

Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art

Edited by Gail Levin
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Reviewed by Aliza Edelman

With the recent output of anthologies and books challenging historical definitions of the modern woman in the twentieth century, Gail Levin's *Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art* claims a strong place and purpose. A monographic study accompanying an exhibition, Levin's approach to Bernstein's long career and life (1890–2002) proposes difficult questions on why and how some women artists from this early generation of American modernists are neglected from canonical records and art markets—including Marguerite Thompson Zorach (1887–1968) or Peggy Bacon (1895–1987), for example—in contrast to the enduring renown and success of such contemporaries as Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) or Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), Bernstein's student. Levin sets out to redress many of the distorted representations, dates, and relationships in Bernstein's career, to uncover the artist's earlier writings, and to throw light on the complex issues of women's representation in this nation's incipient gallery systems. Clarifying that Bernstein was neither a student of Robert Henri nor a member of the Ashcan School, a long-held misconception, further underscores the extent to which an artist's critical trajectory is framed by the significance of her position or affiliation, at times understood as both a privilege and an anomaly. In so doing, Levin repositions Bernstein as a female artist in the context of the struggles of the development of modernism, not just American Realism, and as an artist married to another painter and printmaker, William Meyerowitz (1887–1981). Highlighting the challenges experienced by artist couples to establish careers and identify collectors and patrons—particularly interesting in a marriage as supportive as theirs—the Baltimore Museum of Art, in 1930, held simultaneous individual exhibitions on Bernstein and Meyerowitz. Levin's ardent examination guides this



Fig. 1. Theresa Bernstein, *Lilies of the Field* (1915), 35" x 55". Endicott College Collection, Walter J. Manninen Trust.

book beyond yet another reclamation project, however, offering comprehensive insights on topical issues of gender, womanhood, Jewishness, and longstanding critical success in American art.

Theresa Bernstein: A Century in Art is the culmination of many years of archival research, and includes thematic essays, documentary photographs, large color reproductions, exhaustive chronology and exhibition history. Levin undoubtedly brings personal reflections to the artist's biography, wryly noting that Bernstein had in fact "counted on my writing about her work" (11). Bernstein's engaging life was often cited for its steadfast presence and intimate recollections in lieu of her considerable accomplishments. Born in Cracow and raised in Philadelphia, Bernstein's Jewish roots and then Zionist inclinations play indelible roles in her varied painterly narratives and urban interests, from music and opera, to immigration laws, parades, and the burgeoning suffrage movement. The compressed spaces of *Suffrage Meeting* (1914) and *Suffrage Parade* (1915) mark her presence on the political stage, as a witness to famous activist campaigns for the right to vote. Sarah Archino's essay on World War I distinguishes the artist's "human scale"

portrayal of the patriotic citizen caught up in the daily progression of reports and demonstrations—evidenced in Bernstein's *Reading the War News* (1915) or *National Holiday* (1917)—set against George Bellows's political bent, for example, or the broad spectacle of Childe Hassam's flags (113–14).

Bernstein's formative studies at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, now the Moore College of Art, and lectures at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts inevitably led her to New York City, where she studied briefly in 1911 with William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League before renting her own studio space at the Holbein Studio. Soon thereafter, she attended the trendsetting 1913 Armory Show. In her early adherence to figuration over abstract tendencies, Bernstein sets on a path parallel to her many contemporary urban Realists on the New York scene—primarily those associated with "the Eight" or the Ashcan School, including Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, and Everett Shinn, as well as other early modernists such as Edward Hopper and her close friend, Stuart Davis. Yet many of Bernstein's female colleagues, Levin exhorts, remain

unrecognized if not lost today, relegated to shows and venues organized by women's associations, leagues or clubs. Then again, most emerging American modernists were concerned with limited exhibition opportunities—including Bernstein's Dadaist contemporaries, shown in the inaugural 1917 Society of Independent Artists. Archino offers how the trappings of juried and annual shows, prizes and memberships became raw material for artist parodies and satirical periodicals such as *The Blind Man* or *The Paint Rag*, and notes earlier connections to the leftist politics associated with *The Masses*, where John Sloan became art editor in 1912.

Elsie Heung's essay problematizes Bernstein's alliance to the vital immediacy and arguably "masculine" dynamics critically formulated in the history of the Ashcan painters. Seeking a broader analysis of Bernstein's urban visions beyond formal characteristics of composition and color, Heung considers the artist's traditional training in Philadelphia in contrast to the illustrative and journalistic background innate to the identity of the Ashcan group. Bernstein's subjects, however, pointedly reflected the economic and social boundaries of an educated New Woman in the metropolis—milliners, churches, libraries, portraits, and mothers and children. Her treatment of public and private spaces is equally significant for our broader understanding of the historical dimensions of American womanhood, and equally viable in the cultural matrix as the lascivious bars and otherwise insolvent stations occupied in Ashcan paintings. Directing her attention toward women engaged in more disreputable professions in *Woman with a Parrot* (ca. 1917) or *Lilies of the Field* (Fig. 1; 1915), an uprightness of character, subtle bodily gestures, and dignified attention to clothing and costuming typically associated with prostitutes strategically frame the notoriety on view. In *The Milliners* (1918), another dynamic and circular grouping of immigrant women—modeled on female family members and her parents' housekeeper, Katie—supplies for hat making are copiously distributed around a central

table, harmonizing the internal gaze of the garment workers. *Girlhood* (1921), in the Phillips Collection, was the first painting by Bernstein purchased for an art museum.

When Bernstein's work was successfully reviewed in the company of male contemporaries such as Sloan, for example, her style was cautiously noted for its "unrestraint" (39), or she was critically admired as "a woman painter who paints like a man" (44). One critic wrote: "Theresa Bernstein's attitude toward her work seems to be circuitous rather than direct. This is, in itself, a baffling feminine quality, but dependable..." (53). Gendered connotations of critical terms are ubiquitous, and the "feminine" phrases are depreciative, even when intended as critical appraisal.

As Michele Cohen argues in her absorbing essay, Bernstein actualized "multiple identities as an artist, woman, and partner" through the receptive artistic community and social opportunities during her annual summer residences on the New England coast of Cape Ann in Gloucester, Massachusetts (94). From Fitz Henry Lane to Marsden Hartley, the topographical scale and atmosphere of Gloucester's bustling harbor, majestic schooners and local fishermen, sweeping beaches and hidden coves, sea captain's homes and widow's walks have long inspired artists. Bernstein chose instead to portray the "unseen" elements in women's lives (100). She was welcomed into prominent artist circles around East Gloucester's Rocky Neck Art Colony and Folly Cove, establishing relationships with Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942) and Ellen Day Hale (1855–1940), who made available printmaking facilities. Her participation in the short-lived but important Gallery-on-the-Moors in 1916 (a forerunner to the North Shore Arts Association) exemplified, according to Cohen, the creative possibilities for the New Woman (99).

Levin's exhibition seminar at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York played a seminal role in this project, and doctoral students contributed essays to this catalogue and developed an excellent website as an

additional resource for Bernstein's career. The inaugural exhibition occurred in two locations simultaneously and offered the enthusiastic visitor a unique opportunity to view Martin and Edith Stein's dedicated collection at Baruch College's Sidney Mishkin Gallery, along with an extensive selection of paintings, drawings, early notebooks and clippings, photographs, and letters assembled from additional private and museum collections at the James Gallery at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Observing the trajectory of Bernstein's career, one truly comprehends the far-reaching thread that weaves together her art and life through the century. Bernstein's precocious self-portraits and still lifes composed of both intimate and historically based objects—what the artist called "Symbolic Document-aries"—merit attention and are purposely explored in the catalogue by Patricia M. Burnham.¹ Together with Bernstein's unfailing marriage and primary role as Meyerowitz's champion, examined further in Gillian Pistell's study of the artist's still life-cum-portrait *Documentary Still* (1972), to her aesthetic relationship to printmaking, an important and popular art form in the early twentieth century and also her husband's domain, as Stephanie Hackett offers, we have a range of incisive research material. Yet it is a particular yearning determined in her figural relationships of women, mobilized in all phases of life, where we may find potential avenues for new scholarship on the modern woman, following Bernstein's own words that to paint is "to see a picture in embryo."

Aliza Edelman published "Grace Hartigan's *Grand Street Brides: The Modern Bride as Mannequin*" in *WAJ* vol. 34, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013), and recently organized the exhibition and catalogue, *Judith Lauand: Brazilian Modernist, 1950s-2000s* at Driscoll-Babcock Galleries, New York, Oct. 23 – Dec. 8, 2014.

Notes

1. See Patricia M. Burnham, "Theresa Bernstein," *WAJ* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1988–Winter 1989): 22–27.