

*The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812-1824.* By Alexander Nemerov. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. xiv, 260. \$45.00.)

The Philadelphia artist Raphaelle Peale (1774-1825) is best known for his enigmatic *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*, painted around 1822. Drawing on a familiar mythological theme in European painting, Peale took the title from a work (circa 1772) by the English painter James Barry and appropriated a few elements of the original as well. A nude Venus stands at the center of Barry's canvas. Peale borrowed her right foot and raised left arm; the rest of the body, including the face, he covered with a white napkin depicted so skillfully as to appear real; hence, the "deception" in this stunning example of *trompe l'oeil*. The physical image of the nude persists, its general contours pressing into the folds of the cloth, sensuous yet ghostly. Peale's witty perspective on the mythological tradition at once reveals and conceals. Unlike his better-known artist-father, Charles Willson Peale, who proudly lifts a curtain to exhibit his long gallery of natural history and patriotic portraiture in the famous self-portrait *The Artist in His Museum (1822)*, Raphaelle refuses to show and tell. In the center of his Venus painting he draws a blank sheet, the equivalent of a curtain that never gets raised. While it serves to hide Venus's body yet trace her lines, the napkin is not altogether unmarked; the lower right border bears the artist's signature, as if embroidered into the fabric, in a curious embodiment of his self.

The father-son relationship and its repercussions for self-constitution on a blank canvas lie at the heart of *The Body of Raphaelle Peale*, Alexander Nemerov's inquiry into the artist's still life paintings, the genre in which he worked most successfully. Raphaelle, the eldest son, was one of several children Charles Willson Peale named after artists and who followed the family business of painting. Initially, he showed much talent as a painter of portraits, his father's metier, exhibiting

several examples at the 1795 Columbianum show in Philadelphia. By the 1810s, however, he was devoting his talent almost exclusively to the still life, a genre that ranked low in the traditional hierarchy of subjects. The shift was part of a larger divergence between father and son. In the father's estimate, Raphaelle never quite grew up professionally or personally. The boy, he allowed, had a good heart but was undisciplined and dominated by lower passions. In fact, Raphaelle was an alcoholic whose heavy drinking, combined with painful physical ailments (gout and arthritis), plunged his family into financial distress and dependence on Charles Willson Peale.

The conflicted relationship between father and son drives Nemerov's reading of "body" and "selfhood" in Raphaelle's still lifes. Here is the elder Peale, a man of the Enlightenment who with a grand gesture made a universe of scientific study and American history visible to his audience. A self-styled virtuous republican, the elder Peale ostentatiously dedicated his art to the public good. On the other hand, there is Raphaelle, who employed the still life (*nature morte*) to project a world of morbid sensuality, teeming with decaying objects such as melons and meat, devoid of civic meaning. In images of rotting flesh the artist narcissistically enacted fantasies of death. Not for him the didactic rhetoric of history painting, still a strong presence in Philadelphia during the 1820s and profitably practiced by his brother Rembrandt. Raphaelle was seduced by the physical allure of juicy stuff, such as lush strawberries in a silver cup, which he portrayed so palpably as to whet the viewer's appetite. In Freudian terms, Nemerov argues, Raphaelle's painterly touch is that of an infant caught up in the tactile quality of things, unconscious of a world outside his own sensations. In social terms, Raphaelle rejected the dominant models of adulthood; he would be neither virtuous republican nor possessive individualist. The Raphaelle who emerges in Nemerov's text eludes parental and social expectations through visual playfulness and subterfuge. In his attempts to evade the socialization of selfhood, Raphaelle revels in acts of disappearance and deception, even faking

his own death. Digging through an assortment of fruit, vegetable, and meat, Nemerov finds the return of Raphaëlle's repressed body and the irruption of his self.

If there is a beginning to what Nemerov calls the "moral drama" (p. 13) of Raphaëlle Peale's life, it would appear to be the admonishing letter Charles Willson Peale sent to his eldest son in 1817: control your passions, he demanded of the forty-three-year-old, and "act the *Man*" (p. 3). That statement is the leitmotif in this book. As he translates the father-son conflict into visual analysis, Nemerov proposes intriguing connections between life and art but also stretches the evidence. Did the son measure himself constantly against the father? How else, Nemerov speculates, to explain the fact that Raphaëlle's still life paintings are almost invariably the same size as a series of self-portraits by Charles Willson? Somewhere along the way Raphaëlle must of course kill the father. Nemerov inspects a severed head painted by brother Titian that resembles but is not clearly identified as a portrait of Charles Willson and discerns a transference of Raphaëlle's patricidal fantasies. Apparently, the brothers were co-conspirators in the family drama. If readers are willing to follow Nemerov in this analysis, they will perhaps not be surprised that the search for Raphaëlle's own body leads back to *Venus Rising from the Sea*. The story ends in gothic horror: Venus is not Venus but the returning maternal body of Rachel Brewer Peale; the napkin is actually a shroud hiding an androgynous body—Raphaëlle's own corpse.

Nemerov supports this argument through a fascinating and thoroughly researched examination of the visual culture and social life of Peale's Philadelphia. Following such art historians as Norman Bryson, he resurrects Raphaëlle's still life paintings from neglect and convinces readers of their cultural significance. Among the intriguing subjects discussed are medical dissection, anatomical drawing, scientific illustration, even the changing culture of city butchers. Yet *The Body of Raphaëlle Peale* turns out to be a strange enterprise. Even as Nemerov claims to offer a "history of early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia's visual culture" (p. 5), he presents Raphaëlle's pictorial world

as hermetically absorbed in private fantasies of embodiment. This interpretation presents a puzzle: Peale's art is simultaneously open to its historical milieu and trapped in solipsistic desire. Undeterred, Nemerov attempts to resolve the paradox by assuming a correlation between Raphaelle's private yearnings and his contemporaries' cultural pursuits. Underneath the search for bourgeois respectability, he maintains, Philadelphians indulged in morbid fantasies, read gothic novels, even believed in witches. In this perspective, the morbid Venus painting enacted not only infantile fantasies but also social rage. In its deconstruction of the standard female allegories decorating Philadelphia's city seal, a struggling artisan class, besieged by capitalist forces, found an emblem of its own fragmentation in a city of "social ruin" (p. 196). To support this argument, Nemerov observes that Peale was not alone in his urban nightmare; the Philadelphia merchant David Meredith was also reflecting on the "Horror" and deformity of "Human nature" (p. 189) in a private letter. On such small bits of evidence Nemerov erects large conclusions. Nemerov's Philadelphia is a historical still life seen through Raphaelle's eyes.

Equally problematic is Nemerov's treatment of romantic art. As he points out, Raphaelle's late career overlapped briefly with the beginnings of Thomas Cole's. Does that coincidence support Nemerov's case for a resemblance between Cole's early study of moss hanging from a dead tree and Raphaelle's depiction of Venus's hair? Based on that visual impression, Nemerov suggests that both artists represented "the same failed social identity" (p. 200). Surely that oversimplifies the case. Yes, ruined cities appear later in Thomas Cole's works, as in his allegorical *The Course of Empire* series (1833-1836). But it would take more investigation to make a convincing equation between the decaying objects in Raphaelle's still lifes and Cole's dead trees. That one of Cole's early supporters, the Baltimore art collector Robert Gilmor, actually owned several of Peale's works is intriguing, but Nemerov does not pursue the connection. Instead, he calls on the standard cast of romantic writers—Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Charles Brockden Brown—and links their writings to

Raphaelle's art. In this analysis, Peale's romanticism falls into the conventional polarities: romantic artist/possessive individual, infantile fantasy/respectable bourgeois self, and narcissism/socialization, to name only a few.

Alexander Nemerov's *bravura* performance—his unearthing of fascinating material from Philadelphia archives; his theoretical insights from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, deconstruction, gender theory, and more; his command of the history of romantic and gothic writing in early America; and most of all his imaginative visual analysis—makes *The Body of Raphaelle Peale* a richly textured, provocative study. Nemerov ambitiously aspires to a panorama of visual culture in Philadelphia and an intimate view of still life painting. Yet he falters amid object-oriented, biographical, and contextual approaches. Paradoxically, personal and social history are essential to his project but ultimately extraneous to his hermetic subject. This reader suspects that Nemerov was more comfortable with the intimacies of close reading than with the messiness of the larger historical world. Still, the result is a sophisticated synthetic reading of visual artifacts as documents of an artistic identity intersecting with a shifting social landscape.

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