

Book Review

Maite Méndez Baiges

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon and Modernism

(Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2022)

by Carla Subrizi

The book of Maite Méndez Baiges is an essential step in the studies that in recent decades have successfully attempted to reinterpret important passages of art history.

In a line of contributions by art historians who have found in feminism the theoretical perspective through which to consider different aspects, works and situations of 20th-century art from a different point of view, Méndez Baiges, with her book, has provoked the most conventional narratives. *Las señoritas de Avignon y el discurso crítico de la modernidad*, published in 2021 by Editorial Universidad de Granada, has now an English edition: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon and Modernism*.

The book investigates with intelligence and courage, a crucial period of Western modernism. Pablo Picasso's 1907 work, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, is the starting point for an investigation that, in about 220 pages, shifts the premises, rearranges the directions, and reveals the contradictions of what the author herself has called "the critical discourse of modernity".

Reading this essay, the methodology of art history reveals itself to be not unitary but at a crossroads that weaves together new forms of research and reinterpretations of the art history of the past. What this dynamic juxtaposition of theses, antitheses, positions and counter-positions returns, is an open vision of twentieth-century art history.

In a wide-ranging *Introduction*, Méndez Baiges, with reference to a photograph published in «Life» magazine in 1939, on the occasion of the *Art in Our Time* exhibition at the MoMA in New York in the same year, reflects on the gaze that the group of seven people, all members of the MoMA Board, cast on the painting. Some follow the directions of the man in the center of the picture, Nelson A. Rockefeller, while a lady turns away, smiling. But in the bottom left-hand corner, Méndez Baiges sees a camera, which someone is using to "capture" the scene. Someone else was at the same time taking the photograph we see. However, Méndez Baiges allows herself to be seduced by the angle from which the camera is looking, which, although not in focus, suggests a viewpoint: from below and to the side of the painting. Méndez Baiges bases his reading, or rather reinterpretation of the painting, on this not centered and lowered viewpoint.

In six chapters, the path winds its way, not without a sharp irony present in several passages, between the contexts (Cubism, Surrealism, relations between France and the United States), to retrace the almost complete hegemony of a formalist reading of the work, trying to re-situate the work in (paraphrasing

Michel Foucault), a history of sexuality in Western culture. In the last two chapters, we arrive at a new and original reading situated in a feminist perspective as well as in postcolonial studies. A reinterpretation of the work through recent queer, transgender and intercultural readings, allows to grasp the meaning of the last paragraph of the book entitled "the emergence of other gazes".

Facing an art work that is exemplary not only of Picasso's artistic career (one of the most celebrated artists in the history of Western art: male, genius, author of great masterpieces) but also of a formalist historical-critical methodology, it is possible to understand that the gestures, looks, features and bodies of the *demoiselles* were analyzed by art historians through an intertwined but ultimately closed system of influences, filiations, causes and effects: from Cézanne to Picasso, from black sculpture to Picasso, from Spanish art to Picasso, from Picasso to abstractionism, in the many forms it took in the 20th century.

On the other hand, Picasso was a key pivot point for Alfred Barr's exhibition at MoMA *Cubism and Abstract Art* in 1936, becoming the most representative starting point of the Cubism.

Now a book addresses all these questions. Without polemics I think that this book leads the reader to neuralgic questions of the 20th century. Institutionalized art history developed through narratives oriented towards identifying 'protagonists' in articulate and consequential uninterrupted paths, is at a radical impasse.

Could other historical-critical perspectives for art history be possible? Feminism, as a perspective of research, study and observation, is the real *agency* that leads to different hypotheses.

First of all, the identification of a modernist canon challenges the modernist narrative of art history itself. The fact that a critical perspective on this institutionalized narrative of art history has had fundamental contributions from art historians such as Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin and Rozsika Parker, places Maite Méndez's book on a path of study and debate on art history that is increasingly urgent. The book explores a number of theses that are currently at the heart of the most recent research, between art history and feminism, in a period that is, we might say, ripe for research perspectives that take into account intercultural and transnational exchanges in a globalized world.

An interesting hypothesis on which to continue to focus the most recent debate concerning art history methodologies is the one that focuses on the "gaze" that has been turned over time to Picasso's work.

Where did this visual perspective originate from, how is the gaze never neutral and is instead a cultural construction which is transformed in social contexts, never passively but through intersecting actions that "perform" the way we see and know a visual object?

How is it also possible to advance a different narrative of this Picasso painting from the perspective of gender and feminism?

It is not just a question of implementing a feminist gaze. Instead, it is about deconstructing the starting and ending point of traditional ways of seeing, making the vision more problematic, which is always a situated, culturally oriented vision. Understanding what the models or canons have determined a reiteration of styles, trends, points of view and critical perspectives is, in the first instance, to open up a possibility: to read a work of art and art history as a cultural discourse that has, through its objects of study, the works of art, canonized a narrative, made up of inclusions and exclusions or even forms of appropriation useful for regenerating, from within, the same art history narrative.

From a feminist and post-colonial perspective, the *demoiselles* in this painting thus not only demonstrate how Picasso found a fundamental source in black sculpture. The seduction exercised by the forms of primitivism or exoticism, in the culture of the early 20th century avant-garde, constituted a form of appropriation (or expropriation) that sought in the “cultural other” those elements useful for renewing the same already canonized language.

Going through the meeting points between art history and feminism, citing the contributions of Carol Duncan, Whitney Chadwick, Estrella de Diego, as well as the already mentioned Pollock, Nochlin, etc., "modern painting" finds itself at a turning point. The modernist discourse turns out not to be the only possible discourse. With a series of intersections (sexuality, the voyeuristic gaze, cultural racism and colonialism) that the author uses as keys to a different reading of Western modernity and modernism, the point of arrival of this essay raises a number of questions that can no longer be omitted from art history, its methodologies and research: Méndez brings the young ladies out of the cultural "brothel" of the Western formalist narrative, finds them in other genders or races in recent works by artists and artists (including Damien Elwes or Faith Ringgold), observes them with other critical looks.

Finally, with this book, modernity and modernisms retreat and give way to hybrid reinterpretations, rereadings, rewritings of art history, to understand what happened inside it, looking into the gaps and voids of its great narratives.