

FEATURES

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Tell Me: with Eric Sutphin

by Noah Dillon

*This is the first in a new series of features on artcritical. In it, I go — with artists, writers, curators, dealers, and others in the art world — to look at one artwork of my guest's choice. We have a one-on-one conversation about the artwork, what they find interesting in it and why it's important to them. In this first edition, Eric Sutphin and I met at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sutphin had originally proposed that we look at William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873), which is not currently on view at the museum. Instead, we looked at Edouard Manet's *Boating* (1874).*



Edouard Manet, *Boating*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches.

NOAH DILLON: So why did you choose this painting?

ERIC SUTPHIN: I chose it in part because it's personal. When I was pretty young — before I ever had any kind of idea to be a critic or to write about art — I watched Simon Schama's *The Power of Art* (2006), and he talked about this painting. He claimed that Manet had left this corner piece of sail completely bare and it was just raw canvas coming through, so that it was raw canvas doubling as the actual sail.

When I saw the painting in person I realized that's not true — it's painted. And that inaccuracy imprinted this painting in my mind. It made me suspicious that he never saw this painting in person, and that perhaps he was talking from a reproduction of the painting. It's an interesting painting for a lot of reasons and it's atypical of Impressionism. It's actually one year after the Bouguereau painting I'd originally wanted to talk about.

I think it's important that you chose this as a substitute, because even if you think this is atypical of Impressionism, that Bouguereau painting was his last before the Impressionists arrived and pushed him (and academic painting generally) aside in a big way.

Bouguereau was sort of the archetype of the enemy to the Impressionists. And almost 150 years later both artists are in the same museum. I felt a little embarrassed picking the Bouguereau, because there's still a little baggage. Not that *Boating* feels particularly radical, but it shows how the field has expanded so that anything goes. And I can simultaneously get pleasure out of this *and* the other thing, but they're so far out of context that both paintings mean something completely different from when they were done. And I think the Bouguereau is more complex than this painting, but I think that this painting, right now, has a lot of implications.

Standing here, looking at it, I realize there's no horizon. That might not mean anything explicitly, but implicitly it must. I recently drafted a review of "The Forever Now" at MoMA, and I was easing my way into ideas introduced by Paul Virilio in *Open Sky* (2008), about the disappearance of the horizon and what that means. It's complicated, but right now I'm realizing that this guy is, in a sense, backed into a corner. He has no privacy; a ubiquitous eye has invaded his personal space and he's in danger of falling off the edge of the



William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 100 in x 71 inches.

boat.

Or he could disappear into the amorphous, blue nothingness behind him.

The image is basically space-less, all foreground, with everything pushed to the front, on the surface. It's completely immediate. There's no pretense; there's no allegory. That's really the crux of the Impressionists' objection to the academics and salon painters, was that it's all allegory, and here there's none of that.



Edouard Manet, *Boating (detail)*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches.

In that regard, this upper right corner isn't raw canvas, but it is just a grey space carved out there, which runs contrary to painting conventions. It's an abstraction of the superficial framing of the image, along with the blue that you were talking about, which takes up most of the canvas. You've got the blue of the water, the blue of his hat, the blue of her dress — everything else is additional to that primacy. It also strikes me that, thinking about now, when everything is sort of up for grabs, in a similar way you've got this representational scene that these incidents of abstraction interrupt. They're reflexive and disruptive, without appearing to call attention to themselves. That admixture of approaches has only become more open.

This is another reason I wanted to look at *Boating*: it's a very severe painting. It's all about the composition, about the negative

shapes. And he's framed it in such a way that every bit — even this little wedge of blue at the top right corner — becomes like a series of quadrilaterals. And then you see the portrait. That's what the tension is — that the portrait is the center and you always come back to the guy's face. But it's ominous. He doesn't want you looking at him; he's tired of being looked at.

He's responding to the painter. He's not a sitter and he's not someone in a scene, he's got an indeterminate relationship to Manet.

And in the absence of allegory, you're frozen there: the artist has stepped back, the painting's finished, and it's us. It's uncanny in that sense that the face is so central to the painting, so we're locked into a deadlock of looking at this person. His companion is almost there just for Manet to be playful when he paints her dress. I don't know what that says about social relations between men and women in late 19th century painting, but it sounds like an opening to an uncomfortable issue. And while that's important, it also seems tertiary to the composition and the sort of gridlock that the viewer gets into with the central figure. I think at first encounter there's a sense of tranquility and you're in this nebulous sea blue. But that slips away as you look at it, and you're left with angles and the aggressive of his stare. And it becomes kind of uncomfortable.



Edouard Manet, *Boating (detail)*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches.

There's also the well-known affection the Impressionists had for Japanese prints but I think there are some compositional issues that are equally important here two things: it anticipates the camera view, the way Degas did, but also the disappearance of the horizon, which is maybe not so radical, but a fusion of eastern pictorial sense and with western developments in optical technology.

One thing I've always found interesting about this painting is that the rope was originally much farther left, but was changed, leaving this pentimento. It's a curiosity, to me, how that affects its appearance and how it's read.

Well now it's all I can see. The palimpsest of the movement of the rope is really weird, and the way that sort of imaginatively interacts with the scene. It becomes sort of like Cubist movement where you see two ropes simultaneously, like *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), which inadvertently adds to the aggressiveness.

Is there a way in which this particular museum frames this painting for you? Or even where it is in the museum?

Well, in this room in particular it seems out of place, out of step with its time. It appears to belong to no time or era. Obviously it's from a milieu and there's a long tradition of these boat leisure scenes. But some of the other radical steps that Manet was making, pictorially, anticipate tactics that fully found their place 50 years later. It doesn't really belong to its Impressionist counterparts, other than the handling of her dress and the fleeting quality of his brushstroke. But the rigidity of the composition feels very classical and it has this characteristic triangular golden ratio form. So in that sense it belongs to Bouguereau and the mannered history that preceded it.

How does this find itself in the writing you do and the art you're attracted to? Or how does that relate to how or why you enjoy art?

I feel hopelessly pedestrian in choosing an Impressionist painting to talk about. So the question becomes how to talk about connecting this to contemporary concerns. I've been feeling depressed about a lot of contemporary art. But I've been looking at a lot of contemporary figurative work and I find it can be useful to think about that stuff in relation to strong figurative work such as this.



Edouard Manet, Boating (detail of the pentimento), 1874. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches.

I'm always looking for a way to relate directly with a work of art: How does this work make me feel? What inside of me does the work incite? It connects to the things I've been thinking about with regard to contemporary vision. And these are all, for me, half-cooked ideas; I'm still working it out. This painting is not an end-all, be-all artwork for me. But it's an important painting in a line of thinking I'm trying to explore with regard to how I take images, what I expect or what keeps me looking at something.

This painting feels rather stripped in a way, and I think our identification with some kind of subject, a human subject, is an important aspect of this painting. And it brings me into that by way of all of the vision games Manet's playing. The Impressionists spent a lot of time, I think, considering vision. And sure it's been explored, but I think it remains important. You brought that up when I was writing about "The Forever Now," talking about light and surface, and you asked, "Isn't that what the Impressionists were doing?" And that made me think, "You're right, they were." So maybe that's what brought me back to this particular painting: the question of "What were they doing?" And I guess it comes back to the camera, which is just so... *ugh*.

[*laughing*]

But it's interesting to see that problem as it was born and how it's now complicated, in another way, by the prevalence of cameras and of photographic images.

When you spend a lot of time thinking about how contemporary vision is shifting as a result of the ubiquity of screens, lenses, cameras, all these things, it can feel a little scary, vertiginous. It's a consolation to know that these guys were also at that same precipice. A significant difference between Bouguereau and Manet is the matter of vision and seeing. The two artists are representative of two types of seeing and a shift in the way that people perceive images. It's not incidental: space like this becomes physiological, and by closing in on this scene Manet was both internalizing and depicting a new paradigm in perception.



Edouard Manet, Young Lady in 1866 (aka Woman with a Parrot), 1866. Oil on canvas, 185.1 x 128 cm.

That points back to the question of was Simon Schama looking at a photograph, or was he looking at the thing face to face?

I've looked at this painting at least 20 times, and the first time I saw it, I remembered the Schama video, which on the screen you could buy that it's just raw canvas, and there was no way to verify or argue against it. It was there and I could see it, with an authority telling me that's the case. That's a fundamental issue for the authority the critic and their ethical responsibility. Somebody like Schama — who has television shows, who's a populist and an entertainer — can make you see things: seeing is believing.

[*laughing*]

But I can go and look and see if they've done their due diligence. The disparity I experienced with the Schama video calls into question everything else I've ever seen. Do I have to see it in person before I buy it? I buy everything, I believe so much. I think we all do.

But so there's this painting and in another room there's another Manet painting: *Lady with a Parrot* (1866). It's very gray and sort of claustrophobic, and it's a little like two Manets: this is the Manet of the future, whereas that's the Manet of the salon. So having this here you can see the work and corroborate it not only with its description, but with other works by the artist and by their contemporaries.

Eric Sutphin is a painter and writer based in New York City. Print and online publications include *Art in America*, artcritical.com, *Painting is Dead*, *On Verge*, *American Artist Magazine* and *The Brooklyn Rail*. He has been a visiting critic at the Delaware College of Art and Design and The School of Visual Arts. Recent curatorial projects include "Detlef Aderhold: Null Komma Null," "Berliner Liste" and "Rosemarie Beck: Paintings from the 60's" at the National Arts Club. He is currently writing a biography of post-war American painter Rosemarie Beck (1923-2003). Eric received a BFA from Rutgers University: Mason Gross School of the Arts, and an MFA from The School of Visual arts in 2014.