

Inhabiting tradition: Barbara Campbell's *Inflorescent*
Mary Roberts

The *Venus Victrix* has just enjoyed a new triumph at the Palazzo Borghese, where it was exhibited for a limited time to the public. The procession of amateurs from Rome as well as from abroad continually pressed around it. Daytime visits could not sate their admiration; they got permission to study the statue at night, by torchlight, which, as you know, accentuates and allows one to see the smallest nuances in the handling, and also shows up the smallest faults. It was necessary to set up an enclosure, to protect the work from the crowd which constantly pushed against it.¹

≈

Taking refuge from a blazing sunny day, it took some time to adjust our eyes to the dim light inside the Macleay Museum. Upstairs in a space between the display cases the contours of a female nude were barely visible. The only disturbance to the figure's quiet repose on a *chaise longue* was the gentle rhythmic movement of a fan across her body. As it moved with the regular deliberations of a radar beam, curious phosphorescent surface inscriptions emerged and receded across the body's surface. The markings were fine tracings of cycads, an ancient species valued as ornamental, conservatory plants. I was entranced by these glowing part-drawings as they formed around the curves of her body. These intriguing illuminations disappeared from our grasp the moment after they entered our field of vision. A particularly bold viewer standing nearby urged me to move forward to inspect. Up close it felt as if we had crossed an invisible barrier without permission.

≈

I am struck by the synchronicity between Quatremère de Quincy's description of the public scrutiny of Canova's *Venus Victrix* and Barbara Campbell's simulated nocturnal performance *Inflorescent* and I am tempted to read the latter performance as a response to the earlier incident. There is something quite comic about the unselfconscious voyeurism of the nocturnal visitors to Canova's sculpture in 1814, who felt licensed to scrutinize even the most minor defects of the nude by torchlight. By placing her own body within the tradition of the nude, Campbell's performance mitigates against any such unselfconscious viewing,

¹ Quatremère de Quincy, *Canova et ses ouvrages*, Adrien Le Clere et Cie, Paris, 1834, p149. (Quoted in Carol Ockman, *Ingres's Eroticized Bodies. Retracing the Serpentine Line*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995, p39.)

making us intensely aware of our looking. And indeed Campbell herself takes the place of the nocturnal viewers as we witness her absorption in discovering the intriguing phosphorescent inscriptions on her body. *Inflorescent* inhabits the genre of the nude, borrowing from its familiar repertoire of pose and gesture. But what is its relationship to tradition? What kind of looking takes place here? In what circuits of desire is it enmeshed? I would suggest that the relationship of Campbell's performance to tradition is ambiguous, the genre has been revived and transfigured. A transformation has taken place that is as uncertain as it is fascinating.

There are two bodies in Campbell's performance, the body transformed into its allusive representational double, the nude, and yet also the body in performance, a real body in our shared space. The real-time of performance is ephemeral, in contrast to the fixity of photographs, sculptures or paintings that promise the viewer possession of the representation as object. In this real-time of performance, Campbell holds the possibility of putting us on the spot, and we remain uneasily aware of this potential. She holds the power to confront our looking, to size us up, put us in our place. In the history of western art, *Olympia* is the paradigmatic instance of this threatened reversal, her brazen stare refuses to let us go, her blocking hand assails the audience with the suggestion that Olympia takes control.² An echo of Olympia is suggested at the moment in Campbell's performance when we are confronted by the insistence of her direct stare out. This is reinforced by the accompanying uncanny facial transfigurations, as the fan sweeps across her face, revealing what appear to be scarifications (Fig. 1). Mostly however this power remains latent in Campbell's performance and instead we are invited to witness her absorption in self-discovery. Gently moving the fan, she is transfixed by the emergence of these delicate markings and this capacity for body-writing – this is not iconoclasm, instead quiet, fascinating and subversive self-possession.

This self-possession invites us to place the work within a circuit of feminine desire. The context for production of the *Venus Victrix* (1804-08) could be read as an historical precedent for this aspect of Campbell's performance. There are a number of intriguing examples in early nineteenth-century France, of feminine engagement with the tradition of the nude. In a surprising revision, Carol Ockman has reinserted some of the great masterworks of the neo-classical nude within networks of female patronage and sensual "feminine taste". Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*, for instance, was commissioned by Caroline Bonaparte Murat for her husband. And the *Venus Victrix* itself was commissioned, and purportedly posed for, by Caroline's sister Pauline. Tracing these and other

² The art historical literature on this painting is vast, including T.J. Clark's landmark essay in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his followers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999 (reprint) and Griselda Pollock's recent analysis in *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999.

works that resulted from a web of elite female patronage, Ockman suggests that the pictorial language of this art was created, in large part, by the women who commissioned them. In doing so these women created a dialogue among works of art, where one commission was a response to others. But rather than suggesting an alternative “female” taste, Ockman establishes “a genealogy of masterworks capable of being read both within a history of female patronage and the traditional history of male artistic creation.”³ These historical precedents compel us to find ways of thinking about the representation of the female body that invoke feminine desire that is neither entirely outside the circuit of a masculinist norm, nor entirely subsumed by its sexual economy.

The entanglements of feminine and masculine desire in this period are intriguingly elaborated in the notorious case of Canova’s sculpture. We find evidence of a playful engagement with the tradition in Pauline’s transgressive reply to an inquiry as to whether she posed nude for the sculptor - she is said to have responded that it was warm in Canova’s studio.⁴ The overwhelming popularity of Canova’s nude on a *chaise* is, at least in part, attributable to this transgressive royal response. Surely, for those viewers who pressed up against this work when it was first on public display, part of the attraction was the implied intimacy of the transaction between royal sitter and sculptor and the imaginary access to it through close scrutiny of the work. I would suggest that Campbell’s *Inflorescent* can be read as a response that combines both the intimacy of the sitting and the public display of the finished work through the moment of performance, as artist and sitter are one. But Campbell is also a viewer, witnessing the emergence of the body markings being drawn as she moves the fan across her torso. It is precisely this play between the three roles of sitter, artist and spectator that unsettles their conventionally inscribed distinctions.

*Reading in Detail*⁵

The devil is in the detail, the desire is in the detail, the deviance is in the details. In part, what entices us about Ingres’s odalisques are the luxury of fabrics, the jewelled peacock feather fans, the hard, shiny surfaces of pipes and jewel boxes, are enticing contrasts to the milky white skin of the reclining odalisques. These details augment and enumerate desire across the field of representation. John Frederick Lewis’s magnificent painting The Hhareem, (1849) (Fig. 2) is a pre-eminent example of the pleasures of the detail. Here the uncorsetted bodies of the reclining odalisques are clothed in magnificent silks and these fabrics delight us with their pattern and texture as they define the serpentine contours of the female form. The pleasures in this painting are multifarious as lattice

³ “A Woman’s Pleasure: The *Grande Odalisque*”, in Ockman, *ibid.*, p39.

⁴ Ockman, *ibid.*, p38.

⁵ I am referring here to Naomi Schor’s *Reading in Detail. Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Methuen, New York and London, 1987.

shadows form intricate patterns across the soft fur of the gazelle and across the moiré silk of the odalisque's gown. A master of his chosen medium of watercolor, Lewis provides striking textural contrasts, between the shiny metal base of the narghile (pipe) and the softness of fabric and flesh, even the fruit is invitingly offered for our delectation. This work was perfectly judged to fit the tastes of his Victorian audience, one of whom wrote: "The lord of the seraglio is seen seated and surrounded by his women, who lie in Eastern repose at his feet. Wherever the eye rests all is Oriental luxury and ease: flowers and fruit and rich dresses lend fresh variety and colour to the scene."⁶ These were not exclusively masculine pleasures for the Victorians, we find abundant evidence of delight in sartorial detail in the writings of those purportedly buttoned-up Victorian women travellers who actually visited harems. For instance, Annie Harvey provided a sensual description of the harem women's luxurious clothes in her diary of 1871: "A Parisian's toilette would be as nothing compared with the multitude and magnificence of these toilettes spread before us...The filmy delicacy of the muslin [veil] makes it like a vapour, and the exquisite softness of its texture causes it to fall into the most graceful folds."⁷

For the nineteenth-century painter however, there were attendant risks with this eroticism of the detail. This was balancing act between diverting detail and a composition that anchored the viewer's focus on the central subject of the painting's narrative thereby confirming the distance and privilege of the viewer as it reified the object of his vision.⁸ Even the most successful artist such as Lewis could transgress these mutable conventions. With *The Hhareem* the details were adjudged to be framed and subordinated to the painting's narrative, as the conventions of perspectival composition established the distance of the disembodied western subject. The critics were however less convinced by many of his later harem paintings, objecting that some of them "bewildered" and "fatigued" the eye.⁹ One critic was perturbed by the "dazzling and kaleidoscopic profusion" of colour and detail and conjectured that, "it may reasonably be asked...whether, in acknowledgement of art requirements, some subordination of parts to the whole effect should not be made?"¹⁰ For these viewers, detail threatened to overwhelm through its profusion and to undermine, rather than augment, the fantasy of visual mastery.

⁶ *Illustrated London News*, May 4, 1850, p299-300.

⁷ Annie Jane Harvey, *Turkish Harems and Circassian Homes*, London, 1871, pp65-66.

⁸ For a further elaboration of this co-implication of perspectival visibility and bourgeois subjectivity see, Martin Jay, "The Scopic Regimes of Modernity", *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster, DIA Foundation, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988, p24.

⁹ This is a response to Lewis's harem painting, *An Intercepted Correspondence Cairo* when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1869, *The Times*, May 19, 1869, p5.

¹⁰ *Illustrated London News*, May 8, 1869, p471.

Campbell's performance operates on this edge. In the half-light, the full view of her body is obscured as our attention is focused instead on the curious body markings that appear part by part. As the fan moves, these isolated patternings become sites of fascination, and there is an intensification of the view of these part drawings. Focusing on the part, the whole recedes. Our vision is interrupted as we are diverted by the desire to grasp the details that present themselves only momentarily before receding from view. They distract and divert our gaze, refusing our mastery of the field of vision.

For me, the abiding fascination of this performance lies in the multifarious possibilities it provides for new ways of inhabiting tradition.

Dr Mary Roberts
Department of Art History and Theory,
University of Sydney.