ARTICLES

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Antonia S. Byatt's Intermedial "Art Work:" The Empire Knits Back

Critics have developed various sophisticated hypotheses about the specific relationships between Byatt's *Matisse Stories* and its reproductions of Matisse's art. Gabriele Rippl (2005, 275-280) and Silvia Bigliazzi record the numerous ekphrastic parallels between Matisse and Byatt. Silvia Bigliazzi appreciates the "mise en abyme strategy of intertextuality" (Bigliazzi 1999, 194) in the hybrid "patchwork," but she states somewhat disappointedly that the reproductions primarily serve as accessible and decorative illustrations of the texts – with one exception that I will come back to (192, 195, 198). Catherine Mari even goes further when she states that Byatt's static, evocative descriptions imitate Matisse: "adoptant les priorités esthétiques de Matisse, ces nouvelles se font l'écho de la conception de l'art de ce peintre, 'un art d'équilibre, de pureté, de tranquillité'" (Mari 1997, 32). While it is true that visual description forms a central feature of Byatt's stories, I would seriously question that Byatt endorses balance, a sense of complacency à la Matisse, or any notion of transparent or 'pure' ekphrasis. Isabel Fernades comes to the convincing conclusion that the feminist stories invite new perceptions of Matisse (Fernades 2006, 201). Laurence Petit takes into account both the ekphrastic and the feminist features of Byatt's book in comprehensive and balanced readings (Petit 2005; 2006; 2008). I would like to considerably expand these approaches to the story "Art Work" and take a closer look at its multiple intermedial relationships from the perspectives of literary criticism *and* art history, the latter of which critics of Byatt's short fiction often neglect. "Art Work" deals not only with some of Matisse's particular works but also with the qualities of and relationships between painting, sculpture, crafts, design, photography, and writing. Byatt explores the influence of gender, race, and class on the production and the reception of art, work and art, and especially its critical evaluation and market value. In opposition to Mari and Bigliazzi, I consider the fictitious feminist work of art delineated in detail towards the end of the story, not Matisse's art, as an imaginary correlative to Byatt's story *and* as a subversive supplement to the pictures by Matisse that frame the story.

In spite of her feminist detachment from Matisse's *erotics*, Byatt seems to have chosen the modernist painter as her subject matter for his complementary *aesthetics*: Matisse regarded painting and drawing as a visual language, and Byatt uses writing for visual effects. Matisse's line drawings form the middle ground between painting and writing in literal and metaphorical ways. According to Matisse, drawing is "plastic writing" (Matisse 1995b, 131). Line drawing, Matisse continues, "contains [...] my possibilities of synthesis, the different points of view that I could more or less assimilate through my preliminary study" (131). Byatt, who positions the line drawings between the coloured reproductions of his pictures on the cover of the volume and the

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text of her stories in the volume, seems to unfold these different points of view suggested in the pictures, but also adds perspectives omitted or repressed by Matisse.

Matisse's self-reflexive drawing on the work of art, *L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir* (1937), which reveals the gendered process and product of drawing, serves as an appropriate preface to the self-reflexive story.

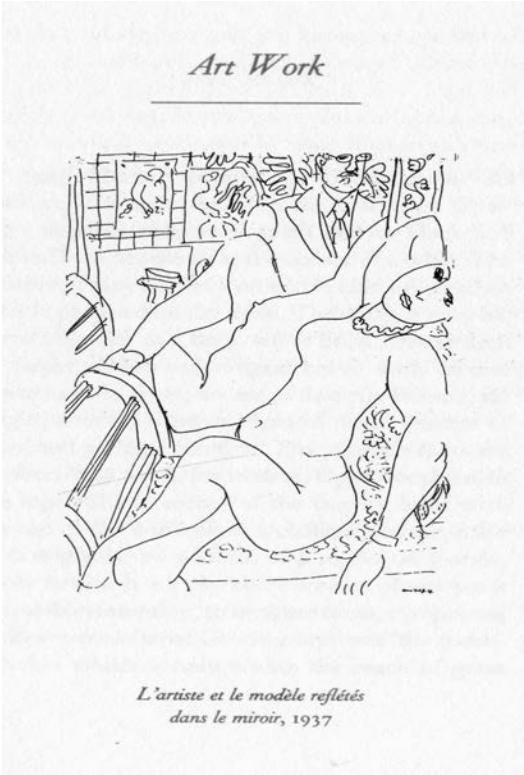

Fig. 1: Henri Matisse, *L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir* (1937; The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection), in Byatt (1994, 29).

In the foreground, the drawing shows a nude as a decorative object (with a bracelet and a necklace) in a relaxed, voluptuous pose with an ambiguous gaze that seems to be directed at the observer of the picture. However, it is questionable whether she sees the observer, since her eyes are looking "as if in a mirror, turning away from us into themselves" (Elderfield 1992, 41). Her back is reflected in the mirror, so that the observer obtains a view of the front and the back of her body, which is, albeit, only a white surface with an outline, a space for the projection of male fantasies. The nude in the foreground is opposed to the reflection of the artist's upper body, wearing rather formal dress. Behind him, we see decorative fronds and more sketches of decorative nudes, mirroring each other and the present scene in their sinuous lines. John Elderfield is certainly right when he remarks that the "model dissolves into her reflection" but less so when he observes that the drawing is "a reverie on female beauty with the artist himself looking on" (27). It is important that

the mirrored artist looks at his easel outside of the picture rather than at his model, suggesting his absorption in art and his detachment from an erotic interest in the model, a view that is endorsed by his formal dress. However, the deflection of his gaze is belied by her pose and position in the foreground, exposed to the voyeuristic view. As Elderfield stresses, Matisse exposes the fact that the models are silent, preoccupied, and theatrically positioned, and that the (imaginary) union is delayed or the "consummation held in suspense" (41). This picture perfectly translates Matisse's aesthetics of a double interest in the erotic body and in the beauty of his composition, which is, as he himself admits, "perhaps sublimated voluptuousness" (Matisse 1995b, 132). The art historian Marcia Brennan lucidly explains how masculinity and aesthetics dovetail in Matisse's work and life via a dialectical relationship with women: "Matisse's artworks presented an implicitly male audience with a privileged, if ultimately fictive, opportunity to access the sensual aspects of the female body while simultaneously preserving the option of intellectual detachment" (Brennan 2004, 11). The story "Art Work," as opposed to the "The Chinese Lobster" in Byatt's collection, offers no direct female response to Matisse's erotic art but a creative feminist expression of the female body and work. The ramifications of gender in the production and appreciation of art form the link between the drawing discussed above, the reproduction and ekphrastic description of Matisse's *Le silence habité des maisons* (1947), and the story itself.

"Art Work" starts with an ekphrastic description of a rather poor black and white reproduction of Matisse's *Le silence habité des maisons* in Sir Lawrence Gowing's book on the artist and his enthusiastic praise of the painter's "sumptuous" (Byatt 1994, 31)[1] colors and "extraordinary virility" (32), an assessment which is somewhat qualified by the colored reproduction of the painting on the cover of the book. We can see that Byatt's description of the formal composition is quite precise. However, instead of the large array of luminous colors, which, according to the narrator, we "may imagine" (32) upon Gowing's account we find that the picture reproduced in color on the cover is dominated by black and shades of bluish grey, painted over bright yellow shining through. The dark walls of the interior frame and set off the window with a view on a tree in bright light outside. Thus, the colors suggested by Gowing and Byatt's narrator represent the picture only with a difference – as does the reproduction in black and white. This self-reflexive intermedial juxtaposition throws doubt upon the question of the appropriate reproduction of art, adequate ekphrastic description, gendered aesthetic value judgements, and the necessary but hardly controllable imaginative readers' responses to all of the above. Byatt's ambivalent introduction raises awareness for the problems of ekphrasis and prepares the reader for the 'colorful' descriptions to come, asking him or her to use their imagination in order to generate color from the black signs of printed words on the white pages. Byatt has Matisse's colors 'speak for themselves' (with a difference in the colored reproduction), but uses very evocative language in order to convey the colors of the imagination and the fictitious works of art in the story.

In view of the feminist story, the two pictures seem to complement each other: the male artist at work on a nude (his potential lover?) in his studio corresponds to his absence in the domestic sphere of his home, where a mother (his wife?) and a child

1 Further references to the short story will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

are sitting at a table with a book. The situation suggests leisure time, but not necessarily harmony or silent bliss. In the upper left corner on the wall, the enigmatic outline of a head could represent the trace of the absent father or/as a dark mirror. We could re-read Matisse's picture as the 'silencing' of the wife and child under the surveillance of the patriarchal ruling spirit, a still life that turns the domestic space into something like a mausoleum. The somber interior is set off against the bright space outside the figures turn their backs to. However, the open white book on the table may provide an escape. The book is empty as the faces, and as Laurence Petit aptly states, they invite us to fill their blanks and to tell the story of the picture:

> This "painted" book thus becomes the locus of an interesting double mise en abyme, wherein the pages turned by the child potentially contain the transcription into words of the imaginary world around them and are, at the same time, the very pages of the short story "Art Work" that we are just about to begin. (Petit 2008, 399)

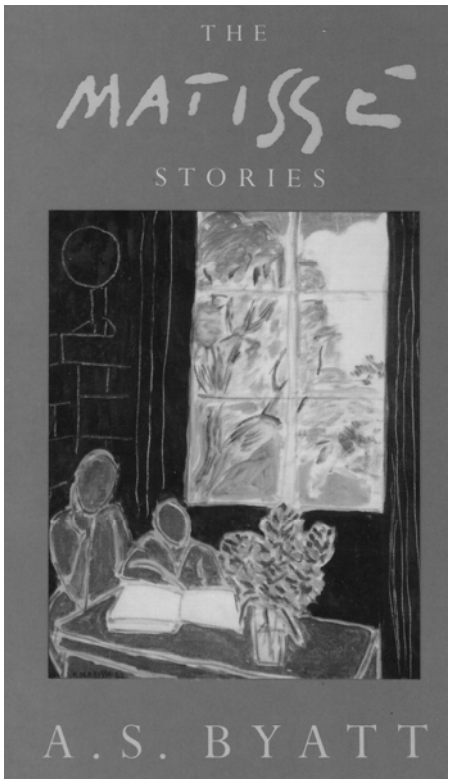

Fig. 2: Henri Matisse, *Le silence habité des maisons* (1947; Bridgeman Art Library, London), as reproduced on the cover (excerpt) of Byatt's *Matisse Stories*.

Possibly, Silvia Bigliazzi hints at a similar point when she writes: "[W]hat kind of book is this? Is it an autonomous object in Matisse's painting, or is it a pictorial equivalent of Byatt's book?" (Bigliazzi 1999, 198). The implied answer seems to be that it is both. Bigliazzi concludes that here, the relationship between picture and text becomes irony and turns into "an uncontrollable semiotic machine" rather than "a

coherent compound of images and words" (198), but she does not analyze the ekphrastic complications Byatt explores towards the end of her story.

The story celebrates colors and pays homage to Matisse (Petit 2008, 399-400), but it does so with tongue in cheek, I would add. Laurence Petit convincingly states that "the three artist figures that this short story stages, namely Robin the painter, Debbie the illustrator, and Mrs. Brown the sculptor/decorator, represent three modes of expression favored by Matisse over the course of his long career" (Petit 2008, 398). However, the story reflects both of the framing pictures with irony and negotiates gender in art. Byatt's intermedial quotation defamiliarize Matisse. The story makes the reader aware of Matisse's influence on the design of objects but also of his reduction of women to passive objects (Fernades 2006, 205): Robin and Debbie's daughter, reclining on her bed, looks like in one of Matisse's portraits, and the design of her bedspread imitates Matisse's picture *Jazz*. Matisse's *Silence* is ironically juxtaposed to the plethora of noises in the house, from the stereo and the hoover, the washing machine, and other household gadgets. Matisse's portraits of naked and passive women exclude all the household chores women took care of in order to maintain his comfort and his carefree life, as is the case with Robin Dennison: their work is devoted to art, effacing the women's work which forms the backdrop of their career. In addition, Byatt "is indirectly calling attention to the differences between her own medium – sounds and words – and Matisse's art of colours, lines and forms" (Fernades 2006, 203). The story tells us how the male artist's absolute devotion to his art leads to his alienation from his family.

Byatt's narrator raises a question but does not answer it directly: "Who is the watching totem under the ceiling" (32)? Later, the narrator presents us with the narcissist and neurotic artist Robin Dennison, the 'madman in the attic,' who is obsessed with colors and collects "fetishes [...] of glossy, very brightly coloured solidity" (62).[2] Byatt's elaborate ekphrastic descriptions of these objects betray both her fascination with colors and a certain self-reflexive irony, implying a distance from the perfect mimesis Robin aims at in his version of neo-realism. Robin's neo-realist art, "just this side of kitsch, then and now" (52), displays two extremes: bare surfaces and tiny hyperrealist objects. He seems to be possessed by the colors of things rather than displaying his possession of things through artistic representation in the sense of Matisse (Matisse 1995c, 156). Robin does not only stand "for the intellectual, cerebral, rational, spiritual, purified, and dematerialized pole of Matisse's approach to light and color" (Petit 2008, 398). He exaggerates and reduces this approach to a rigid system, a "caricature" (Fernades 2006, 207) that Matisse himself would have scorned (cf. Matisse 1995a, 41). Robin is fascinated by the "pure sensuousness" and "power" (56) of Matisse's *Luxe, calme et volupté*, a patriarchal fantasy of an island arcadia with a clothed motherly figure and several naked beauties (cf. Elderfield 1992, 33-36). The only male figure in the picture is a boy on the verge of his initiation into sexuality. Robin resembles a petulant boy rather than a man, and fails in his imitation of Matisse's style (56-57). Sometimes Robin paints the shadow of a toy soldier into

2 Laurence Petit develops a relevant alternative reading that compares the totem to Mrs. Brown's position as a cleaner, who has superior insight into the Dennisons' family life and their household, and seems to weave herself into her soft sculpture of an interior (Petit 2008, 408). Petit's interpretation would support the change of real power from the male head of the family to the female 'underdog' that Robin seems to despise for her apparent filthiness and ignorance, an attitude that betrays discrimination of race, class, and gender.

crowds of other things in his pictures (62), a self-effacing remnant of a dated masculinity, which recalls the virility attributed to Matisse in a satirical manner that works both ways (cf. Fernades 2006, 209).

Byatt's story can be read as an allegory of the (real or desired) decline of the domination of fine art by bourgeois men and the rise of women in adverse circumstances. The minor male artist is confronted with three women who represent the gendered change in the art market: the Irish-Jamaican Sheba Brown, an underprivileged lower-class cleaner who turns out to be an innovative artist, Dennison's own wife, the critic (cum artist), and the self-confident gallery owner Shona McRury.

Robin's wife Debbie (temporarily) gave up her ambition to become an illustrator and designer for the more immediately accessible and remunerative career of a design editor for *A Woman's Place*, implicitly not restricted to the home (36). In spite of Debbie's and Shona's interest in Robin's art as defamiliarizing the perception of trivial objects (Debbie) and raising an awareness of the littleness of our lives (Shona), both women are more intrigued by the "amorphous" (68) feminist art which does not aspire to "the 'authority' of 'artworks'" (68-69). This feminist art would represent everyday things that male artists neglect, and "the interior cavities of women, not the soft fleshy desirable superficies explored/exploited by men" (69), an obvious critique of Matisse's nudes.

Whereas Robin Dennison's art is his life (as was Matisse's), the cleaning lady Sheba Brown turns her life and work into art against all odds, or rather with the odds and ends other people discard, parts of upholstery, strands of wool, bits and pieces of all sorts of fabrics. Matisse was also an eager collector of textiles, starting out "as an art student, spending tiny sums he could not afford on frayed scraps of tapestry from Parisian junk stalls," and even continuing to pick up discarded rags when he could buy expensive embroideries and carpets from Africa, Arabia and Persia (Spurling 2004, 15). Ms. Brown's strange and innovative combinations of color are not only based on her intuitive and subjective aesthetic sense but also on the vast variety of colors she happens to come across over the years of her domestic service. She is closer to Matisse in her independent development than Robin, who consciously tried to emulate the great master but gave up. Matisse stipulated that the "knowledge of color depends upon instinct and feeling" and goes beyond any theory of colors (Matisse 1995a, 41). Petit argues perceptively that there is a parallel between Matisse's composition with color, Byatt's weaving of color into her text, and Brown's weaving of colors into her network of fabrics (Petit 2008, 407-408). Sheba is a "travesty" (Fernades 2006, 209) of Matisse: the 'colored woman's' version of an *arte povera*, using the traditional female crafts, is juxtaposed with Matisse's luxurious and bourgeois paintings and sculptures. Matisse sometimes seems to have adapted his female models to the decorative textiles he draped them in, but Mrs. Brown re-creates the image of women by the very textiles they used. Her stunning, colorful installation or assemblage of wall-hangings, crochetings, weavings, stitchings, and knittings in combination with a collection of everyday items and furniture exceeds comprehension – it is truly an expression of the female Other missing in both Matisse's and Robin's art: The Empire knits back.

In spite of her indulgence in optimistic, lively colors, Sheba does not present the joy of women but includes what Matisse ignored (Fernades 2006, 209). There are creatures which could be furniture, animals, or women, both recalling and confusing

the images of women as objects of use or pleasure and creatures of nature (78-79). In the center of the cavern, a soft, almost organic interior, we find a defamiliarizing and inverted version of an arch-patriarchal motif: a dragon, a chained lady, and a knight. The 'dangerous animal' is "a Hoover and a dragon, inert and suffocating" (80), representing the household chores that fetter women to the domestic sphere. The woman's body is broken and twisted, chained by "twisted brassières and demented petticoats, pyjama cords and sinister strained tights" (80). The composition recalls images of sexual violation. It is disturbing that the woman's eyeholes are cut out and "stitched round with spiky black lashes" (80), as if to expose her reduction to a sexual object of the male gaze.[3] The tiny knight is an even poorer version than Robin Dennison's and totally incongruous to the situation: "a plastic knight on a horse, once silver, now mud-green, a toy soldier with a broken sword and a battered helmet" (80). Sheba Brown ridicules traditional expectations of masculinity, an ironic echo of Gowing's comment on Matisse's 'virility,' which seems to be of as little use to women as the toy soldier or real men, as Sheba knows from her own experience with the abusive father of her children.

The golden letters of Mrs. Brown's name and the title "WORK IN VARIOUS MATERIALS 1975-1990" (81) on a washing line recall both her colored skin and her work (Petit 2008, 408-409), Byatt's use of colored letters, and her ekphrastic description of Sheba's fictitious work of art. In spite of Byatt's rendering of Sheba's installation in very evocative language, Sheba's work can neither be described nor interpreted exhaustively in writing due to its complex and transgressive features and the medial differences between visual and verbal representation. Of course, the information given in the story is 'sufficient' and each reader is free to conceive his or her version of the imaginative and imaginary work.

Next to the letters, Debbie finds the photograph of an amused Mrs. Brown: "Her skin has come out duskier than it 'really' is, her bones are sculpted, she resembles a cross between the Mona Lisa and a Benin bronze" (81). The observer, Debbie, views the photograph from a double perspective, redolent of Roland Barthes's theory, which roughly locates photography between an analogous inscription of reality without a code and art as a coded sign (Barthes 1982, 19). The reference to reality is put in inverted commas: Debbie knows that her object of correspondence is not reality as such but her perception of reality. Nevertheless, she finds that the photograph represents 'reality' only with a difference, which paradoxically adds an artistic touch to the picture reminiscent of a three-dimensional sculpture. Ironically, it is helpful to understand the mimetic mis-representation by the photograph through the reference to the arts, in other words by ekphrasis in the story.[4] In this case, the invocation of the European Mona Lisa and the African mask from Benin, both expressions of beauty, mystery, and ultimate artistic accomplishment, do not aim at the exact mimetic representation of the hybrid Irish-Caribbean artist, but at an elaborate appreciation

3 Matisse also painted women with empty or blackened eyes, a feature that could be read as a sign of closed painted eyes or as a way of reducing them to puppets – either interpretation is disturbing and disconcerting to the voyeuristic gaze.

4 The reflection on photographic misrepresentation brings us back full circle to the beginning of the story because the inadequate but interesting photograph echoes Gowing's reproduction of Matisse in black and white. In both cases, the ekphrastic description requires both the reader's imagination and knowledge of the cultural context in order to generate both visual quality and verbal meaning.

that adds to our understanding of her in a larger cultural context. The ekphrastic periphrasis reveals an ironic and self-reflexive postmodern combination of writing, traditional and modern African and European arts. The multiple ekphrastic representations of the photograph in words, in terms of a painting and a sculpture, help to make sense but also complicate our understanding because the intermedial semiotic process foregrounds both the Derridean "différance" (cf. Derrida 2004) of any representation and the otherness of its subject.

Mrs. Brown immediately attracts the attention of the media. Ironically, the critic in a woman's magazine does not value her art as a work of her own, but compares her "intricate woven backgrounds" (83) to the paintings of the mad and violent Victorian artist Richard Dadd, and her "luxurious innovations" (83) to those of the Anglo-American Kaffe Fasset, who has actually appropriated and successfully marketed the "decorative" female crafts of knitting, needlepoint, and patchwork (cf. Kaffe Fasset Studio 2011). However, Sheba Brown's creative and disturbing re-knitting of the male images of women invert and subvert Kaffe Fasset's commercial and conservative designs for upscale comfortable homes. The fact that Richard Dadd killed his father is not mentioned in that critique but may form a subconscious motif of the critic's comparison of Dadd and Sheba, alluding to the rise of the woman artist over '*his* dead body.' Thus, the parochial article places Sheba Brown in a tradition of deviant white male artists that she most likely has never even heard of, and neither in Matisse's tradition nor in the more appropriate tradition of women's arts and crafts. Sheba admits to having turned into art what she learned about and from the Dennisons. In turn, she inspires Debbie to return to making book illustrations and Robin to paint in weaving patterns and new colors. Debbie's exotic fairies have the "haughty face of Sheba Brown" (89), but Robin paints Kali the Destroyer in a dark and terrifying, "simplified travesty of Sheba Brown" (90). His vengeful misrepresentation inverts her creative power. Robin's new picture vilifies the woman artist in spite or rather because of her influence on him. The image of Kali is the very opposite of Matisse's silent beauties and stereotypically represents women as monsters, mothers, or maidens. These misogynist stereotypes fly into the face of Sheba Brown's complex, ambiguous and inexhaustible web of textures, colors and meanings, which forms an intermedial correlative of Byatt's moderately feminist "Art Work," without collapsing the differences between the fine arts and the art of language, Brown's intuitive style and Byatt's intellectual and highly self-reflexive style. Thus, the story and the imaginary installation form the vision of a new kind of the '*sister* arts,' which criticize the masculine tradition of the gendered arts and the international art market, which highly prizes Matisse's many masculine and decorative pictures.

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