

Book Review

Title: *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*

Author: Ann Millett-Gallant

Publisher: New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010

ISBN: (hard cover) 978-0-230-10406-8, 177 pages with 10 embedded images

Cost: \$75.00. Amazon price \$60.18

Reviewer: Cherie Luckhurst, University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa

I have heard Dr. Millett-Gallant lecture and thought she was brilliant, but I was impressed anew by the depth of her scholarship in this book. Each paragraph is thick with ideas, and each description of art is thoughtful and detailed. Each analysis is meticulously built. The book is intended for scholars, but newcomers to this area of disability studies—such as myself—would be comfortable with its thorough treatment of topics. The density of the text calls for careful reading.

Dr. Millett-Gallant describes many types of visual media here, including photography, performance art, sculpture, and medical displays. While she describes, she simultaneously deconstructs the effects of these media on both the viewer and the viewed. She does not shrink from speculating about the motives of artists who exploit or embrace disability. Many of the artists themselves have disabilities, so this is delicate ground to tread. She appears to be fearless.

The author’s analyses are penetrating. In chapter one, Millett-Gallant describes the psychology of the gaze. She discusses Freud and the role of the gazed-upon versus the gazer. She assesses the gaze as an indicator of status and class, race and gender. She examines iconography versus humanity. In subsequent chapters, Dr. Millett-Gallant analyzes the work of famous artists. Photographer Diane Arbus’s work, which is sometimes described as “enfreakment” of those with disabilities due to her exaggeration of their physical characteristics, is analyzed here. So is the work of Marc Quinn, whose sculpture of Allison Lapper’s disabled body stood in London’s Trafalgar Square alongside monuments to military heroes and statues of royalty. The author also describes the physical pain depicted in paintings by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and the publicity photos of “human curiosities” commissioned by P. T. Barnum. It is a fascinating variety of art and intentions that Millett-Gallant unravels in these pages.

Sadly, the book is lacking in graphics. As early as the introduction, I was both frustrated and intrigued by the lack of visual reference material. Why would a book about art have so few illustrations? Was it an exercise in imagination? Was it a statement about the objectification of the observed? Was it a budget problem? Fortunately for the reader, Millett-Gallant writes beautifully, and her descriptions of the art are richly detailed. The inclusion of more illustrations, however, would have saved me many searches on the internet.

I was also distracted by a few publishing errors--persistent spelling mistakes, proofreading notes, a printing error--the volume is compact and attractive but not perfect. In addition, a thorough editor might have simplified a sentence here and there to give the reader some relief from the complexity of the paragraphs. But these are irritants, and the book, overall, is a gem.

I will be reading it—carefully—a second time. It is that good. The book is a stew of descriptions, observations, arguments, psychologies, exploitations, empowerments, and complications all exposed in contemporary art that features the disabled body. Millett-Gallant has packed this skinny volume to bursting.

Cherie Luckhurst is a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa. She researches empathy and the influence of culture on social interaction.