

Carrie Burt

Annual Symposium at the Mint Museum of Art

March 30, 2008

Conquering the Body: Maja Godlewska's *Fifth Continent* 2002

This afternoon I would like to give a critical reading of Maja Godlewska's *Fifth Continent*, completed in 2002 that will focus on the concepts of colonization and gender identity. While on first glance this work seems to be distinctly European - a European subject done by a European painter - in fact a more insightful way to read the painting is by acknowledging the history of colonialism. The best account of this history comes in the form of Edward Said's highly influential text *Orientalism* (published in 1978). For Said Orientalism is a Western form of domination that operates through a discursive restructuring or colonizing of another culture. Authority is then in the hands of the colonizer over the colonized. The "Orient" for Said is a fictional site defined by a set of ideas, cultures, and histories that can not be understood without acknowledging the configurations of power which allow the colonizer to take up a position of actual difference.<sup>1</sup> One legacy for Said, is the study of the institution and the maintenance of the "Orient" that translates into the way in which post-colonial scholars read these images. They read larger events like colonialism through smaller instances of individual identity. In particular, we must examine the role of gender because Orientalism creates a binary theme: one of self/other, me/not me, etc. This characterizes how identities are constructed within a colonial context. This binary theme has been referred to as "othering", and evidence of its existence throughout the history of colonialism can be found in an archive of materials that are created to maintain this relationship between a European self and a non-European other. In a sense the European "others" these native cultures in that they make them represent everything they are not.

<sup>1</sup> Said, Edward W.. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

At the heart of colonialism we always find the idea of gender and in this a self/other dilemma is constructed which allows us to explore the relationship between the masculine and feminine identity. In Godlewska's work this self/other structure comes out of the ideas of the female nude as a metaphorical site of colonization, the masculine is the colonizer and the female is the colonized territory.

This metaphor of the female nude as colonized territory has held a central place in art history since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the central figure of Godlewska's painting is a direct allusion to Fracis Boucher's 18<sup>th</sup> century Rococo painting, *Odalisque* (1745). Boucher was a painter in service of the French ruling aristocracy. Both the subject (Odalisque), and the figure (the nude) reinforce not only the importance of Orientalism as a central methodology for art historical practice, but also female nude as conquered territory elision. We can see this metaphor throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in European art from Boucher to Gauguin.

Let us spend some time reading one work that exemplifies this metaphor. *The Turkish Bath* (1862) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres is an example of a harem as European obsession. A harem has been such a privileged site in the European imagination because it allowed for the circulation of uninhibited ideas or desires. The women in this painting appear semi to fully nude; which results in the bodies taking on a homogeneous effect. When looking at the painting the women appear as if they are a representation of a single model. The exception, of course, is the darker skinned woman in the right middle ground. The women are only individualized however slightly - by their respective accoutrements and poses. This homogeneity is a primary and reoccurring theme of Orientalism. Rather than anything that approaches anthropology or sociology themes, representations such as these reveal a critical distance between the actual culture of Turkey and the ways Turkish culture functions in the European cultural imagination. We must remember that the conquering

the land could provide and the end result in a spread of power. By not giving these women any individuality Ingres gives the viewer the power over them, resulting in the idea of the land that has been conquered symbolized in the use of the female nude for the pleasure viewing of the conqueror.

*The Turkish Bath* uses voyeurism as a way to assert the European viewers power over the scene - these women. The gaze is not directly returned. This lack of eye contact enables the viewer to freely look at the women, his conquest, without any consequence because the implied audience of paintings such as these was pre-dominantly European males; the figures perspective reveals itself as one of power and pleasure. The cultural historian Laura Mulvey has argued that this visual pleasure and power are inseparable. She writes: "The pleasure that is achieved... through objectification... the male/viewer asserts his control and dominance in punishing, saving, or transforming this threatening object into a reassuring one (woman as other)." This holds as well for Orientalism in which both women and non-European are objectified.. .that is constructed as fetish objects. The framing of the *Turkish Bath* itself reinforces power. This shape takes on another representation of power in that it symbolizes the idea that the viewer is looking into a scene implicitly voyeuristic that is not meant for them to see. Ingres subjects and his framing - an iris shape - foreground the importance of reading vision not as sight and action but as something that takes place historically and culturally. Simply put we must understand when and how something becomes visible.

This same metaphor of the female as colonized territory translates through *Fifth Continent*. Within the titles reference to Australia and what we see in the painting itself, we are again confronted with gender as colonized territory metaphor. In order to see this we must first

<sup>2</sup> Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3, no. Autumn (1975): 6-18.

look at the two female nudes of the painting. The first nude we encounter as I have already noted is the reproduction of Boucher's *Odalisque*. She is repainted by Godlewska as the focus of her work. The second nude is not as apparent it is composed by rapidly executed broad white brushstrokes. On the left you can see her foot, her buttocks in the center of the painting framing the same body part as in the Boucher nude. For my purposes I will be referring to each of these nudes respectively as the Rococo nude and the gestural nude. The Rococo nude and the gestural nude form two diagonal lines. The Rococo's head occupies the top left of the painting and her body draws a line to the bottom right. The gestural nude takes on the opposite, with her upper body in the upper right corner drawing down to her lower body in the lower left. In doing this the artist creates an "x" with the two diagonal lines. This "x" becomes the crossing point of the two nudes, and in *Fifth Continent* this point is made up of the buttocks as a sexual reference of each nude, one realistically rendered and the other in white outline. The nude throughout art history has become a signifier for many ideas. Here the two nudes allude to this idea of conquest and domination. This comes from the focal point of the painting being about gender identity. Here the gender is implicit; this is about the female nude as site. There is no barrier in between the viewer and the nudes, and this generates a power given to the viewer over the nudes. We as viewers are given the ability to conquer them, and this is done in giving the viewer the central focal point and making it explicitly about gender. In essence this is what the nude comes to signify in the painting; her gender is read as colonial in a post-colonial context and through this becomes the subject of the piece because it produces another metaphor for this conquering. The fifth continent is the name given to Australia after its colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Godlewska obtained this title after looking at Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's series *Four Continents* completed in 1744 that are located in the Wurzburg Residence in Germany.

these portrayals of the continents Europe takes on the most superior and civilized of the four. Following Orientalist logic Europe is depicted as the dominant power. For Godlewska this style of painting is what gave her inspiration for the landscapes in the scene as well as her visitation to the continent. The landscape much like the two nudes are presented in a dichotomy, the realistic portrayal at the top of the painting blends into abstraction as it descends to the bottom of the painting ending in a dripping technique. The end result is blending of reality and abstraction. The landscape starts out as a traditional Rococo landscape and slowly diffuses into unrecognizable forms; in the same way colonialism presents itself as perfected idea in that it is helping a society through colonization become civilized, but the reality is that it is violent and disseminates a society of its original form by erasing its culture.

On first examination of the nudes we see a defining difference in the use of brushstroke and artistic portrayal. According to Godlewska the use of different if not opposing painting techniques in the portrayal of each nude came to her in the philosophy of Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche played on a division of artistic styles. For Godlewska the Rococo nude takes on what Nietzsche terms the "Apollonian" style. It is structured and distinct. This female nude is naturally rendered, and it appears self-possessed leading the viewer into the idea of complete perfection. The gestural nude is depicted in the "Dionysian" style in that its boundaries are unclear; this is produced in the use of the wide brushstrokes and dripping technique and results in a destruction of the form of the female nude. The gestural nude is about construction presupposing destruction. It is about violence and unpredictability which are both misunderstandings of the culture that is being colonized. For the colonizer the "other" must be structured, and ordered seen in the Apollinaire style. Here Godlewska uses the nudes to represent the two sides of colonialism;

the world as the colonized "other". This colonized "other" comes to us as a realistic female nude form. She is the conquered territory shown as the conquerors would have her shown, content and submissive. She takes on these traditional values that have been set up for her by the colonizer. The gestural nude gives us the reality of the conquered. The strokes of the paint are slashed violently along with the dripping technique onto the canvas reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism however for my argument this is not the abstract expressionist gesture of liberation but one of aggression. This nude conveys ideas that have been only recently addressed. The ideas of the reality of colonization; it is a violent act of domination and power over a culture. The artist's portrayal of the nudes gives us a new understanding of this conquered territory metaphor. The nudes present us with a propaganda picture of the "other", presented to us in a representation of one as an ideal form of reality constructed for the viewer by the colonizer and the other as a post colonial critique of that history that exposes its implicit violence.

In this combination of artistic forms and references a *bricolage* is formed. *Bricolage* is textual process of loss and gain, it cuts up, makes concrete, delights in the artificial, it knows no identity, stands for no pretense or presence or universal guide of truth, is short the artist has compiled different elements from different sources and combines them into a work. This *bricolage* is compiled in *Fifth Continent* of references to the artists own identity based on her individual ethnicity and gender and other visual art works that we have discussed above this creates a critique of these ideas of modernism, in that as a post-modernist artist she wants to expose the contradictions of modernism. We can clearly see this referenced in her painting style and presentation of the nudes that she depicts. In short, her work questions this constructed metaphor of the nude female as conquered territory and critiques it in two ways; through the biography of the artist and in the context from which it derived, that of

Maja Godlewska was born in Poland. Poland was colonized from 1795 till 1914, a time known as the "Great Captivity". It was not until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the Polish people gained their true independence. As a woman that lived through these major changes within the transition from a colonial territory to a liberated country *Fifth Continent* instills this critique. In Orientalist art the artists constructed their "others" to give a visual perception of the threat that they felt towards non-European societies. Godlewska uses the nudes and her title to acknowledge her own thoughts on Western domination and the influx of colonialism that she confronted in her own life. For her the nudes take her own body as she relates to her own culture and gender, and through this metaphor of the female nude as colonized land, Poland becomes the land that is colonized. In essence she reveals to us how "omering" is a problematic idea of modernism and any depiction of a nude female can not be simply explained away. Simply put, as Freud quipped sometimes a cigar is just a cigar; a female nude is never just a female nude.

Lastly, she takes a painting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century of a rococo nude and crosses it with a post-modern style creating a collision of two ideas. The idea of rational power with the idea of uncontrollable power, this power struggle is what modernists instilled on non-European cultures as seen in the Rococo nude. According to Hal Foster visual culture is enlisted by colonial history in that it helps: "camouflage a historical event, by disguising the problem of colonialism in terms of art.. .to the point where the problem "appears" resolved."<sup>3</sup> The "resolved" problem is in the justification of colonialism, where a power, in our case a European one, comes in and eradicates

<sup>3</sup> Foster, Hal. *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. 1st ed. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985.

a culture through transposing their own ideas, morals, and values based on the simple observation that they are different. The critique addresses this problem, and provides a resolution. The resolution is that as viewers of a post-colonial society we must see the colonizers for what they truly are, people on a mission to completely restructure a society based on difference. For post colonial artists and thinkers this restructuring must be reversed and through this an opening can take place that is essential. As Said has convincingly argued "the opening of a culture to experiences of the Other is the recovery of a history.. .either misrepresented or rendered invisible." <sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Said, p.96