Undressing the Victorians

by Roger Kimball

On Exposed: The Victorian Nude at the Brooklyn Museum.

Manners are of more importance than law. ... The law touches us but here and there and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform and insensible operation like that of the air we breathe in.

—Edmund Burke, “Letters on a Regicide Peace”

The artist used to be at war with the Philistine. Today, for fear of being tainted with élitism or with failing to meet the elementary requirements of the democratic outlook, your intellectual abases himself before the power-hungry world of show-business, or fashion, or advertising.

—Alain Finkielkraut, The Undoing of Thought

When “Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection” opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in the fall of 1999, the museum thoughtfully included a mock “health warning” with its press material. “The contents of this exhibition,” the advisory began, “may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety.”

In fact, what the exhibition (which had originated at the Royal Academy in London) chiefly caused was an unbearable sense of tedium. Sure, there was an outcry about the several odious objects on view. (Remember the blasphemous picture of the Virgin decorated with cutouts from pornographic magazines and clumps of elephant dung?) And Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor of New York, gave the “arts community” its biggest thrill in years by threatening to withhold city funding if the museum insisted on showing the Virgin de la merde picture. “You don’t have a right to a government subsidy for desecrating somebody else’s religion,” he said at the time. “[I]f you are a government-subsidized enterprise, then you can’t do things that desecrate the most personal and deeply held views of people in society.” What a delicious access of indignation that supplied! For many years now, bourgeois cultural institutions like museums and theaters have been gratefully embracing every new “transgressive gesture” as soon as it rolls off the assembly line. How refreshing, how novel—how transgressive when you come right down to it—to encounter some old-fashioned moral resistance at last. Naturally, members of the “arts
community” roundly denounced Mayor Giuliani as a philistine and worse (Nazi Germany was invoked, as were the interventions of Senator McCarthy). Secretly, in their heart of hearts, I suspect they were offering him thanks. In these latitudinarian days, it’s not often that the beautiful people have the opportunity to indulge themselves in such preening ecstasies of self-righteousness.

Apart from the gleeful circus of indignation, however, “Sensation” was not much of a sensation. Oh, there were plenty of rebarbative things on view: you could tell that the curators had worked overtime to pique the jaded palates of a public surfeited on “challenging” art. But was there anything new? Were there any aesthetic innovations? Were there even any novel perspectives or ideas? No, no, and no again. It was the same tired old stuff. Pubescent mannequins studded with erect penises? Been there. Bisected animals suspended in glass tanks? Done that. Even the focus of moral outrage—the sacrilegious Virgin—was hardly more than a reprise of stuff Dalí and other surrealists had paraded half a century ago. In straining for effect, the objects assembled in “Sensation” wound up communicating chiefly the effect of straining.

Still, “Sensation” did harbor two lessons, a moral lesson and a commercial one. The moral lesson centered on the great tedium “Sensation” produced. Here at last was unmistakable confirmation of a strange phenomenon that had been flickering into focus here and there in the art world for some years: that an exhibition or performance can be disgusting without being shocking. The full implications of this development, I believe, have yet to be absorbed. Among other things, it suggests that the whole movement of “cutting-edge” art has entered a terminal phase. Like pornography—from which it is often indistinguishable—contemporary “avant-garde” art is a drearily formulaic, naff, and ultimately desperate enterprise. The stimulus is artificial, the means degrading, the result an exercise in futility. The overall effect is boredom.

Curiously, the commercial lesson of “Sensation” seems, at first blush, to cut in the other direction. For while the exhibition was a yawn in the gallery, at the box office it really was a Sensation. Like the crowds who congregated with touching anticipation to see the next exotic attraction when P. T. Barnum, overwhelmed with patrons, nailed up a sign emblazoned with the legend “This Way to the Egress,” the art-going public reported for duty en masse at the entrance to “Sensation.”

The great question is to what extent the Barnum gambit is replicable. The jury, I believe, is still out on that one. Even today, probably, there are people who would line up to see so strange a thing as an Egress; and doubtless there are many others eager to share with them their own encounters with that elusive beast. It is clear at any rate that the Brooklyn Museum is wagering that the trick still has legs. Hence its enthusiastic acceptance of “Exposed: The Victorian Nude,”[1] the latest Barnumesque import from Britain. Billed as “the first exhibition to chart the moral and aesthetic controversies about the nude body in English visual culture,” “Exposed” has more than a little in common with Barnum’s innovative approach to crowd control. For one thing, there is the great discrepancy between expectation and fulfillment. “Exposed” is marketed as this year’s sexy art event. The chief publicity image is from Cadmus and Harmonia (1877), a little-known painting by Evelyn De Morgan (née Pickering). It’s a sort of Botticelli-meets-the-pre-Raphaelite-brotherhood
production: svelte, leggy nude, posed like the figure in Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* but with the regulation pre-Raphaelite red hair and an alarming “soulful” expression. You might think that the thirty- or forty-foot snake, coiling up from the damsel’s legs, would be grounds for alarm, but Harmonia seems to be perfectly at ease with her pet—Nastassja Kinski before her time—since she gently if absent-mindedly presses its head to her breast. The catalogue for “Exposed” features a detail of this picture with a thin paper band positioned carefully across Harmonia’s bosom. To open the catalogue, you have to break the band and expose her nakedness: get it? It’s about as exciting as the Egress must have been.

Much of what one sees in “Exposed” is like Harmonia and the paper band. That is to say, there is everywhere the hint, the suggestion, the atmosphere of prurience. It is partly the result of the works on view, but only partly. A lot of it comes from the presentation: the arrangement of works, the accompanying commentary, the whole premise and marketing of the exhibition. (One section is called “Sensation! The Nude in High Art.” But what is sensational about nudes in high art?) There are a handful of overtly pornographic works on view in “Exposed”—Aubrey Beardsley’s comical “The Impatient Adulterer” (1896), for example, some drawings by Turner of copulating couples, and some photographs by Edward Linley Sambourne. But the real obscenity lies elsewhere. It is grounded largely in the diffuse, hothouse ickiness of eroticized idealism that hovers about many of the works: Ernest Normand’s *Bondage* (c. 1895), for example, which depicts the Pharaoh inspecting a possible recruit to his stable of slaves, or Gustave Boulanger’s *Phryne* (1850), or John Collier’s *In the Venusberg* (1901).

These are seriously bad pictures: cloying, aesthetically static, cringe-making in their combination of coy, sugar-glazed, semi-concealed eroticism and spurious high-mindedness. This is not a novel observation about high Victorian painting. Consider the case of Frederic Leighton, represented by more than a dozen works in this exhibition. Leighton’s work was immensely popular in its day. But even at that time some observers grasped the essentially meretricious nature of his work. For example, Henry James, writing in 1882 about Leighton’s picture *Phryne at Eleusis*, noted that “his efforts remain strongly and brilliantly superficial. His texture is too often that of the glaze on the lid of a prune-box; his drawing too often that of the figures that smile at us from those receptacles.” The great mystery about artists like Leighton is the source of their charisma. For no sooner are they dead than the spell is broken. Leighton, James wrote, was “one of those happy celebrities who take it out … in life.” Reflecting in 1897 on the great public funeral accorded to Leighton, and the great public indifference to his work that immediately followed his interment, James asked: “Is the key to the enigma that there was too much noise yesterday, or that there is not enough of it today?” For a hundred years or so, artists like Leighton subsisted in the dignified silence provided by well-deserved obscurity. It is one of the aims of exhibitions like “Exposed” to generate enough noise that no one notices the process of unjustified disinterment they depend upon.

In *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956), Kenneth Clark famously distinguished between the
ideas of nakedness and nudity. “To be naked,” Clark wrote, is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body.

The curators of and contributors to the catalogue for “Exposed” do not much like Clark’s book. His passing allusion to the “great frost of Victorian prudery” is several times cited only to be dismissed. For the governing presupposition of “Exposed” is that, deep down, the Victorians were just as sex-obsessed as we are only, alas, their moral and religious commitments tended to interfere with their sex lives. This presupposition, elaborated in the menacing strains of contemporary lit crit jargon, imbues the catalogue and other official commentary for the exhibition with an anachronistic aura that is partly noxious, partly just comic. For example, in “The Nude in Nineteenth-Century Britain: ‘The English Nude,’” Alison Smith, the exhibition’s chief curator, writes that in Bathers (1876), a seemingly innocent picture of boys swimming, Frederick Walker was “imagining a male utopia that surreptitiously admitted a homoerotic chivalric gaze, while at the same time honoring a popular pastime.” I am not sure exactly what a “homoerotic chivalric gaze” is, but I am confident that Walker’s muddy, sentimentalizing effort has nothing to do with a “gaze” of that or any other sort.

One is never far from the jarring effect of anachronism in “Exposed.” Of course it is most patent in the catalogue. The vertiginous effect is due partly to the argot, which is wildly at odds with the subject matter. Smith again: “the female nude was assigned to the confined urban context of the studio or bedroom which had so disturbed critics earlier in the century. Designed to illuminate a seamy side of the female nude, such works succeeded in disturbing the idea of the artistic or unified body through a process of fragmentation.” But what does “disturbing the idea of the artistic or unified body through a process of fragmentation” have to do with the works on view? What indeed does it even mean?

The element of anachronism is not only rhetorical, however. In “Prudery, Pornography and the Victorian Nude (Or, What Do We Think the Butler Saw?),” Martin Myrone draws on a pornographic 1993 comic strip in order to drag in Margaret Thatcher and her call for a revival of “Victorian Values.” “For its proponents,” he explains, “Victorian values stood for cleanliness, hard work, strict self-discipline and economy, and a code of morality centered on ‘normal’ heterosexual family life.” Why the scare quotes around “normal”? Does Myrone believe that there is no such thing as a normal heterosexual family life? Does he believe that the Victorians denied it?

One of the contributors to the catalogue quotes the comment that “The Victorians and sex have been exhaustingly, if not exhaustively, written about.” And how. You put down the catalogue for this show feeling very tired. One last example. In “Thoughts and Things: Sculpture and the Victorian Nude,” Michael Hatt tells us that
the question of colouring the nude clearly has ramifications for ideas about gender. The coloured female nude is problematic because it turns the nude into a sign of sexual desire, of base physicality; exactly what the ideal is designed to expunge. Here decorous femininity turns into deviance: the matron is in danger of prostituting herself.

An interesting thought experiment for the ecologically minded: what if academics were forbidden to use the word “gender”? How many acres of wood pulp would we save?

There are a handful of good pictures in “Exposed.” Few of them are Victorian. Indeed, “Exposed: The Victorian Nude” is misnamed. It should have been called “Exposed: The Painful Effort to ‘Sensationalize’ One-hundred and Fifty Anaphrodisiac Pictures, Most of Which Are Victorian.” What, for example, is Walter Sickert (1860–1942) doing in an exhibition supposedly devoted to the Victorian nude? Or Gwen John (1876–1939)? Or William Orpen (1878–1931)? These are not Victorian painters, spiritually or chronologically. And what is the point of the smirking film clips from Pathé Frères, circa 1903? What do they have to do with “The Victorian Nude”?

The answer is nothing. But even to ask that question is to misunderstand the governing impulse behind “Exposed.” The Victorian nude was merely the pretext, the occasion for this exhibition. In fact, “Exposed” is almost entirely about pretext. In the first place, a group of (mostly) undistinguished art works is gathered together as the pretext for an exercise in sexual politics and cultural warfare. The curators are not interested in these objects for their aesthetic merits (which is just as well, since considered aesthetically most of what is on view in this exhibition is period-piece kitsch). On the contrary, their chief interest is in spinning a psychodrama about the supposed repression or the inversion or the complications of sex in the Victorian period. The assembled works of art provide the excuse to fight some contemporary ideological battles: battles about the place of sexuality in public life, the ideals of modesty and seemliness, the concept of sexual normality.

In other words, “Exposed: The Victorian Nude” is yet another chapter in the so-called culture wars. Over the past decade or so, it has become increasingly clear that this war is a battle about everything the Victorians are famous for: the “cleanliness, hard work, strict self-discipline,” etc., that one of the people responsible for this exhibition speaks of with such contempt. Do those values, those virtues, articulate noble human aspirations? Or are they merely the repressive blind for … well, you name it: narrowness, hypocrisy, the expression of a “white, patriarchal, capitalist, hegemonic,” blah, blah, blah? As our distance from the Victorian era grows, we can appreciate more and more what giants they were: intellectual, political, scientific, cultural, and moral giants. They did not, it is true, excel at painting or sculpture. But in virtually every other department of human endeavor, the Victorians are models we dismiss or patronize at the cost of our own diminishment. “Exposed” is almost entirely predicated on such a patronizing attitude (an attitude that is only half-masked by the lurid interest in the sentimental schlock that is Victorian painting). Which means among other things that “Exposed” is yet another attack on the moral, aesthetic, and cultural patrimony that Burke extolled under the name of manners.
Finally, exhibitions like “Exposed” are commercial pretexts for institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, which are devoted to transforming themselves from repositories of our cultural heritage into beacons of trendiness. Like almost every other art museum in the Western world, the Brooklyn Museum is engaged on an ambitious building program. What will occupy its capacious new galleries? Hitherto seldom-seen items from its permanent collection, in part. But also a great deal of contemporary art and many exhibitions like “Exposed.” The Brooklyn Museum took “Exposed” in the hope that it would be another “Sensation”: a box-office success with an abundance of buzz. Artistic quality enters the equation only incidentally, if at all. As of this writing, the calculation does not seem to be paying off particularly well. Which may mean that what “Exposed” exposes is above all the limits of cynicism in marketing art. Or perhaps it only means that Victorian nudes are just too anemic to function as a crowd-pleasing Egress.

Notes

Go to the top of the document.

I. “Exposed: The Victorian Nude” opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on September 6 and remains on view until January 5, 2003. The exhibition, which was previously seen at Tate Britain, London, and Haus der Kunst, Munich, travels to the Kobe City Museum, Kobe, in February 2003 and Geidai Museum (The University Art Museum), Tokyo, in June 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Alison Smith, has been published by Tate Publishing (288 pages, $45). Go back to the text.