ARISTOCRATIC DEMONS:

SATIRICAL APPROPRIATION AND THE GROTESQUE IN THE WORK OF GENIEVE FIGGIS

by

EMILY DORWARD

Bachelor of Arts, 2015
Rhodes College
Memphis, Tennessee

Submitted to the Faculty
Graduate Division
College of Fine Arts
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2020

ARISTOCRATIC DEMONS:

APPROPRIATION AND THE GROTESQUE IN THE WORK OF GENIEVE FIGGIS

Thesis Approved:

Major Professor, Dr. Frances Colpitt, Professor of Art History

---

Dr. Babette Bohn, Professor of Art History

Dr. Katherine Brodbeck, Curator of Contemporary Art, Dallas Museum of Art

---

Dr. Joseph Butler, Associate Dean, College of Fine Arts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Frances Colpitt for chairing my committee and advising me. Thank you for your boundless knowledge and thought-provoking questions. I am also grateful to Dr. Babette Bohn, for taking on a topic outside of her field and pushing me to be my best over the past two years, and to Dr. Katherine Brodbeck, for her time, advice, and expertise. I would also like to thank Genieve Figgis herself, without whom this thesis would not be possible, and Gwenvael Launay at the Almine Rech for answering my questions.

Thank you to my classmates, whose encouragement and occasional commiseration were invaluable to the completion of my coursework. In particular I would like to thank Jennifer Yuhas for being a constant calming presence and Jen Earthman for her sense of humor and reason in the face of distress. Thank you to Hannah Plank, whose vast technological knowledge and problem-solving saved me and the printers from many a breakdown.

I would like to express my gratitude to Meredith, for her encouragement as a friend, a writer, and a travel companion, helping me to get the most out of Dublin and myself. I would also like to thank my parents, for feeding me and my curiosity and supporting me without question. Thank you to Milton and Lucy for their constant comfort. And of course, to Will, who is both champion and critic, and has taught me far more about style than I ever anticipated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: THE SLIPPERY GROTESQUE & GENIEVE FIGGIS	4
CHAPTER II: COVERING THE CANON	18
CHAPTER III: BAD PAINTING AND THE VIEWER’S VOYEURISM	33
CONCLUSION	47
FIGURES	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	57
VITA	59
ABSTRACT	60

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Genieve Figgis, *Heracles and Omphale (after Francois Boucher*), 2017, acrylic on canvas

Figure 2. Genieve Figgis, *A Social Portrait*, 2014, acrylic on canvas.

Figure 3. Genieve Figgis, *The Swing after Fragonard*, 2014, acrylic on canvas.

Figure 4. Genieve Figgis, *"Venus" after Nicholas Poussin*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 5. Genieve Figgis, *Olympia*, 2015, acrylic on canvas.

Figure 6. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 51.4 x 74.8", Musée d'Orsay.

Figure 7. Paul Cézanne, *Olympia*, 1875-77, watercolor on paper, Stern Collection, New York City.

Figure 8. Genieve Figgis, *Olympia (after Édouard Manet)*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 31 × 39".

Figure 9. screencaps from the animated television show *Tom and Jerry*

Figure 10. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Les hazards heureux de l'secarpolette (The Swing*), 1767-68, oil on canvas, Wallace Collection.

Figure 11. Genieve Figgis, *The Happy Accidents of the Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2018, acrylic on canvas.

Figure 12. Genieve Figgis, *The Spectator*, 2019, acrylic on canvas.

Figure 13. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, *The Private Academy*, 1755, oil on panel, Frick Collection.

Introduction

Genieve Figgis (b. 1972) is a contemporary Irish painter whose body of work has been dedicated to reimagining historical artworks in a liquid, grotesque style. Just two years out of graduate school in Dublin, she was discovered on Instagram by Richard Prince, whose exposure of her work catapulted her to art world fame in 2014. She has since maintained a steady popularity, collaborating with fashion magazines and the Metropolitan Opera, and has been cited as a major inspiration for a recent Marc Jacobs collection. At first flush, she seems an odd darling of the art and fashion scenes, given that she is a middle-aged mother whose paintings are historicizing and backward-looking in their content and slapdash in their execution.

Her paintings are relatively small, rendered in acrylic, and are almost always figurative. She uses scenes from historical painting and adopts elements of the period pieces she plunders. Pools of swirling paint in vibrant colors abstractly indicate haunting landscapes and the melting faces of aristocrats from a bygone era. Her work suggests the macabre, populated by skeletal, ghostlike figures dissolving into their surroundings. Faces and any clear forms are obscured in Figgis's application of paint, and instead she emphasizes the fleeting grandeur of the interiors, estates, and wardrobes of the aristocratic and elite.

The singular combination of loose brushwork and historical content is what makes Figgis's grotesque adaptation of a rococo sensibility so compelling and so contemporary. She celebrates the materiality of paint and illustrious history of the medium while calling attention to the absurdity of society portraiture. Though her points of reference span several centuries, Figgis is best known for her adaptations of eighteenth-century works and

her emulation of a rococo style. The increasing commodification of our culture has a parallel in the eighteenth-century material of which Figgis is so fond. Despite her centuries-old reference points, there is a familiarity and freshness in her painting that I believe stems from the jarring juxtaposition of her subject matter and technique. In the critical response to her work, only one definitively negative review stands out, which I will address in chapter 3. I think there are two reasons for this overwhelmingly positive reception: the first is that her style implicates its audience by reflecting the viewpoint of her viewers; the second is that critics who dislike her work likely find it below reproach, obvious or infantile in its execution.

Past scholarship, of which there is little, has identified Figgis as a narrative painter whose work stems from her Irish Catholic upbringing. Her paintings are generally considered grotesque, but to date there has been little discussion of the implications of her distortion and monstrosity. Figgis's implementation of the grotesque is a largely unexplored topic. My analysis minimizes the narrative aspect of her painting, as I agree with her own assessment that while her work seems to be narrative, it is not created with any specific storytelling intention.[1] Indeed, the brunt of my research rests on the idea that her work is free from didactic and moralizing intent, and is contemporary in its reliance on the variability of audience interpretation.

My first chapter defines the grotesque, to the extent to which such a definition is possible. The implications of the grotesque genre of which Figgis's works are a part molds the meaning of her work. I will analyze and defend her reliance on satirical appropriation,

---

[1] Genieve Figgis, interview by Katy Hessel, *The Great Woman Artists Podcast*, February 11, 2020.

demonstrating that her copies are instances of artistic invention, which redefine the limits of originality. The final chapter will relate Genieve Figgis's work to the advent of "bad" painting in the 1970s and the deskilling of the artist. This argument will be bolstered by analysis of an original composition. This paper will conclude by paralleling the limitations and supposed shortcomings of her work to an art history structured on the assumption of gendered ability.

Throughout this paper I describe Figgis's painting style as a deliberate device. In particular, she consciously works against expectations of "high art" and historical oil painting in style and materials. Her use of acrylic paint, appropriation, and dismissal of figurative naturalism enhance the tropes and compositions she takes on as her own. Figgis's ability to pay homage to "masterworks" of the past while deconstructing the canon on which they are scaffolded is dependent on her grotesque painting style, and makes her painting both relevant and contemporary.

Chapter 1: The Slippery Grotesque & Genieve Figgis

A pink curtain cascades from above a rumpled bed where two naked figures embrace, their flesh melting and melding as they kiss, their forms leaking into one another. Their individual forms are barely contained, and their copulation is the undisputed content of the painting. Around them the room and its suggestions of material decadence swirl into broad swaths of paint, as if the entire scene was blurred by passion, and the figures' attention to each other has let the reality of their surroundings slip. Was it not for the painting's title, *Heracles and Omphale* (Figure 1), or its abridged compositional resemblance to Boucher's *Hercules and Omphale* (1732-34), the painting would hardly resemble an allegorical history painting. In Genieve Figgis's 2017 rendering, the scene's mythological symbols are either blurred or erased, and the composition is unmasked as one of pornographic pleasure, rather than moralizing history. Boucher's painting embraces the sinuous, sensuous forms, the saturated pastels, and erotic subject matter that typified much of French Rococo art. The theme of Boucher's painting, a man's strength undone by the licentiousness of a seductive woman, is erased in Figgis's work. Instead Figgis brushes aside the subject's thin moralizing content and unveils the voyeurism of this kind of history painting in her simplification of the scene. This kind of appropriative painting is typical of Figgis's work. Genieve Figgis's paintings are grotesque, simplified, and often secondhand, and are all the more meaningful for it.

Genieve Figgis's reputation as a grotesque artist is part of a complicated lineage that relies on academic ideals such as representation and mimetic practice. The meaning of the grotesque is multivalent. Despite Vasari's acknowledgement of the genre even at art history's advent, it remains notoriously hard to define. In Vasari, the grotesque originated

in the "grotto-esque" form of the Baths of Titus, emphasizing their decorative nature, made to "please the fancy and the eye rather than to instruct the soul."[2] Denoting definitively ornamental details such as foliage and animals, grotesquerie also came to encompass the hybrid, bizarre, and fantastical creatures accompanying these ornamentations. This was likely the first transformation of the word from the original "grotto-esque," and the beginnings of its associations with the monstrous and the unnatural.[3] From there, the definition of the grotesque expanded and became muddled, and is now defined in part by its very elusiveness, and is best recognized as an embodiment of contradiction.

Geoffrey Harpham, perhaps the foremost writer on the grotesque in modern art, has called the concept "the slipperiest of aesthetic categories."[4] Even so, Harpham attempts to delimit the category. In referring back to Wolfgang Kayser's seminal work on the grotesque, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, he describes the aesthetic as a structure of estrangement, in which the familiar becomes uncanny or even alien, or conversely the absurd takes on the guise of the familiar. The grotesque therefore relies on its audience's familiarity with a certain trope, symbol, or subject.[5] The best measure of this largely indefinable aesthetic lies not in the artist, but in its effect on its audience.[6] In this way, the grotesque category essentially defies the traditional biographical model of art history. Instead, the grotesque privileges the multivalent possibilities of prioritizing art's reception over its creation, favoring audience over artist as the root of a work's meaning. Rejecting

---

[2] Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 18.
[3] Ibid., 24.
[4] Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 4 (1976): 461.
[5] Ibid. Harpham explains this in reference to Le Lorrain Albright's *Temptations*, which depicts the torment of Saint Anthony in which Saint Anthony is absent.
[6] Ibid., 462

authorship and artistic intent and embracing multiplicity of interpretation provides a groundwork for an understanding of Genieve Figgis's grotesque, appropriative art. In short, the grotesque embodies contradiction, where order has collapsed,[7] and its art "subverts not only aesthetic categories, but human virtue, dignity, and pretense."[8] The subject of grotesque art is often the uglier side of humanity, painted in a humorous or monstrous light. In the original use of the word, the grotesque was the product of the artist's unruly imagination. And while Genieve Figgis's works are rife with fantasy, it is their combination of grounding in familiar tropes and their emphasis on the stark reality of human crudeness and decay that makes her work so compelling.

As the meaning of the grotesque shifted over the centuries, so did its regard. During different eras the grotesque has been considered bad or blasphemous, and at other times prescient or pleasing. The shifting tides of the grotesque's reception often correspond to the era's attitude toward representative veracity. Vasari suggested that the fantastical nature of the grotesque reflected artistic innovation. Though Vasari praised the grotesque for going beyond reality, Vitruvius denounced the grotesque as overly decorative and representative of worldly impossibilities.[9] Vitruvius saw the grotesque as an almost blasphemous undermining of nature: "irrational, in bad taste, and immoral."[10] The fact that Vitruvius considered the grotesque an intentional negation of classicism is the root of his criticism. However, it is the grotesque's disavowal of classical values that gives it a unique

[7] Harpham, "The Grotesque," 466.
[8] Ibid., 467
[9] Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 31.
[10] Ibid., 30.

ability to undermine the traditional expectations of art. The genre is far more flexible than the rigidity of classicism, in part because of its reliance upon variable audience reception.

Despite the slippery nature of the term itself, there is general agreement that the works of certain artists are unquestionably grotesque. Kayser singles out Bruegel and Bosch as exemplars that helped to mold its modern-day definition, shifting the grotesque from the ornamental to the demonic.[11] Francis Bacon and James Ensor are also cited repeatedly in reference to the grotesque, often providing a visual foundation for the tricky explanation of the category, and an illustration of the idea that the grotesque is easy to recognize but difficult to explain.

The grotesque was criticized for its lack of classical restraint, its irregularity, and also its paganism. It was called frivolous, decorative, and devoid of a higher (i.e., religious) meaning.[12] The lack of harmony and frequent extravagance were seen as immoral, and thus ungodly. While the grotesque's anti-classicism and immorality were used by some to devalue it, the disordered paganism of the grotesque is the root of its unique power in art. Because it is not beholden to convention, the grotesque is potentially capable of creating an art that reveals or reinterprets the truth. The revelation and transmission of superior knowledge has long been purported as the aim of high art.[13] Despite the fact that this understanding of the artist is centuries old, it is echoed in the discussion of genius that

---

[11] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 34.
[12] Ibid., 118-19.
[13] This idea stems from Vasari. See Patricia Lee Rubin and Maurice Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 411. "For Vasari, artists were a channel for divinity. The artist, with his skill and 'learned hand,' could bring minds to contemplate the idea behind reality, the higher truth"

dominates popular understanding of artists even today. In upending traditional values, the grotesque paradoxically acquires the ability to achieve traditional artistic aims.

Because the grotesque does not adhere to classical ideals, religious or political propriety, or even attempt to represent the beautiful, it can reveal the ironies in that which is typically revered or above reproach. The grotesque can dismantle prevailing cultural values and institutions, and through its artistic realization, disassemble the traditional ideas of art itself as the representative, moralizing product of a skilled hand. The comic and satirical ability of the grotesque takes it outside of the strictures of academic art even while implementing the structure of academic art to reveal its flawed foundations. Satirical and grotesque art depend on existing ideals and thus reinforce the long-standing status of genius, truth, and narrative as the foundation of artistic understanding and criticism. In disavowing the lofty ideals of high art, the grotesque achieves them, becoming a means of reaching and revealing an art that conveys truth.

Genieve Figgis has been the subject of a lot of press but little serious scholarship. The press pieces are usually short, and in general agreement describing her work as "ghoulish,"[14] somewhat familiar, but filled with dark humor.[15] Her work is said to present a sort of "unreality" and the "otherworldly,"[16] which are typical of the grotesque's inclination to remove viewers from their known world, or to make our world alien. Her work has been

---

[14] "Biography of Genieve Figgis." Widewalls, accessed Dec. 2019, https://www.widewalls.ch/artist/genieve-figgis/.;
Dominique Mucols, "Genieve Figgis," Flaunt Magazine, January 11, 2016, https://www.flaunt.com/content/art/genieve-figgis.
[15] "Biography of Genieve Figgis," Widewalls.
[16] Eric Troncy, "Genieve Figgis: Wish you were here," trans. by Noëllie Roussel, *GalleriesNow*, January 2018, https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/genieve-figgis-wish-you-were-here/.

compared to that of Ensor[17] and Goya,[18] two unequivocally grotesque artists, and has been described explicitly as grotesque in numerous articles.[19] The criticism and publicity of her work have almost unanimously declared her a grotesque painter. Her brushwork, layered paint, dripping, distorted bodies of a ghostly aristocracy, and the dissolving Georgian country-house landscapes are the most cited aspects of her work, and are indeed the combination of factors that contribute to her achievement of the grotesque.

Both the style and the content of Figgis's work contribute to something both profound and funny and epitomize the possibilities of the contemporary grotesque. The grotesque has been identified with "chimerical fantastical creatures,"[20] and while the Figgis's grotesquerie goes far beyond the literal depiction of monsters it remains always illusory and chimerical in theme. Most reviewers describe her distinctive painting style as an indivisible from her grotesque content. Critics have said her "forms dissolve amongst each other,"[21] that her figures appear through a "melted macabre filter,"[22] her "fluidic paint makes the scenes appear melted," her paintings "ooze" and her blurred paint ensures her "characters are eerie, often unrecognizable."[23] In the first monographic publication on the artist, *Making Love with the Devil*, David Rimanelli describes her paintings as duplicitous.[24]

[17] Mucols, "Genieve Figgis."
[18] Roberta Smith, "Genieve Figgis: Good Morning, Midnight," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014.
[19] These include *The Cut*, Juztapoz Magazine, Phillips, *The Irish Times*, Harper's Books, The Sunday Times, Art News, Vice, and Huffington Post.
[20] Barasch, 82.
[21] Eric Troncy, "Genieve Figgis," Le Consortium, Consortium Museum, June 2018, https://www.leconsortium.fr/en/en/lalmanach-18-genieve-figgis.
[22] Mucols, "Genieve Figgis."
[23] "Biography of Genieve Figgis," Widewalls.
[24] David Rimanelli, "Wonderful Party, Darling" in *Making Love with the Devil: Paintings by Genieve Figgis* (New York: Fulton Ryder, 2014), 3.

Her melting figures, illusory landscapes, and lurid palette combine to create an eerily amorphous narrative which obscures any clear narrative. The paintings are humorous, seemingly optimistic, and yet they contain an undercurrent of dissonance and estrangement. The "liquidity"[25] of her paintings makes her uncannily familiar subject matter ominous, distant, and grotesque. Figgis's paintings lack narrative and require viewers to use their own memories and imaginings to augment her ambiguous compositions. The lack of definitive narrative, setting, identity, and even mood has the effect of displacing easy interpretation. This ambiguity undercuts conventional ideas of authorship and contributes to her grotesque sensibility.

Figgis's tendency to melt her characters into one another, strip them of defining features, blur their identities, and abstractly embellish their dress, decoration, and surrounding landscapes becomes especially macabre in combination with the familiarity of her characters. She plunders art history for reference, sometimes lifting entire compositions without qualm. Under her brush, these well-known, oft-considered "masterpieces" become blurred ghostlike recreations of familiar paintings. Her editing of the compositions from which she steals introduces the possibility of reference without deference. Her oeuvre includes direct copies of some paintings and original compositions that are based on the Georgian manors and mountain landscape of her Dublin upbringing as well as cinematic period dramas. This range of references gives her work an air of the familiar, an element that is absolutely fundamental to the contemporary character of her grotesqueries.

---

[25] Ibid.

For example, her 2014 painting, *A Social Portrait* (Figure 2), recalls the court paintings of Goya or Velazquez, or perhaps Sir Joshua Reynolds, but it has no specific precedent. However, she obfuscates the figures' faces, preventing their identification, and refuting the painting's classification as portraiture. Instead, clothing, expression, and interaction are emphasized, suggesting a narrative of upper-class social drama that cannot quite be defined. Even though, in this instance, she is not directly quoting a particular painting, the conventions of court painting are evident. The composition, wardrobe, and arrangement of figures are reminiscent of group portraits of a royal family. This colors our reception of the painting, which is then undercut by our inability to identify any of the figures, their setting, or their relation to one another.

The confluence of grotesque liquidity and recognizable referents elevates her work into the realm of high art. Even though works such as *A Social Portrait* ape the dress, composition, and grandeur of royal portraiture, the work denies typical value indicators of academic painting, such as precise technique, originality, medium, and narrative clarity. Her work's grotesquerie deconstructs any notion of set meaning. Figgis's painting style is by no means an embrace of abstraction over figuration in the manner of modern painting. In the past, movements like action painting and color field painting have forgone the figure entirely, seeking to attain meaning through materiality and form. Figgis, however, holds on to traditional content even while her painting style dismisses academic rigidity.

Her rejection of traditional painting techniques —such as illusionism, figure/ground relationships, and three-dimensional modeling— may not seem radical half a century post-Pollock. And while after modernism, painting cannot be radical, Figgis's work exposes the gaps between representation and abstraction, and in utilizing both points out their

similarities. She uses abstraction and representation in conjunction with the contemporary concept of appropriation. In doing so, she puts aside any concern for originality, and instead embraces, in a painterly hand, Rosalind Krauss's query "What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy?"[26] Krauss, however, takes Sherrie Levine and her photographic reproductions as exemplars of this postmodern idea. Levine's work is made without intent of altering the original, and thus comments on the modern idea of male authorship. In her appropriation, Levine makes a space for herself as a woman in an overly masculine field. Figgis likewise embraces the copy and titles her works in the tradition of Levine (see for example, *The Swing after Fragonard*). However, her distinct hand alters her compositions, changing or enhancing their meaning, so that she achieves something new even as appropriation suggests that originality and authorship are irrelevant measures of value in contemporary art.

Figgis falls into a category of painters populated by the likes of Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik that is critically termed "faux naïf."[27] She has also been associated with the advent of "bad painting," so named in the 1970s by curator Marcia Tucker.[28] Like those of her predecessors, Figgis's paintings reveal her seemingly unskilled style as an artistic choice since elements of her work reveal a wealth of artistic knowledge and delicacy of touch. To paint in this way is to upend and undermine Western values of naturalism, realism, and mimesis as the basis for good painting. While these ideas are hardly

[26] Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986): 168.
[27] "Biography of Genieve Figgis," Widewalls.
[28] Marcia Tucker, *"Bad" Painting* (New York: The New Museum, 1978).

contemporary, they did color criticism of the works she emulates, and are therefore foregrounded in the contemporary reception of her work.

Figgis is well known for her appropriation of other artists' compositions, and it is seeing a familiar work in Figgis's wayward hand that catches the attention of most viewers. Her best-known painting is a 2014 reworking of Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767, Figure 3). Fragonard is a frequent subject of Figgis's thievery, perhaps because his overwrought, sexualized paintings are perfect fodder for her grotesque style.[29] Figgis's work is enhanced by her appropriated subjects, and it is these quotations that make her work exceptionally grotesque, and undermines Western art's emphasis on originality and innovation.

While *mimesis*, the naturalistic representation of observable reality, was a key element in assessing technical skill, exceptional art went beyond representation to *invenzione*. Vasari set down this idea at art history's advent. A true artist, a "genius," could improve upon the natural world in his work. In fact, this is the basis of Vasari's praise of the grotesque: its ability to go beyond naturalism. However, Figgis's frequent reliance upon preexisting canonical paintings flies in the face of *invenzione,* even as her grotesque style denies the academic importance of representation. Figgis's work seems to say that originality is overrated, and any good work of art has the ability to continuously create new meaning. Again, Figgis aligns with Krauss's suggestion that appropriation grants us a perspective from which, "we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication."[30] Her choice to replicate well-known historical paintings in her

[29] A selection of these paintings after Fragonard include two renditions of *The Swing*, *The Pursuit*, *Confession of Love*, and *The Lover Crowned*
[30] Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 170.

own hand, sometimes more than once, is a postmodern embrace of replication that eschews originality, while maintaining authorial invention.

Figgis's use of appropriation is especially intriguing as a female artist. The works she copies are invariably painted by men (albeit often male artists whose styles were identified as feminine in their time). She paints nudes, coy Fragonard love scenes, mythological stories, and has even taken on Manet's *Olympia*. Women artists were largely limited to portraiture and still lifes in the eras from which she appropriates. As a gender they were considered incapable of artistic invention and thus limited to genres that allegedly required only imitation.[31] Her appropriative paintings keep her within the realm of replication while simultaneously taking on suggestive compositions that would have been anomalous or inappropriate for her gender.

Despite the academic reverence for oil painting, Figgis works almost exclusively in acrylic. Oil paint has been more highly regarded than acrylic or watercolor paint for a number of reasons. Its longevity and integrity as a material, reflected in its long drying time, is typically considered an advantage. The medium's malleability is especially helpful when working on large-scale paintings, which lends it a certain grandeur. However, oil painting also requires space and ventilation. As a result, women in centuries past were often limited in the scale or medium of the works they produced. They could rarely have studios of their own and the media they used had to be suitable for them to pursue in the domestic sphere.

---

[31] Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi, "'La femminil pazienza': Women Painters and Natural History in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 69, 2008, 160.

In part, Figgis's practice could be considered a result of these same restrictions. Like generations of women artists before her, Figgis created works of a scale and medium that were suited to her studio. Though she has since created work on a larger scale, as illustrated in her most recent museum exhibition, *Desire: A Revision* at the IMMA, her most recent paintings remain acrylic on canvas. Her style is largely dependent upon the ease with which her medium can be manipulated. It is a medium that allows her to create a layered, marbled, melting effect in her figures and landscapes. She has said that acrylic is her medium of choice because it has an unpredictability that suits her practice, whereas oil paint allows for a more controlled style of painting.[32] Thus her choice and use of medium plays a large part in the creation of her grotesque style. Her practice in acrylic also serves to undermine the notion of artistic genius, by embracing some loss of artistic control Its associations as a "lesser" medium, especially in comparison to oil paint, veil her work in another layer of meaning, reiterating her copycat status and creating a comparison between the oil paintings that she appropriates. These meanings expand the potential of her paintings to destabilize the material value system of Western art history while bringing gendered values to the fore. This revitalizes canonical paintings for a contemporary audience, and highlights the historical value system which they perpetuate.

The tombstone labels next to her work often include her name, her medium (acrylic on canvas), and the title of the work and artist from which the composition is pulled. One such example from her most recent show (Figure 4):

Genieve Figgis
"Venus" after Nicholas Poussin, 2019

Acrylic on canvas

[32] Figgis, by Katy Hessel, *The Great Woman Artists Podcast*.

Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech

The label serves to equalize her name, Poussin's, and her material. This has the effect of bringing Poussin's artwork into reconsideration, while simultaneously raising her own name above his and introducing herself into the company of the canon. Her medium serves the purpose of affecting subject matter, in this case the classical goddess of beauty rendered as a molting fleshy mass in plastic-based paint, and thus revealing the grandeur of oil painting as a relic of art history.

Thus her identity as a woman, her style of painting, and her medium are part of an irreverent attitude from which the grotesque stems. Her choice of subject and appropriation are key components of her realization of the grotesque. Just as her quotation of famous artists challenges our regard for both her and them, so her subject matter itself serves the dual purpose of heightening her work by association with "masterpieces" and prompting a reconsideration of the work she adopts. Figgis's tendency to reinterpret paintings of nude women painted by and for men is a subversion of the intentions of the works she appropriates. In painting these compositions she enacts an "oppositional gaze"[33] that allows for the deconstruction of the male gaze, reforming voyeurism, rather than the nude as the subject of her paintings.

Each of these elements of Figgis's painting — technique, originality, medium, and subject matter — contribute to a body of work that is fundamentally grotesque. Her irreverence in all of these areas makes her work exceptionally humorous, and thus well positioned as satirical critique. Her paintings allow for a critical reexamination of an art

[33] This concept has its origins in bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 307-320.

history consisting of large, original oil paintings by male artists. Figgis would have been traditionally excluded from this lineage, but in her critique, she manages to place herself amongst an exclusive canon. Her handmade appropriations expand the copies of Levine and Prince in a way that emphasizes the modern idea of technique in addition to originality. Genieve Figgis has used the conventions of Western art to deconstruct it from within, relying on the grotesque as a means of creating work that is meaningful in its protest and celebration of the European artistic past.

Chapter 2: Covering the Canon

Appropriation is a key element of Genieve Figgis's practice. In Craig Owen's "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," the allegorical is tied to appropriation: "Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. . . .He does not restore an original meaning. . .rather, he adds another meaning to the image."[34] Figgis's grotesque reinterpretations of famous works of art layer new meaning upon her altered compositions. The recognition of her compositions, in combination with her style is a means of manipulating meaning in the "masterpieces" she confiscates. It is the instant familiarity of her most famous works that has sparked much of her early media attention. Her use of past compositions has garnered both praise and criticism, and while it defines much of her artistic persona, little has been written on the significance of her parody and alteration of canonical images. The fact that Figgis was discovered by Richard Prince has perhaps helped solidify her as an appropriative artist, but I feel their connection has deflected an examination of some of the more interesting elements of her quotations. Figgis calls her copies "covers," a term used in popular music to indicate a remake of an original song by someone else in the artist's own style. This term underscores the idea that she is bringing something original to someone else's composition. Her appropriation is not reproduction, and therefore is more appropriately termed parody or satire. Unlike Prince's infamous Marlboro Man adaptations of the 1980s, Figgis's approach is far from rote. But like Prince, her copying is a kind of curation. In her

---

[34] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980): 69.

case it is configured in a touch and a style that, in combination with her compositional edits, creates an independent work of art in both idea and technique.

I would like to begin with a more thorough examination of Genieve Figgis's distinctive style of painting by discussing two of her most oft-cited works: *The Swing after Fragonard* (2014, Figure 3) and *Olympia* (2015, Figure 4). She returned to these paintings again in 2018, making a second version of each. Both works are archetypes of her appropriative strategy. Given that their source material is immediately recognizable, these paintings are especially clear examples of the way Figgis uses paint to blur, distort, and disfigure masterworks of the past. Fragonard and Manet are emblematic of the kind of painters she prefers to mimic. Fragonard's coy, sexualized, rococo scenes border on the illicit and are almost garish in their bright coloration and their material decadence. Figgis translates these elements into the language of this millennium in her "covers," reviving their meaning for a contemporary audience.

Manet, whose painting style bridged Realism and Impressionism, painted intimate scenes in a way that is, unlike Fragonard, pared back. While it may seem as if Fragonard and Manet are at stylistic odds, both make sense as inspirations for Genieve Figgis's work. Her flair for embellishment, vivid coloring, and humorous sexuality all find their mirror in Fragonard. Likewise, Manet's simplicity, the frankness of his images, and his irreverent, satirical references to art of the past also figure strongly in Figgis's *modus operandi*. Like Manet, she strips her figures back, sometimes to the bone, and simplifies social scenes quoted from past art to starkly reveal the more animalistic truth of human interaction. In looking at these paintings in comparison to their source material, the content and stylistic elements Figgis privileges become clear.

Manet's *Olympia* (1863, Figure 6), the repeated subject of Figgis' own work, needs no introduction; her unwavering gaze and blatant sexuality were notorious from the painting's first public presentation. Because of this painting, Édouard Manet's work has been lauded by history as the origin of modernism. His composition echoes his acclaimed predecessors, and in particular recalls the reclining nude of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538). The brushwork is relatively informal and the background holds only the suggestion of a folding screen and dark wall, which are rendered in large brushstrokes. Figgis's compositions echo this simplicity of form, and like Manet's bring focus to the flesh of their figures. Contemporary critics attacked the flatness of Manet's figure and his indelicate brushwork.[35] Manet's masterwork was poorly received at the time for its straightforward sexuality. Olympia is famously described as naked rather than nude. Her shoes and jewelry emphasize her nakedness, which, alongside the title, insinuate that she is a prostitute.

The cat at the foot of the bed and the servant who proffers the bouquet of flowers both allude to Olympia's profession. However, it is not only the subject matter that caused a stir when this painting was first shown in 1865. The very style with which Manet painted *Olympia* was a way of critiquing the history of art. His brushwork revealed his hand and the process of his painting eschewed the carefully concealed brushwork and illusionistic naturalism that dominated centuries of Western art. Manet made no attempt to hide his brushwork, just as he did not strive to shield viewers from Olympia's reality as a sex worker. His combination of style and subject matter communicated an irreverence for academic art. Figgis's work functions in a similar way, by taking traditions and compositions from centuries-old canonical artwork and rendering them in an imperfect

[35] Eunice Lipton, "Manet: A Radicalized Female Imagery," *Artforum* 7 (March, 1975): 48.

style that flies in the face of tradition and good taste, a strategy that is enacted especially well in her "covers" of *Olympia*.

In one of the few favorable contemporaneous critiques of *Olympia*, Émile Zola talks about the coloration and tonality of Manet's paintings, saying that its bold contrast is rendered in "simple masses and large areas of light," giving the composition as a whole "a somewhat rude and austere appearance."[36] These statements could just as easily be applied today to Figgis's work, and her own reinterpretation of Manet. She uses a bold but often limited palette, painting and pouring broad swathes of color to make up the majority of her composition, giving limited attention to the middleground by collapsing the space between her foregrounded figures and their flattened landscape. But it is not just the technical innovation of Manet's and Figgis's work masquerading as a lack of skill that unites the two painters. Both Manet and Figgis frame their paintings by pickpocketing the artistic past in a way that expands the meaning of their works and reinvigorates their source material. Figgis's critical appropriation of Manet demonstrates that his painting's attempt to reveal the nature of historical art placed him within the very lineage he was critiquing. Her painting reveals that the canon absorbed his work in the acceptance of modernism.

In his book on *Olympia*, Theodore Reff takes the view that the most penetrating commentary on Manet's masterwork is visual.[37] It is the appropriation and reinterpretation of *Olympia* that has done the most to elucidate the original's meaning and cultural significance. For example. Cézanne made multiple works based on Manet's *Olympia* and notably introduced a male visitor into his compositions (1875-77, Figure 7). His figure is

---

[36] Theodore Reff, *Manet: Olympia*, (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 22.
[37] Ibid., 29-30.

shadowy and loosely defined, but his presence alters our understanding of the original. The implication of a male viewer is so strong in Manet's work that Cézanne felt adding his physical presence still constituted an obvious homage.[38] While this evinces the importance of the gaze, it perhaps subsumes the viewer's role as the male spectator whose presence Manet implies. Like Cézanne, Figgis's tribute to *Olympia* foregrounds the spectator and our gaze as viewers, but she does so without making any fundamental alterations to the composition.

Manet's source material largely eluded his contemporary critics, but became clear in posterity, in part through the painting's frequent copies.[39] As Reff rightly points out, in even mockingly relating himself to artistic predecessors such as Titian, Goya, and Velázquez, Manet attempts to insert himself into their ranks.[40] That *Olympia* is considered seminal to modernism is evidence that he succeeded in that regard. Manet went beyond Titian in incorporating a contemporary (to him) subject in a flat and decorative style. Likewise, Figgis's ornate rendering of the same subject enhances its ornamentality and furthers its frank sexuality and dismissal of illusionism. In joining the cadre of artists who have taken *Olympia* as their own, Figgis attempts to follow Manet's example in comically copying the canon to place herself within it. Like Manet's sly emulation of Titian, Figgis's appropriation of Manet gives new meaning to the piece she copies, and places it within a contemporary context.

Genieve Figgis's interpretation of *Olympia* is one of her better-known paintings. She has actually painted two versions. The first dates to 2015 (Figure 5). In this version she

[38] Ibid., 32.
[39] Ibid., 29.
[40] Ibid., 48.

takes the controversial and demeaned elements of Manet's painting to the extreme. She further flattens his surfaces to the extent that foreground and background exist almost on the same plane. The cat that serves as an indicator of *Olympia*'s sexuality is even more animalistic in Figgis's painting, but also is a secondary symbol in the way its body fades into the background. Zola particularly praised Manet's handling of *Olympia*'s bedding, but Figgis flattens the delicate drapery and brands it with her distinctive painterliness. The paint of her bed swirls as if it was poured and the marbled edges where it melds with the background give the suggestion of undulating movement that heightens the provocativeness of the scene. Her figure is melting into the bed, melding her to it. To gaze at her is to understand that the bed helps to define her occupation, and pins her there for posterity. The background rejects any visual relief and reinforces the directness of both Figgis's composition and the original.

Perhaps the element for which *Olympia* is most infamous is her gaze. Her stare meets the spectator's, giving the painting a naturalism that belies romanticism and reveals *Olympia* as a prostitute rather than a goddess or a muse. Her gaze implies the spectator, and thus implicates him (for in the Salon's showing would have been a primarily male audience) in her depravity. The gaze is overtly, even grotesquely, emphasized in Figgis's 2015 iteration. Olympia's eyes are swirls of paint that take up much of her face. A defining characteristic, these unsettling saucer-like eyes largely conceal her features. There is only a suggestion of a nose, but unlike Manet's version, here Olympia is grinning. Her mouth is a toothy smiling slash that makes her gaze read like a leer, which like Manet's, freezes the spectator, and incriminates him in the scene. Her eyes are like holes, and all the more arresting for it. In addition to their unnerving rendering, it is the repetition of the eye's

shape throughout the painting that grounds her gaze as the viewer's recurring focal point. For example, the maidservant's eyes are two black holes that appear to simultaneously look out of the painting and at Olympia. This reinforces the presence of our own unabashed gaze. Thus our gaze ricochets between Olympia, ourselves, and the maidservant, heightening our awareness of our voyeurism.

Olympia's eyes are repeated in the way Figgis has emphasized her nipples. This reinforces the fact that the gaze is sexualized. Figgis in many ways simplifies Manet's composition, ridding the narrative of extraneous details while maintaining a painterliness that keeps the scene's scandalous decadence intact even as it embodies the straightforward spirit of the original. The shape of the eye is also repeated in the flowers and in the bed covering. This repetition of shape is thus a suggestion that the spectator's gaze populates, and even makes up, the form of the painting. The gaze is echoed in her very setting, the bed, and as the maid's offering to Olympia, replacing the form of the flowers. In her appropriation of Manet's image Figgis paints the scene in a grotesque way that allows a contemporary audience to experience the competing pull of fascination and repulsion that defined *Olympia*'s original reception. Furthermore, she maximizes the role of the spectator and the gaze, which enhances and modernizes the content of the composition.

Figgis's painting style denies finish and artistic originality, points which I will discuss in depth in Chapter 3. This democratizes her work, privileging the audience over the artist and emphasizing the viewer's role in assigning meaning. While this devalues authorship, it enhances the role of voyeurism, calling attention to the role of the gaze in her own work, but also in the paintings she chooses to appropriate. Her unconventional style coupled with the facticity of her painting scenes of female nudes intended for a male

audience as a woman upends our expectation of author and audience. Figgis's repetition of eye-like shapes and the thematic emphasis on voyeurism underscores our role as viewers, implicated in the continued and canonized sexualization of the female nude, as the content of the work.

The spectator and the gaze are especially prevalent in Figgis's work. Her adoption of Manet's painting is particularly well suited to her artistic attitude and painting style. Her 2018 version (Figure 8), while markedly different, privileges similar elements. For example, the eyes of Olympia are again the obvious focal point. This time they are not swirling pools of brown, but more traditionally rendered with an iris floating in the white of an eye. They are totally round and the irises are differing sizes. The result is a haunting, disturbing, and unwavering gaze. The nose is again perfunctory, while the toothy mouth remains, this time in a grimace, her yellowed teeth in permanent lockjaw. The set of the eyes and the mouth appear paralyzed, and have the effect of arresting the viewer in return. The eyes of the maidservant are again an integral part of the painting. This time her gaze is far less ambiguous, her eyes literally popping out of her head towards Olympia. Her eyes are also slightly more naturalistic than in the previous painting. But unlike Olympia, her eyes are not white circles, but yellowed ovals containing two small teal irises. The ovoid shape of the maidservant's eyes helps define the direction of her gaze, which in combination with their yellowed color calls to mind a trope in animation in which a character's eyes will pop out of his head, often to indicate surprise, overwhelming attraction, or both (see for example Figure 9). The maidservant's eyes are a stand-in for the spectator, who would be alarmed and enticed by the forwardness of Olympia's nudity.

The yellow in the maidservant's eyes, in contrast to the white of Olympia's gaze suggests that the spectator's gaze is less pure, and gives it a dirty overtone. Likewise, Olympia's yellowed teeth eliminate the possibility of any romantic idealization by giving her grin an ominous, contrived cast and suggesting any transaction between her and the spectator is one of lust, not of love. Again, Figgis finds new ways to represent Manet's original composition that heighten his implicit criticisms of both his spectators and of art past. That she furthers Manet's flattened style and makes no attempt to hide brushwork brings the original sensibility of *Olympia* into the modern age. Figgis's style prioritizes the visibility of the artist's hand and thus gives her a kind of ownership over the material even as she simultaneously keeps her quotation obvious.

In her 2018 *Olympia* (Figure 8) the eye form is repeated again, with the entirety of the bouquet resembling a large, unblinking eye. But for the most part this composition is defined by a new repetition of shapes that goes even further to emphasize the artist's touch and reinforce the theme of physical contact. The maidservant's disfigured three-fingered hand disrupts her offering of flowers, suggesting that the flowers come with an expectation of erotic touch, and thus allude to Olympia's role as a prostitute. The cat at the foot of the bed has faded into a suggestion, with only three protruding legs clearly visible against the black background, an echo of the servant's outstretched hand. The crass allusion of the cat in Manet's painting is perpetuated here. The cat reiterates the shape of the hand and brings sexual specificity to the expectation of touch. Just as in Figgis's 2015 painting, when the repetition of eye-like shapes was found even in the sheets supporting Olympia and defining her role, so now we see the claw-like hand repeated in Figgis's depiction of the tassel hanging from the throw beneath Olympia. In fact, Figgis has manipulated the shape of the

bedding to suggest an animal skin, where the tasseled edge looks almost like a claw. In doing so she finds a new way of enhancing the animality,[41] which pervades Manet's work without making any significant compositional changes. Figgis' changes emphasize aspects of Manet's painting that show Olympia as his critics saw her, thus restoring her original shock value for a contemporary audience. Her ability to make these suggestions suggests her so-called "bad" painting style is a farce, and that in truth she is masterful manipulator of paint.

Like her appropriation of Manet's paintings, Figgis's affair with Fragonard's work and the Rococo period as a whole is rooted in subject matter and painting style that are exceptionally well suited to her sensibility. The over the top nature of the Rococo is part of the reason Figgis uses references the genre so regularly. Oftentimes her use of a limited and unrealistic palette connects her figures to their opulent surroundings, while their decaying visages enhance the suggestion that their finery is more like frippery; a façade that masks their base animality and their inherent mortality. In Figgis's scenes the masks of civility are slipping and human baseness is revealed.

Figgis's best-known work is also an appropriated composition: *The Swing after Fragonard.* Like *Olympia*, Figgis has created two renditions of *The Swing*. Fragonard's scene is, on the face of it, almost achingly bucolic. It appears carefree and fantastical, strewn with roses and lit by a dappled, intimate light. And yet, upon closer examination and with knowledge of the painting's commission, the composition reveals a sexualized and perhaps sinister side. Like *Olympia*, Fragonard's painting is about desire, but its tone is far more playful and perhaps more in keeping with Figgis's artistic attitude. The scene reads like a

---

[41] Ibid., 35.

fantasy, and indeed it is the artistic realization of a sexualized fantasy. The story behind the painting is well known: the painting was commissioned by Baron de Saint-Julien who asked for a composition in which his mistress was swinging above him so that he would have a privileged upskirt view. Fragonard's painting imbues the scene with a playful sexuality. This work is a coy balance of naturalism and fantasy that makes for a decorative composition whose content is simply pleasure. These elements make it a "masterwork" of the Rococo and a sort of testament to decadent aristocratic frivolity at the end of its era.

Fragonard uses stylistic and symbolic elements to achieve a sexualized and idealized fantasy for his client. The swing, as well as the presence of two men, suggests a playful fickleness and the inconstancy of women.[42] Similarly, the shoe flying off the woman's foot is a continuation of a trope common in the eighteenth century, which symbolized a woman's sexual availability.[43] The barking dog in the grass is not a reference to the animal's frequent symbolism as a sign of fidelity, but a sexual symbol of the time that appears famously in another Fragonard work, *Girl with a Dog* (1770). The putto that oversees the scene, eye-level with the woman's lost shoe, has a finger to his lips to indicate the scene's secrecy. And, despite being outdoors, the clearing is shaded in a way that gives it the dimension and privacy of an interior room but also lends it the theatricality of a stage, with the mistress spotlighted from above, performing for her lover. Her flying shoe, juxtaposed against the putto's expression of discretion, summarizes the depicted relationship, of a mistress and an aristocrat.

---

[42] Donald Posner, "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard," *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 1 (1982): 76.
[43] Ibid., 82.

Fragonard is preoccupied with eroticism, the trappings of upper-class society, bucolic romance, theatrics, and voyeurism. *The Swing* (Figure 10) is from a period in Fragonard's career during which he was painting for a small, educated circle, often erotic scenes or compositions that referenced the art historical past. Figgis's own painting practice is defined by these same traits and in her quotation of Fragonard she achieves both. Fragonard's landscapes often appear as a mise-en-scène, which Figgis emulates in her own work, curving compositions so that the viewer feels the room or landscape as an enclosure, lending her compositions a privacy and voyeurism that go hand in hand.

In her rendition of *The Swing After Fragonard* Figgis whittles the scene down to its core elements: the mistress, the two men, and her flying shoe. The only other included detail is the pair of putti beneath the woman, whose forms appear ghostlike and ominous. If not for their obvious referent in the original, the two would hardly be reminiscent of a romanticized cupids. The rest of the scene is reduced to its swirling shadowy landscape, exaggerating Fragonard's own sense of drama and enclosure. Furthermore, her brushwork expands on Fragonard's famed loose touch, which has been linked to his eroticism. In doing so, Figgis untethers the scene from naturalism, fully embracing its dreamlike fantasy, which the figures' ungainly features edge towards nightmarish. The swing's ropes, which Fragonard so carefully renders, vanish into gossamer brushstrokes under Figgis's direction. The mistress is held aloft seemingly by the gaze of the two male voyeurs, placing her on a pedestal among the clouds on the basis of base desire. Figgis's handling of paint and strategic editing of Fragonard's composition heighten the lewd romanticism of the 1796 painting and temper the scene's rococo decadence with the dark undertones of aristocratic frivolity.

Figgis's return to the painting in *The Happy Accidents of the Swing (after Fragonard)* (2018, Figure 11) is almost identical in its stylistic and compositional decisions, with the only major difference being the rendering of the mistress and her dress. Her dress almost disappears into the background. It is utterly sheer, which suggests two things: that the dress is just a stand-in for what lies beneath it, the true focus of the composition and the reason for the original commission, and it makes the mistress appear as a mirage. She is unreachable, unattainable, and will remain a wishful figment of her suitor's (and the viewer's (voyeur's)) admiration. The dress itself is rendered with a delicate, almost marbled effect that stands alone as beautiful paintwork. The woman's face rises out of the top of the dress, and whereas her previous rendition of *The Swing* made the woman out as pink, overly fleshly, and perhaps overripe, here she is skeletal. Her features appear as those of a skull atop a thin column of vertebrae. The scene therefore takes on an even more ominous tone, and the fleeting pleasure of Fragonard is distilled by Figgis into a fading dream, dissolving into a *memento mori*. Her painting style thus amplifies the most famed elements of Fragonard: touch of the artist, decorative compositions, and overtones of indulgent sexuality.

In addition to the more obvious reasons for Figgis's affinity with Fragonard, such as eroticized content, dreamlike compositions, and a frivolously well-dressed upper class, her painterly style is also reminiscent of his. During his career, Fragonard was noted for his sketchy, loose rendering, particularly of his figures. Mary Sheriff places the eighteenth century interest in the sketch as the domain of the aristocratic connoisseur, a fact that

neatly echoes the subject and audience of Fragonard's work.[44] Diderot identified the sketch as an intimation of the moment of artistic invention, whose viewing compelled the audience to complete the artist's touches with his own imagining.[45] In a detailed examination of Fragonard's *The Bathers*, Sheriff describes the variance in brushwork as intentionally erotic. She claims that Fragonard's brushstrokes use a revealing looseness that solicits the viewer's voyeurism: "it is only through his beholding that forms are completed and realized…adding his own vicarious touches. Thus he imagines stroking the bathers in two ways, as the artist who lays pigment on the canvas and as the lover projected on the fictive world of the painting."[46] This specific description, and Sheriff's explanation of looser brushwork as a means of isolating different parts of a more easily understood whole, could be transposed onto an analysis of Figgis's own peculiar and distinctive painting style. Fragonard's decadent touch is pushed to the extreme in Figgis's swirling pools of paint that emphasize the sensuous pleasure of looking. The sketch-like execution of Fragonard's most erotic paintings was well-suited to their small scale for intimate and sensuous viewing. Figgis's work often implements these same conventions: small scale and a pleasing lack of finish combined with erotic content to stimulate the audience's prolonged sensuous savoring of the painting.

Fragonard and Figgis are celebrants of the voyeurism that they practice in their painting. Figgis's style is integral to her proclivity for appropriative parody. Extended analysis of these two most famous instances of her use of appropriation reveals her ability

[44] Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 142.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 151.

to translate the original work and its contemporaneous reception, through her stylistic delicacies and *negligence*,[47] into the modern age, recreating their effect for a contemporary audience. Her emphasis on touch and her refusal to mask any brushwork serve as a means of transforming appropriation into artistic invention. In doing so, Genieve Figgis both gives canonical paintings contemporary relevance while demonstrating an unequivocal irreverence for the academic values of art history.

---

[47] Ibid.

Chapter 3: Bad Painting and the Viewer's Voyeurism

The concept of "bad" painting predates Genieve Figgis's work by several decades. Marcia Tucker's 1978 show *"Bad" Painting* at the New Museum defined the concept as a purposeful stylistic decision that prompts the reevaluation of values in painting. The press release reads almost like a checklist of Figgis's conventions: "characterized by deformation of the figure, a mixture of art-historical and non-art resources, and fantastic and irreverent content. In its disregard for accurate representation and its rejection of conventional attitudes about art and its commitment to beauty, "bad" painting is at once funny and moving, and often scandalous in its scorn for the standards of good taste."[48] Though her style is visually distinct from the fourteen artists in this seminal exhibition, Figgis's willful crudeness belies an artistic sophistication that has the potential to shift our understanding of art history's past, and reinvigorate painting in the contemporary age.

Tucker identifies figuration as a key part of bad painting: "It is figurative work that defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classic canons of good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation."[49] Figgis's distorted figures defy classical ideals. However, her sense of coloration and brushwork is eye-catching, and taken alone, detail images of her work translate as interesting, pleasing textural abstraction. But the fact that Figgis brings this sensibility to figurative work pulls her oeuvre into the realm of the grotesque. One of the participants in Tucker's 1978 show, James Albertson explains that it may be more correct to qualify this art as bad in its moral indifference, or even perversity, rather than in its

---

[48] Marcia Tucker, *"Bad" Painting* (New York: The New Museum, 1978).
[49] Tucker, *"Bad" Painting*.

rendering.[50] And indeed, the idea that art may not be truthful or moralizing is perhaps the most damning quality of Figgis and her cadre of "bad" artistic companions. As Tucker made clear in the press release and catalogue of her exhibition, bad painting is not defined by a lack of technical skill, but by a willful disregard for accurate representation can be both "scandalous" and "moving."[51]

Tucker identifies Manet as a precursor to this painting style in his use, specifically in *Olympia*, of a flat, painterly, and non-illusionistic picture plane. This creates a confused composition which privileges neither illusion nor realism. The same can be said for Figgis, whose work is unquestionably representational, but whose brushwork appears to care little for the details of realistic depiction. The entirety of bad painting is a counterargument to the notion that art is progressing.[52] Bad painting does not represent a regression, but a rejection of modernist progress. These painters posit that art simply changes, rather than evolves, thereby signaling the end of modernism's evolution. Art's transformation is a combination of past influence, current taste, and prevailing value systems. In denying good taste as a marker of value, bad painting broadens the opportunities for multivalent, non-moralizing works of art. In doing so they refute the supposed death of painting by demonstrating that the medium is ripe for reinvention and reevaluation.

"Bad" painting differs from the concept of deskilling, but both concepts are relevant in evaluating Figgis's work. "Bad" painting is the dismissal of academic painterly technique, but deskilling has its origins in the readymade. In much of contemporary art, whether it be readymade or mass-produced, the hand of the artist is absent. This artistic movement away

[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

from individual technical skill is not one that denies the individual capabilities of the artist. Rather, it shifts the concern with skill and innovation from the technical to the conceptual. In some ways, Figgis is part of this legacy despite her indisputable concern with painterly touch.

However, in viewing her paintings through the lens of deskilling introduced by John Roberts in *The Intangibilities of Form*, we understand that the meaning of Figgis's appropriations lies in her conceptual reworking of them. Her conceptual practice is dependent on the hand, something Roberts posits as present even in the conceptual practice of the readymade, which is "lodged at every turn within the problem of painterly figuration."[53] Although it may not be quite what Roberts intends, Figgis epitomizes his description of the reintroduction of skill in contemporary art as "the craft of copying without copying."[54] This definition has its parallel in Vasari's emphasis on mimetic skill combined with imaginative *invenzione*. Figgis's rejection of canonical values thus bears relevance to both Vasari's and Roberts's understanding of artistic valuation. Her work is emblematic of the ways in which art's valuation of individual innovation and genius have remained intact even as the form of "good" art and painting have changed dramatically.

Two more recent examples of artists who reject the connoisseur's standards of finish and paint handling are Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton. Both in content and style, these two artists bear far more resemblance to Genieve Figgis than their 1978 predecessors, though they mark a continuation of "bad" painting's attitude. Like Figgis, Kilimnik and Peyton do not use oil paint and are prone to appropriation, painting snippets

---

[53] John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, (New York: Verso, 2007), 58.
[54] Ibid., 98.

stolen from art history or snatched from the pages of a fashion magazine. These two paint recognizable figures, often celebrities such as Kate Moss and Paris Hilton on small canvases in a slapdash manner that suggests an impromptu sketch. In doing so they pull these celebrities into a nouveau-aristocratic circle comprised of the rich, beautiful, and famous. Kilimnik and Peyton practice what we would call faux-naïf painting. Their work is society portraiture for the contemporary age.

The intimacy of style and scale typical of both artists is at odds with their depiction of public personalities. Their paintings appear quickly rendered and give the illusion of being sketched casually from life. Both artists are evidently able to create likeness even with the simplest brushwork, which suggests a representational skill that they've rejected in favor of informality. This informality frames their paintings as sketches, constructing an implicit closeness to their celebrity subjects through their casual brushwork, suggesting they are often brushing shoulders with the famous.

Their work lays claim to a social circle they may or may not occupy as a way of crafting their artistic persona. By intermixing images of celebrity, her boyfriends, and the royal family, Peyton has blurred the line between appropriation and acquaintance. We are deceived into perceiving a closeness between her and her subjects even where none exists. Likewise, Figgis seeks to inject herself into an exclusive group of which she is not a part: the Western canon of art history. A description of Kilimnik's work as postmodern applies equally to that of Peyton and Figgis: "All the signs and strategies are there: the concerted mix of culture high and low, the myriad mediums and allusive styles of depiction, the

appropriation and fragmentation of images, the fugitive sense of history and identity."[55] Like Figgis, their work serves to broaden rather than define possible meaning.[56]

The irreverence of a sloppy painting style in combination with symbolic trappings of wealth, fame, and status enhance the style's rebuttal of traditional artistic values. In the work of Kilimnik, Peyton, and Figgis, things considered beautiful or in good taste are rendered in a way that defies good taste. These painters embrace figuration and more traditional subject matter while simultaneously rejecting illusionism. In tying bad painting to symbols of wealth and good taste, these three women dent the façade of art history's formerly static value system. In doing so, they harness the rebellious innovative spirit that has defined art history's narrative of forward progress trailblazed by individual genius. The supposedly bad painting of Figgis, therefore, is a means of earning a place in the artistic canon by rejecting its rules. While these rules have changed post-Pollock, the categorization of canonical paintings past has not. These values may no longer serve as indicators of good art in this century, but they are integral in the work and style Figgis, Kilimnik, and Peyton appropriate. Skill, representational compositions, and moralizing content are relevant in their contemporary work. In doing so, they point out that the ideas of technical skill, originality, and authorship still pervade contemporary scholarship.

Figgis's style and substance go hand in hand. Her casual paint handling, distortion, and exaggeration call into question the veneration of the paintings she quotes. That her quotations stem solely from the work of men demonstrates the twofold gender disparity of

---

[55] Ingrid Schaffner, *Karen Kilimnik* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007), 38-41.
[56] Scott Rothkopf, "Wordly Wise" in *Karen Kilimnik* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007), 130.

art history. On the one hand, it illustrates the dearth of "great" female artists. On the other hand, it shows that female bodies have helped to define "high art," but that have had little agency in its creation. The canon holds women as perpetual objects, a truth Figgis overturns in her satirical authorship of paintings past. The quotation that colors Figgis's oeuvre is elevated from copying to critical parody through her application of paint. Likewise, without the aspects of the familiar, her style becomes irrelevant, and potentially empty of content. Despite her irreverent attitude, Figgis's work depends upon two historical elements: the art historical canon and the importance of touch. While classicism sought realism that hid its own brushwork, the biographical model of connoisseurship has since favored the idea of artists having a distinctive touch, which is often linked to genius.. In that case, the visibility of brushwork in painting functions as a kind of overbearing signature, defining the artist's style and promoting a model of connoisseurship and genius.[57]

There is also a secondary role for the visibility of brushwork. Namely, that looser renderings allow for audience involvement and interpretation that resists the moralizing elements of more tightly rendered classical and neoclassical work. In the previous chapter I touched on Mary Sheriff's analysis of Fragonard's more erotic work, in which she places the role of the sketch as a celebration of connoisseurship that involves the audience's imagination. Both of these elements are at work in Figgis, and both seek to shift the onus of a work's meaning from artist to audience. Figgis's style necessitates the viewers' reliance on their own visual memory. Rimanelli also credits the audience's imagination as the

---

[57] Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3, 7.

source of Genieve Figgis's narratives.[58] Her paintings implicate their audience, just as *Olympia*'s gaze implicated her viewers in her sexualization. That Figgis's grotesque style is reliant upon her viewers is another way of reinforcing her constant thematic voyeurism. Her rendering of female nudes with oppositional gazes is a way of emphasizing her shifting of gender dynamics in reinterpreting female nudes that were intended for the male gaze.

Figgis's touch is essential to her painting's content, and she is thus dependent upon traditional artistic values associated with genius, even as her appropriative tendencies underscore her indifference toward that value system. The importance of the artist's hand has privileged the artist as a meaning-maker, but Figgis's use of touch denies that. Like Fragonard, her style tends towards the sketch. The dearth of descriptive detail is compensated by the viewer, and shifts the power of interpretation away from the artist. This reliance upon viewer imagination, as Harpham has shown, is a fundamental aspect of the grotesque.[59] Therefore, the "duplicitousness"[60] of her work, and its implication of her audience, stems from her painterly touch.

The only truly derogatory review of Figgis names her a "decorator" and a participant in "like art."[61] This critic, Rob Colvin, says that this kind of art is void of aspiration, and "offers no insight into anything at all."[62] While I argue that Figgis's blatant appropriation of past masterworks is a contemporizing homage, Colvin says that she, and the artists of her ilk, infantilize past art. However, at the end of the article, Colvin concedes that his students

---

[58] Rimanelli, "Wonderful Party, Darling" in *Making Love with the Devil*, 3
[59] Harpham, 461.
[60] Rimanelli, "Wonderful Party, Darling", 2.
[61] Rob Colvin, "Everybody Likes 'Like Art,'" Hyperallergic, March 1, 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/361596/everybody-likes-like-art/.
[62] Ibid.

have defended Figgis "for having a vision beyond her application style."[63] I think this dismissal of her work is a continuation of a value system that fails to understand that her vision and technique are inseparable. Her work is not careless, and her selection and configuration of compositional remnants in paintings like *The Swing* and *Olympia* demonstrate an artistic sophistication.

A recent instance of an original composition that employs the same technical elements as her appropriative paintings is *The Spectator* (Figure 12). *The Spectator* is a boudoir scene, which, like many of her original paintings, has the air of the familiar but cannot quite be placed. The closest image I have found is Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's *The Private Academy* (1755, Figure 13) in which a reclining nude woman lies on a couch before a fireplace in the company of a single, fully clothed man. In Saint-Aubin's painting the man sits before the woman, sketching her, pen poised above paper. He is in shadow and thus vaguely rendered. The man stands as a kind of everyman, free to gaze upon the nude woman before him in the name of art. The artist in the painting echoes the composition's audience, free to gawk at the nude woman before them and imagine themselves as the artist, studying her body and through the movement of the pen and the eye, stroking her *in absentia*. This recalls Mary Sheriff's assertion of the sketch's erotic appeal, its imprecision prompts the imagination, imploring the viewer to fill in the details in his mind's eye.[64]

Figgis's *Olympia*s and *The Spectator* utilize repetition as a way of building symbolism and meaning in a deceptively simplified composition. In *The Spectator*, above the mantle is a painting of an eye. While this is a blatant reference to our own gaze and

[63] Ibid.
[64] Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, 142.

draws attention to the way the viewer looks at this painting in particular and the nude in general, it is also the shape that is used as a repeated motif. The shape of the eye is echoed directly beneath it in the nude woman's genitals. Again, in staring at her most private parts, our gaze is met, rebuffed, and implicated in the painting's sexualized meaning. The room curves towards us, inviting us in and creating a claustrophobic sense of space that itself echoes the shape of the eye. The suggestion of the rug beneath her chaise is yet another instance of the eye-symbol consuming the nude at the center. On the right, and behind the woman is the painting's namesake (unless, of course, it is us, the ultimate spectator). The man gazes fully clothed at the nude before him. He is framed by the window and drapes behind him, enveloped in a vaginal form that deepens that blatant innuendo of the painting. Similarly, his legs are bent and parted, and in the negative space we see between them is another instance of the same shape that seems at once to symbolize both the female sex and the eye of the male gaze. The ceiling is lined with a row of dots spotlighting the scene with a 360-degree repetition of the gaze. This obsession with the gaze is in part a holdover from Figgis's religious upbringing, in which her sense of Catholicism was one of always being watched.[65] The sense of voyeurism is all-encompassing, and in the middle of the composition is a lit fireplace. The fireplace was a trope utilized in the eighteenth century to symbolize female sexuality and nymphomania,[66] and is the overwhelming symbol in this painting and Saint-Aubin's counterpart.

Figgis's use of eighteenth-century erotic painting and her clever interpretation of Manet's *Olympia* make clear that she is careful in her composition and symbolism, skills

[65] Figgis, by Hessel, *The Great Woman Artists Podcast*.
[66] Mary D Sheriff, *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 133

that are belied by her seemingly arbitrary application of paint. The empty frames lining the wall of *The Spectator* also allude to the practice of the sketch; unfinished and unfilled, they are a literal prompt for the viewer to fill in the blanks. This painting's compositional and symbolic similarity to *Olympia* demonstrates how accomplished Figgis's adoption of tropes is and her ability to upend them.

The nude figure faces away from the male spectator, but it is difficult to assume she is unaware of his presence. She faces out at us, the audience, posturing in a way that, like *Olympia*, implies she is aware of our presence and the way we are looking at her. Like *Olympia* she meets our gaze, demonstrating a sort of exchange. The man in the background is reminiscent of Cézanne's introduction of a male suitor into his version of *Olympia*. I earlier posited that this compositional inclusion was demonstrative of the blatancy of male presence in the original, but also might be a way for Cézanne to buffer the confrontation of *Olympia*'s gaze by introducing a fictional counterpart to the viewer. Figgis's spectator does not act as a buffer. The man's stance is passive, and his gaze makes no pretensions of visiting the woman or sketching her. He simply stands and looks. Figgis's figure heightens our awareness of ourselves as voyeurs rather than abates it. The nude figure adopts the forthright knowing attitude of *Olympia* and holds the power in the painting, even though the man is standing and fully clothed. She is centered, unashamed, and foregrounded. He is sheepish, frozen as if caught hiding behind the curtain, and his hands dissolve into the background. Her hands, however, are marked by specks of red polish that accentuate her agency. In emphasizing her hands, Figgis suggests her ability to act. Her pose therefore appears purposeful, not prop-like as in *The Private Academy*. Her mouth, another indicator of agency, is likewise emphasized in red. The man's mouth is nonexistent. Figgis's

conflation of sexuality and agency reclaims power for the reclining female nude and makes us as viewers aware of our own role as voyeurs. In her own role as painter, she displaces the traditional agency of male artist/viewer in her reinterpretation of sexualized historical nudes. Figgis restructures the power system within this type of erotic painting, granting agency to herself as (female) painter and to the nude female model. Her painting places the gaze of the male artist and his audience under the microscope, making their voyeurism the subject of the painting, rather than the available recumbent female nude.

Figgis's work displays an understanding and respect for the tropes and conventions of academic painting, but at no point does she defer to those dated ideals. Most of the elements of Figgis's work seem out of touch with the art world's advancements over the past two centuries. She paints perhaps not having heard the medium is dead. She is a figurative painter attached to scenes from the 17th, 18th, and 19th century, and she often steals these scenes. She is not even what most would consider a good painter. And yet, in spite of all of these things, or perhaps because of them, her art is relevant today. She has revitalized all of these dated ideas into a body of work that feels current and demonstrates that her denial of representational skill is really a way of creating new meaning. That she denies both traditional classicism and the advent of abstraction as guiding forces forward in art rebuts the idea of art as evolutionary or driven by singular artists. Kosuth said that, in terms of posterity, it is only important what artists bring to art, not the things they maintain.[67] For Figgis, it is both. The compositional elements she chooses to maintain in her appropriations are just as telling as her shedding of technical skill. Her art and its meaning

---

[67] Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, Part I," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (Oct. 1969): 136.

relies upon maintaining elements of art of the past while denying their most fundamental values. These values include skill, naturalism, genius, moralization, and above all, the idea of progress. Figgis's work is exceptional in her ability to pay homage to certain masterworks while demonstrating an irreverence for the value system that canonized them.

Figgis's practice thus questions the tenets of high art and reveals them as dependent upon arbitrary notions of taste that frequently omitted women painters. Figgis's work and its characteristics can be understood through the lens of the past's gendered limitations. She adopts these limitations as her own in a way that brings attention to the flawed value system of Western art. Art has traditionally been valued for scale, style, invention, accurate representation, medium, use of the nude, moralizing content, and artistic originality. This created a value system that often excluded women who did not have access to a studio outside the domestic sphere or were prohibited from studying the nude within the Academy. Indeed, Figgis did not attend art school or begin painting until she was in her 30s and had already started a family. This gave her access to a studio that allowed her to be "completely involved" in her work.[68]

In some ways, Figgis adapted to and absorbed these limitations as her own. In scale, her paintings are relatively modest, she paints in acrylic not oil, and the tropes and works she appropriates are sourced primarily from portraiture or genre scenes and do not reference history painting. Her transgressive use of the nude and adoption of the grotesque create a particularly potent parody of the paintings she appropriates. Her proclivity for

---

[68] Figgis, by Katy Hessel, *The Great Woman Artists Podcast*.

domestic and social scenes speaks to a gendered tradition and her own decade of experience as a full-time inhabitant of the domestic sphere.

Figgis's rejection of perfect technique privileges the medium over her intent. She is interested in the visibility of process, and indeed her process is displayed rather than disguised in her paintings. Her poured backgrounds are evidenced by the paint drips on the canvas' edge, and her method of paint manipulation is always apparent in her finished work. Her revelation of process has a twofold effect that mirrors the spirit of her work as a whole. First, her demonstration of process creates a leveling effect in her art. In revealing within the work how it was made, she suggests her style is simply a process, and not a result of a secretive or indefinable genius. Secondly, the clarity of her process gives the impression, not so much that the work is unfinished, but that it is in progress, being poured and molded before our eyes. This effect further enhances the role of the viewer and lends Figgis's work a freshness that balances the familiarity and decadence of her subjects. Furthermore, the flowing, swirling distortion of shape in her poured paint echoes her understanding of history itself: "History is fabricated in a way, and bent in a direction of whoever is writing the history."[69] In this case Figgis is writing (or rewriting) history but she makes her distortions obvious and points to the ways in which history and art history have been bent to suit dated cultural values.

Figgis's works depict the trappings of high society and material wealth as emblems of frivolity. Her preoccupation with decoration, interiors, and costume derive from her adoption of the rococo sensibility. However, her depiction of these elements strips them of their social status. The juxtaposition of the melting faces, skeletal bodies, and ghost-like

[69]Ibid.

flesh of her figures appears as a stark contrast to their lavish surroundings and decadent dress. In this contrast she lays bare the debauchery that dominates these supposedly civil societal scenes. The result is a body of work with a playful palette and a humorous reinvention of art history that, to some, could pass for being simple decoration itself. But as trifling as her paintings may pretend to be, they are rife with sophisticated social and cultural criticism that belies their frivolity.

Conclusion

Genieve Figgis is part of a long lineage of grotesque artists. She carries the genre into the contemporary age, bringing with her the rococo compositions and commitment to paint as a medium. I believe her grotesque style is fundamental to the meaning and gravity of her work. Furthermore, her paintings' classification as grotesque is dependent upon the push and pull of the familiarity of her subjects and the dissonance of her style. This makes appropriation of "masterworks" a key element of the meaning and ingenuity of Figgis's paintings.

In Figgis's work appropriation is an innovation. Her alterations of the scenes she steals and the tropes she adopts shift or reframe the meaning of the art she appropriates. In her thievery Figgis manages to emulate the gendered restrictions of art of the past. She gives herself permission to paint scenes from history paintings and erotic works by using the guise of mimesis, the only kind of painting of which eighteenth-century women were considered capable.

In the same vein, Figgis's work denies the intention of the artist as the source of meaning in art. Her work is consistently focused on the fundamental role of voyeurism in making and viewing art. In a way, this theme privileges the role of the spectator over that of the artist. Again, her lack of stylistic finish is essential in upending traditional values of art that have privileged a select company of mostly male artists. The narrative instability of her work stems from her sketch-like approach. And it is the looseness of her brushwork that emphasizes her works sensuality, linking the nudes of high art to base human inclinations.

The content of her painting, particularly her commitment to the appropriation of male prototypes, keeps her in the realm of limited opportunities allowed to women

painters. Her practice does not use oil paint or large canvases, meaning that she does not need an elaborate studio. Her practice deferring to medium and leaving process visible also parallels the classification of traditionally “feminine” media such as watercolor, pastel, and pencil, which would only be used by masters in preparatory work. While Figgis’s paintings emphasize the domestic sphere and female fashion, they also relate deeper subjects like *memento mori* and questions of representation, granting due gravitas to a traditionally female domain. Genieve Figgis is contemporary in her combination of tradition, denial of artistic technique, and embrace of appropriation, all of which combine in her melting compositions to elucidate a point of view that reveals and opposes the male gaze in the paintings she quotes, and redefines the female nude as a symbol of agency.

Figure 1. Genieve Figgis, *Heracles and Omphale*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 2. Genieve Figgis, *A Social Portrait*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 3. Genieve Figgis, *The Swing after Fragonard*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 4. Genieve Figgis, *“Venus” after Nicholas Poussin*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 5. Genieve Figgis, *Olympia*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 6. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 51.4 x 74.8", Musée d'Orsay.

Figure 7. Paul Cézanne, *Olympia*, 1875-77, watercolor on paper, Stern Collection, New York City.

Figure 8. Genieve Figgis, *Olympia (after Édouard Manet)*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 9. Screencaps from the animated television show *Tom and Jerry*

Figure 10. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Les hasards heureux de l'escarpolette (The Swing)*, 1767-68, oil on canvas, 32 x 25". Wallace Collection.

Figure 11. Genieve Figgis, *The Happy Accidents of the Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

Figure 12. Genieve Figgis, *The Spectator*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, © the artist and Almine Rech.

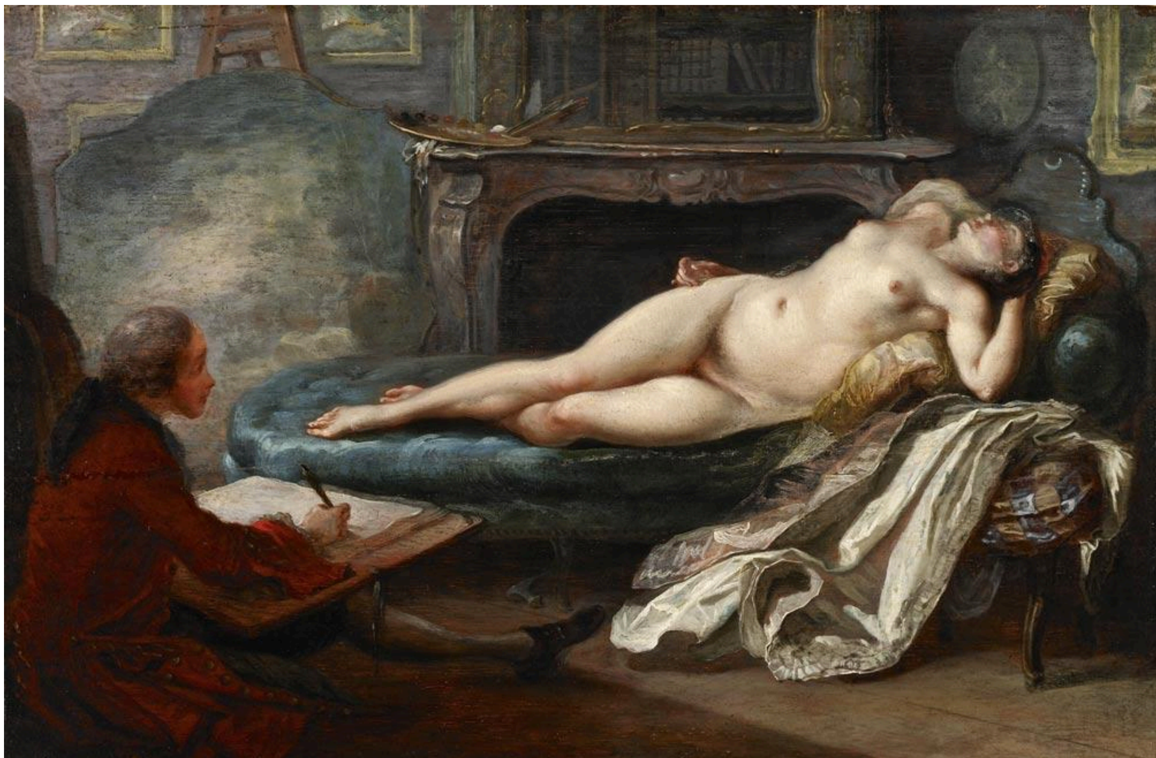

Figure 13. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, *The Private Academy*, 1755, oil on panel, Frick Collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barasch, Frances K. *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

"Biography of Genieve Figgis." Widewalls. Accessed Dec. 2019. https://www.widewalls.ch/artist/genieve-figgis/.

Colvin, Rob. "Everybody Likes 'Like Art'". Hyperallergic, March 1, 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/361596/everybody-likes-like-art/.

Figgis, Genieve. *The Great Woman Artists Podcast*. By Katy Hessel. February 11, 2020.

Gingeras, Alison. *Genieve Figgis*. New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2017.

Harpham, Geoffrey. "The Grotesque: First Principles." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 4 (1976): 461-68.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." In *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, 307-320. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Translated by Ulrich Weisstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

Kosuth, Joseph. "Art after Philosophy, Part I." *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (Oct. 1969): 134-37.

Krauss, Rosalind E. "The Originality of the Avant-Garde." In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.

Lajer-Burcharth, Ewa. *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Lipton, Eunice. "Manet: A Radicalized Female Imagery." *Artforum* 7 (March, 1975): 48-53.

Mucols, Dominique. "Genieve Figgis." Flaunt Magazine. January 11, 2016. https://www.flaunt.com/content/art/genieve-figgis.

Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86.

Posner, Donald. "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard." *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 1 (1982): 75-88.

Reff, Theodore. *Manet: Olympia*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.

Rimanelli, David. "Wonderful Party, Darling." In *Making Love with the Devil: Paintings by Genieve Figgis.* New York: Fulton Ryder, 2014.

Roberts, John. *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*. New York: Verso, 2007.

Rothkopf, Scott and Meredith Martin. *Period Eye: Karen Kilimnik's Fancy Pictures*. London: Serpentine Gallery, 2007.

Rubin, Particia Lee and Maurice Rubin. *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Schaffner, Ingrid. *Karen Kilimnik*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007.

Sheriff, Mary D. *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

_____. *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Smith, Roberta. "Genieve Figgis: Good Morning, Midnight." *The New York Times*. October 23, 2014.

Tongiorgi Tomasi, Lucia. "'La femminil pazienza': Women Painters and Natural History in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries." *Studies in the History of Art*, 69 (2008): 158-185.

Troncy, Eric. "Genieve Figgis: Wish you were here." Translated by Noëllie Roussel. *GalleriesNow*. January 2018. https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/genieve-figgis-wish-you-were-here/.

_____. "Genieve Figgis." Le Consortium. Consortium Museum. June 2018. https://www.leconsortium.fr/en/en/lalmanach-18-genieve-figgis.

Tucker, Marcia. *"Bad" Painting.* New York: The New Museum, 1978.

VITA

Personal Background	Emily Gail Dorward Born in Dallas, Texas Daughter of Brenda and Don Dorward
Education	Diploma, Parish Episcopal School, 2011 Dallas, TX
	Bachelor of Arts, Art History Rhodes College, 2015
	Master of Arts, Art History Texas Christian University, 2020
Fellowships and Awards	Tuition Stipend Award Texas Christian University, 2018-2020
	Mary Jane and Robert Sunkel Art History Endowment Research Award Texas Christian University, 2019, 2020
	William Bruce Prize Rhodes College, 2015
	Kepple Prize Rhodes College, 2012
	National Merit Scholar, 2011
Professional Experience	Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant Texas Christian University, 2019-2020
	Curatorial Intern Dallas Museum of Art, Summer 2019
	Visual Resource Library Assistant Texas Christian University, 2018

ABSTRACT

Genieve Figgis famously references canonical paintings in much of her work. But while she gestures towards the familiar, the melting faces of her figures incite feelings of the grotesque, displacing the viewer's sense of recognition, and prompting an engaged gaze which begins to dismantle the value system that canonized the works she copies. I begin this paper by placing Figgis as an inheritor of the grotesque tradition.

The grotesquerie that defines Figgis's paintings is reliant upon her appropriation and the recognizability of the works she selects as subjects. Figgis paints in a way that appropriates artistic convention while simultaneously upsetting it. Her referential pieces pull from history while refuting the value systems of academic art. I focus specifically on versions of Fragonard's *The Swing* and Manet's *Olympia* in formulating an understanding of her appropriative tendencies. Examination of these paintings foregrounds the role of the gaze in Figgis's work.

Her paintings of women pulled from a canonical tradition populated by male artists constitutes an oppositional gaze that grants agency to her subjects and spotlights the inherent voyeurism of artist and audience. Her style of painting, which echoes the provisional painting style of faux naïf painting and the "bad" painting of the 1970s, is integral to the subject and substance of her work. Her rejection of technical precision is a relinquishing of artistic control that upends gendered ideas of genius and artistic prowess. Instead, Figgis's painting style demands interpretation on the part of her audience.

Though her reference points are centuries-old, Figgis is contemporary in her combination of tradition, denial of practiced technique, and embrace of appropriation. Her contemporary relevance stems from a point of view that opposes and reveals the male gaze in the paintings she quotes and redefines the female nude as a symbol of agency in art.