

Lost in Arcadia

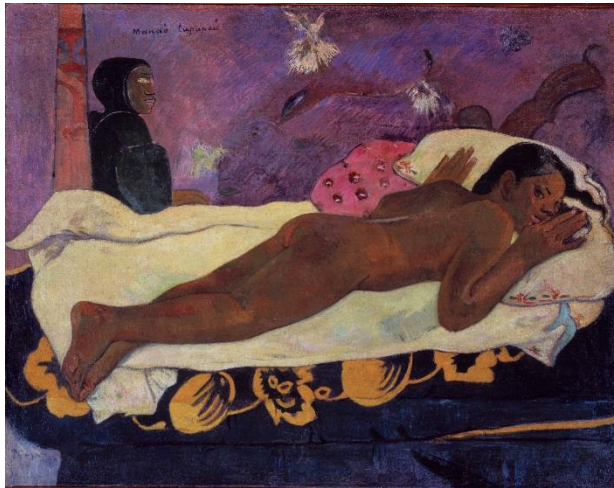
Gauguin, the Alchemist Grand Palais, Paris

Robin Richmond, December 15, 2017

Eugène Tardieu: So, do you accept the idea that you are a revolutionary?

Paul Gauguin: I find this idea ridiculous.

Interview, *L'Echo de Paris*, May 13, 1895



The Spirit of the Dead Watching: *Manaò tupapaú*, 1892



From the Noa Noa woodblock print series, 1893-4

It is hard to believe that anyone ever thought that Paul Gauguin was a revolutionary, and it's revealing that the man himself disparaged the concept. These days - aside from the well-behaved, bonneted Breton ladies of his early work in Pont Aven - the archetypal Gauguin image we hold dear is one of beautiful, fecund, bare-breasted *wahines*, flowers in their hair, impassively resting under our yearning gaze.

To us beleaguered city dwellers, Gauguin's work is the consummate fantasy representation of the classical Northern European set loose in the South Sea islands - a queasy amalgam of Fletcher Christian, Lord Jim, Thor Heyerdahl and Jack Sparrow. He paints our dreams of an Edenic paradise where life is scented with

lotus flowers, deliciously imbued with *Noa Noa*, the fragrance of the Exotic. He is lost in Arcadia.

This new show, which focuses principally and exquisitely on his late work in Polynesia, makes itself clear in its subtitle. There are his clunky, hand-built, faux-barbaric ceramics based on indigenous work. There are fabulously inventive wood block prints and his wood carvings which are, for me, a revelation. And there are his magnificent paintings. But just before Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in 1891, escaping France, it had become a French colony, and by the time he got there there was little evidence left of the old culture. Far from leaving the Christian stuffiness of Paris behind, he was confronted by fervent Christian evangelism. He was forced to rely on old photographs for iconographic history. The society was already fragmenting.

He is posited at the Grand Palais as a magician. An alchemist. We are given the evidence of his shamanic journey from an old life in stuffy Old Europe, to a better life, where, in his own words, he is “seduced by a virgin land, by a primitive race, for humanity in its beginnings.” So this is a show about cultural appropriation (and oh does he love his “primitive” idols), but it is also a show that demonstrates the energy created in that place where male sexuality and spirituality collide.

The reconstruction of his hut in Atuona in the Marquesas islands is the centrepiece of the show with its celebratory *Maison de Jouir* carved into its lintel. This is translated as *House of Pleasure* for the countless schoolchildren that throng the show, but which might be better translated as the *Maison de Bang Bang* - think of Berlusconi's bunga-bunga. This is where he left his parting gift to its inhabitants - syphilis.

The job of a good curator should not include moral judgement. But little is made in this exhibition of Gauguin's lack of affect or self-awareness in his work and life. This bothers me, probably more than it should. Departing married life in Paris, Gauguin's psychological journey takes him to pastures new. There is little mention of the abandoned Danish wife and 5 children and job in the stock market in 1886. And nowhere is there a mention of his careless renegeing on his commitment to the artistic community with his dear “friend” Van Gogh in Arles in 1888. There is little doubt now that this contributed hugely to Vincent's self-mutilation and breakdown. Of course one doesn't have to be a good person to be a good artist. This has always bothered me a lot. In my heroes Michelangelo, Virginia Woolf, Picasso, and T.S. Eliot, the milk of human kindness seems curdled in their souls.

So I have to end this with a confession. Gauguin, the Alchemist, in the catalogue's words “aims to explore Gauguin's capacity to transform materials through his unrestrained and experimental approach to his disciplines” and it is a true wonder of a show. I recommend it. But I came out of the Grand Palais, in a mood markedly at odds from my fellow visitors, who were the very crowds that Gauguin disparaged and rejected. Well-heeled, well-behaved, well-dressed Parisians worshipped at the shrine.

I left feeling angry.