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Art

Exposed: The Victorian Nude
Alison Smith, editor
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Locking eyes with her viewer, a nude woman nests heavily in the tousled sheets of her four-post bed. Over the casual slump of her shoulder, and with one leg thrown ahead of her swollen belly, her glance casts the ruddy weariness of her dimly lit boudoir. Softly, on another canvas, the downward gaze of a goddess traces the lucent curves of her breast and stomach only to reflect in the bath waters at her feet—stilled and swallowing the border of her golden drape. In the contrasting imagery of the female form seen between Orpen's *The English Nude* and Leighton's *The Bath of Psyche*, the elusive nature of the Victorian nude in general is, at once, exposed.

Alison Smith, author of *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art*, and curator of *Tate Britain*, sculpts an important academic incarnate in Exposed, a masterful catalogue fashioned to accompany the first comprehensive exhibition of Victorian nude art, which travels to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in autumn. Due largely to the weedy aggression of imprecise Victorian stereotypes, stemming from seeds of early twentieth century cultural connoisseurs once sewn to define the path of modernism, nude art of this era has until recently suffered considerable scholastic neglect. Nineteenth century Britain, once obscured by opaque cliches of cultural and social frigidity, emerges here in shades of latent aesthetic intricacy.

A trio of essays launching the book provides the stalwart academic scaffolding from which the flesh of the nearing catalogue hangs. Penned by different hands with shifting tonalities, each shoulder the weight of relevant topics with characteristic literary densities, while retaining accessibility to an admittedly foreign subject matter. Smith opens with a study of the "English" nude, providing an ossified anchor for following essays by discussing at length the tortuous historical approach to defining nude representation, and stylistic evolution in the British tradition. Fellow curator Martin Myrone follows with an informal discussion of fabled Victorian priggishness, palpable pornography, and the question of decency in relation to the nude. Nottingham University lecturer Michael Hatt rounds out the triad with a thoughtful essay

regarding the role of nude sculpture in Victorian tradition.

Cleaving the catalogue into six cells of concentration, Exposed effectively delineates a collection that may otherwise appear nebulous to unfamiliar audiences. Sections titled “The English Nude,” “The Classical Nude,” “The Private Nude,” “The Artists Studio,” “Sensation! The Nude in High Art,” and “The Modern Nude” trace the growth of the Victorian nude into a tradition of its own design, reflecting a movement from classical idealism to a stark modern realism.

Included in the catalogue of nudes in high art, Hacker’s *The Cloud*, depicts a libidinous representation of the female form, shattering any illusion of repressed Victorian sexuality, with its cresting eroticism. Arching her back across a cumulus cloud, a woman is bathed in radiant sunlight, as “by the end of the century sun iconography had become an important means for justifying the representation of the body beautiful and the expression of physical rapture and evolution.” Similarly, the carnal verve of Leighton’s bronze sculpture *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python*, harnesses the passionate allure of the male nude form, as it captures muscles fluidly frozen against the writhing vice of a serpent. Wound sensually twice about a thigh, the python’s head is ultimately held at arms length by the athlete’s rigid sinews; a stirring contrast of sinuous scales against sleek flesh rendered with exacting, astonishing detail.

Pages, thick and lushly gravid with color, resonate the inherent beauty of the showcased works in this opulent volume. Sophisticated design, teamed with rich production value provides the visual equivalent to cerebral satiation. Filling pages primarily with reproductions of canvases, the catalogue offers a fair showing of sculptures, illustrations, cartoons, gelatin-silver prints, and 35mm silent film frames. Meaningful and provocative accompanying texts will at once leave audiences lingering over each image, while spurring them to the next page of its tangible gallery tour.

Demonstrating certain value to students of art history and all students of human aesthetics in general, *Exposed* emerges as a significant academic and perceptual work. Here lies the beauty of the Victorian nude form, somewhere beneath the sheathing patinas of bronze torsos, and behind the fragile canvas collarbones and apricot oils—a beauty found in the complexities of an era, which lies deeper than flesh.

Karen Wyckoff