

Salon de Peinture

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In July 1573, Veronese was put on trial for heresy before Venice's Tribunal of Inquisition because the latter considered that the former's *Last Supper* was not in keeping with its subject. When Veronese was asked about the reason why he depicted characters other than Christ and the twelve Apostles, he answered: 'If in a painting there is space left over, I fill it with figures from my imagination. [...] My commission was to make this picture beautiful according to my judgement, and it seemed to me that it was big and capable of holding many figures.' Veronese eventually had to rename his painting to *The Feast in the House of Levi*, originally executed for the refectory in the Venetian church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, now in the collection of the Gallerie dell'Accademia. As Anthony Blunt argued, Veronese thought 'in terms of beauty not of spiritual truth, and his object was to produce a magnificent pageant painting, not to illustrate a religious story.' Or, to put it in another way, Veronese's painting is a mosaic of painterly moments—the most eloquent one being the man whose nose is bleeding in the lower right-hand side (the lower left-hand side of the painting).

Paul Cézanne—whose visits to the Louvre we can imagine through Joachim Gasquet's memorial work published in 1921—was not mistaken when he praised the penetrating and aerial chromaticism of the Venetian master's *Wedding Feast at Cana*. His remarks, as well as Veronese's defense, might prove that there is no such thing as artists serving the glory of their country, or, that artists best serve their country when they 'think of nothing [...] but the truth which is before [them],' as shown by Marcel Proust against Maurice Barrès in *Time Regained*. It is colours that Cézanne perceived and felt in Veronese's paintings—*une grande ondulation colorée*.

When Napoléon III ordered Émilien de Nieuwerkerke to establish the Salon des Refusés in 1863, he put an end to the institutional supremacy of the *pompiers* and the *art officiel*. A first since the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture invented the whole idea of Salon in 1667—the term was actually coined from the Salon Carré of the Louvre, where such exhibition took place from 1725 onwards. One could say that Napoléon III felt the Académie des Beaux-Arts was suffocating insofar as it prevented artists from fully expressing themselves. Bonapartists will say that here we have an example of the Emperor's liberalism, but it would be too great an honor for he who was brought to power after the coup of December 2, 1851. The Salon des Refusés was conceived of as a counterpoint to the official Salon, which we could name the Salon des Acceptés. The former was thus aimed at constructing the anti-canon of the Second Empire, or, the canon of the outsiders. We should nonetheless not underestimate its historical value, for it provided nineteenth-century French artists with a platform freed from any sort of obedience to religious faith, nationalist sentiments, and academic norms.

To paraphrase Gaëtan Picon's great eponymous essay, art historians and critics have described the 1863 Salon des Refusés as *the birth of Modern painting*. But the Modern in Modern painting is deeply flawed. For it has been understood as a term germane to such concepts as "novelty" and "progress." It has thence been tinged with the Enlightenment's ideology and desire to propel humanity to embrace an ascensional fate, best exemplified in Turgot's *Reflections on the History of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1749), and Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* (1794). Yet, the modernity of the Salon des Refusés was resolutely Baudelairean.

Let us look at Édouard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*—included along with *Olympia* in the 1863 Salon des Refusés—to better grasp what is at stake in that distinction. Teleological narratives on Modern art have identified Manet's *succès à scandale* with their point of origin. It has thus become one of the so-called modernist canon's emblems, for reasons that do not reveal the painter-as-painter in Manet, but rather stem from a craving for what is supposedly *new* and *groundbreaking* (read: what is thought of as being *modern*) in *Luncheon on the Grass*, notably the eruption of the bourgeois sphere's sociable spaces and modes of sociability in painting's classical space. Such idealist views entertain the myth of *tabula rasa* and shadow artworks: they force Modern artists to acknowledge rancid originality and innovation as the moral duties and cardinal principles of artistic creation. Within that framework, the *groundbreaking* is reductively seen as the product of the *new* in its most caricatural form. In reality, the modernity of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* resides in the transformation of Marcantonio Raimondi's *Judgment of Paris*, in the becoming *antique*—in the strongest sense of the word—of the *Parisian nymphs*, to speak like Aby Warburg, who sit in the center of the composition.

But the fact remains that the ideology of “progress” inheres in the Salon as a model, whose trajectory espouses the dynamic of what Thierry de Duve called the Courbet-Manet-Cézanne-Cubism-Duchamp cycloid. The Salon's adage could be: the more *spectacular* the better, which is why art fairs, or, for that matter, biennials could be regarded as the Salon's legitimate heirs. In these places, interventions that mimic the ethos of Duchamp's *Fountain* take center stage and estrange the public from the urgency of painting as a language.

Almine Rech's own Salon de Peinture walks away from that mundane longing for spectacularity and revisits the idea of Salon. By narrowing down again the focus to painting, she emulates the vitality of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French Salons (the Salon des Refusés, des Indépendants, d'Automne and so forth). It should be noted that a Salon is not a group show per se: it is not curated and does not historicize the *now* in the fashion characteristic of contemporary art museums and curators. As such, it is more of an *innocent* conversation with which an array of living artists engage. Painters based in France, the United States, Ireland, Britain, Germany, and China are part of the discussion Almine Rech has initiated. Her Salon moreover instigates yet another conversation: a dialogue with painting of the past. The gallery, located at 39 East 78th Street, inscribes the Salon into the artistic topology of the Upper East Side: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the Guggenheim Museum, among others. There, numerous spaces and times mingle, becoming one in a way that is reminiscent of the spatio-temporal weave that French Salons and the Louvre formed more than a century ago. We shall now remember Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in October 1907, activated the chromatic axis that ties nineteenth-century France to sixteenth-century Venice, going back and forth between the Cézannes of the Salon d'Automne and the Tintoretts, Veroneses, and Titians of the Louvre.

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