

Pretty, Ugly, Beautiful: Florine Stettheimer at the Jewish Museum

by Max Kozloff

Florine Stettheimer: Painting as Poetry at the Jewish Museum

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Florine Stettheimer, Beauty Contest: To the memory of P.T. Barnum, 1924. Courtesy of Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, CT

Paul Gauguin once belligerently declared: “Ugliness can sometimes be beautiful; the pretty, never.” As an article of modernist faith, this sentiment was later joined by pronouncements such as the critic Clement Greenberg’s “All profoundly original art looks ugly at first.” Despite being qualified by “sometimes” and “at first,” these categorical statements also work as exclusionary dicta.

An ugly image is generally thought to be displeasing upon visual contact. Here it’s implicitly regarded as a sign of tough mindedness that breaches conventions and disrupts them with art that defines a new, challenging beauty. The ethics of such ‘ugliness’ may also generate an artist’s principled resistance to being understood too easily. If a picture is truly modern, viewers must look for meanings that are unexpected, imperious and hard to take.

A pretty picture, contrarily, is stigmatized as a product made to gratify or seduce viewers, in compliance with cultural norms. Also, it is associated with aesthetic modes favored by the “weaker sex.” An appetite for pretty things is enhanced if it has a sweet tooth. One can therefore easily imagine what a manly modernist might think of a painting titled “Love Flight of a Pink Candy Heart.”



Florine Stettheimer, *Spring Sale at Bendel's*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art

frequently scattered across nebulous white grounds and are endowed with a gem-like aura that resembles the capitals in illuminated manuscripts. Yet, when they're on the move, they might also recall the snap of a Fred and Ginger routine in Hollywood movies. Had he known them, Busby Berkeley, the dance choreographer, would have found them congenial—if a little loose. Stettheimer herself was beguiled by glamor, whose effects and trappings she applied to decorate private or public festivities. Fashion runways, cocktail parties, and picnics on the grass were evoked as appropriate environments for diarist memories, garnished with vines that twitch and outsized flowers that bloom.

The words themselves carry such a heavy charge of glucose as to suggest an ironic intent. Their author, the New York artist Florine Stettheimer (1871-1944) does employ irony, but not so much as to dilute the warm feeling she extends toward her subjects. It emerges in the way the men she depicts are as feminized as the (far fewer) women, both made amiable by the camaraderie of the salon world she presented. Even when seated, these dapper fellows are very light on their feet, as dainty as a ballerina's. Far from treating it only as a nuance in the proceedings, Stettheimer asserted the prettiness of the men at the soirees she enjoyed and often hosted. You are invited into her relaxed socialite enclaves, fetched there by diminutive characters that resemble dolls or puppets.

What strikes the eye immediately is the rhythm of line and limb that jumps about, especially in ensembles with little narrative pretext. They're

Contemporary American figure painters of her period, roughly 1917 to the early forties, had not visualized anything so outlandish as could be called a fragrant atmosphere. Café life in the “roaring twenties” was at least well toasted by Archibald Motley in Chicago. As for the next decade, regionalists specialized in agrarian sagas, and their urbanist counterparts in carnivalesque satire or citified solitude. Think of Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, George Tooker, and the romantic Puritan synthesis achieved by Edward Hopper. One would look in vain for any of their works to feature a cigarette in a holder or a champagne flute about to be sipped. (Also, Prohibition didn’t encourage it.) Rather, the sufferings of thirties hard times induced in painters a need to take themselves seriously, propelled by austerities of style. Stettheimer was an ardent New Dealer. But if politics entered her art, it was apparently to celebrate the patriotism of Wall Street, art museums and the entertainment industry with a bouquet of fire works and flags. Her Cathedral series, which visualizes such themes, easily manages to squirt hints of institutional self-importance up from the pseudo pageant conducted on the ground. Fifth Avenue as the Garden of Eden. This artist worked hard to have fun—at short, metropolitan range.

Certainly her jocular sensibility placed Stettheimer far to the side of contemporary art mainstreams. There is, of course, no law against artists delivering such marginal reports. But when their iconography is concentrated upon a privileged, insular coterie in an era of national suffering, the result may look inhumane to people with a liberal conscience.

But what if the art itself exhibits sympathy to members of a minority group, so disparaged at the time that they could not expect to have civil rights equal to those of their fellow citizens? I refer to the depiction of gay men in Florine Stettheimer’s oeuvre.



Florine Stettheimer, *Self-Portrait with Palette (Painter and Faun)*, ca. 1915, oil on canvas. Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York

In life, no more than a handful of those she knew were actually homosexual—a fact that scarcely mattered. She visualized almost the whole lot of them throughout her career, as essentially fellow women, regardless of their male outfits and histories. They come across as vibrant presences, alive with curvaceous behaviors. And when they swagger, they're truly elegant. It's a comedy of manners, whose players are perceived in almost a domestic context. Forget the dynamics of gender conflict or any idea that an ethical issue is involved or that an activist program was required to motivate the stories she tells. Everyone looks at who ever else, presumably through the embracing lens of the female gaze, come what may.

Some notion of this shift in gender inter-action has certainly trickled into the growing scholarship on Florine Stettheimer and lifted her up as an American original. The talk at those gatherings she shows might have been highfalutin and some of the accents, foreign. “This isn’t Kansas anymore”, says Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.” Just as evident is the fairy tale aura that has morphed Florine’s New York into a mythical city—not that it has affected her characters, though it definitely has conditioned her viewers.

This overt figure of pictorial speech permitted the artist certain liberties, above all the camouflage of modernist innovations by outsider, “unschooled” practices. Her interest in garden, lacy, or wood bower ornament was translated into obtrusive yet attractive frames for her paintings. Her drawing style imitated those of young girls, fashioning mash notes in daybooks, yet it seems more knowing and mundane than was within the reach of its genre. As for the space fancied in her art: nominally, it results from a bird’s eye view, suggesting an aloof, buoyant perspective. But it’s really a white, pearlescent background holding vignettes in place without any general grip of logic or locale. This white stuff serves as an invisible scaffold, sometimes melted a little to reveal labels that tell of the personalities illustrated in unrelated scenarios. Such is the funky outcome of strategies that have transposed a collage aesthetic into a personal memoir.

I have so far left out two features that reward our contact with her works, as physical objects. They have surfaces built up through attentive layering by a palette knife, that in the end creates a thickness worthy of frosting on pastry. Or cake. I came away seduced by this flirtation with the human sense of taste. More dramatic, however, is the appeal Stettheimer makes to arouse viewers by color. In her vision, a marriage of color and light can take place in a deliquescent array of hues, as in stained marble, or in opaque, individual fields of heavily saturated yellows, oranges, or blues. Against the pervasive white, with which they are paired, they stand out as fiercely emotive patches of here and now, front stages of perception rather than of those far away. Seeing these pictures only in black and white reproduction would not prepare you for the forcefulness of their chromatics.

So, is Florine Stettheimer's art a paragon of prettiness, as formulated offhandedly by modernist doctrine? Aware that one of her closer friends was Marcel Duchamp, alias "Rose Sélavy," I would say "maybe." With his readymades, Duchamp played an unlikely role as metaphysical dandy. But when we turn to another of her associates, one she actually collaborated with, the case is not so simple. Gertrude Stein invited Stettheimer to design the costumes and sets for the opera "Four Saints in Three Acts" (music by Virgil Thomson). Their most vivid moment of collaboration came in the chorale (sung by an all black chorus), "Pigeons on the grass, alas!" The theatrical constituents of this scene included cellophane, feathers and lace—materials designed to banish any thought of modernist gravitas, though inescapable as avant-garde tokenism. Given that she anticipated the advent of popular forms into progressive art, Stettheimer insinuated that they were also to be enjoyed as absurdist gamesmanship. She had chops in both areas. Pretty, ugly, beautiful: she misused and mixed their modes at cost to the stodginess of their traditions. No wonder the critics of our day are want to take their hats off at the spectacle she provides.