

Forms of Enchantment: Writings on Art & Artists. By Marina Warner, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2018, 288 pp.

In her creative writing and interdisciplinary approach to art criticism, Marina Warner presents her writings on art and artists. An acclaimed novelist and non-fiction writer for popular and literary magazines and several monographs, Warner's work reveals her steadfast fascination with the role of mythology and gender in culture. Her most cited books include her feminist take on the Marianne cult with *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; 2013), on female imagery more generally in *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985; 2000), and on the tellers of and female figures in fairy tales in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (1994). Warner's latest book highlights her longstanding interest in art, especially by women artists; this book brings together her art criticism, published between the 1980s and 2017 in exhibition catalogs and magazine articles.

Four sections—"Playing in the Dark," "Bodies of Sense," "Spectral Technologies," and "Iconoclashes"—loosely frame Warner's art criticism. Each of the twenty-one short chapters focuses on a given artist from well-known historical figures, such as Hans Baldung Grien (1480-1545), to mid-career and established contemporary artists, including iconic Damien Hirst (1965-). Frans Masereel (1889-1972), Janine Antoni (1964-), Richard Wentworth (1947-), Kiki Smith (1954-), Zarina Bhimji (1963-), Tacita Dean (1965-), Joan Jonas (1936-), Sigmar Polke (1941-2020), Jumana Emil (1971-), Cristina Iglesias (1956-), and Julie Mehretu (1970-) are amongst the artists. Examining the structure, the section "Playing in the Dark" marries the idea of child's play with the darkness of nightmares. This subtheme most clearly comes together in Warner's chapter on Portuguese artist Paula Rego's (1935-) haunting prints of childhood memories and bedtime nursery stories. "Bodies of Sense" looks at body parts, limbs, fluids, and the senses.

Whereas French American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) gives space to the body's corporeality with her large-scale sculptures of plush mannequins with missing limbs, the chapter on British sculptor and installation artist Helen Chadwick (1953-1996) emphasizes external and internal body parts. Human hair, animal fur, animal intestines, and strong-smelling fluids come together in Chadwick's work to elicit the senses of taste, smell, touch, and sound. "Spectral Technologies" combines the spectral found in "dreams, visions and apparitions" with the technological in the form of moving images and digital media such as in the computer-generated environments of the British filmmaker duo known as AL and AL (active from the 2000s onwards) (139). *Iconoclash* is a term from Bruno Latour describing the tension between the love of images and iconoclastic tendencies found in the creative destruction and visual clashes that characterize much of contemporary art.

The chapters unevenly support the overarching theme of enchantment. The one-to-three-page introductions to each section leave little space to explain the pairing between historical and contemporary artists or to describe the groupings within their subthemes. The chapter on Henry Fuseli's (1741-1825) Shakespeare-inspired nightmarish scenes reside in "Playing in the Dark" even if the playful quality of his fairies, Bottom, and Puck—otherwise discussed by Nicole Brown's *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (2001)—goes unaddressed. Warner focuses on snippets of the artist's biography for an interpretation of misogyny and chauvinism to the detriment of bringing the playful qualities of the figures to light. Later, in the "Iconoclash" section, Warner meticulously examines Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516)'s sixteenth-century iconography. She makes a case for how the panels in *The Haywain* altarpiece present human pleasure across various walks of life into the afterlife as perverse. While "Hieronymus Bosch: Trumpery, or, The Followers of the Haywain" stands on its own, the jump between Bosch and

the next chapter on millionaire Damien Hirst hallowed symbolism is jarring, which would not be the case if there was more of a discussion about the continuities and discontinuities between the historical and the contemporary. Where iconoclashes describe any number of tendencies in contemporary art, it is hard to say why Hieronymus Bosch, Damien Hirst, and Felicity Powell are placed in the “Iconoclashes’ section and not such artists as Christian Thompson (1978-). An Australian artist who plays with identity stereotypes related to his sexual orientation and Indigenous Bidjara heritage, Thompson’s self-portrait photographs are stunning because of their visual clashes. In other words, the chapters are uneven in how they speak to the overarching theme of enchantment— perhaps because Warner did not initially write the chapters for the subthemes, which might explain why the occasional reference to enchanting sources such as specific fairy tales appears in passing.

The primary source of enchantment in the book is its writerly charm. Warner’s eclectic style of art criticism generates appealing moments that allude to her first-hand experience of the artworks and, in some cases, her encounters with the artists. Her approach typically includes snippets from the artist’s biography and personal memories of the paintings, prints, installations, video works, glasswork, and sculptures. Warner emphasizes the potency of Felicity Powell (1961-)’s reworking of the medal of dishonor in the multi-sided relief sculpture titled *Hot Air*—describing how “[t]he obverse shows a Medusa head with a serpent’s forked tongue, while on the reverse a powerful pair of buttocks rise out of the ocean and explodes in a blast of carbon emissions; round the rim she wound a tape measure embroidered with politician’s lies about climate change” (221). Warner’s skill in visual description occasionally extends to those she has met and interviewed. She writes of Paula Rego, “Her smile is like her work: it is exuberant and

infectious, open and warm, but mysterious, too, and sometimes unsettling. The dress, the brilliance, the lavishness goes with the art as well” (19).

Interspersed within her reflections of the artists and their works are references to literature (the Bible, Angela Carter, Shakespeare, the Grimms, Brontës), philosophy, history, and non-English language concepts (*unheimlich*, *maleficium*, *tempus*, *ingenium*, *diabolus*). The quick transitions between engaging with artists and artworks and the web of interconnected ideas are suited to the exhibition catalog. The graphic design, creative spacing, image-heavy qualities, and the liberty to work both within and outside of the expectations of academic writing are typical of this publication genre. To this end, Warner provides the sources for the chapters otherwise published in exhibition catalogs, art books, and art magazines (277-78). When small print runs can be hard to track down, holding the compilation of Warner’s art criticism in hand is a convenience for art lovers.

After an art exhibition, it is common enough to hear “I liked it” or “that was not for me” murmuring in the background. Primarily written for a general audience who goes to art exhibitions and collects exhibition catalogs and art books, *Forms of Enchantment* pushes the conversation towards the interesting. Written for those who enjoy looking at art and the world through a feminist lens, Warner’s essays point to details in the works themselves, the lives of the artists, and her bookshelves of philosophy, literature, and history. Rhizomatic in its threads and topic jumps, the energy of the individual chapters resonates with what the pub hour that follows a compelling exhibition’s vernissage sounds like. Amongst specialized readers, art historians may find it handy to have the texts compiled together for their research on the reception of individual artists, and fairy-tale scholars of diverse disciplines may have a lot to add to the discussion on how the selected artist practices are informed by enchantment.

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