

Richard Hawkins

Smoke-Smoke*, Salome.

3 November 2011 – 7 January 2012

opening reception on Thursday, 3 November, 7-9 pm

“... it cannot be by chance that I cut those handsome, vacant-eyed heads out of the magazines.”

– Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*

A primary interest, for many years, has been Gustave Moreau's “*Salome Dancing Before Herod*”. Intrigued by the fact that Cindy Burlingham at the Hammer Museum has been working on an exhibition focusing specifically on Salome and been given rare access to the Musée Moreau's extensive archives, I have been peeking in on her research, sharing reading material and picking her brain for months now.

Though I have always been fascinated by this painting I have never been able to quite find a text or context that matched the direction of my fascinations. There have been some attempts, particularly in the 70s, to recoup Moreau as a forerunner to abstraction for the simple reason that he would title, frame and hang on the wall even the roughest of his rough oil sketches. I'm sure it's true. I'm even sure his students Rouault and Matisse would agree but ... meh ... it seems you discount Moreau's amazing ability to meld looseness with detail and narrative with affect to get at this particular reclamation. And besides having to overlook Turner – a decades-earlier example of the “much better unfinished” school – the evidence for this line of appreciation has always been there without dragging out every little half-baked sketch. Most of Moreau's more finished paintings are riddled and coruscated with epiphanic little passages of pure non-descriptive painterly indulgences. The observation, sadly lacking, should perhaps be that this singularly evidential joy of pushing paint around was always available to viewers of Moreau's most publicly well-known pictures; they'd just have to stow their Victorian values and make it through the confrontational and horrific *Grand Guignols* of *Salome* and the *Hydra* to get there.

Also, what does it mean that an artist returns to mytho-religious subject matter when – within the same year – Caillebotte is painting a real-life rainy day Paris street corner (one that happens to be only about 5 blocks away from Moreau's studio on rue de La Rochefoucauld)? Is Moreau doing something really heretical and obstinate in contrast? Or something begrudgingly and nostalgically conservative? Why couple the lurid and sickly with the erotic when Bouguereau is still towing the academic party line for the plump and the saccharine? Why such an emphasis on sharp distinctive line when Manet is across town painting a portrait of Mallarmé with a few breezy whisks of a brush? Why such overwrought embellishment when Cézanne is already working on reducing even mountains to a few very simple rudimentary forms?

Aside from the early abstraction line of reclamation, the other discourse that currently surrounds *Salome* is that she is a kind of personification of feminine evil at the advent of burgeoning 19th century women's rights. Which is true, obviously – but only if you believe art is inevitably ever more than a Freudian slip of culture's unconscious. To retrieve such a great painting from the trap of such narrow (though pointedly well-intentioned) interpretation, one might only have to look as far as the painting's initial exhibition, the other elements within the picture itself and, specifically – as I have said – the tiny jewel-like rivulets and globules of paint that make up its surface.

I'm not Bataille. But if I were, I'd want “*Visions of Excess, Volume 2*” to have a chapter addressing answers to the following questions regarding Moreau and *Salome*: Knowing that the artist exhibited “*Salome Dancing*” in the Salon of 1876 alongside two other works – “*The Apparition*” and “*Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*” – does the intentional pairing with mythological subject matter thwart the intention of the original bible story? (Like, for example, the tone and arcane poesis of Oscar Wilde's play on the same topic does – just imagine bringing up either Wilde or Moreau in your Sunday School class on the Gospel of Mark and you might see what I mean). Don't all three works – *Salome*, *The Apparition* and *Hercules* together – throw an understanding of Moreau's work into a less deterministic area where a delight in dark superfluity and the poly-perverse are embraced? And who of the several characters portrayed has access to power and uncompromised agency across the three pictures? – Weak and incestuous Herod? The controlling Herodias who tries to put an end to the viral pollution of Christianity? Seductress yet mere catalyst *Salome*? Goddess *Diana of Ephesus*** whose many nurturing breasts are also severed testicular tributes and who looms matriarchally over the whole scene? The apparitional prophet who carries with him the same nuisance that involuntary memories, zombies and other forms of resurrection always have in common (they pop up most anywhere and are then doggedly determined to not be sent away)? The most enfeebled and twinkiest of all representations of *Hercules*'s known to the history of art? The smattered mass of skulls and finely executed corpses at his feet?

Or the Hydra-cephalic monster who shares a superabundance of organs with Diana as well as the frustrating reanimation capabilities of Iokanaan?

And if I were Kristeva or Melanie Klein, wouldn't I see in all this something deeper and more ghastly than turn-of-the century gender politics? The rich, stagnant but fertile pre-conscious pools of symbiosis and ambivalence for example?

So – sigh – without answers to these questions, I've been making my own Salome paintings.

Richard Hawkins, October 2011

* In many forms of Pidgin English the doubling-up of a verb indicates the extension, multiplication or abundance of a particular repetitious activity. "Walk-walk" means walking further than you might like and "talk-talk" means talking more than a little. "Smoke-smoke" in the same parlance indicates a blowjob.

**Unused by most of these feminist fatale critics I mentioned, by the way, is the presence of Diana of Ephesus herself in "Salome Dancing". There's no verifiably scriptural reason why she's there other than that Moreau sets the scene in appropriately Roman times. If it's castration anxiety one's looking for, it's there already – in buckets – without even having to trudge through the metaphor of a beheading. (Except, of course, if you're pagan and you see Diana's castration cult as evidence of the ecstatic limits of eroticized bodies doing double-service as both polytheistic worship and surplus pleasure).