

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.

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**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 Reliques', 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-lives 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

associated with social subordination in the eyes of contemporary viewers.

Caravaggio's humble beginnings as a genre-painter help Olson explain why the artist would bestow a seemingly unwarranted focus on marginalia in even his most important ecclesiastical commissions. At one point Olson rhetorically questions his own focus on these details, interrogating his spectatorial preoccupation with twisted cloth, patched elbows and fraying ropes. For Olson, these seemingly unmediated traces of habitual actions are rich with semantic possibility, metonymic indices that point to a radical decentring of pictorial composition. By privileging the 'gratuitous materiality' of surfaces, materials and textures, Caravaggio implicitly challenged the pre-eminent cultural capital of the human body, and the narrative forces that drove the 'ideal' Renaissance work of art.

It is in his exploration of another, related pictorial decentring that Olson is perhaps at his most successful. Turning his attention to the resurgent martyrological culture that saw ossified relics and the blasted fragments of long-broken holy bodies elevated into the most prized precipitates of cultural discourse, Olson probes how this environment profoundly altered the relationship between religion and representation during the Counter-Reformation. As Olson shows, the figure of the martyr challenged traditional modes of compositional expression codified by Alberti in the preceding century. Whilst the Albertian *historia* demanded heroic bodies, actively re-configuring the world around them as architects of their own destiny, Christian martyrology demanded just the opposite: abject and passive bodies, whose hagiographic significance lay in inverse proportion to their pictorial dynamism.

As an inherently passive construct, the martyr rendered the classical ideal of a heroic pictorial subject fundamentally anachronistic. The active figures of martyrdom are instead torturers and executioners, wielders of clubs and blades. What happens when the subaltern takes centre stage? How do we reconstruct a heroic model for painting when the very notion of heroism has been undermined? Can the marginal speak the language of history painting? These fascinating questions drive Olson's analysis of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600), whose impossible, inevitably incomplete body is the fractured lynchpin around which the entire book turns.

For Olson, Saint Matthew's fragmentary body dramatizes the incompatibility of a pictorial tradition grounded in harmonic principles with a theological position that venerated violated and disintegrating corporealities. In what Olson characterizes as Caravaggio's world of 'contiguous relations', a homology between body and canvas is created by rendering pictorial composition as a kind of martyred body. The painting's composition reflects the violent unmaking of its subject, and the body of Saint Matthew emerges as a 'pitiful relic'. The fragile contingency of the saint's anatomy contrasts obscenely with the majestic physique of his executioner; the heroic Albertian subject has been fundamentally displaced from saintly actor to subaltern support. For Olson the heroic body of humanism and the passive, broken body of martyrdom could not easily coexist; in the devotional climate of post-Tridentine Rome, all that remained were Caravaggio's pitiful relics.

Later chapters explore other collapses in identity politics within Caravaggio's work. Olson examines the contemporary rumour

that Caravaggio modelled his *Death of the Virgin* (1604–1606) on a dead prostitute, and draws her body into the orbit of other exemplary corpses circulating in the city's cultural imagination, such as the miraculously preserved Saint Cecilia and the recently deceased Filippo Neri. What emerges in each of these examples is the fragility of the bodies concerned; concerted attempts to bring epistemological coherence and authenticity to these corpses were repeatedly frustrated in a search for the corporeal integrity that Caravaggio's canvasses would ultimately deny.

The bloated flesh of Caravaggio's *Madonna* with which Olson concludes his study ruptures the prototypical relationship between signifier and signified that constituted the basis for Counter-Reformation justifications of the image. Caravaggio's 'lesson in perishable materiality' inadequately reflected the life-cycle of the Virgin's salvation. Like the stubbornly incomplete anatomy of Saint Matthew, the dead Virgin once more highlights the profound difficulties involved in effective religious representation during this period. Olson's combination of close visual analysis, theoretical speculation and a virtuoso command of sources leads him to ask compelling new questions on familiar territory. As a serious attempt to understand exactly how Caravaggio's work operated in the complex material culture of Counter-Reformation Rome, Olson's book is an indispensable new departure in post-Tridentine scholarship.

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**'Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past', Tate Britain, London, 25 November 2015 – 10 April 2016. Catalogue: Eds Alison Smith, David Blayney Brown and Carol Jacobi, Tate Publishing, London, 2015, 256 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781849763592, £29.99.**

The face-to-face encounter is very much of the essence in Tate Britain's exhibition, 'Artist and Empire', not simply in how the objects confront the viewer, but in how they confront and problematize each other. These confrontations are by no means reduced to binary oppositions between, say, past and present or colonist and colonized. Rather in its display of the anachronistic entanglements implicit in all forms of cultural encounter, the exhibition goes some way to endorse Georges Didi-Huberman's critique of 'euchronistic' connections, proving that 'contemporaries often fail to understand one another any better than individuals who are separated in time.'<sup>1</sup> While the curators' decision to include recent works in its final section, 'Out of Empire', could be read as a retreat – being 'out' of it suggesting the prospect of escape – confining the time of Empire to a historical period in this way only partially diminishes the sense of temporal discordance. Indeed, much effort has been made in confounding chronological structures of display and highlighting the subversive potentialities of the exhibition's objects.

This is subtly evinced in the 'Face to Face' section. Here we encounter a series of portraits of Pacific islanders, including works by three artists who accompanied Captain Cook on his voyages: Sydney Parkinson's *A Man from New Zealand* (1769), William