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"A Careful Cruelty, A Patient Hate": Degas' Bathers in Pastel and Sculpture

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Abstract

"A Careful Cruelty, A Patient Hate": Degas' Bathers in Pastel and Sculpture

By Randi L. Fishman

This paper analyzes the themes of misogyny, twisted sexual fantasy, and grotesque eroticism in Degas' Bathers sculptures and pastels. Degas' Bathers series is a contemporary and cultural deconstruction of the nude as the ideal of feminine beauty, where the artist produces a twisted erotic fantasy, informed by his own misogyny and contemporary values and practices regarding sexuality, prostitution, and bathing. By engaging Degas' Bathers series within a distinctly contemporary context, I will argue that the Bathers series embodies epitomizes misogyny and eroticism in Degas' *oeuvre* in various and complex ways, situating my discussion in the contemporary context of late-nineteenth-century Paris. It is the contemporary context, which truly elucidates the complex nuances of Degas' Bathers series, which have too often been overlooked by scholars. Engaging with contemporary context demands understanding both artistic intention and audience reception. Artistic intention is particularly pertinent to Degas' work, as he was known for his systematic working methods, as well as the fact he was vehemently exposed to the public exposure his sculptures have received posthumously. Additionally, considering contemporary audience reception is crucial, as Degas' controversial images of women were displayed to a Paris in crisis: the advent of the French feminist movement, the deregulation of prostitution, and a syphilis epidemic all created tension and cultural anxiety over sexuality and gender during the period Degas was producing the Bathers series. While Degas' Bathers pastels are better known, it is the series' sculptures, which epitomize Degas' misogyny and the misogynistic themes imbued in the series.

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My art, what do you want to say about it? Do you think you can explain the merits of a picture to those who do not see them?... I can find the best and clearest words to explain my meaning, and I have spoken to the most intelligent people about art, and they have not understood; but among people who understand, words are just not necessary, you say humph, he, ha and everything has been said – Edgar Degas[1]

[1] Quoted in Richard Kendall, *Degas By Himself: Drawings, Prints, Paintings and Writings* (London: Time Warner Books, 2004), 7.

I. Introduction

One afternoon in Degas' studio, the artist gave his friend the Irish novelist George Moore a privileged view of the Bathers pastels. Ever since Moore recounted the day's events in the *Burlington Magazine* after Degas' death in 1917, the anecdote has provided unique insight into Degas' work and his artistic intentions. Specifically, it elucidates Degas' attitudes towards women and his Bathers series. Moore recounts this particular trip to Degas' studio, where he viewed some of the Bathers pastels, as well as an unidentified painting of three peasant women washing themselves in a river:

> A woman who has stepped out of a bath examines her arm. Degas says *"La bête humaine qui s'occupe d'elle-même; une chatte qui se leche.*" Yes it is the portrayal of the animal-life of the human being, the animal conscious of nothing but itself. "Hitherto," Degas says, ". . . . the nude has always been represented in poses which presuppose an audience but these women of mine are honest, simple folk, unconcerned by any other interests than those involved in their physical condition. Here is another; washing her feet. It is as if you looked through a keyhole."[2]

Moore's quotation reveals many of the fundamental elements of the Bathers series, elucidates Degas' views towards women, and alludes to the significance of the keyhole point of view. In stating that there is no shame or guilt in the voyeur, Degas implies that the image of the nude has always been intended for the pleasure of the beholder. This view becomes apparent the in Bathers series, as Degas challenges artistic convention, intensifying voyeurism to unprecedented levels. Degas' discussion of the oblivious, peasant woman, whom he describes as almost animal-like, reflects his consistently distorted and dehumanizing representations of the female body in the Bathers, as well as his misogyny. Finally, Degas also explicitly references the "keyhole," his signature

[2] Moore, "Memories of Degas," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 32 (February 1918): 64-65.

perspective style. The keyhole point of view characterizes Degas' images of women, specifically the Bathers, and is a device that links his art to his misogyny.

In my analysis of the Bathers series, I will engage with Degas' reputation, as there are three main factors that support Degas' misogyny. The first is the anecdotal and biographical evidence from Degas' lifetime. Additionally, Degas' artistic approach betrays his misogyny, as his use of the keyhole point of view creates a voyeuristic and erotic fantasy view that privileges the male gaze. His representations of women are ugly, indecorous, and misanthropic at times, revealing the artist's interest in Social Darwinist theories such as criminal physiognomy. Most importantly, Degas' choice in subject matter throughout his career reveals his misogyny, as his representations of women consistently juxtapose ugliness and eroticism, producing a grotesque eroticism. These complex layers of the artist's misogyny are apparent in the Bathers pastels and sculptures.

Misogyny and eroticism is also related to the theme of sexual fantasy, which will be an integral component of my examination of the Bathers series. While the traditional Western archetype of the nude (or bather) was meant to epitomize beauty in its purest and most ideal form, it was also consciously sexually provocative. The traditional nudes of Titian or Ingres, for example, present a sensual and idealized eroticism. Degas' Bathers, however, represent a sexual fantasy, as Degas eroticizes the figures in the most degrading and humiliating moments of bathing. To put it in Moore's words, "with cynicism Degas has rendered the nude an artistic possibility."[3] Degas' Bathers series is a contemporary and cultural deconstruction of the nude as the ideal form of feminine beauty, where the artist produces a degrading erotic fantasy, informed by his own misogyny, and contemporary values and practices regarding sexuality, prostitution, and bathing.

[3] Moore, "Memories of Degas," 64.

The Bathers series as a whole, however, has received less scholarly attention than some of Degas' more famous series, such as his Dancer paintings. The Bathers sculptures in particular, have been scarcely researched aside from Degas' 1881 sculpture, *The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. I will argue that when the Bathers transform from pastel and take sculptural form, they realize and epitomize Degas' misogyny. Moreover, I will prove how the Bathers series embodies the themes of grotesque eroticism and misogynistic sexual fantasy by engaging Degas' Bathers series within the distinctly contemporary context of late nineteenth-century Paris. It is contemporary context, which elucidates the complex nuances of the Bathers series, which have too often been overlooked.

Engaging with contemporary context demands understanding both artistic intention and audience reception. Artistic intention is particularly pertinent to Degas' work, as he was known for his systematic working methods. As the artist himself declared, "No art is less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the greater masters; of inspiration, spontaneity and temperament, I know nothing."[4] Moreover, George Moore recounted the artist's inability to maintain his professional work and personal life as independent entities: "No artist's practice ever accorded more nearly with his theory than Degas'."[5] Considering contemporary audience reception is also crucial, as Degas' controversial images of women were exhibited to a Paris in crisis: the advent of the French feminist movement, the deregulation of prostitution, and a syphilis epidemic all created tension and cultural anxiety regarding sexuality and gender during the period. This paper not only engages the issues of

[4] Quoted in James H. Rubin, *Impressionism* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 179.

[5] Moore, "Memories of Degas," 28.

intention and reception, but also problematizes them: Degas heavily favored pastel, and his pastels were the only Bathers he ever displayed publicly. Furthermore, issues of intention and reception are particularly interesting when considering the Bathers sculptures. Despite Degas' wish that his sculptures *never* be exhibited, they were posthumously cast in bronze in 1921, and are now visible in museums throughout the world. Even these issues, however, are imbued with the Bathers series' central themes of misogyny, sexual fantasy, and grotesque eroticism. I will nuance the original 1880s assumptions about misogyny, artistic intention, and audience reception in Degas' Bathers series, by taking a late-twentieth century art historical approach, which includes, deconstructionism, feminist and psychoanalytic theory.

II. Literature Review

The theme of misogyny, essential to Degas' work, has polarized Degas scholars. As the art historian Lillian Schacherl asserts, Degas' reputation as a misogynist has a long history and is well documented.[6] The Bathers series has been perceived as misogynistic since its debut at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in Paris in 1886. Much of the contemporary reaction to and criticism of the series reflects a sense of shock and horror towards Degas' misogynistic content. As the well-known art critic, J. K. Huysmans wrote in his 1886 review:

> [Degas] brought to his study of nudes a careful cruelty, a patient hate…. He must have wished to take revenge, to hurl the most flagrant insult at his century by demolishing its most constantly enshrined idol, woman, whom he debases by showing her in the tub, in the humiliating positions of her intimate ablutions…. He gives her a special accent of scorn and hate.[7]

Similarly, the art critic Felix Fénéon's 1886 review reveals the apparent and unapologetic misogyny of Degas' Bathers series:

> Crouching, gourd-like women fill the bathtubs…One with her chin on her breast is scratching the nape of her neck; another, her arm stuck to her back, and twisted in a half circle is rubbing her behind with a dripping sponge. Hair falling down over the shoulders, breasts over hips, belly over thighs, limbs over their joints, all makes this an ugly woman.[8]

While neither Huysmans nor Fénéon use the term "misogyny" explicitly in their reviews, their description of Degas' work implicitly communicates the theme, as the art critics discuss Degas' "hate and scorn" towards the "ugly" women of the Bathers series.

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[6] Lillian Schacherl, *Edgar Degas: Dancers and Nudes*, trans. John Omrod, (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 70.

[7] Quoted in Eunice Lipton, *Looking Into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 182.

[8] Ibid.

In the mid-twentieth century, scholarly discussion of Degas' misogyny focused on the specific theme of violence. In 1955, Daniel Catton Rich identified a specific type of violence in Degas' Bathers series. Late in Degas' career, Rich argues, he turned to the nude, and specifically the bather, at a "furious rate," displaying the body as "twisted, pulled, turned, and contorted with a new violence."[9] Charles Bernheimer adopted this notion of misogyny and violence three decades later, articulating Degas' misogyny as specific to humiliation, violence, and sexual fantasy. Degas used the keyhole point of view, Bernheimer argues, to communicate misogyny in his Brothel and Bathers series, as it "creates a fantasy projection in which the voyeur is sadistically fantasizing about his ability to penetrate and humiliate the woman he gazes upon."[10] Both Bernheimer and Rich argued that violence and misogyny are integral components of Degas' Bathers series.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Norma Broude and Eunice Lipton published new and controversial work arguing *against* Degas' misogyny. In her 1977 essay "Degas' 'Misogyny,'" Norma Broude argues that the "old" and "one-sided assumption" of Degas' misogyny must be reevaluated. Broude argues that Degas' reputation as a misogynist is problematic as it perpetuates a limiting paradigm for the artist's work: "Degas' misogyny has been assumed, his paintings have been interpreted accordingly, and they have then been held up as proof of the original assumption."[11] Broude also argues that because Degas did not paint flattering pictures of beautiful women, does not necessarily make him a misogynist, citing his portraiture as proof:

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[9] Daniel Catton Rich, "Bathers by Edgare-Hilaire-Germain-Degas (1834-1917)," *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 40 (November 1955): 68.

[10] Charles Bernheimer, "Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology," *Representations* 20 (Autumn 1987): 162.

[11] Norma Broude, "Degas' 'Misogyny,'" *The Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 95-96.

"Degas did not paint women as stereotyped feminine objects, but as distinct human beings, emphasizing neither prettiness, nor grace, nor charm, but rather individual character." Additionally, she argues that too much emphasis has been put on Degas' "bachelorhood as a sure sign of serious maladjustment." She argues that modern art historians have unfairly condemned the artist as a misogynist because of a cultural bias towards the importance of marriage and heteronormative family values.[12] Broude asserts that his work is not informed by misogyny, and that his historically unchallenged reputation as a misogynist threatens to compromise objectivity in Degas scholarship.[13]

Following Broude, in her 1986 book, *Looking Into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*, Eunice Lipton argues that Degas' Bathers were not misogynistic representations of women, but images that originated in a "lived social experience," like his images of the racetrack and opera house.[14] Lipton asserts that Degas' Bathers are not *sexually explicit*, but *socially specific* images of prostitution.[15] Social codes changed in the second half of the nineteenth century, and prostitution became not only more prevalent in French culture, but more ambiguous. While official prostitution was regulated by the French government, and "for centuries had had a specific and recognizable position on the margins of society," social anxieties arose when prostitution became increasingly deregulated in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century. Lipton argues that Degas' images of women reflect the evolving and ambiguous identity of the prostitute in French culture. She defends Degas' reputation and the Bathers series, claiming that his images of women were not misogynistic, but realistic: "Degas

[12] Broude, "Degas 'Misogyny,'" 104 – 107.

[13] Ibid., 96

[14] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 165.

[15] Ibid., 170.

painted them in such a way as to minimize, even undercut, their immorality."[16] The Bathers pastels do not degrade women, Lipton argues, but demonstrate the trend of unregistered prostitution in Paris and Degas' artistic response to this contemporary phenomenon.

The art critic Wendy Lesser also challenged the notion of Degas' misogyny in "Degas's Nudes," an exhibition review of "Degas: The Nudes," debuting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1988. Lesser argues that Degas was not the infamous voyeur that art historians have accused him to be, but that he simply painted from a "real-world viewpoint." Additionally, Lesser asserts that his representations of the nude are not misogynistic, but rather "unusually delicate." This delicacy, Lesser argues, has been tainted as people search for crimes in Degas' nudes:

> [I do not] feel the violence, the degradation, the contortion, and even the "torture" that other critics have perceived in the bathing bodies and the attitudes they assume. To me, the paintings and pastels are entirely about grace: the natural physical grace that unselfconscious bodies feel and convey. [17]

Rather, Degas' "radiant, weighty, self-enclosed bathers" are the opposite of misogynistic, as he idealizes delicate femininity to "locate feminine beauty" in his nudes.[18]

As Mary Kelly argues in her 1996 book *Imaging Desire,* notions of a "*post*feminist" period in the 1980s opened up new channels of feminist art historical discourse. "The pivotal point of an ongoing effort to decipher and critically rework codes of a 'feminine aesthetic,'"[19] Kelly writes, is evident in Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock's 1991 anthology *Dealing with Degas*. The essays, like others that emerged from

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[16] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 152.

[17] Wendy Lesser, "Degas' Nudes," *The Threepenny Review* 37 (1989): 26.

[18] Ibid., 29.

[19] Mary Kelly, *Imagining Desire*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), xxiii.

this period, reflect a shift in scholarship back toward upholding Degas' original misogynist reputation, with new evidence from emerging discourses such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist theory.[20]

In the title essay Kendall asserts, "So relentless was Degas' pursuit of the female image that it has been seen as obsessive or pathological," since representations of the female subject account for more than three-quarters of his oeuvre. Kendall argues that Degas' contemporaries, such as Huysmans, reacted with shock towards the Bathers due to "an awareness of a change in Degas' art," related to his increasingly apparent degradation of the subject:

> As in earlier decades, there was an admiration for the startling verisimilitude of his figures and for his rejection of the sentimental stereotypes of femininity. This time, however, there was also a recognition that Realism no longer accounted for Degas' art, that the languages of depiction, metaphor and allusion had been carried forward into new areas of complexity.[21]

Additionally, as Griselda Pollock explains in her essay, "Degas/Images/Women: Women/ Degas/Images: What Difference Does Feminism Make to Art History?" these complexities must be understood in terms of gender. Specifically, Degas' images of women must be read as images of masculine power and sexuality:

> Woman, hitherto the sign of sexuality, contaminated and defined by her body, can now be understood as functioning specifically as the sign of *masculine* sexuality. Masculinity projects out its particularity onto the figuration of woman's body. Thus an "image of woman" is not about a woman. It is a representation, whose signifier may be a female body. Its meaning, however, is the formation of masculinity within specific class relations.[22]

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[20] Kelly, *Imagining Desire*, xxiii.

[21] Richard Kendall, "Dealing with Degas," ed. Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollack, in *Dealing with Degas,* 11-21, (New York: Universe, 1991), 11-12, 15.

[22] Griselda Pollock, "Degas/Images/Women: Women/ Degas/Images: What Difference Does Feminism Make to Art History?" Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas,* 23.

Pollock asserts that by understanding an image of a woman as a "sign of sexuality" within a distinctly masculine paradigm, art historians can understand the complexities of misogyny in Degas' work. Moreover, by naming the male gaze, scholars can "undermine [its] mastery" and implicate the "sexual politics around looking and its objects."[23] Schacherl adds that specifically within the Bathers series, Degas "was trying, it would seem, to speak of the female body as a faceless and timeless object, a pure gesture of flesh," echoing Pollock's argument about the complex gender and sexuality issues surrounding male-produced images of women.[24]

Anthea Callen's 1995 book *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* analyzes misogyny in Degas' Bathers and Brothel series. Like Pollock, Callen argues that the male gaze and masculine control are central themes in Degas' Bathers series, as the images do not portray femininity, but the supposed moral superiority of masculinity. Callen argues that the subjects of Degas' Bathers and Brothel series are not so much women, but women's "illicit sexuality." Degas naturalizes "the cultural construction of woman as a sexual degenerate" in the Bathers series. One of the devices he uses to communicate misogyny is the keyhole point of view, which Callen argues provides a platform for "voyeurism and the narratives of sexual conquest."[25] The keyhole point of view creates a paradoxical relationship between desire and revulsion in which the spectator remains safely distanced from the subject while transferring all

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[23] Griselda Pollock, "Degas/Images/Women," Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas,* 23.

[24] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 86.

[25] Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 71, 75, 162.

sexual guilt to the subject. Simultaneously, however, the beholder is able to maintain a misogynistic sense of intrusive control and sexual power over the subject.[26]

Misogyny has become one of the most divisive and important issues in Degas scholarship. The debate continues to examine themes of masculine power and control, the keyhole point of view and voyeurism, violence, humiliation, and sexual power. Engaging with the complex components of Degas' misogyny is imperative to engaging with the Bathers series.

[26] Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, 105, 109.

III. The Bathers in Context

The nuanced complexities of the Bathers series are highly dependent on three important elements of the artist's contemporary context. The first is the issue of bathing in late-nineteenth century Paris and the cultural norms associated with it. The second is the question of Degas' modernity or realism: In modern scholarship, Degas' relationship to the Impressionist movement has superseded his relationship to strong Neoclassicism, which was apparent to his contemporaries. The third is the paradigmatic difference between the naked subject and the nude subject in Western art, its contemporary connotations, and the impact it had on Degas' contemporary audience.

The theme of bathing in Degas' Bathers series displays a startling divergence from archetypal representations of bathing in Western art. Degas' bathers are not biblical Susannas, or classical Dianas, as they are devoid of traditional elements and narrative context. As the art historian Richard Thomson asserts,

> In the early 1850s, when Degas decided to become an artist, it was unquestioned the nude was as fundamental to *la grande peinture* as it has been three centuries before. The artist of high ambition was expected to draw his subjects from classical mythology or the Bible, from ancient or perhaps more recent history, with the intention, above all, of procuring an image which conveyed noble and moral sentiments.[27]

Though archetypal tropes such as "Diana the Huntress" and "The Elders Spying on Susanna" had fallen out of popular favor by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the archetypal image of the nude and its adherence to moral codes was maintained. Therefore, when Degas' Bathers series portrayed the actual *act* of bathing instead of the archetypal *theme* of bathing, it departed from the sphere of morality and the accepted discourse of the female nude, scandalizing Degas' contemporaries.

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[27] Richard Thomson, *Degas: The Nudes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 15.

Moreover, contrary to modern social and hygienic practices, during the nineteenth century women bathed infrequently. Though Degas consistently produced images of women bathing in the 1880s and 1890s, regular or frequent bathing was stigmatized during the period because of social values (particularly notions surrounding prostitution) and medical myths. As Lipton has shown, in spite of Paris's grand renovations under Baron von Haussmann, bathing was frowned upon in late nineteenth-century Paris, since even after 1860, water was still considered unhealthy.[28] As water had been a major source contagion during the earlier part of the century, cultural anxiety and skepticism precluded frequent bathing.[29] Baths were rumored to cause a range of maladies, including weakened sexual desire, infertility, and "withered beauty."[30] Additionally, many parents feared that bathing might tempt their young daughters with "indecent self bodily-awareness," or worse, prompt masturbation or lesbianism.[31] Bathing was perceived almost as a necessary evil, an ideal reinforced by the fact that prostitutes were the only women in French society who bathed regularly, due to the spread of venereal diseases, which further degraded the status of prostitutes in French society. As Lipton explains,

> Bathing was so unquestionably associated with prostitutes that the nineteenth-century authority on prostitution Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent Duchâtelet was certain that it was baths that caused the plumpness of prostitutes in general; another nineteenth-century authority attributed the infertility of courtesans to bathing.[32]

Additionally, as the contemporary writer Henry Fèvre described:

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[28] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 169.

[29] Anthea Callen, "Degas' *Bathers*: Hygiene and Dirt – Gaze and Touch," Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas*, 162-164.

[30] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas,*168.

[31] Callen "Degas' *Bathers*," 173.

[32] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 169.

> In the ambiguous bedrooms of unregistered houses, where certain ladies fill the social and utilitarian role of great collectors of love, fat women wash themselves, brush themselves soak themselves and wipe themselves off in basins as big as troughs.

Fèvre concludes by describing prostitutes as pigs, "unequivocally connoting bestial filth."[33] Bathing was associated not only with prostitution, but also with broader cultural ideals of women's sexual immorality and sexual degeneracy.

Additionally, the notion of Degas as a realist must be addressed. Degas' alleged modernity has been used to rebut claims of misogyny in his work. As the art historian James H. Rubin explains, "However loudly Degas's work proclaimed modernity, even while affecting detachment and impassivity, its underlying impetus was, as for Baudelaire's dandy, resistance to modernity's leveling effects."[34] Though Broude and Lipton would argue that Degas portrayed modern Paris, contemporary life, and "lived social experiences,"[35] Degas' Bathers were firmly rooted in the academic tradition.

A comparison of works by Èdouard Manet and Degas elucidates Rubin's argument and rebuts Lipton's claims about Degas' modernity or realism. Manet's work often challenges gender roles and social norms and is far more "uncompromisingly contemporary"[36] – to borrow Broude's words – than Degas' work, as evident when comparing Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* (fig. 1) with Degas' 1886 pastel *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* (fig. 2). As T. J. Clark asserts, everything about Manet's *Olympia* – an update of Titian's 1538 masterpiece *Venus of Urbino,* which epitomized the

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[33] Quoted Callen, "Degas' *Bathers*," Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas*, 174.

[34] Rubin, *Impressionism*, 218.

[35] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 165.

[36] Broude, "Degas 'Misogyny,'" 97.

archetypal nude and ideal feminine beauty– was shockingly modern. Even in the era of the courtesan and legalized prostitution, Olympia's yellow-green skin, the residual pubic hair extending up to her navel, the way her hair is tied back unceremoniously, and her audacious straightforward gaze towards the viewer, present her with unprecedented agency that authoritatively challenges the male gaze. Clark argues that these physical and psychological attributes present Olympia as a modern woman and not just as another passive nude.[37] Degas' *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub,* however possesses the opposite qualities: Olympia's autonomy is replaced by anonymity, as Degas' bathing figure awkwardly crouches in the tub, completely unaware of the viewer. While Manet's nude is a contemporary image of the autonomous modern woman, Degas' *The Tub* is a misogynistic representation of a voyeur's sexual fantasy, where the figure is dominating by the male gaze – or to borrow Bernheimer and Callen's, words is "penetrated"[38] by "voyeurism and the narratives of sexual conquest."[39]

Contrary to modernist or realist works such as Manet's *Olympia*, Degas' Bathers are reminiscent of Ingres' Neoclassical nudes, particularly *La Grande Baigneuse,* also known as the *Valpinçon Bather* (fig. 3).[40] A comparison with Degas' 1886 *Nude Woman Combing Her Hair* (fig. 4) situates Degas' Bathers in a distinctly Neoclassical tradition, as opposed to a modernist one. Like the nude figure in the *Valpinçon Bather,* Degas' subject rests on a cushion, and faces completely away from the viewer. The works' details display more congruities: both bathers sit with legs crossed, left over right,

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[37] T. J. Clark, "Olympia's Choice," in *Titian's Venus of Urbino,* edited by Rona Goffen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1998), 130-132.

[38] Bernheimer, "Degas' Brothels," 162.

[39] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,* 162.

[40] The title Valpinçon *Bather* originates from the patron family's name, Valpinçon.

exposing the underside of the right foot; both are situated with their bodies pointed towards the left, as their gazes linger towards the right, and both artists erotically emphasize the buttocks as a primary point of interest in the composition. Even the most basic compositional structure reveals striking similarities, as Degas' green chair in the upper-left corner parallels Ingres' green curtain, and the white robe the figure sits on in the diagonal corner parallels Ingres' white lounge. Although Manet's *Olympia* had similarly referenced Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Manet completely modernized the work, composing a recreation of and break from the original, which – as evident when comparing Ingres' *Valpinçon Bather* – Degas never achieved in his Bathers series. Though the minor changes in setting and hairstyle from Ingres' *Valpinçon Bather* to *Nude Woman Combing her Hair* represent a modern update, a comparison betrays the unshakeable and defining Neoclassical influence that Ingres had on Degas' Bathers series.

When Ingres became Degas' mentor in the 1853, the young artist began to frequent the master's studio. Degas' interest in Ingres' *Valpinçon Bather* in particular, is documented in Degas' notebooks, as multiple attempts at the Neoclassical masterpiece are worked out in the young artist's sketches. One particular episode, however, in 1854 displays Degas' obsession with the painting: Degas was visiting the Valpinçon residence on the Rue Taitbout in Paris to once again admire the painting when he quarrelled with the painting's owner. Ingres had requested to borrow the painting for his upcoming exhibition at the Exposition Universelle of 1855, but Valpinçon refused, citing risks to the painting's security.[41] As the Degas biographer Roy McMullen describes the episode,

[41] Roy McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times and Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 34 -36.

> The usually well-behaved Edgar exploded into a tirade about "disgusting selfishness" and "an affront like that to a man like Monsieur Ingres," and finally the collector, "much shaken," agreed to reverse his decision. So the next day the two of them appeared at Ingres's studio, on the Quai Voltaire, in a handsome Louis XVI building with balconies overlooking the Seine and Pont du Carrousel. The god himself, massive, dewlapped, hierophantic figure with spaniel's eyes, answered the bell. Valpinçon begged pardon for his refusal, announced his change of mind, and gave his young companion the proper credit.[42]

Degas' respect for Ingres was great, and his allegiance for his mentor was substantial. His passion for the *Valpinçon Bather* in particular was enduring, and resonates strongly in the Bathers series.

In addition to the Neoclassicism tradition, the Bathers series also has strong ties to the Classical artistic tradition. As noted by such art historians as Schacherl and Broude, Degas' 1886 pastel *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* is strikingly similar to the Hellenistic sculpture *Crouching Venus* (fig. 5), which was on display at the Louvre during Degas' lifetime. *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* is an adaptation of this Classical trope: both figures squat awkwardly in the act of bathing, crouching down and bending at the abdomen. Degas' inspiration from the Hellenistic *Crouching Venus* also adds another eroticized component to the Degas' Bathers pastels. As McMullen asserts, references to sea water – an integral aspect of the myth of Venus being born from the sea – would have been considered a sexual innuendo in nineteenth-century France, as sea water was considered an aphrodisiac.[43] This reference would have been apparent to contemporary viewers; when the pastel debuted in 1886, George Moore described it as a "modern Venus in her shell."[44] Moore's reference also reflects Degas' defiance of the

[42] McMullen, *Degas*, 36-37.

[43] Ibid., 37.

[44] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 94.

traditional Venus archetype and deconstruction of the traditional nude. Not only do comparisons to Venus firmly root Degas' Bathers in a Classical tradition, but they suggest another nuanced layer of eroticism in the series, one dependent on its relationship to Classical art.

One major difference, however, between Degas and his Classical and Neoclassical predecessors is his works' divergence from the traditional nude. The difference between nudity and nakedness is central to Degas' creation of a unique eroticism and fantasy in the Bathers series. Elucidating this distinction, Anthea Callen offers three criteria for the archetypal nude: even in the absence of eye contact, the figure possesses self-awareness, communicated through the posed body, which invites the gaze of the privileged spectator; the nude's body proportions are Classical and idealized; and the body is presented in a full frontal or rear view.[45] Considering these criteria, Degas' Bathers clearly defy archetypal representation. Schacherl adds that Degas' nudes break from tradition in that their nakedness is not disguised in mythology, history, or the symbolism of the exotic.[46] Still, Callen argues that the discourse of the nude is not only a visual phenomenon, but also a psychological one. She asserts that the visual markings of the nude have a sort of moral coding and normalization that relieve the spectator's sexual guilt, "transferring" the sexual guilt to subject. Within Degas' contemporary context, the naked body represented a "lack of civilized femininity," casting the figure in a light of animalistic or carnal sexuality, and sexual perversion."[47] Degas' appropriation of

[45] Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, 82.

[46] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 74.

[47] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,*106, 88.

nakedness creates a grotesque eroticism, distinct from the sensual and idealized eroticism of the archetypal nude, which his Bathers series seeks to defy and deconstruct.

Some scholars have argued that the choice to render his Bathers naked is part of a misogynistic inclination towards an unapologetic realism. Rubin discusses this view in connection with Degas' Dancer paintings – an argument that can be used to understand the effects of Degas' nakedness in the Bathers series: "The fact that Degas felt entitled to practise such unvarnished naturalism on ballet dancers implies a position of both social and sexual power."[48] Degas' desire to render his female subjects with an unprecedented level of naturalism, especially in regard to nakedness, reflects a sense of masculine entitlement and privilege. The theme of nakedness in the Bathers series transforms and deconstructs the ideal of the nude, and its sensual eroticism, into a twisted, humiliating, and fantasy projection. Moreover, the Bathers series elucidates the ideological and artistic impulse towards misogyny that undergirds the Bathers pastels and sculptures.

[48] Rubin, *Impressionism*, 199.

IV. The Bathers Pastels

Degas' Bathers pastels demonstrate the complex nuances of his misogyny. Specifically, the keyhole point of view is one of Degas' most powerful devices for conveying the themes of eroticism and sexual fantasy. As he explicitly stated to George Moore, "It is as if you looked through a keyhole."[49] This statement resonates with the Bathers pastels, as the keyhole vantage point intensifies and foregrounds voyeurism in the works. The keyhole point of view had a specific cultural context during his lifetime. A meaning, however, that has too often been overlooked by Degas scholars, with the exception of Anthea Callen. Due to a syphilis outbreak in Paris in the nineteenth century, peepholes became an increasingly popular brothel service. Callen argues that Degas recreates the experience of the peephole in Parisian brothels by subjecting his Bathers to the "intrusive and controlling" keyhole point of view, making the viewer's experience of beholding these works inherently erotic and voyeuristic.[50] Likewise, Callen asserts that the peephole embodies the contemporary "morbid fascination" between reconciling the increase in demand for prostitution, the explosion of unregulated prostitution, and the increase of venereal disease contagion: "This conflict between the desire to look and the fear of contamination, between gaze and touch, is discernible in Degas' Bathers."[51] It is Degas' dangerous placement of the Bathers pastels on the boundary between gaze and touch, and Degas' reenactment of the brothel peephole that reveals the theme of sexual fantasy.

Sexual fantasy has a strong thematic presence in the Bathers pastels, specifically a potential fetish for hair. One model told the writer Edmond de Goncourt that the "strange

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[49] Moore, "Memories of Degas," 65.

[50] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,* 92.

[51] Callen, "Degas *Bathers*," Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas,* 174.

gentleman" paid her for a four-hour session, but when she arrived at his studio, he did nothing but comb her hair. While it cannot be *proven* that Degas had a personal sexual fetish for hair, the biographical and anecdotal evidence suggests that the theme of hair is related to sexual fantasy in Degas' Bathers series. Hair as a theme is constantly repeated in the Bathers pastels, as evident in the 1886 pastel *Nude Woman Having Her Hair Combed*. The naked subject sits on a chaise lounge, resting on her bathrobe, languidly arching her back, and tilting her head back into the hands of a maid, who tends to the bather's long red hair. The figure's explicit physical pleasure, combined with her voluptuous naked body, immediately imbues Degas' pastel with erotic undertones that resonate throughout the work. As Schacherl notes, "Even the buttoned upholstery of the daybed is echoed in the bulges of the woman's ample figure." The theme of women "dressing their hair" is so disproportionally represented in Degas' Bathers pastels, Schacherl asserts that it could constitute an entire sub-genre within the series.[52]

It is not the emphasis on hair in the Bathers pastels, that is unique, but *how* it is depicted. Hair was an extremely important characteristic of the archetypal nude. Traditionally, the nude had long, flowing hair, simultaneously idealizing feminine beauty and eroticism, while modestly covering the nipples. Degas' Bathers pastels, however, are not idealized nudes, but a cultural deconstruction of the nude as ideal feminine beauty. Therefore, Degas' representation of hair embodies new meanings, distinct from the traditional symbolism that imbues the archetypal nude.

Notions of sexual fantasy and hair become apparent when comparing the Bathers with Mary Cassatt's work. Between 1879 and 1880, Degas and Cassatt worked closely, often together in Degas' studio, collaborating on a new art periodical, *Le Jour et la nuit* –

[52] Schacherl. *Edgar Degas,* 98-101.

a black and white print journal that never came to fruition. During this period of intense work and artistic collaboration, both Degas and Cassatt created prints of women bathing. These prints, such as Degas' 1880 monotype *Combing the Hair,* precede what is formally considered the Bathers series, due to differences in composition, medium, and date. It is interesting, however, to consider Degas' image of a bather combing her hair with a strikingly similar image by Cassatt, *Back View of Draped Model Arranging Her Hair,* 1880. As George T. M. Shackelford asserts, it is likely that Cassatt was influenced by her time spent in Degas' studio:

> Cassatt's deployment of silhouette, coupled with the fact that none of her nudes look back at the viewer, makes these women disconcertingly anonymous, not unlike some of Degas' Bathers. This may result in part from the possibility that she did not draw any of them from a live model, but rather based them on memory or on her study of Degas' monotype nude studies.[53]

It is this probable influence and the similar composition of Degas' and Cassatt's 1880 productions, that elucidate some of their most striking differences. The softness and dainty femininity in Cassatt's 1880 print is contrasted to the violence evoked in Degas' monotype. While Cassatt's figure delicately fingers her long, wet tendrils, Degas' bather aggressively slashes a comb through her hair, vigorously trying to undo a stubborn knot. These thematic differences are reified by Degas' and Cassatt's different uses of the print medium. Cassatt's print is a smaller, soft-ground etching, composed with fluid movement of form and long, flowing contours. Degas' monotype, more than double the size of Cassatt's, presents an abrasive *chiaroscuro,* creating a harshness further emphasized by repeated and abrupt staccato lines. While Cassatt's print connotes an

[53] George T. M. Shackelford. "*Pas de deux*: Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas," ed. Judith A. Barter, in *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1998),119.

intimate tenderness, Degas' monotype connotes pain, violence, and aggression, likely linked to his misogyny and perhaps also to his own hair fetish.

While it is impossible to prove that Degas' compositions are a direct realization of his most intimate sexual fantasies, biographical evidence of Degas' hair fetish and the predominant theme of hair in the Bathers pastels suggests a link between them, since sexual fantasy is a characteristic theme. Richard Thomson addresses the impact of Degas' sexuality on his work, specifically in the context of his Brothel series:

> By the late 1880s and early 1890s gossip circulating in the Parisian art world whispered that Degas was an inadequate lover. If there was an element of truth in such rumors it might go some way to explaining Degas' apparent lack of any consistent romantic or physical attachment to a woman. It might also promote the related idea that he frequented brothels, as a convenient outlet for a fragile sexuality without risk of humiliation, and that the creation of images showing both the place and means to satisfy an appetite was perhaps some kind of substitute for the performance.[54]

It is interesting, however, to consider Thomson's argument in the context of the Bathers series instead of the Brothel series, since the dates cited in Thomson's argument are problematic. If this salacious and scandalous gossip had indeed circulated during the 1880s and early 1890s, it would correspond to the Bathers series, not the Brothel series, which was produced a decade earlier, between the late 1870s and early 1880s.

Thomson's argument that Degas' Brothel monotypes were intended to "substitute for the performance" – the images are "artificial," Thomson writes, "created from a remove from life" – is intended to prove that Degas' series served as a means of "fantasy and control." Thomson's argument, however, provides compelling evidence for notions of "fantasy and control" in the Bathers series. As Thomson speculates, Degas was

[54] Thomson, *Degas's Nudes,* 101.

rumored to be an inadequate lover; ashamed of his poor sexual performances he was unable to maintain romantic and physical relationships. Humiliated by this, Thomson theorizes, the artist became sexually inactive.[55] Others, however, such as McMullen, have speculated that Degas was celibate, refraining from sexual and romantic relationships throughout his lifetime: "Degas lived, as far as even his close acquaintances could tell, utterly without sexual gratification. He was concubineless as well as wifeless." Whether or not Degas was actually celibate, even his bachelorhood would have been stigmatizing. As McMullen explains,

> [The bachelor] was thought of as a retarded adolescent who refused to accept the adult male's obligation to found a household, beget children, and thus continue the established order. In short, he was something of a traitor to his class. He was apt to be suspected of secretly being a homosexual, a masturbator, an impotent syphilitic, or a libertine ready to prey on innocent females.[56]

If rumors were circulating about Degas' impotence in the 1880s and 1890s, he surely would have responded to them, since he was obsessed with his reputation. As the Degas scholar Carol Armstrong asserts, "One of the things that is interesting about this artist is the way the construction of his persona as a representation appears to match his attitude towards representation."[57] Armstrong then, confirms the reasoning for Thomson's hypothesis that Degas created the Brothel series in response to rumors about his sexuality, since he consistently used his art to fashion his reputation. If his sexuality was a source of controversy or embarrassment and posed a threat to the artists' reputation, it is probable that it would have had an effect on his work. Also supporting Thomson's

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[55] Thomson, *Degas's Nudes,* 101.

[56] McMullen, *Degas,* 262.

[57] Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991),19.

argument that Degas' work as an exercise in sexual satisfaction, and masculine control and power, is the Degas scholar Theodore Reff's observation that Degas was known for "his own insistence on the superiority of art to real experience."[58] While Broude argues that Degas' historical reputation as a misogynist and biographical anecdotes about his sexuality and bachelorhood could "compromise scholarly objectivity,"[59] it is actually the opposite. Degas' personal attitudes towards women and sexuality are actually imperative to accurately assessing the Bathers.

While the Brothel series is often thought to be the erotic climax in Degas' career, the nuanced way the theme of sexual fantasy is translated into the private sphere in the Bathers series, creates an even more intense eroticism. The Bathers series represents the erotic climax of Degas' oeuvre, not the downturn. As Callen asserts, the Brothel monotypes were "an *hors d'oeurve* to the main dish of the *Bathers.*"[60] As in the Bathers pastels, voyeurism is a major component in eroticizing the Brothel monotypes. Generally, the Brothel series can be classified in two voyeuristic categories, which are then reproduced in the Bathers series: The intense keyhole point of view that is clearly reminiscent of the brothel peephole, which exploded in popularity at the time, is apparent in the majority of the Brothel prints, as well as the later Bather series. The second category of images takes a haphazard and peeking glance into a prostitute's interactions with a client inside the brothel. Degas recreates this in many of the Bathers pastels, as the viewer has an opportunistic glance at the bather's interaction with a maidservant. The

[58] Theodore Reff, "Further thoughts on Degas's Copies," *The Burlington Magazine*, 113 (September 1971): 538.

[59] Broude, "Degas' 'Misogyny,'" 95.

[60] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,* 74.

same types of voyeurism Degas evokes in the Brothel series dominates the Bathers pastels, as he transfers eroticizing style and technique from one series to the other.

The Bathers pastels were completed immediately after the Brothel monotypes, and while the scene moves from the public sphere to the private sphere, through his stylistic choices, it is as if Degas translates the aura of the brothel into the Bathers pastels. The themes of explicit sexuality and fantasy in the Brothel monotypes are epitomized by the 1880s monotype *Relaxation,* in which three prostitutes lounge together masturbating in each other's company in an imagined and distorted space. The lack of any distinguishable setting and the haphazard arrangement of bodies, as well as the scene's pornographic content, present a sexual fantasy. The Bathers pastels represent both an immediate chronological and artistic progression from the Brothel monotypes. This is evident when comparing *Relaxation* to the 1886 pastel *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* (fig. 2): the focus moves from three figures to one, concentrating the erotic energy on a single subject. In terms of contemporary context, the shift from the public institution of the brothel to the private institution of the home makes this eroticism even more immediate and personalized for the beholder. While Degas' depiction of three prostitutes masturbating together already represents a sexual fantasy, in its original context, the sight of a woman bathing totally naked in *The Tub* would have presented an even more twisted, and erotic scene. To have a naked woman – a symbol of prostitution – penetrating the sanctified private sphere of the home, would have been even more shocking to the contemporary viewer.

The physical locations depicted in the Bathers pastels also reinforce their fantasy qualities, since the spaces Degas' bathers occupy would have been paradoxical, and even

unintelligible, to the contemporary viewer. Degas scandalously conflates the settings of the brothel and the upper-class household: only middle- or upper-class women had freestanding bathtubs, a near-universal attribute of the Bathers pastels. Additionally, in more prosperous homes, women would bathe in their dressing rooms, often furnished with armchairs, footstools, mirrors, and a dressing table, accompanied by a maidservant. Lower-class women, however, including prostitutes, had smaller washbasins near a direct water source, such as a tap.[61] Prostitutes bathed completely naked, while other women bathed with some clothing on. Degas creates social confusion in his Bathers pastels because his subjects are at once intelligible as upper-class women, due to their physical surroundings, yet also as prostitutes, as they bathe completely naked. In the 1895 pastel *Breakfast after the Bath* (fig. 7), Degas' subject is immediately degraded by her nakedness and its connotation of prostitution, as prostitutes during the period were commonly referred to as "*légout des spermes"*(the sperm sewers).[62] Yet this "sperm sewer" contradictorily occupies a lavish, distinctly upper-middle-class space, with luxurious carpets, curtains, chaise lounge, and a maid tending to her. As Lipton asserts, "Degas, in his daily life, would not have had access to middle-class women's bedrooms," a fact again reifying the fantasy qualities of the Bathers pastels. Considering the shock that Degas' Bathers pastels caused in 1886, she continues, "Even if he *had* been familiar with the dressing rooms of middle-class women, contemporary ideological assumptions would have precluded his painting them." Though upper-class women bathed in luxury

[61] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 161-162, 156.

[62] Thomson, *Degas' Nudes,* 178.

(when they *did* bathe), the iconography of the tub itself was still unmistakably the "sign of the prostitute."[63]

Lipton argues that the physical settings of the Bathers pastels do not reflect fantasy, but reality, as the women pictured in the series reflect the contemporary crisis of deregulated prostitution in Paris.[64] Though prostitution was breaking the traditional boundary of the brothel as a social and physical institution, the laundresses and milliners, as Lipton describes, who traded sexual favors for money, would still not have had the opportunity to bathe in such lavish circumstance as depicted in *Breakfast after the Bath*. Moreover, most who were engaging in part-time in acts of prostitution would not have bathed totally naked, but still partially dressed. Degas' decision to place a naked figure (representing prostitutes, the lowest class of women) in a lavish upper-class setting did not reflect a social reality, but produced a confusing notion of class unintelligibility. *Breakfast after the Bath,* with its imagined physical setting, reifies the theme of sexual fantasy in the Bathers pastels. Also, the immediate connotation of the naked female body to prostitution, or "the sperm sewers," conveys a grotesque eroticism.

Considering *Breakfast after the Bath* in relation to Cassatt's 1891 color print *Woman Bathing* further elucidates Degas' distinctly misogynist point of view in the Bathers series. Cassatt's subject is immediately recognizable as a lower-middle-class woman. With her nightgown draped at her waist, she exposes only her upper body as she bathes at a small basin, the water jug by her side suggesting the water source. The room is furnished with some luxuries, including a mirror, perfumes, soap and lotion, as she modestly lowers her hands into the bath water. Cassatt's distinctly contemporary image

[63] Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 168-169.

[64] Ibid., 170

documents the mundane task bathing, and notably, the tub itself, an icon unequivocally associated with prostitution and so prevalent in Degas' work, is missing. As Susan Fillan Yeh asserts, "Cassatt's art offers a new vision of the unconsidered facts of everyday bourgeois life, because she defined her world through women." In regard to Cassatt's 1891 print, Yeh notes that Cassatt dealt with sensuality differently from her male counterparts, evolving the theme "which departed from the standard of male appreciation." Cassatt's images of Bathers differ so drastically from Degas', because they are devoid of the themes of masculine power, the male gaze, eroticism, and sexual fantasy. Contrary to Cassatt, Degas evokes misogyny in his Bathers pastels, foregrounding the erotic by conflating the identity of the prostitute and the upper-class woman. While Degas' misogyny degrades women, Cassatt's images, as Yeh asserts, represent distinctly "women-centered art because she conceived of women as complete within themselves."[65] The aesthetic differences between Degas' and Cassatt's Bathers demonstrate the different attitudes the artists held towards women. Cassatt's images of women are intimate and positive images that celebrate women's experience, while Degas' images of women are, as Callen argues, not about women, but women's "illicit sexuality" and naturalize "the cultural construction of woman as sexual degenerate."[66]

While Degas presents a heightened sense of eroticism and fantasy in his Bathers pastels, the bather has historically embodied these qualities to varying extents, as the archetypal nude was traditionally meant to evoke an idealized and sensual eroticism. It is the way that Degas presents the theme of eroticism in the Bathers pastels, however, that makes it distinct. Degas' break from the traditional nude creates a unidealized and

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[65] Susan Fillin Yeh, "Mary Cassatt's Images of Women," *Art Journal* 35 (Summer 1976): 359, 361-362.

[66] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,* 75, 162.

degrading eroticism that is particularly evident when comparing the 1885-86 pastel, *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* (fig. 8), with Renoir's 1883-84 painting, *Seated Bather*. While the works share the theme of bathing, have comparable dates of production, and were both exhibited publicly, they are markedly different. They are produced in completely different styles, as Degas' rough and sharply linear pastel work contrasts to the delicacy of Renoir's fluid brushstroke. Renoir's *Seated Bather* demonstrates the artist's break from Impressionism, his return to the Neoclassical style, and especially to the theme of the archetypal nude. Renoir's engagement with the archetypal representation of the nude is contrary to Degas' deconstruction of the nude's ideal beauty through his appropriation of nakedness. Renoir creates a provocative and ideal eroticism, in which an ambiguous, lush, and forested background gently envelops the voluptuous subject. Her beautiful flowing hair complements her succulent white skin as she smiles, gazing just beyond the viewer. Degas' figure, on the other hand, connotes prostitution and sexual immorality, deconstructing the sensual and idealized eroticism in Renoir's nude. While Renoir presents the archetypal *theme* of bathing and its idealizing connotations, Degas presents the actual *act* of bathing and its degrading connotations. As Christopher Riopelle describes Renoir's *Seated Bather*, "The painting achieves a calm idealization that is based on observation of nature but which has the impact of an Old Master painting."[67] This description could not be further from Degas' pastel, which represents the deconstruction of the archetypal nude and the traditional image of the bather.

[67] Christopher Riopelle, "The Great Bathers," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 86 (Fall 1990): 10.

The distinction in Renoir's and Degas' work between nude and naked, and the theme of bathing versus the act of bathing is even more apparent in Degas' 1884 pastel, *Woman in a Tub.* Not only is Degas' depiction of the act of bathing indecorous in and of itself, but *Woman in a Tub* is particularly unidealized to the point of humiliation: the figure awkwardly leans to the side, supporting her weight on her left hand as she uses her right hand to clean her *derrière*. The pastel's shallow foreground and high horizon line displays Degas' intensification of voyeurism, thus privileging the dominating male gaze, vis-à-vis his manipulation of perspective. Art critic J. K. Huysmans' 1886 review resonates with a comparison of *Woman in a Tub* and Renoir's *Seated Bather*, as he writes:

> [Degas] must have wished to take revenge, to hurl the most flagrant insult at his century by demolishing its most constantly enshrined idol, woman, whom he debases by showing her in the tub, in the humiliating positions. . . .[68]

While Renoir's *Seated Bather* epitomizes the "enshrined idol" of woman, specifically the idealized femininity expressed by the archetypal nude, Degas' deconstruction of the archetypal nude was equated by his contemporary, to hurling "the most flagrant insult at his century." As exemplified by *Woman in a Tub,* Degas' appropriation of nakedness and his depiction of the act of bathing, again reflects both the artist's misogyny and the scandalizing effect it had on his contemporary audience.

Differences in Degas' and Renoir's eroticism are also reified by the distinction between the indoors and outdoors. Renoir's *Seated Bather* locates the idealized nude outdoors in a lush, Arcadian landscape. This enhances the idealized eroticism of the nude, as the background itself is idealized, again referencing the archetypal imagery of the traditional bather. Conversely, Degas' choice to situate his bather in a contemporary

[68] Quoted in Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 182

interior reifies the figure's eroticism, as well as notions of Degas' misogyny. Scholars such as Lipton have argued that Degas' choice reflects his interest in depicting contemporary social realities. But as *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub* demonstrates, the portrayal of the naked bather in a contemporary upper-class bedroom creates class confusion. This unintelligibility reifies the theme of sexual fantasy. Degas' confinement of his figures to the contemporary private sphere, instead of placing them in the idealized outdoors, as in the traditional images of bathers, reaffirms contemporary connotations of prostitution. The choice to locate the bather indoors not only serves to deconstruct the traditional archetype of the nude, but also relates to notions of misogyny and masculine control, as Degas confines his subject to the limiting private sphere. This is also particularly relevant to contemporary context and audience reception, since Degas composed his Bathers series while the French feminist movement was challenging the boundary between the feminine, private or domestic sphere, and the masculine, public or political sphere.

If Degas' contemporary audience was shocked by the handful of Bathers pastels debuted in 1886, they would have been even more appalled by many of the works not exhibited, which possess even stronger grotesque qualities. The 1885 pastel *Nude Woman Drying Herself* again demonstrates the misogynistic use of nakedness. The subject lacks self-awareness, unlike the archetypal nude, and is rendered with body proportions that are the opposite of ideal: her dwarfed arms are only slightly larger her feet, and her breasts are as small as the heel of her foot – features exaggerating her already grotesquely large buttocks. Through a masterful control over space, Degas manipulates the subject's body to disproportionally enlarge and distort the buttocks, which he makes the focal point of

the composition. These manipulations of the naked female body, result in a bather who is not the realistic contemporary French woman, as Broude and Lipton might assert – a statement, which better describes Cassatt's Bathers – nor is she idealized, like Renoir's Bathers. Rather, Degas' image is a gruesome, misogynistic, and distorted representation of the female form.

Degas is frequently credited with the revival of pastel in the nineteenth century,[69] the medium he favored in the Bathers series. His use of pastel betrays his misogyny when considered in the context of Charles Blanc's treatise on the arts, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*. Published in 1867 in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Blanc's treatise addresses the subject of pastel at length, propagating what Callen defines as "an inscription of difference." Blanc discusses art in a series of gendered metaphors, asserting that line is masculine while color is feminine: line, like men is dependable, and color, like women, is changeable and unreliable. Moreover, Blanc asserts that pastel is particularly feminine since its shortcoming is fragility.[70] In addition to connotations of femininity, pastel also carried the potential for connoting sexual immorality in the nineteenth century, a notion evident in Degas' Bathers pastels. Degas would have been familiar with Blanc's text, as would his contemporary audience, including the Parisian elite, artistic intelligentsia, and professional art critics. Blanc's theories of pastel, color, and sexuality became common artistic knowledge even before Degas produced the Bathers series two decades later.

Theories of pastel and color such as Blanc's were part of both the contemporary audience's mindset and the contemporary artistic aesthetic. A September 1867 letter from

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[69] Schacherl, *Degas: Dancers and Nudes*, 48.

[70] Anthea Callen, "Coloured Views," ed. Andrew E. Benjamin, in *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts: The Body* (London: Academy Editions, 1993): 23-24.

Degas' friend the American expatriate artist James McNeill Whistler to a their mutual acquaintance, the artist Henri Fantin-Latour, elucidates the assimilation of Blanc's theory into the contemporary artistic consciousness:

> Colour – it's really a vice! Certainly it has the right to be one of the most beautiful virtues – if directed by a strong hand – well guided by its master drawing – colour is then a splendid bride with a spouse worthy of her – her lover but also her master, – the most magnificent mistress possible! – and the result to be seen is all the beautiful things produced by their union![71]

Whistler's letter appears to reference to *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, demonstrating the widespread understanding of Blanc's theories. It is as if the artist quotes Blanc's statement that "drawing is the masculine sex in art, colour it is the feminine sex." According to Blanc's treatise, the most erotic potential of pastel was in the application of color, reflected in Whistler's description of color as "the most magnificent mistress possible!" Specifically, Blanc asserted the erotic potential lay in the contrast of colors, as superimposing warm tones over cool tones connoted sexual immorality.[72] Callen asserts that Degas understood this eroticized and gendered "inscription of difference" and purposefully evokes it in the Bathers pastels. While Callen's argument risks accusations of extremism, it is useful for understanding the way that Degas' audience, familiar with Blanc's theory, may have perceived a notion of misogynistic eroticism in the Bathers pastels vis-à-vis his application of color.

The Bathers pastels, already erotic in content, are the only pastels in Degas' oeuvre in which he superimposes warm and cool tones so aggressively. Within Blanc's contemporary and gendered paradigm, Degas' enables the erotic potentials of pastel in

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[71] James McNeill Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour, September 1867, London, in *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, edited by Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp, on-line edition, University of Glasgow, http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence (accessed March 24, 2010).

[72] Callen, "Coloured Views," Benjamin, *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, 23-25.

his 1895-1900 pastel *After the Bath.* Connoting sexual immorality (according to Blanc's treatise), Degas boldly superimposes warm and cool tones creating a dramatic effect, as the work becomes a site of conflict: Her yellow skin and red hair abruptly contrast to the purple and blue on her arms and neck, while red, lightening-bolt-shaped lines slash through the green and yellow chair in the foreground. Additionally, on the walls of the room Degas rapidly scribbles yellow, red, and green lines on top of one another. Degas' superimposition of warm tones and cool tones in this pastel is so extreme that at times he creates brown spots. For example, where the bather lifts her warm-colored leg out of the cool-colored tub, Degas' has overlayed warm and cool tones so heavily that form becomes ambiguous, and the space becomes brown and muddled. This abrasive conflict between cool and warm envelops all aspects of the composition. As Rubin remarks, even without "Degas's keyhole vantage point. . . . his materials heighten sensuality, maintaining its location on the woman's body and the objects of her environment, yet displacing the erotic to the aesthetic."[73] The figure's sexual immorality, connoted by Degas' artistic choices, would have been immediately striking to a contemporary viewer. This, combined with the stark nakedness of the subject and its immediate reference to prostitution, demonstrates not just the erotic potential for color that Blanc described, but Degas' creation of a distinctly misogynistic eroticism.

When Degas combines the themes of eroticism and sexual fantasy with voyeurism, he communicates a misogyny specific to humiliation. As Rubin explains,

> The odd angles and the unconventional positions in the bather images suggest an unprivileged, haphazard view, like that of the opportunistic voyeur. Yet each was

[73] Rubin, *Impressionism,* 214.

> carefully calculated; one model recalled how excruciating were the poses the irascible artist demanded.[74]

Not only does Degas capitalize on the connotation of bathing to prostitution, he also chooses to present the most unflattering and degrading moments possible, humiliating the subject. One common trope in the Bathers pastels is a scene of a woman leaving her bath, stepping out of the tub, and suspending her body precariously in a state of frantic imbalance. Degas creates an experience that privileges the male gaze in which the viewer, privy to a naked woman's bath, can enjoy this erotic experience while the subject struggles awkwardly. These images present a sexual fantasy and Degas' misogyny is tangible. Schacherl notes that the bathers poses are "often graceless, as they stoop or recline; or lopsided, as they struggle to keep their balance while standing in the tub," yet simultaneously imbued with "raw" and "elemental" erotic power.[75] It is the tension in this category of Bathers pastels, between the subject's struggle and Degas' misogynistic eroticization of it through the voyeurism, privileging of the male gaze, and the connotations of nakedness, which communicates a misogyny specific to humiliation.

These pastels are similar in both composition and the specific message they communicate: Generally, a bather's buttocks are the focus of the composition, as she is about to tumble over the side of the tub. With her legs spread wide, Degas commits the ultimate breach of decorum: depicting the vagina, and even at times exposing public hair. To a contemporary viewer this would have had a strong effect, as it was a slap in the face to the decorum of the traditional nude. Because Degas' appropriation of nakedness already connoted prostitution, by exposing the vagina he dangerously challenged the

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[74] Rubin, *Impressionism,* 210-211

[75] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 90.

boundary between high-art and pornography. One of these images, the print *Leaving the Bath,* was produced in twenty states, suggesting an impulse to repeat and reproduce this particularly degrading and humiliating aesthetic.[76] As Rubin asserts:

> In probing the reality of the other seen close up, Degas performs a kind of violence. He implied as much when he once observed: "A picture calls for as much cunning, trickery and vice as the perpetration of crime." Even when it is transposed to the aesthetic – through fragmentation, ephemeral effects and lush handling – the act of vision is nevertheless an exercise of power.[77]

This misogynist impulse and "exercise of power" is evident throughout the Bathers pastels. While Wendy Lesser agues that critics have unfairly searched for crimes against Degas' nudes, the artist himself compares his own artistic process to committing a crime.[78] *Leaving the Bath* represents a trend in the Bathers pastels to communicate a misogyny specific to the humiliation and degradation of the subject.

This purposeful humiliation, in combination with a sense of misogynistic eroticism resonated with Degas' contemporary audience. Art critic Felix Fénéon's 1886 review reflected his shock to the bather with "her thighs wide open."[79] These specific subjects have awkward, ape-like body proportions. Images such as *Leaving the Bath* reveal misanthropy specific to Degas' misogyny, further degrading and dehumanizing the figure. Heather Dawkins argues that this eroticized and misogynistic misanthropy is reflected in the 1886 reviews of the Bathers pastels:

> The women depicted in various states of undress were described not only as slatterns (poor, ugly, and repulsive), but as animals, frogs, monkeys or cats – or as fat prostitutes having the flesh of mammals and rented out by the weight.[80]

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[76] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 46.

[77] Rubin, *Impressionism,* 218.

[78] Lesser, "Degas' Nudes," 26.

[79] Quoted in Lipton, *Looking Into Degas,* 182.

[80] Heather Dawkins, "Managing Degas," Kendall and Pollock, *Dealing with Degas*,134.

Again, Degas' misogyny, and his misanthropy in this case as well, are related back to nakedness and its unmistakable, contemporary reference to prostitution. It is this complex intersection of misanthropy, nakedness, and voyeurism, which created notions of an eroticized misogyny specific to violence and humiliation in the Bathers pastels.

V. The Bathers Sculptures

When compiling an inventory of Degas' possessions after the artist's death in 1917, Degas' dealer Paul Durand-Ruel discovered that the artist's apartment and studio were cluttered with hundreds of original sculptures, "scattered over his three floors in every possible place."[81] Despite his vast body of sculpture, Degas only exhibited one sculpture during his lifetime, *The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen,* in 1881. Posthumously, however, Degas' sculptures have experienced widespread and sustained circulation since 1921. Today in museums and private collections throughout the world, there 1,700 bronze casts of seventy-four of Degas' original wax and mixed-media sculptures. At the Norton-Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, which holds the master collection of Degas' bronzes, the Bathers series accounts for nearly a quarter of the entire body of work.[82] While the Bathers sculptures have received little scholarly attention, they are significant entities within the artist's oeuvre and demand critical engagement. Degas' Bathers sculptures epitomize the themes of misogynist control, grotesque eroticism, and sexual fantasy evident in the Bathers pastels, transforming these complex themes into three-dimensional forms. The medium of sculpture and its three-dimensionality creates opportunities to manipulate texture and the relationship between the work and the beholder –formal elements that Degas capitalized on to maximize erotic potentials and express misogyny through new means in the Bathers sculptures.

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[81] Daphne S. Barbour, "Degas's Wax Sculptures From the Inside Out" *The Burlington Magazine* 1077 (December 1992): 798.

[82] Musèe d'Orsay website, http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/the-tub-3146.html?no_cache=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bsword%5D=Degas%20sculpture&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509%2C842%2C846%2C847%2C848%2C850&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=851&cHash=b0e9c49b0e. Accessed March 25, 2010.

One contributing factor is the unique and intensified level of voyeurism in the Bathers sculptures. Works such as Degas' 1888-89 *The Tub* display how Degas recreated the keyhole point of view in sculptural form. *The Tub,* like many other sculptures from the series, was intended to rest on the floor. Degas' construction the work to be viewed from above intensifies voyeurism, emphasizing themes of the male gaze, and masculine power and control, creating a level of voyeurism that surpasses that in the Bathers pastels. In *The Tub,* the figure rests obliviously in the water, languidly crossing her left leg over her right and examining her left foot as she lies relaxed in a small, round tub, absorbing nothing, in Degas' words, but her own "physical condition."[83] Schacherl describes the uniqueness and intensity of this voyeuristic phenomenon in *The Tub*, and how the beholder's experience is affected by the change in medium from pastel to sculpture: "When the water nymph takes on three-dimensional shape, she makes herself as comfortable as if she were seated in an armchair, casually crossing her legs and forcing the beholder to confront her from above, in a way that sculpture had never demanded before."[84] The positioning on the floor creates a voyeuristic effect even more powerful than the keyhole point of view of the Bathers pastels. The viewer is able to behold the sculpture in totality from a physically dominating position, in which he is privileged with uninhibited access to the work. Degas creates an unlimited accessibility that intensifies voyeurism, privileging the male gaze and augmenting the sexual objectification of the passive and oblivious subject. He also creates an erotic fantasy, recreating the experience of the brothel peephole in sculptural form. This reconstruction provides the viewer even greater sexual power and control. In the contemporary brothel peephole, the voyeur's

[83] Moore, "Memories of Degas," 64.

[84] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas,* 102.

gaze was limited by the physical confines of the peephole, a limitation that Degas overcomes in *The Tub*. This augmented voyeurism is enabled by Degas' mastery and control over his work, which led Theodore Reff to describe him as "the artist as technician."[85]

Themes of voyeurism and misogynist control would have been even more evident before the sculpture was cast in bronze. In their original form, Degas' experimental use of mixed media would have blurred the boundary between the viewer and the subject, creating an immediacy in viewing the works. Degas used objects from contemporary life in the Bathers sculptures to create a tangible relationship between viewer and subject that was unprecedented by the Bathers pastels. As Roger J. Crum asserts, this is what caused much of the outrage when *The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* debuted in Paris in 1881: "The *Little Dancer* was controversial because of its casual, lifelike appearance, its novel combination of sculpted matter and actual materials, and its rough, unidealized, and seemingly unfinished surfaces."[86] This lifelikeness and unorthodox mixing of materials would have been even more scandalizing in the Bathers sculptures, which were already more erotic and controversial in theme. Before the bronze was cast in 1921, *The Tub* consisted of rosy, flesh-colored wax; the water was made of liquefied plaster, and the bather even grasped a real sponge in her left hand.[87] All of these compositional elements provide a sharp contrast to the traditional nude, sculpted in "high-art" materials such as bronze or marble.[88]

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[85] Theodore Reff, *The Artist's Mind* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harper & Row, 1976), 270.

[86] Roger J. Crum, "Review: Degas Bronzes?" *Art Journal* 54 (Spring 1995): 96.

[87] Schacherl. *Edgar Degas,* 102.

[88] Crum, "Review," 94.

Considering the works in their original state also provides the potential to understand the complex nuances of eroticism and twisted sexual fantasy in the Bathers sculptures. As Crum asserts, "The bronze cast of *The Tub* is a rather dead approximation of the original. Dead indeed. Much of the excitement, daring and contemporaneity of Degas the sculptor is lost in bronze statuettes."[89] Reff discusses the significance of Degas' use of materials in the Bathers sculptures, explaining that the original works possessed "astonishingly lifelike colored wax," as well as "real hair, which Degas had brought from a manufacturer of dolls' or puppets' wigs."[90] Again, there is an emphasis in the artistic process on hair, perhaps related to Degas' hair fetish. The use of real hair would have emphasized the figure's *nakedness*, rather than the idealized beauty of the nude, reifying the series' theme of a grotesque eroticism. As Schacherl asserts, Degas was an "alchemist," always seeking to mix and experiment with mediums in order to create the perfect composition.[91] Likewise, the effect of real hair, combined with the work's three-dimensional form and unconventional appropriation of ordinary materials, may have even elevated the grotesque eroticism in the Bathers pastels to a morbid eroticism in their sculptural counterpart: Degas' use of mixed media in the Bathers series deconstructs the boundary between the viewer and the artwork. As Degas' sculptures possessed actual, ordinary materials, as opposed to traditional, high-art materials, they demanded an even more immediate engagement with the viewer. Furthermore, they demanded higher level of interaction between the beholder and the work than either the

[89] Crum, "Review," 97.

[90] Reff, *The Artist's Mind*, 290-291.

[91] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas,* 48.

Bathers pastels or a traditional marble or bronze sculpture of the idealized and archetypal nude bather.

One unique feature of the Bathers sculptures is their rough texture, which creates a heightened sense of touch. This striking tactility is created by Degas' "exploitation" of the textural possibilities.[92] The works' rough folds, crevices, and edges tantalize the beholder, prompting the urge to touch the sculptures and discover their irregular and unpredictable surfaces. The tactility in the sculptures presents the viewer with an even more tangible eroticism than their pastel counterparts do. Here, Degas deconstructs the ideal nude in sculptural form by breaking down the boundary between gaze and touch and transforming an untouchable ideal of feminine beauty into a grotesque, rough, and readily accessible form. Callen argues that the tactility of Degas' Bathers sculptures directly relate to contemporary social anxieties: when the peephole became popular in brothels in response to the syphilis outbreak, it produced a new social and sexual anxiety, since the ability to look did not quench the desire to touch – an anxiety communicated through Degas' remarkably tactile work: "The same morbid fascination, this conflict between the desire to look and the fear of contamination, between gaze and touch, is discernible in Degas' *Bathers.*"[93] Just as Degas intensifies voyeurism as he moves from pastel to sculpture, he also intensifies themes of grotesque eroticism when changing mediums by evoking such strong tactility. Rooted in a distinctly contemporary context, these erotic, tactile, and voyeuristic qualities would have been even stronger to a contemporary viewer.

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[92] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas,* 102.

[93] Callen, "Degas *Bathers*," 174

The roughness of the Bathers sculptures is even more striking when they are compared to the Dancer and Equestrian sculptures. The Bathers sculptures are far rougher and therefore far more tactile than Degas' other sculptures, reserving the erotic and controlling effects that this tactility produces for the Bathers series. For example, the smoothness of Degas' 1892-96 Dancer sculpture *First Arabesque Penchée* is in stark contrast to the roughness of the artist's 1895 Bather sculpture *The Masseuse*. *First Arabesque Penchée's* unadulterated, smooth surface emphasizes the beauty and grace of the dancer's movement, which the viewer beholds from the usual physical and psychological distance. The roughness of *The Masseuse,* however, creates a visceral reaction, as the beholder is intrigued by the rough surface's tactility. Degas' manipulation of sculpture as a medium antagonizes the beholder, tempting the viewer to break the traditional boundaries of art upheld in the Dancer sculptures, making the naked figure accessible to the viewer – not just through gaze, as the Bathers pastels allow, but through touch as well.

The Bather sculptures create a paradoxical tension for the viewer, which communicates both a sense of ambiguity in form and the aggressive and assertive presence of the artist's hands. As Rich argues with regard to the Bathers pastels, the Bathers sculptures lack Degas' consistent emphasis on "prettiness and finish." Rich's argument resonates when comparing Degas' *First Arabesque Penchée* to *The Masseuse*. Though both were produced in the same time period, only the Dancer sculpture has "prettiness and finish," while the Bather sculpture is left tattered and rough. Elucidating the significance of this disconnect, art historians believed until the 1980s and 1990s that Degas' sculptures were made late in Degas' life when he was going blind, as it seemed

only plausible that a visually impaired Degas would create such anomalous work.[94] However, as Degas himself explained, his Bathers sculptures were purposeful and composed with genuine artistic intention: "I modeled animals and people in wax for my own satisfaction, not to take a rest from painting or drawing."[95] While this myth of "the blind Degas" has since been dispelled, it speaks to the striking texture that characterizes the Bathers sculptures.

It is also interesting to consider the ambiguity of form in the figures as a result of Degas' rough handling of material. Broude wrote in her defense of the artist's reputation that, "Degas did not paint women as stereotyped feminine objects, but as distinct human beings, emphasizing neither prettiness, nor grace, nor charm, but rather individual character."[96] This assertion accounts for Degas' portraiture and his habit of painting recognizable dancers in paintings of the ballet, but it does not accurately describe Degas' Bathers. Contrary to Broude, Schacherl argues that Degas' Bathers can be described in three words: "anonymous, oblivious, and self-absorbed."[97] While this is evident in the Bathers pastels, where Degas frequently situates subjects with their faces away from the viewer, it is even more apparent in the Bathers sculptures, where the rough handling of material renders even more ambiguous forms. Not only are the figures in *The Masseuse* devoid of any defining facial features, such eye and lip shape, mouth size, pupils, eyebrows, or nostrils, but the rough texture makes it impossible to discern where one figure begins and the other ends. Degas' Bathers do indeed lack grace, charm and

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[94] Barbour, "Degas's Wax Sculptures," 798.

[95] Crum, "Review" 95.

[96] Broude, "Degas 'Misogyny,'" 104.

[97] Schacherl, *Edgar Degas*, 103.

prettiness, but not because of any emphasis on "individual character." Rather, Degas' rough handling of material betrays his misogyny.

Additionally, as Barbour's research shows, Degas' Bathers sculptures would have appeared far rougher in the original wax forms. A comparison of Paul Durand-Ruel's 1917-18 inventory photograph of *Seated Woman Wiping Her Left Side* with the master bronze in Pasadena displays the effects of the casting process. As Barbour notes, the surfaces of the master bronze appear "highly finished, as seen in the precision and definition of the musculature"[98] – features not found in Degas' original wax sculpture. There is a particular difference in the rendering of breasts between the wax sculpture and the master bronze. The rough texture of the wax sculpture emphasizes the bulbous nature of the figure's large breasts, which are distinctly mounted on top of the subject's torso, with special attention to the articulation of the nipples. While Broude and Lipton have argued that representations of the female body in Degas' Bathers series are intended to be highly naturalistic, it is clear from the perfectly shaped, melon-sized breasts, perfectly centered nipples, and lack of sag, despite the figure's lowering and twisting movement, that *Seated Woman Wiping Her Left Side* is an eroticized depiction of the female body. This, however, is lost in the bonze casts, where the breasts emerge more subtly from the torso, diminishing the beholder's experience of breast shape and size, and attention to nipples that Degas foregrounds in the original wax sculpture. As seen by comparing the two versions of *Seated Woman Wiping Her Left Side*, the augmented eroticism combined with the increased tactility of the original wax form would have communicated an explicit sexuality that is diminished in the bronze casts. Even more than in the pastels,

[98] Barbour, "Degas's Wax Sculptures," 804.

Degas' sculptures demonstrate how the Bathers are not, as Pollock asserts, images of women, but "sign[s] of sexuality" constructed in a patriarchical paradigm."[99]

The defining tactile, rough, and unusual texture of the Bathers sculptures reaffirms Pollock's claim, and the desire to touch is evident in works such as *The Masseuse* is augmented by the presence of a second figure, the maidservant. The presence of a second figure is not unique to the Bathers sculptures, as a similar secondary figure is present in many of the Bathers pastels, as well as in the Brothel monotypes. In the Bathers pastels and Brothel monotypes, the secondary figure reflects the theme of voyeurism, as the opportunistic beholder is able to peek inside the room. What is unique about this secondary figure in the Bathers sculptures, however, is the significant impact it creates in regard to themes of touch and violence. Unlike Degas' Bathers pastels, where the secondary figure is often cropped, the secondary figure is here fully described. In *The Masseuse*, the direct and highly apparent physical contact between the bather and the maid enhances the sense of tactility, as the beholder's desire is intensified by the physical contact between the two figures. Additionally, the relationship between the maid and the bather implies Degas' misogyny through its explicit communication of violence. In *The Masseuse*, the bathing subject is obviously in pain as the maidservant touches her: the subject's pose, clutching her lower back and twisting away from the masseuse is not a pose of physical pleasure, but of physical discomfort. Degas explicitly inflicts violence upon his subjects in the Bathers series that is intensified from the Bathers pastels. This is evident merely by observing the physical interaction between the two subjects in *The Masseuse*, and the physical anguish that the bather suffers from as the result. In

[99] Pollock, "Degas/Images/Women," Kendall and Pollock, *Dealing with Degas,* 23.

interactions between two subjects in Degas' Bathers sculptures, the misogynistic and violent tensions remain unrelieved and become focal points of the work.

A comparison of *The Masseuse* with *First Arabesque Penchée* reveals Degas' overt implementation of power and control in the Bathers sculptures. There is a contrast between Degas' Bathers and the Dancer and Equestrian sculptures, between stasis and movement. Lesser argues:

> Degas's nudes actually represent a captured moment in continuous movement. What we witness in them is not prolonged strain, but strength in motion – an almost oblivious strength. . . . To describe these captured gestures as "tortured" or "awkward" is to misunderstand the difference between a single moment of continuous movement and a permanently held pose.[100]

Lesser's argument describes the sustained movement in Degas' Dancer and Equestrian sculptures, but does not accurately describe the Bathers sculptures. Degas emphasizes the beauty in elegant movements in *First Arabesque Penchée* as the dancer glides through the air, and the beholder can experience the fleeting moment in which her movements climax in a graceful arabesque. Similarly, the Equestrian sculptures capture the fleeting moment of a horse's rapid gallop. The effect in the Bathers sculptures, however, is completely opposite. While the subject in *First Arabesque Penchée* represents Lesser's "single moment of continuous movement," *The Masseuse* is indeed a "tortured" and "awkward," "permanently held pose." There is a distinct feeling of stasis for the beholder, who has the power to view the intimate act of bathing indefinitely and without inhibition. Callen argues that this effect is also prevalent in the Bathers pastels: "At times, Degas's hatching explicitly denies the movement of the form."[101] This effect is expressed even more explicitly in the series' sculptures. The sculptures' distinct

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[100] Lesser, "Degas' Nudes," 26.

[101] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,*128.

statics, combined with unlimited access to them, privileges voyeuristic opportunism in a way unprecedented by either the Bathers pastels or any other of Degas' sculptures. As Bernheimer argues, Degas' voyeurism "cater[s] to his misogyny," humiliating the subject for the "sadistic sexual pleasure of," and without guilt for, the voyeur. [102] As stasis is not a universal attribute of Degas' sculpture, but a unique characteristic of the Bathers sculptures, it reveals an intensified misogyny specific to the series.

While the defining stasis in Degas' Bather sculptures betrays Degas' misogyny, it also relates more broadly to contemporary gender issues and the notion of control. Degas' was a period of heightened gender and sexual anxiety, originating from a multiplicity of sources including the breakdown of regulated prostitution, the outbreak of venereal disease, and the establishment of the French feminist movement. It was a societal belief that for the sake of cultural survival, masculine order was essential to counter female chaos. This is reflected in the Bathers sculptures, as Degas' static representations of the Bathers trap them for eternity in a position that offers the (male) beholder complete control over the (female) bather. Callen asserts that this was confirmed and legitimized by "the explosion of discourses on woman at all cultural levels – in the popular press and novels through to criminal anthropology, medicine and art." [103] This would affect, Callen argues, both artistic intention and contemporary reception to the Bathers series. It is within this historically and culturally specific context that stasis in Degas' Bathers sculptures elucidates new and more complex possibilities for meaning. As discussed earlier, Degas' Bathers related to contemporary anxieties surrounding the deregulation of prostitution and fears that it could lead to societal breakdown. While

[102] Bernheimer, "Degas' Brothels," 175, 162.

[103] Callen, "Degas' *Bathers*," Kendall and Pollack, *Dealing with Degas*,162.

Degas' Bathers pastels demonstrate a reaction to these contemporary anxieties, the sculptures privilege the male gaze and masculine control with greater immediacy and intensity.

One of Degas' most intriguing works is *Pregnant Bather.* While the subject seems anomalous, the sculpture embodies all the defining and problematic features of the Bathers series. Many of Degas' contemporaries also produced images of motherhood: Renoir's 1885 painting *Mother's Joy* depicts a mother breastfeeding a baby, while Cassatt's 1893 painting *The Child's Bath* presents a mother giving her daughter a bath. Degas' sculpture, however, presents a strikingly different image of motherhood. The pregnant woman is not a symbol of ideal femininity – as in Renoir or Cassatt's images of motherhood – but a site of erotic engagement for the viewer, as Degas' emphasizes her voluptuous breasts. Like the other Bathers sculptures, the figure is extremely rough provoking the beholder with the temptation to touch. While Degas' counterparts idealize motherhood, Degas' eroticization of the pregnant female body, with its nakedness and tactility, in combination with the theme of bathing and its connotations of prostitution, creates a grotesque eroticism and sexual fantasy. Degas degrades pregnancy and motherhood to an animal-like representation, as this rough and ugly figure clutches her pregnant belly, gazing obliviously outward, and in the artist's own words about the Bathers pastels, is "unconcerned by any other interests that are involved in their physical condition." Werner describes Degas' misanthropy in regard to the Bathers,

> He viewed his models as an animal keeper might study his caged creatures. To him, they were chattels rather than women, scarcely distinguished from the horses he observed at the racetracks. He dethroned the idealized woman of the Classical painters and offered us, instead, "a cat licking herself" (in his own words).[104]

[104] Alfred Werner, *Degas: Pastels* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1977), 68.

In *Pregnant Bather,* Degas simultaneously deconstructs the idealization of motherhood and of the archetypal nude. Degas' identities as misogynistic misanthropist and voyeur intersect in *Pregnant Bather*, producing a figure that is animal-like and ugly, yet grotesquely erotic.

As demonstrated by *Pregnant Bather,* while the Bathers sculptures communicate themes of misogyny, control, and fantasy more explicitly and successfully than their pastel counterparts, there are some issues regarding intention and reception. Though the works stimulate interesting dialogue about the complex and nuanced meanings in the series, it is interesting and at times problematic to engage the Bathers sculptures. Degas' attitude towards sculpture changed drastically throughout his career. In the early 1850s in a letter to his friend the artist Pierre Cornu, Degas pondered his direction as an artist, "I often wonder whether I will be a painter or a sculptor. I have to say I am very undecided." Later in 1921, the first year of circulation for Degas' posthumous bronze casts, the contemporary art critic François Thiébault-Sisson recounted what Degas had once told him about his sculpture:

> My sculpture will never give that impression of completion that is the ultimate goal of the statue-maker's trade, and since, after all, no one will ever see these efforts, no one should think of speaking about them, not even you. After my death all will fall apart by itself, and that will be better for my reputation.

Degas then, never intended for his sculptures to be seen by the public. Even more problematic, as Crum explains, when works are cast, the process is usually closely supervised by the artist.[105] It was Degas' dealer Durand-Ruel, however, who selected the seventy-four waxes, he deemed "quite fine" and appropriate for casting and subsequently

[105] Crum, "Review," 95, 97.

supervised the casting process. Of these, forty-two underwent structural repairs, and many others were "restored" by conservators. As Barbour asserts, "Ironically, these bronzes, which are now so prominent as to overshadow the originals in popularity, are sculptures which the artist himself never knew."[106] It would be a disservice to discount the Bathers sculptures from the scholarship, but it is also problematic to consider the bronze casts as authentic Degas' works. As Crum asserts, the focus of scholarly investigation must address a specific question: "But what exactly did Degas 'behold' when he modeled a figurine in wax and clay?"[107] For this reason, it is imperative to consider Degas' Bathers sculptures in their contemporary context in Degas' studio, as this paper has done. Even though most of what remain of Degas' Bathers sculptures are bronze casts, they still offer valuable insight into the series, and the artist's career, specifically when considering them within their original, contemporary context.

The posthumous bronze casting also problematizes audience reception. For the privileged few who saw the Bathers sculptures in Degas' studio during his lifetime, the works had a remarkable impact. Renoir, one these privileged few, and himself a misogynist, declared Degas to be "the greatest living sculptor."[108] Crum argues that because the original sculptures would have been debuted to a contemporary audience in wax, as opposed to a high-art material such as bronze or marble, they would have appeared even more scandalous and shocking – as was the case when Degas' exhibited *The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* to an audience that reacted with dismay and horror. The misogynistic appropriation of eroticism and fantasy in Degas' Bathers sculptures

[106] Barbour, "Degas's Wax Sculptures," 798-799.

[107] Crum, "Review," 94.

[108] Barbour, "Degas's Wax Sculptures," 798.

were conveyed by the attributes of roughness and tactility, voyeurism, unorthodox use of non-high-art materials, the enhanced, and violent at times, eroticization of bathing, and Degas' even more misanthropic communication of misogyny.

VI. Conclusion – Degas' Bathers: Problems and Possibilities

While the posthumous casting of Degas' sculptures pose questions of intention and reception, the Bathers pastels are not without problems. According to Callen, it is rumored that after Degas' death, his brother destroyed many of the Bathers pastels and Brothel monotypes to prevent the family's humiliation, since the works were so sexually explicit that they tested the boundary between high-art and pornography.[109] A similar problem exists in regard to the Bathers sculptures as well, as many of the wax originals in Degas' studio – some of which were likely more sexually explicit than the works Durand-Ruel decided to cast – have been lost or destroyed since the artist's death in 1917. If scholars are indeed missing the most erotic images from Degas' oeuvre, it could alter the discourse on Degas' Bathers, as well as the entire field of Degas scholarship.

With issues from the past come issues in the present. As pastels are fragile, many Bathers images have been removed from public view in museums and placed in storage for preservation. The fragility of the pastel medium, which Degas originally used to communicate misogyny in accordance with Blanc's treatise, has become the works' weakness. Today, in art institutions such as the Norton-Simon Museum in Pasadena, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Musée D'Orsay in Paris, the Bathers sculptures have greater public visibility than the pastels, and have become a part of Degas' artistic legacy, despite his vehement opposition to their exhibition. The problem, as Pollock diagnoses it, is that the museum is a "site of legitimization," where institutional prestige and authority dictate the viewer's experience of art.[110] Therefore, this shift in visibility from the pastels in Degas' contemporary context, to the sculptures

[109] Callen, *The Spectacular Body,* 82.

[110] Pollock, "Degas/Images/Women," Kendall and Pollock, *Dealing with Degas*, 22.

in modern museums, reflects an inevitable shift in both the meanings of the Bathers series, and the works' potential to communicate those socially and historically specific meanings. The imperative to conserve the pastels, in conjunction with the greater durability of the sculptures has superseded Degas' original artistic intentions. It also alters audience reception, as with this shift, much of the contemporary meaning is lost in the modern context of the museum. These shifts have had a profound impact on the series, since comprehending Degas' misogynistic appropriation of eroticism, and sexual fantasy is dependent on contemporary context.

Nevertheless, the Bathers series provides a fruitful opportunity in an underdeveloped field of Degas scholarship. Though there are problems regarding modern display and meaning, considering them in the context of late nineteenth-century Paris elucidates the nuanced complexities of the series. Degas' Bathers series is rich with culturally and historically specific meaning, and demands further critical engagement.

VII. APPENDIX

Fig 1. Èdouard Manet (1832-1883) *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Fig 2. Edgar Degas (1834-1917). *The Tub,* 1886. Pastel on paper, 60 x 83 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Fig 3. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) *The Valpinçon Bather*, 1808. Oil on canvas, 146 x 97 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Fig 4. Edgar Degas (1834-1917). *Nude Woman Combing her Hair,* 1885. Pastel on paper, 78.7 x 66 cm. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. A. Alfred Taubman.

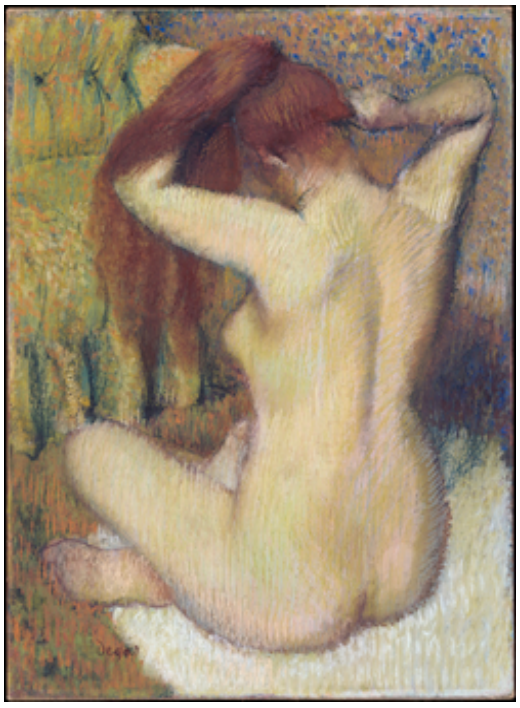

Fig 5. *Crouching Venus* c. 1st century BCE, Roman copy of Hellenistic original, c. 3rd century BCE. Marble, (h. 96 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Fig 6. Edgar Degas (1834-1917). *Nude Woman Having Her Hair Combed,* 1886-1888. Pastel on paper, 74 x 60.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: H.O. Havemeyer Collection.

Fig 7. Edgar Degas (1834-1917). *The Breakfast after the Bath,*1895. Pastel and a brush on tracing paper (121 x 92 cm). Private Collection.

Fig 8. Edgar Degas, French, (1834-1917). *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub,*1885-1886. Pastel on paper (70 x 70 cm). Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington.

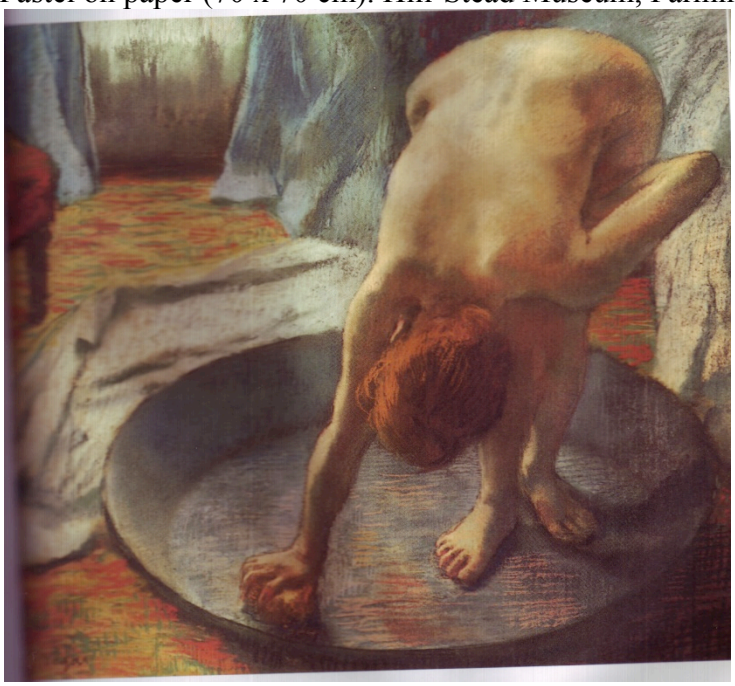

Fig 9. Edgar Degas (1834-1917). *The Tub,* modeled 1885-1886, cast 1921. Bronze (h. 22.5 cm). Musée D'Orsay, Paris. Photograph by the author.

Fig 10. Edgar Degas, French, (1834-1917). *The Masseuse,* modeled 1895, cast 1921. Bronze (h. 43 cm). Musée D'Orsay, Paris. Photograph by the author.

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