Brown on Barbillon et al., editors (2017)


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The fourteen essays comprising this volume tackle an important issue that has shaped critical writing about female artists and their output, namely, their connections to the lives and works of other—typically male—relations. Classified as “companions,” “daughters,” “sisters,” or “widows” of other individuals, women have often found their creative agency undermined by a focus on the familial roles they have played throughout their lives. Descriptions of female creativity are shown to be an important litmus test for a society’s ideas about the roles for which women are suited and, by extension, the areas in which their contributions are most valued. Typically, there is an “either/or” involved in decisions taken by family members, historians, critics, and—on occasion—women themselves: wife or business woman; muse or artist; disciple or innovator. The tensions involved in making these choices and imposing classifications are traced in this volume through a series of case studies drawn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Section one examines familial relations as both a stimulus and an obstacle to individual creativity. Denis Laoureux begins by considering the impact of marriage on the creative lives of nineteenth-century Belgian women, noting that the majority of professional female artists of the period remained unmarried. While Laoureux examines ways in which women negotiated private relationships and professional networks (sometimes adopting a pseudonym to assert a public identity), Amandine Rabier shows how the Italian-English artist Maria Cosway abandoned her career as a history painter, but carved out a distinctive role as teacher, specifically of young women. Rabier’s essay reveals that this particular assertion of agency has been underestimated by historians who have typically positioned Cosway in relation to two celebrated men—her husband, the painter Richard Cosway, and her close associate, Thomas Jefferson. Other essays in this section offer illuminating studies of Louyse Moillon, second daughter of the celebrated portraitist Nicolas Moillon (Cécile Coutin); Madeleine Dinès, daughter of the Nabi painter, Maurice Denis (Élodie Bouygues); and of professional and amateur photographers active in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century (Thomas Galifot). While authors showcase the strategies that women devised in order to negotiate social structures that threatened their independence, Galifot shows how the invention of photography offered women certain advantages by virtue of its distance from existing patriarchal structures and artworld institutions. The upshot, he argues, was the emergence of a new creative “sisterhood,” the members of which developed their own networks of professional and personal solidarity in response to the spread of the new medium.

Contributors to the book are sensitive to the fact that women could often turn personal relationships to their own advantage. Growing up in the household of a successful artist-father, for example, could offer financial stability, education, and access to a network of artworld contacts. Taking up this point, section two sharpens the focus on the professional environments in which women operated. Pascale Cugy examines the roles that women played in eighteenth-century printmaking industries, their contributions to business operations often having been obscured by virtue of the familial context of the firm or directly threatened by internecine jealousies among relatives. Other essays in this section focus on women who have been classed by critics and historians as students, mistresses, adoptive daughters, and widows of male artists. Julie Verlaine’s discussion of the impact of widowhood on the careers of Sonia Delaunay and Jeanne Kosnick-Kloss is particularly interesting. Despite having enjoyed a successful career in her own right as both an artist and a businesswoman in the early decades of the twentieth century, Delaunay opted to sign her name “Sonia Vve Robert Delaunay” after her husband’s death in 1941. Similarly, Kosnick-Kloss devoted herself to establishing the posthumous reputation of her husband to the detriment of her own career. Yet, as Verlaine notes, the adoption of a commemorative role also opened other spaces in which each woman could establish a sphere of self-worth—public recognition as the widow of a great artist and a social basis from which to promote her own art.

The final section of the book focuses on artistic couples, including Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann, Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, and Yoko Ono and John Lennon. Essays consider what it means to be part of a couple and how the combination of social pressures and close personal ties can generate tensions in the assertion of creative identity. As Émilie Bouvard notes, the vilification of Yoko Ono by Beatles fans upon her marriage to Lennon, and the overshadowing of her art and contribution to the Fluxus movement persisted long after Lennon’s death in 1980. Yet contributors also show that couples devise ways in which to negotiate new identities within their public output. Whether subverting traditional social roles in the case of Lennon and Ono, or abandoning individuality in favor of a shared creative persona in the case of Cahun and Moore, being part of a couple could permit, as the editors note, forms of “reciprocal
emulation” (5), capable of unleashing, rather than hindering, the creative potential of the individuals involved.

While the essays in the volume are interesting and engagingly written, the book itself has not moved much beyond the conference framework from which it was drawn. Little work has been done to frame and contextualize the essays, and there is neither an index nor a bibliography. Given the space constraints imposed on the authors, the book remains a tantalizing introduction to the impact of personal relationships on the aspirations and careers of female artists. Contributions open trajectories for further study and—most importantly—invite the reader to question the wider socio-critical apparatuses within which female creativity has typically been discussed and analyzed.