5 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, N. C., 2010, p. 112.

Thalia Allington-Wood

10.14324/111.2396-9008.015

'Splendour and Misery. Pictures of Prostitution, 1850–1910', Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 22 September 2015 – 17 January 2016. Catalogue: Musée d'Orsay/ Flammarion, Paris, 2015, 308 pages, hardback, ISBN 978-2-0831-7274-0, €45.00.

When the Musée d'Orsay advertises the 'first major show on the subject of prostitution', we are immediately wont to wonder why no such exhibition has been organized before. There is no dearth of art, material culture or archival documentation relating to the sex trade from 1850–1910, nor a want of art historical scholarship on the practice or its representation in that period. And so it seems appropriate to ask, reprising Linda Nochlin's foundational feminist inquiry as to 'why have there been no great women artists', whether the question of why there has been no major show of 'pictures of prostitution' might suggest a problem inherent in the concept of prostitution itself.[1] Like greatness – a constructed category obscuring underlying social and economic relations – prostitution is also a projection of fantasy that fascinates because it mystifies.

The prostitute in nineteenth-century France resisted definition. The term named a phantasmatic figuration of difference rather than an actual woman, as demonstrated by the fact that within the show it applies to women of radically disparate experiences, from the wealthiest courtesans to the most desperate poor. Proliferating terms intended to distinguish between types of venal femininity attested to the difficulty of classifying women by a singular quality, their perceived sexuality. Henry de Hem's Second Empire lithograph (1869), illustrating 25 types of grisettes (working class women who took lovers but were unpaid for sex) and cocottes (referring either to flirtatious women understood to be of 'easy virtue' and not necessarily paid, or sometimes to successful courtesans) is a case in point. The first four rooms entitled 'Ambiguity' address this confusion concerning which women sold sex. Dim lights that force us to squint at the text mounted on maroon walls stage the problem of identification, especially in the third and notably darker room, titled 'L'heure du gaz', which dramatically simulates the trade's nocturnal nature with spotlights that illuminate paintings as street lamps would street walkers.

Thus we are initiated into a curatorial strategy casting us in the role of potential customer of sexualized female bodies; the only traces in the 17 rooms of male prostitution, not an insignificant corner of the market that generated its own anxiety about male-male sexual relations, are six small pornographic photographs of naked boys and a page from a police record of the so-called pederasts who purchased their services. Moving into the display of paintings of the opera, the carpet turns red as if to welcome us as *abonnés* to the spectacle of female flesh on the stage or waiting in the wings. Entering the next set of rooms on brothels, Courbet's *Mère Grégoire* (1855 and 1857–1859) faces us on a barrier that we move around. We are the unseen clients with whom this madam negotiates an admission fee to the interior space, as imagined

by way of the male artists rather than the 'girls' (quoting the wall text) employed there. The adjoining room, including Cézanne's *A Modern Olympia* (1873–1874), is fitted with those trappings of a *maison de tolérance* that Cézanne's painting exposes and interrupts. An oversized red velvet sofa placed in the centre of the space invites visitors to sit along its four outward-facing benches, or else to kneel upon them and peer into the glass cases embedded within, which display tourist guides to brothels; special coins used there as currency; and calling cards noting the hours that certain courtesans accepted clients. Such theatrics prefigure what is yet to come, including a chair designed to allow the corpulent Prince of Wales (future King Edward VII) to simultaneously have sex with two women, and the bed of courtesan La Païva, built to resemble Venus's scalloped shell, complete with mussed satin sheets. Those displays of the 'Aristocracy of Vice' are papered in Venetian prints, signaling our arrival in the boudoir.

The exhibition includes two annexes cordoned off by red velvet curtains and a sign restricting entry to those under 18. These contain early pornographic photographs (some stereoscopic to simulate three-dimensionality) and films. Without a guard to enforce it, however, the age requirement functions more to titillate viewers in advance of entry, and raises questions about the nature of such a museum space. Like any major museum of European art, the Musée d'Orsay displays sexualized imagery of women to all visitors, including Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). This prompts the question of where the obscene begins and the artistic ends, and whether it is a matter of medium or maker. Dozens of lewd photographs taken by amateur photographers displayed in one of these annexes share the subject matter of Picasso's line-drawn *scènes érotiques* (1902) hung just outside. Watching the pornographic film amongst a group of strangers is an awkward but important aspect of the exhibition. Shot before strong conventions for the genre emerged, clumsy men and women undress one another in overblown narratives, exaggerating emotion and flailing their way to anticlimactic intercourse. The illusion of male authority that is maintained outside these rooms breaks down. In the rest of the exhibition, where only works by male artists are displayed, along with police registers opened to pages intended to regulate named women, visitors are cast as empowered to look and thus to assess women not just in brothels but in virtually every public space. But inside the curtains the male body is exposed and implicated, stripped of its protective armour, whether the stark black suits and phallic hats worn by the men in Manet's exhibited *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873) or the identity of professional painter put on by its artist alongside that uniform. The wall text explains how the photographs taken in studios staged as brothels functioned: 'By consuming the image, viewers became virtual clients'. If the show as a whole offers this experience, then these two rooms make that encounter uncomfortable, with the effect of unraveling the relationship of viewer to art and its subjects that is elsewhere reinforced.

The exhibition continues into the twentieth century and outside of France under the heading of 'Prostitution and Modernity'. We wonder what modernity might come to signify, following a display which has demonstrated that a socially and temporally constructed femininity, as it operated under the sign of the prostitute, functioned as the ultimate symbol of the modern within artistic

and literary cultures that made the concept of modernity the obsessive object of their masculinist discourses and products. The conceptual premise of prostitution seems inadequate as a guiding framework for the impressive scope of objects and images amassed with the weight of the Orsay's institutional clout. Each new view through labyrinthine rooms reveals familiar paintings with unlikely new bedfellows – Tissot with Toulouse-Lautrec, Béraud with Cézanne – and so while the exhibition begins as an exhilarating transgression of the boundaries between the conventionally classed 'modernist', '*juste milieu*' and 'academic', by the end too much has been collapsed within the new category 'pictures of prostitution', while little has been revealed about the lived experiences of sex workers.

1 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists', in *ARTnews*, vol. 69, 1971, pp. 22–39, pp. 67–71.

Allison Deutsch

10.14324/111.2396-9008.016

Todd P. Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014, 248 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300190137, £45.00.

As the English chronicler Gregory Martin wound his way through the streets of 1580s Rome, his eyes were drawn towards the city's destitute and homeless citizenry. In Martin's account, their abject and miserably deformed anatomies paradoxically constituted 'living pitiful Relikes', collections of inchoate corporeal fragments semantically unable to constitute integrated bodily wholes. Characterized by fragmentation and material incoherence, Martin's relics were precariously positioned between life and death, between sapient subjecthood and inert objecthood; as such, they emerge as a wholly appropriate point of departure for Olson's ambitious monograph on Caravaggio's Roman oeuvre.

Like Martin, whose ekphrastic eye eulogized the lesions and sores of Rome's urban underbelly, Olson turns his attention towards the marginal in Caravaggio's work. In doing so, he suggests a series of radical pictorial decentrings that shed new light on the artist's position as both an innovator and controversialist in Counter-Reformation Rome. Olson's work is firmly grounded in the city itself, arguing that Caravaggio sought to fashion his art out of the corrupted materials of a fragile urban environment comprised of blood-stained relics, decaying bodies and the fractured remnants of a pagan past. Far from practicing an unmediated naturalism, Caravaggio emerges as engaging in a complex discourse with the manifold contradictions of this febrile cultural moment.

The book opens with Caravaggio labouring as an itinerant painter of still-lifes and genre-scenes in the papal capital. Olson's exploration of the transgressive social world that Caravaggio depicts in these paintings is familiar scholarly ground. But his attention to the material conditions of these works leads to an original and unexpected question: was there a correlation between 'realistic pictorial effects' and subordinate class identities in Caravaggio's work? Olson argues that these early canvasses reflect social marginality formally as well as thematically, convincingly demonstrating that the pictorial qualities of supposedly 'unmediated' observation so frequently noted in his work were strongly