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Florine Stettheimer

New York and Toronto

by MATTHEW J. ABRAMS

THERE ARE PAINTERS, and then there are painters' painters. Many become the former; only a few become the latter. It is a rarefied community, and one that Florine Stettheimer – a wealthy, queer, Jewish New Yorker who painted her friends and family in her palatial midtown home – has dominated for the past century. But there is something strange about Stettheimer's *œuvre*, given its popularity among artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and Jutta Koether: despite her widespread and continuing influence (she died in 1944) Stettheimer's own work has, somewhat inexplicably, eluded canonisation. The exhibition *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* at the **Jewish Museum, New York** (to 24th September), and then at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (21st October–28th January 2018), hopes to bridge the gap between Stettheimer's two disparate identities: perennial darling of the art world and relative outsider of more popular narratives of Modernism. *Painting Poetry* is a sweeping survey of the artist's manifold works of art, and it represents an impassioned campaign for Stettheimer's genius and contemporary relevance. The sheer number of her paintings on display, many from private collections, makes this important and delightful show a rare treat.

Florine Stettheimer, her two sisters, Carrie and Ettie, and their mother, Rosetta, formed

an intimate cohort of well-travelled, highly educated cosmopolitan women who lived together until Rosetta's death in 1935. Raised and trained in New York, then Stuttgart, Berlin and various other European cities, Florine received a traditional and thorough art education. With the outbreak of war in 1914 the family fled from Paris back to New York, settling first on the Upper West Side and then moving permanently to their midtown apartment in the Alwyn Court building. Here they established a salon that became a seedbed for American Modernism and, until her unexpected death three decades later, Stettheimer enjoyed a prodigious, albeit cloistered, period of productivity. This mature period, which is well represented at the Jewish Museum, is almost as unique as it is ineffable.

It is apt that one must open a door to enter the exhibition. Interiority, both spatially, formally and thematically, defines the display. Co-curated by Stephen Brown and Georgiana Uhlyarik, it opens with *Family portrait II* (cat. p.46; Fig.90), where Stettheimer's typically thin, almost invertebrate bodies compete for space with a massive floral bouquet. Nearby stands a vitrine displaying ephemera, photographs and books by Stettheimer and Ettie (who received a Ph.D. in philosophy from Freiburg University). Above this vitrine hang half a dozen small oils and drawings; alongside, the words of the first of several poems by Stettheimer are printed in gold leaf. The show's logic is thus part-chronological, part-thematic. It then regresses further in time to Stettheimer's juvenilia, which appears alongside an early and quite academic drawing of Florine by the Stettheimers' friend and

French tutor, Marcel Duchamp (affectionately known to the sisters as 'Duche').

Following a photographic enlargement of Stettheimer's later Bryant Park studio, three portraits exemplify her mature, high-camp aesthetic. The three women portrayed are Stettheimer's mother, aunt and teacher, painted in 1925, 1928, and 1929 respectively. Their bodies are waifish, their homes divine. In *Portrait of my mother* (Museum of Modern Art, New York; p.67), Rosetta appears cocooned in black lace, seeming to float above her fabric-fringed and floral-printed interior. Her skin is pink, her flesh undefined and she holds a copy of Ettie's novel *Love Days* (1923). Amazingly, the family's interiors really were this camp, as were all of Stettheimer's mature paintings. Irreverence, excess and dabs of humour constitute both. We find this everywhere, including in Stettheimer's private poetry: 'You stirred me / You made me giddy / Then you poured oil on my stirred self / I'm mayonnaise'.¹

The next of the four distinct sections tracks Stettheimer's proposed theatre project, *Orphée of the Quat-z-Arts*. Inspired after seeing a Ballets Russes production of *L'après-midi d'un Faune* in 1912, Stettheimer began designing her own ballet, and hoped to induce Vaslav Nijinsky to dance the lead. Included here are several dozen maquettes, drawings and mixed-media studies depicting lithe dancers in campy costumes. The maquettes especially have a fantastic, cartoonish quality (Fig.91), much like her later paintings, and the curators suggest that the ballet indeed functioned as a catalyst for formal innovation. The idea that Stett-



89. *Asbury Park South*, by Florine Stettheimer. 1920. Canvas, 127 by 152.4 cm. (Collection of Halley K. Harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York; exh. Jewish Museum, New York).



90. *Family Portrait II*, by Florine Stettheimer. 1933. Canvas, 117.4 by 164 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Jewish Museum, New York).

heimer's stage maquettes somehow revolutionised her approach to depicting the body is tantalising. But there is a darker side to this watershed period. Stettheimer's mature style was established between 1914 and 1918, during the war that forced her family to flee Europe. It seems likely that the war, and not just the Ballets Russes, contributed to the solidification of the artist's long-incubating style. One could even argue that Stettheimer's interwar bodies parallel those of, say, Otto Dix – only in Stettheimer's visions, Dix's painful grotesques that resolve an unspeakable reality become ecstatic arabesques inhabiting an unlivable fantasy. For Stettheimer, her wish to return 'home' remained just that – she would never see Europe again.

At the centre of the exhibition are two square rooms facing one another, each enclosed behind a narrow opening that emphasises the sense of interiority (and by extension, domesticity) in Stettheimer's paintings. To the left is a room filled with portraits – men on one side, women on the other. Particularly striking is her *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy*, a double portrait of the Dadaist and his androgynous alter-ego (1923; p.113). Typical of this period, the work includes an extravagant frame, a repeating 'MD' in silver wooden letters. Beside this are portraits of other close friends and cultural luminaries, including the art critic Henry McBride (1922; p.108) and Alfred Stieglitz (1928; p.114). Opposite this wall is *Portrait of myself* (1923; p.21), where Stettheimer lies recumbent in a sea of pink and red fabrics, and family portraits including *Portrait of my sister, Carrie W. Stettheimer* (1923; p.95), in which her sister appears beside the doll's house that she laboured over for decades and that became a site of artistic exchange when artists began donating miniature works to it. This work especially stress-

es the inextricable ties between Stettheimer's social life, her domestic space and her art. The three collapse upon one another into a dizzying *mise-en-abyme*.

The strategically placed hearth screen, handpainted by Stettheimer (p.79) presents the space as a sort of mini-salon. To this purpose, the walls of the gallery have been subtly engraved to effect mouldings: wainscoting, pilasters, chair-rails and entablatures. This is a nice middle ground for Stettheimer exhibitions (as rare as they are), which have tended to attempt a wholesale transformation of the white cube into Stettheimer's domestic space (see images of the interiors in the exhibition catalogue, replete with cellophane curtains, gauzy trim and gaudy ornament).² The Jewish Museum wisely keeps the schmaltz-factor to a minimum, recognising that you can never completely whitewash the white cube, even when its walls, as here, are painted bubble-gum pink.

The paintings in the room opposite depict group scenes. Lively, if not chaotic, tableaux fill each canvas in the *fêtes galantes* tradition. Whether ice-skating, canoeing, beach-going, or elbowing fellow wealthy shoppers as in *Spring sale at Bendel's* (1921; p.121), Stettheimer populates her works with herself, her family, and recognisable friends. Again, her coterie becomes the cause and effect of her works.

Perhaps the most important work here is *Asbury Park South*, an incredible vision of the community's day trip to a segregated beach in New Jersey (p.119; Fig.89). Given its daring subject-matter (a white female painter depicting black, middle-class leisure) and its complex composition, *Asbury Park South* might very well be Stettheimer's magnum opus. The work also raises a pressing issue for Stettheimer scholars: how do we reconcile the Stettheimer salon, its extraordinary affluence

and anti-bohemian sentiments with the larger Modernist community? And what should we make of their engagement with the Harlem Renaissance, which was encouraged by the family's closest friend and the movement's noted but controversial impresario, Carl van Vechten?

The show's final space is a requiem to Stettheimer's costume and set designs for the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1933). Scored by Virgil Thompson and written by Gertrude Stein, the two asked Stettheimer to provide suitably avant-garde designs. She met the challenge, which resulted in extraordinary costumes made from experimental fabrics like foil and crinkly pink cellophane. Here we find a vitrine of ephemera, a second large display of maquettes and a screening of an early *Four Saints* production (the opera premiered at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford on 7th February 1934; it opened on Broadway two weeks later). By bookending the exhibition with Stettheimer's early and late forays into the performing arts, the curators help to lay bare the artist's impressive range and the importance of seemingly marginal practices to her larger aesthetic.

¹ F. Stettheimer: *Crystal Flowers*, New York 1949, p.30.

² Catalogue: *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry*. Edited by Stephen Brown and Georgiana Uhlyarik. 168 pp. incl. 150 col. ill. (Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2017), £35. ISBN 978-0-300-22198-5.



91. Faun Maquette for *Orphée of the Quat-z Arts*, by Florine Stettheimer. 1912. Modelling putty on wire armature with brass sheet and shellac-based paint, height 30.5 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Jewish Museum, New York).