Standing Female Nude

Within the framework of recent critiques by women art historians of traditionalist male theorizing about the female body, this essay explores the way that Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude" can be read as a similar challenging of the gender biases that inform Robert Browning's defense of a Renaissance painter of nudes in his poem, "With Francis Furini."

My purpose in the following essay, therefore, is to explore the way that these two poems constitute a kind of intertextual equivalent of the debate about the female nude currently conducted by art historians. I will thus begin by briefly outlining the major features of Nead's critique of Clark's study, and then go on to show how Browning's poem invokes tradition, arguing in favor of the artist. Turning then to Duffy's poem, I will show how she encodes and deconstructs the ideology informing such arguments, whereby her poem functions as a defense of the model.

In contrast to Browning's "defense of the artist" stance, Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude" focuses attention on the subject of art, the model. Whereas Browning attempts to expunge gender and class difficulties, Duffy's poem moves through what Linda Kinnahan calls a "process of self-deconstruction" (2), to reveal the model as situated within or mediated by social discourses. In doing so, as Jane E. Thomas notes, Duffy not only "recognizes the lineament of [her] foremothers - the women of the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s" (78), but she has also taken the further step of reshaping ideas of the self by focusing on the indeterminacy of boundaries and the ways in which a naturalized fixing of those margins can prove dangerous to those "permanently" situated on the periphery.

"Standing Female Nude" is a 4-stanza, 28-line poem which operates as a type of dramatic monologue, albeit an internal one. The situation is staged as a painting session, during which - as she poses - the model registers her feelings about the artist, his actions, and his representation of her. Insofar as these involve a challenging of traditional notions about the creative process, Duffy's title thus serves not merely to evoke the visual setting but also serves to suggest the way that this "standing" nude is at odds with the typical "reclining" configuration.

At first, however, it seems that Duffy's poem adheres to standard attitudes toward nude painting - like those present in Clark's work - since it features a male painter who sees the naked female body as an amorphic form whose boundaries must be regulated and translated into visual art. This tradition, we should note, regards the female body as easier to paint than the male form because of its wholeness and plasticity, but in doing so also demands "ideal" measurements for certain body parts. Thus in her critique of theorists like Clark, Nead cites Martha Rosler's video Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained (1977), in order to show how the painter's method of achieving perfection in his art comes at the cost of female psyches who have internalized this means of meeting standards. In this sense, having the correct measurements means not only that one is an ideal model for a painter but also that one is an ideal woman.

In certain respects, Duffy's model has internalized this tradition. At the beginning of the poem, for example, she refers to herself in terms of body parts, "Belly nipple arse" (2). Similarly, when the painter, Georges, criticizes her general shape - "You're getting thin, / Madame, this is not good" (9-10) - the model's response is to admit: "My breasts hang / slightly low" (11). As much as she seems to submit to male regularization on canvas, however, so much does she resist being

reduced to any single, identifiable social category. Although Georges consistently refers to her as "Madame" (4, 10), and although she initially envisions how his painting of her will be exhibited in "great museums," she also goes on to note: "The bourgeoise will coo / at such an image of a river-whore" (6-7). The term "Madame," in short, functions on a variety of levels, and while a Victorian code might wish to make it a case of either/or - either respectable, middle-class, married woman or low-class prostitute - Duffy's poem confuses the linguistic categories and the social stratifications that go with them.

Closely related to Duffy's deconstruction of the notion that the artist creates the model - i.e., her demonstration that the model's identity is not tied to the artist's representation of her - is her investigation of the extent to which the relations between the artist and model, and the model and the painting, are ultimately economic ones imbricated by the power connections extant in gender realities. Dealing generally with this issue in her attempt to reintroduce female painters into the canon, art critic Griselda Pollock has argued that frequently well-respected modern art pieces characterize men as having "the freedom to take their pleasures in many urban spaces," while women must "work in those spaces, often selling their bodies to clients, or to artists" (247).

Introducing this economic tension into her poem, Duffy thus sheds light on the way that interpreters or painters of nude art have danced around if not completely erased the very historic conditions that give rise to artistic power relations. Conversely, however, the poem also cleverly questions the notion of the passive woman when it calls attention to the artist's dependency on the model:

> There are times he does not concentrate and stiffens for my warmth.
> Men think of their mothers. He possesses me on canvas as he dips
> the brush repeatedly into the paint.
> Little man, you've not the money for the arts I sell. (16-20)

The sexual metaphors invoke the tradition whereby it was common for the male artist to take his model for a mistress, but the model then enlists economics to preclude such a "free ride." Moreover, although her own financial situation might require that she be "possessed" on canvas, she knows that she cannot be physically conquered, and to this effect she also cleverly invokes the Freudian Oedipal taboo - "Men think of their mothers." In a final turn of sorts, she then assumes authority by telling Georges that ultimately he is poorer than she, reminding us that both she and the artist depend on her modeling for survival, be it aesthetic or economic.

Museums, of course, are a prime site of aesthetic commercialization and gender politics, even if they pretend otherwise - a point made by Carol Duncan in her study of the way that the Metropolitan Museum of Art has become masculinized because of the art forms it houses: while museums are supposed to be "public spaces dedicated to the spiritual enhancement of all who visit them," in practice "they are prestigious and powerful engines of ideology" (348). Although Browning's poem does draw attention to aesthetic politics, Duffy does so with a specific view toward historicizing the way that museums have been dangerous to the women being represented in them:

> Belly nipple arse in the window light I shall be represented analytically
> and hung in great museums. He is concerned with volume, space. It does not
> look like me. (2-28)

In her discussion of the poem, Thomas has identified Georges as a Modernist painter, pointing out that his name seems to be evocative of the Cubist artist Georges Braque. In addition, we

might note not only his concern with the analytics of "volume, space" but also the way that he seems to focus in Picasso fashion on "Belly nipple arse." What needs to be emphasized in turn is how Cubist art would seem to elide but actually perpetuates the issues of sexuality posed by 19th-century realistic modes. As Duncan has argued, the High Modernist tradition in painting continued, like realist nude art, to found its assumptions about Art upon the mastering of the female. In both traditions, the model becomes the repository for the artist's repressed urges and anxieties, and the act of painting itself becomes comparable to sexual intercourse. Drawing specific attention to this aspect, Duffy has the model evocatively describe the conclusion of the painting session: "When it's finished / he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette" (26-27). This emphasis on George's physical appetites neatly deconstructs the notion that the artist is able to transcend bodily realities, and in conjunction with the model's request for her fee - "Twelve francs" (28) - Duffy's poem thus resituates the artist and the model in a real world of power dynamics, not a celestial one of the kind invoked in Furini's painting of the heavenly Andromeda.

Concerned as she is with "the next meal" (9), when the model looks into her tea cup what she sees is a different kind of stellar system:

> ...In the tea-leaves ! can see the Queen of England gazing on my shape.
> Magnificent, she murmurs moving on. It makes me laugh. (11-14)

Symbolizing the public realm, where the masculine prevails, the Queen is also a figure for all museum-goers who might look up at and admire Georges's representation of the model. It is the Queen who upholds the tradition of nude painting similar to the one that Browning validated through the priestly Furini. Like the London public who Furini asks to "gaze on the beauty" of his Andromeda, the Queen of England perpetuates a High Art tradition by looking "low" - at the naked model - in order to acclaim the ideal manifested in Georges's elevation of her to the status of a nude. The model, however, overturns the voyeuristic power of the Queen's gaze by anticipating the time when the Queen will pronounce her "Magnificent" - and by laughing at the thought. Laughter disrupts an otherwise unquestioned binary between gaze and look, high and low.

As part of this deconstructive process, Duffy's poem employs strategic line breaks that, like shades in painting, provide a simultaneous bridge and border between points. For example, when the model muses,

> "The bourgeoisie will coo
> at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.
> Maybe" (6-8)

the first line places her within one socio-economic context, while the next dislodges her from that world and locates her among the lower classes. Similarly, while the conclusion of the middle line makes her representation part of a High Art tradition - timeless and universal - the single word in the next line doubly questions this allocation. First, the "Maybe" raises doubts about whether Georges's work is good enough, and second it shakes the stability of the division of high and low art. In this way, we also begin to see that the female nude tradition is something revered by those in power, with the others participating because of the need for a means of subsistence.

Such a deconstructive use of verbal strategies, furthermore, constitutes a particularly effective interarts demonstration that the model cannot be contained by the visual art that would regulate her. And here the way that the poem ends with the model's final comment on the painting - "It does not look like me" - is especially instructive. On the one hand, her response suggests that she is naive and does not understand the nature of Cubist art. On the other hand, however, the

comment suggests her own variableness, and challenges traditionalist notions that the naked model can, indeed, be transmogrified into the male artist's representation of her in nude form. To the model, the painting does not represent either what she understands herself to be or her lifestyle:

"At night I fill myself
with wine and dance around the bars" (25-26).

By thus suggesting that instead of being "true to life" the painting is more concerned with illustrating Georges's "genius" (15), Duffy places her poem in the tradition of Christina Rossetti's "In An Artist's Studio," where we similarly encounter a model who feels that the male painter merely "feeds upon her face," presenting her not as she is but as she "fills his dream" (9, 14). Going further, however, when Duffy's model verbally protests Georges's construction of her, she also engages in the kind of self-empowering representation that Lynda Nead describes: "to represent is to take power - it is to tell your own stories and draw your own lines, rather than succumb to the tales and images of others. Of course, there is a risk involved; you might not end up telling a fairy-tale with a happy ending, but at least you are the narrator and are in control of the means of narration" (82).

Such verbal control, of course, is also the bottom line of "With Francis Furini," which enlists painting ultimately for the purpose of demonstrating the poet's power. In doing so, however, Browning also perpetuates the standard gender hierarchy: in essence he feminizes both painting and painter and presents the naked female body as something formless that most be given shape by the male artist, be it painter or poet. In contrast, "Standing Female Nude" negotiates a variety of seeming polarities: Cubist art and the formalities of a nude art tradition, "Art" and various "arts," the artist as powerful male and the model as powerless female. Similarly, by simultaneously working within and deconstructing traditional notions about the female nude, Duffy's poem creates a space where the model need not be locked into an unchanging and objectifying signification. Finally, by using an internal dramatic monologue, a mode often associated with Browning, Duffy reshapes that verbal form into a strategic platform from which the transgressive female body speaks about the violations done against it in the name of a High Art tradition, be it visual or literary.