explored the familiar art historical subject of the sensual and mythological paintings of women by the nineteenth-century English artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but offered new insights into the meaning of his work. Griselda Pollock argues in *Vision and Difference* (1988) that the profusion of

flowers, often symbols of women's sexuality, effectively cancels out the sexuality of the subject in Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia* (1864-68). She compares this 'unstable' image to that of the psychology of a child who has yet to discover his or her identity.

Concentrating upon changing contemporary notions of 'beauty', Faulkner provided a convincing alternative reading of *Venus*. Noting the similarities between Rossetti's portrayal of the honeysuckle flowers surrounding Venus and Darwin's detailed drawings of the reproductive process in the same plants, she argues that the publication in 1866 of the fourth edition of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* 'profoundly affected how plants and flowers' beauty was perceived in the late nineteenth-century'. Although traditionalists such as John Ruskin were disturbed by the 'coarseness' of Rossetti's painting, it appeared that aesthetics or beauty was now linked to the survival of the species. *Venus Verticordia* may thus be seen as a powerful symbol of beauty, linked to the reality of reproduction in nature, not a corrupted abstract concept of beauty (as Ruskin would have it), or self-cancelling (as Pollock).

Kerry Kavanagh's talk on Renaissance *cassoni* decorations highlighted an aspect of this subject that needs further investigation. She considered the well-documented ritual of giving and carrying in procession these highly decorative wedding chests in Florence. However, when comparing the paintings on the outside of the chests with the often crudely-painted nude figures found inside the lids (and therefore normally hidden), Kavanagh (Oxford) gave a fascinating glimpse of the contrast between the public purpose of *cassoni* and their private use to stimulate sex and procreation. Beautiful images, so people believed, 'would help to produce handsome and healthy male children.' As Kenneth Clark suggested, there could well be a link here with the early sixteenth century erotic nudes by Giorgione and Titian.

Catherine Hunt (Bristol) allowed us an intriguing glimpse into a similarly under-researched subject: the extremely varied symbolism of gloves in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European art. As well as being associated with love, courtship and marriage, gloves were also used in moralising and humorous imagery, as symbols of legal agreement, and in commemorative portraits. Hunt showed that there could often be multiple layers of meaning in the practice of giving and receiving gloves, and that these meanings changed during the period.

'Subversive Sexuality'

Rebecca Rose (Essex) presented perhaps the most speculative paper of the conference, 'Desire as Grotesque; Transposition of Sexual Fear onto the Female Subject in Figurative Painting'. This covered a great deal of ground, from Degas, Munch and Kirchner to de Kooning, and finally, Warhol. Rose claimed that in such images 'sexuality is refracted into a spectrum of risk' and that male artists' images of women reflected upon a developing power struggle. Although the paper was lucidly written and presented, I wasn't fully convinced by the way the speaker inferred, without sufficient explanation or detail, a connection between these artists' paintings and the changing contemporary context. Perhaps one of

the advantages of a student conference is that it provides a genuine platform for emerging ideas and open debate.

The conference concluded, as it began, with a challenging and well-informed paper devoted to Surrealism. Esra Plumer (Nottingham), opened with a disturbing sadomasochistic photograph by Hans Bellmer of a woman's body tied up and visually divided into compartments by a piece of string. The string effectively made the subject's body a parcel of meat. Although Plumer looked briefly at the relationship between Bellmer and his model, Unica Züm, her focus was on Züm's artistic practice, derived from these submissive acts. Plumer demonstrated how Züm, who had a history of mental illness, became fascinated by the possibilities of harnessing the submissive side of her relationship with Bellmer, using 'her identity and femininity as a performative artefact'. For Plumer, 'submission becomes a form of silent expression'.

As the lively question and answer session indicated, this was a good paper on which to end the day. Even so, I felt the overall sequencing of the conference topics was awkward. It would have been more logical to group this paper with Boaden's *Convulsive Nursery* and Silwinska's contemporary art analysis, perhaps followed by Faulkner's Pre-Raphaelite paper. There were also connecting themes here of binding and unbinding as well as neutralisation or cancelling out. Perhaps a two-day event would have allowed for the kind of cross-fertilisation between periods and methodologies that the organisers obviously had in mind. In every other respect, the conference was well-organised. I was impressed particularly by the willingness of contributors to present and discuss difficult subjects in imaginative, sophisticated, and yet accessible ways. I found the atmosphere critical but supportive to the student members learning how to best present their research. There were no papers from those researching art history beyond Europe and North America. Perhaps this is something that might be corrected next time.

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1. Association of Art Historians, 'Art and Desire, New Voices – Student Conference', more information at <<http://www.aah.org.uk/post/102>> [accessed 10 May 2010].