

Prosthetic Gods by Hal Foster, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2004, 464 pp, 15 colour plates and numerous black and white ill., £ 22. 95, ISBN 0262062429.

Hal Foster's writings are always deeply intelligent and challenging and this collection of eight essays, nearly all of which have appeared previously in other forms, will be gratefully received and widely read. The essays deal with a variety of topics, including primitivist rhetoric in early twentieth-century art, the architectural theory of Adolf Loos, the machinist imagery of Marinetti and Wyndham Lewis, reflections on psychotic art from the Prinzhorn collection, aspects of Max Ernst's Cologne Dada production, images of women in surrealist photography and the art of Robert Gober.

To an even greater extent than in his previous books (with the exception perhaps of *Compulsive Beauty*) Foster links these seemingly disparate topics via a psycho-analytic logic. Freudian and Lacanian modes of analysis predominate throughout these essays, forming the basis for the complex theoretical and interpretative schemas by which the book is unified. For instance, two of the finest essays - the title piece 'Prosthetic Gods' on Marinetti and Lewis, and 'A Bashed Ego' on early Ernst - powerfully contrast representations of male subjectivity in early twentieth-century art, using Lacanian conceptualizations of lack alongside the Freudian concept of the 'death instinct' (a notion much used in *Compulsive Beauty* but arguably more telling in this shorter essay). These psycho-analytic strategies are augmented by the ideas of Klaus Theweleit (on male Fascist psychology) and Leo Bersani

(on masochistic self-shattering) in order, finally, to set up the Marinetti/Lewis aesthetic of machinist 'hardening'/armoring against the more parodic and self-reflexive uses of related imagery in Ernst's Dada printer's block drawings of 1919-20. Foster argues that the work of Marinetti/Lewis suggests that 'the very stake of high modernism at this time involves wagers with reification and death' (p. 149). In contrast, Ernst exacerbates this strategy of mimicking the anti-human tendencies of social modernization and warfare to the extent that his 'excessive identification renders the given conditions absurd' (p. 166). Marinetti/Lewis are thus seen as embracing the death-instinct in a sadistic or masochistic attempt to surmount the shocks of modern experience, whilst Ernst is revealed to have been more capable of surrendering the prerogatives of masculinity in images of 'phallic divestiture.' Foster's overall argument here is thoroughly convincing, and he is much more attentive to the art historical background for the works he discusses than was sometimes the case in his earlier writings.

It would be impossible to devote space here to all of the essays in this volume. Perceptive and original reflections on individual artists and works of art abound, and for every moment of agreement with Foster (as in his brilliant analysis of Ernst's *That Makes me Piss* collage of 1919, on pp. 169-70) there is a moment when one feels his theoretical schemas blind him to comparatively straightforward aspects of individual images. The latter objection particularly holds for his reading of Ernst's *The*



Master's Bedroom (pp 209-14) where, as I noted previously with regard to Foster's discussion of this work in *Compulsive Beauty*, it is remarkable that he fails to register the image's relation to Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*. Ironically, the invocation of Van Gogh would have bolstered Foster's arguments which, at this point in the book, concern the figuring of psychotic states. According to Foster, 'Ernst evokes ...paranoid alienation in a work like *The Master's Bedroom*, where the viewer becomes the viewed' (p. 219). Surely the 'paranoid' aura of Ernst's work, or more particularly the sense that it recoils on the viewer in some way, is an outcome of the way in which the marked perspectival recession in the image is contradicted by the scale of the bear at the far end of the room or the disposition of the furniture at the lower right. These spatial contradictions precipitate a dizzying toppling of the room's perspective into the spectator's space, a process which was implicit in Van Gogh's original *Bedroom* painting. Ernst must have taken his visual cue from Van Gogh, just as surely as the Dutchman represented for him the archetype of the 'mad artist.'

It should be clear from the above that Foster's book provides ample opportunities for both enlightenment and disagreement. For surrealist scholars there will be nothing particularly new in the publication, given that the main piece on surrealism, titled 'A Little Anatomy,' was included in the exhibition catalogue for *Desire Unbound* at Tate Modern in 2001. What is very interesting, though, is the way that Foster's orchestration of his previously-published essays produces a model for the way in which surrealism might be thought to 'continue' into the concerns of contemporary art and theory. This is consolidated by the final essay in the book, a fascinating discussion of Robert Gober, theorised in relation to the Lacanian 'lost object.' It could well be that Foster's importance as a critic will rest on the way that he has clarified and elaborated a genealogy of surrealist concerns that is in no way reducible, in the final analysis, to the movement proper.

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