Boundaries in Modern Representations of Bathers: An Assault on Male Sexual Pleasure

Christophe Viret

Water, the origin of life on earth, is the most universal symbol of fertility known to man. Every living organism depends on water for survival; water’s nurturing qualities associate it with the female body, which bears and nurtures children, populating humanity. Depictions of the nude female form immersed in water have recurred in European artwork: drawing the female nude was considered to be the most venerable form of art by the French Academy, which led the European art world for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Until the late nineteenth century, visions of female nudes frolicking in water dominated the romanticized, and seductive, act of bathing. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though, by breaking down the academic representations of bathers and their purpose to delight the male viewer’s eyes, modern artists brought the assumption of male pleasure when viewing nudes under assault.

I. Fragonard, The Bathers, 1765

The female nudes in Fragonard’s The Bathers are intended to arouse the male viewer without either distancing him from them or drawing him into the painting. The Bathers was a part of the rococo movement based around the Enlightenment philosophy that the purpose of life might be to enjoy our time on earth instead of attempting to merit entrance into heaven. The American Declaration of Independence, a document that was written based on this Enlightenment ideal, stated that “all men are…endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights,” amongst which are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹ Hence, rococo paintings are often “dominated by a simple and beautiful nature where appeased passions would leave room for pure love,” propagating an idealized “dream of happiness.”² Both of these state-

This paper was written for Rebecca Gertmenian’s Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Art elective in the fall of 2010.
ments show the sensuality that pervaded rococo art and the misconception that women enjoyed the sexual urges of men as much as men did. In addition, Fragonard’s *The Bathers*’ central theme is “the bed,” and “what saves him from vulgarity” is “the lightness of his touch.” *The Bathers* is an example of a traditional, academic European painting that centers on pure sensual pleasure.

![The Bathers, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, 1765](image)

Whether the scene portrayed in *The Bathers* is meant to be accessible to the viewer is unclear; but regardless of its accessibility, Fragonard’s depiction of female nudes splashing around in a bubbly brook brings him pleasure. The lack of negative space and diminution, and the use of pastel colors throughout the painting seems to block the viewer out of the space of idealized sensual love. Yet, brushstrokes are extended to the edges of the frame and faces are turned towards the viewer, giving him or her the sense of exiting the dark woods. The ambiguity regarding the viewer’s place in *The Bathers* is typical of rococo and...
other traditional depictions of female nudes, and bathers in particular. *The Bathers* was created with the sole purpose of delighting the viewer with a joyful scene of frolicking in the woods; Fragonard perhaps did not even contemplate the dynamic of specific relationship between the viewer and the bathers in the painting.

II. Degas, *The Tub*, 1886

Degas’ establishment of a clear boundary between the male viewer’s space and female bather’s space in *The Tub* indicates his respect for women’s space and his qualms about entering it, breaking down the academic tradition of painting female nudes solely to please the viewer. Degas uses Japonisme to establish a boundary between the viewer and the bather. Japonisme was a style of painting that emphasized large, solid forms and clashing patterns, and was inspired by Japanese prints. The woman’s bony, angular, unflattering back is by no means sensual, repulsing the viewer and pushing him out of her space; the objects of the round tub, curtains and sheets, and brightly-colored floor in addition to the bather’s back block the viewer’s entry into the bather’s space. This, coupled with the fact that the viewer looks down upon the bather, puts him in the position of the unseen and uninvited observer, establishing a boundary between him and the bather.
Degas purposefully portrays a woman’s space to indicate his respect for women and control of his own male sexual urges. Impressionist paintings are regarded as “a defense against the threat of rapid urbanization and rapid industrialization” through their portrayal of “domestic interiors, private gardens, [and] seaside resorts.”

Women in late nineteenth century Paris were often confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from the “bourgeois social sphere” of the “boulevard, café, and dance halls.” By depicting the unglamorous action of taking a sponge bath, a banal aspect of everyday life for upper middle-class women in turn-of-the-century Paris, Degas is giving the viewer, who is accustomed to his own male-oriented world, a glimpse into a reality
that is entirely different from his own. Degas said that the women he depicted were “simple, honest creatures who [were] concerned with nothing beyond their physical occupations,” and that viewing them was “as if you were looking through a keyhole.” The fact that Degas purposefully does not arrange the women he portrays in a seductive or appealing pose shows that he does not bear the expectation of their compliance with male sexual desires.

Degas’ delineation of a boundary between the viewer and the bather is also due to his own feelings of sexual inadequacy as a human being. He wrote to the painter Henri Lerolle:

If you were a bachelor and fifty years old...you would have moments [when], most quite alone you would suppress everything around you, and once quite alone, you would annihilate yourself, kill yourself even, with disgust...I piled all my plans in a cupboard for which I myself always carried the key. And I have lost the key. In short I only feel the comatose state I am in and I cannot arouse myself from it.

The feelings of insufficiency, inability, and loneliness expressed in this quote due to Degas’ solitary existence are mirrored in his use of Japonisme to exclude the male viewer from the female space. Degas feels “quite alone” due to his inability to connect to other people and his status as “a bachelor and fifty years old.” As Degas aged and grew accustomed to this loneliness, he began to “suppress” his sexual urges: he lost “the key” (that he himself “always carried”) for their “cupboard,” placing himself in a “comatose” state from which these urges cannot be “aroused.” This indicates his inability to experience sexual pleasure and his sexual repression. Degas’ unease with sexual feelings, then, may explain why he so clearly establishes a boundary between the viewer and the bather in The Tub: he gives the viewer a taste of his apathetic perception of sights that should attract him.

Whether Degas had a personal feeling of insufficiency or a respect for women, his conception of the female nude bather radically differed from that of his predecessors. His establishment of a boundary between the viewer and the bather raises the viewer’s awareness that turn-of-the-century women in Paris had a mode of existence that was entirely
different from that of men. In doing so, Degas broke down the tradition that female nudes necessarily appeal to, and solicit, male pleasure.

III. Cézanne, *Les Grandes Baigneuses*, 1906

The confinement of nude bathers to a central ‘island’ between the viewer and civilization, and relegation to the frame of the painting, indicates Cézanne’s apprehension about the consequences of entering the sexual realm of his instincts, further criticizing the academic tradition of depicting nude female figures to please the male viewer.

Cézanne confines sexuality by placing it on an island that extends from the picture plane to the bathers’ river, evoking the traditional male viewer’s frame of seeing the world. Parisian turn-of-the-century culture was one based on the dominance of men, prostitution, and the marginalization of women; the feminine bathers are dehumanized and pushed into the frame of the painting. Their bodies are distorted and melded to fit into the rest of the primal world in order to enhance the ideal compositional form of the pyramid in the painting. There is little reference to sexual forms on women’s bodies, no boundary between the figure and the ground (hands fuse with feet, heads, and foliage, destroying the specificity of and respect for the human body), all the elements of the primal island have the same painterly quality, signifying their sameness and unity, and figures merge together (on the far right, the shoulders of one are buttocks of another).
The pyramid that dominates *Les Grandes Baigneuses* can be thought of as grandiose and associated with tradition. The “ascendant vaults of trees” that make up the pyramid “restat[e] the pairs of chestnut trees that lined the approach to [Cézanne’s] family estate at Aix,” creating a “grandly pyramidal symmetry,” and “perpetuat[ing]…the authority of old-master compositions.” So, while Cézanne’s creation of such a composition refers to the marginalization of women, it also refers to the frequent depiction of female nudes in traditional European artwork such as Fragonard’s *Bathers* that delighted the intended male viewer’s eyes.

What makes *Les Grandes Baigneuses* unique, though, is that Cézanne, instead of creating a primal scene for the male viewer to enjoy, reminds him of the judgment that ultimately awaits him. Inside the pyramidal frame formed by the women’s bodies and the trees, and across the river, Cézanne depicts the realm of the civil. This includes a woman and child at the riverbank and the spire of a church at the vanishing point.
The family that gazes at the viewer, a creation of his sexual desires, ties him down, reminding him of the worldly consequences of these desires. The spire reminds the viewer of his Christian culture’s view of the afterlife: that in the end, his entrance to heaven will be judged according to his adherence to Christian morals, which include monogamy and disdain adultery. Any orthogonal in *Les Grandes Baigneuses* will pass through the sexual island, but all the orthogonals in the painting converge at the church’s spire: every indulgence in sexual desires will be perceived by the eyes of God.

Cézanne’s confinment of the primal could have been due to how uncomfortable he was with his own sexual identity. The bathers have been likened to “spatial containers” or “spatial envelopes” which are blank and devoid of sensuality. Historian Tamar Garb claims that the painting offers “no satisfaction for the rapacious eye, no resolution for the fetishistic gaze which seeks reassurance in the polished surfaces and sealed orifices of the idealized body.” In effect, the static bathers “will never change their gender, gestures, or positions, nor leave their confines to frolic” on the banks of the river. They were used by Cézanne, then, as a method of confronting, expressing, and controlling his changing attitude toward women and resolving doubts about his sexual identity.

*Les Grandes Baigneuses* has been called a majestic, timeless work, which, in its re-interpretation of famous paintings of nudes in landscape such as Fragonard’s *Bathers*, evoked the central theme of the harmony of the figures with the landscape. *Les Grandes Baigneuses* is composed of four systems of organization: the pyramid; its counter-balance, the downward motion of the bathers’ arms; the horizontal lines of the horizon and riverbanks that delineate the island; and the orthogonals formed by the figures that add depth to the painting. These systems of organization, though, far from supporting the theme of the harmony of man and nature found in traditional depictions of bathers such as the one painted by Fragonard, represent Cézanne’s own attempts to stabilize his own adulterous and possibly even homosexual tendencies against the backdrop of a world that was, ultimately, intolerant of them.
IV. Derain, *Baigneuses I*, 1906

Derain legitimizes his blurring of the boundary between male and female in his depiction of bathers and in the viewer by removing his figures from our civil world and placing them in a primal realm of their own.

The composition of *Baigneuses I* is dominated by three figures that represent a transition from the female gender to the male gender. The figure farthest to the left features round breasts and wide hips; the figure in the middle has a more muscular build, more angular limbs, less prominent breasts, and hidden genitals, causing her gender to remain a mystery to the viewer; the figure farthest to the right has short, manly hair and salient, flexed muscles on his arms and legs, signifying that he is male.

The questionable gender identities of the figures can, in part, be attributed to Derain’s interest in African art. Derain was introduced to African sculptures by fellow artist Vlaminck sometime around 1905, before he created *Baigneuses I*. Once, “Vlaminck showed an African
sculpture to Derain, remarking that it was ‘almost as beautiful’ as the Venus de Milo. Derain then supposedly replied that it was ‘as beautiful’ as the Venus.”

Derain was also a member of an artistic movement, the Fauve movement, which wanted its art to capture the primal energies of, and be akin to, “the art of wild beasts.” The angularity of the forms that comprise the middle body, in particular, can be attributed to the influence of one ‘primal’ mask found in the Congo, in which “the head is a spherical or block-like shape, and the features are merely indentations or concave planes.”

However, Derain blended European and African art to create an acceptable style through which to explore taboo topics such as gender identity. One of the primary differences between “primal” art and “European” art, according to the members of the Fauve movement, was that primal art was “largely composed of single figures,” and “implied removal from space, time, and—perhaps most crucially—gravity.”

While vestigial references to the natural environment of the forest and the riverside remain in Baigneuses I, the forms are heavily outlined and depicted using warm orange tones that are complementary to the cool greens and blues of the background. The figures are greatly distanced from their background, seeming to exist in a world of their own, confined to the realm of the canvas. Confinement of the blurred boundary between genders was imperative for Derain to maintain his credibility as an artist, for such topics were very taboo at his time; American art collector, writer, and thinker Gertrude Stein, one of many critics of Baigneuses I, characterized it as “a strange picture” that represented “a sort of man or woman” whose exact gender was unknown.

Clearly, while Derain did incorporate the beauty of African art into Baigneuses I, the painting was mainly an exploration of gender as a whole. Derain purposefully depicted his figures in a natural environment and entitled his painting “Baigneuses I” as a reference to past portrayals of feminine beauty and allure. Yet, Derain’s depiction of bathers is worlds away from Fragonard’s concept of delicate feminine beauty. While Derain blurs the boundary between male and female in his artwork, by depicting nude male bathers, he also brings the assumption of an unquestionably male, heterosexual viewer, the tenet for all artwork up until his day, into question.
Notes


5. Ibid.


**Bibliography**


