

TITANIC: A Deep Emotion
Some thoughts on the kiss on the bow and Modern painting

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Of the multiple readings that emerge from *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion*, a video created by Claudia Bitran between 2014 and 2015, two have drawn my attention, perhaps mainly because of the overlap with my own interests as an art historian. The first has to do with quoting Manet's Modernism from a lesser-known angle: the unconscious; and the second has to do with the performative dimension and familiarization of gender. Both are present in the artist's video, or rather present by their absence—Manet's painting never physically appears in *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion*, although it appears constantly through visual cues, that is, a repetition and literalness: Jack's body – the protagonist, played by Leonardo DiCaprio in James Cameron's movie – changes again and again in Bitran's version between a heterosexual male body, a female homosexual body, a queer body, and a boy's body. Thus, Manet's inconsistent Modernism – as art historian Carol Armstrong astutely observed, and to which I will refer – and an understanding of the performative nature of gender – a theory generated by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who started Queer Studies in the early 1990s – constantly intersect in Bitran's video, as if they cannot exist in isolation either in historical time, or in the temporality of video. In other words, through complex, sarcastic, and clever montages that reproduce Cameron's film, not frame by frame, but rather subjectively, from a starting point of fiction, documentary, and animation, Bitran subtly reminds us about Manet's inconsistency, as well as making us take note of the binary notion of gender, its multiplicity and incongruity. In what follows, I shall refer first to Manet's inconsistency to discuss Bitran's video from Armstrong's feminist perspective and Butler's performative dimension of gender, focusing mainly on the references to art history and its conventions, which the artist very lucidly and playfully rescues from the 1997 version of Titanic.

After the proliferation of postmodernism in the 1970s, constantly challenging Clement Greenberg's formalism through issues related to feminism becomes a trend in the history of Modern art. How can one celebrate, for example, the straight, white, male body emanating from the flatness and large-format of Jackson Pollock's (1912-1956) works, and ignore the ejaculatory gestures they signify—the artist's "dripping," as Amelia Jones observed in her studies on performance?¹ Celebrating the notions of novelty, freshness, universality, and transcendence that Greenberg attributed to Pollock and canonical abstract expressionists, today seems like an ethical problem that morphs into triumphalism, misogyny, xenophobia, and racism. Greenberg himself nevertheless provides us with a key clue to consider Claudia Bitran's *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion*. As noted by Carol Armstrong in her book *Manet Manette* (2012), Greenberg (referring to the artist's retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago in 1966 and

¹ For more information on the gendered implications of Pollock's dripping, see Amelia Jones, "The Pollockian Performative and the Revision of the Modernist Subject," in Jones, Amelia *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53-102; and also see Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in Helaine Posner, ed., *The masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, exh. cat (Cambridge: MIT, 1995), 31-42.

1967) wrote that, although he considered Manet's technique less meticulous than Monet's and Renoir's, Impressionists who better portrayed the leisure of the bourgeoisie, his "inconsistency" was exceptional, not in technical terms, but with respect to the ever-changing direction of his painting.² Thus, as Armstrong reminds us, Manet never painted in series, instead he intended each one of his works as an approximation of Modernity, different and isolated; however this thematic and theoretical inconsistency was largely ignored by followers of Greenberg, like Michael Fried, who focused more on Manet's radical break from Illusionism. With that, the name Manet became synonymous with launching Modernity, leaving his "inconsistency" a forgotten treasure for fear of breaking the linearity of history.³ By focusing on gender multiplicity emanating from Manet's works, Armstrong rescues that inconsistency through a feminist lens. As is known, the protagonists in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) or the character of *Le Fifre* (1866), for example, were posed alternately with men and women. Manet's brother, his muse Victorine Meurent, his friend and sometimes rival Berthe Morisot, and his son Leon, among others, gave Manet's characters an attractive and troubling gender ambiguity, which informed Armstrong's book title, *Manet Manette*. The same occurs in Bitran's *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion*. Very much in line with Armstrong, as well as Butler, where sexuality is understood as naturally binary and not as an unquestionable fact, determined by both sexes' genitals, Bitran, following Manet's example, challenges a less obvious type of masculinity in the character of Jack, which also occurs, in this case with an indeterminate type of femininity, in the character of Rose considering the diversity of her sexual desire. In Bitran's video, Jack is a blond, young, and handsome straight man; then he is a middle-aged straight man; then he is a young, white lesbian; then he is a Chilean child of European descent; then he is a young, queer white blonde, and so on. The body of Rose, played by Bitran, however, is always the same: a young, white woman who is fluent in English and Chilean [Spanish], but nevertheless wishes – even while protecting him maternally – for a sexual and, in Butler's terms, naturally binary Jack.

But again, why start with Manet and his so-called inconsistency, considering that his paintings and name appear neither in the original version of *Titanic*, nor Bitran's remake, as is the case with other late nineteenth and early twentieth century artists who are mentioned in Cameron's film and Bitran's version? One may refer back to the story of Rose's fascination with Modern Art and her "good taste" – as created by Cameron, and which Bitran reproduces cleverly and ironically – and perhaps draw attention to Jack and the illusionist and amateur painter that he represents according to Cameron's lens. Bitran flips him again through Modernity and Manet's gender inconsistency, which serve to emphasize Manet's presence, although not literally, in *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion*. In Cameron's movie, as the journey across the Atlantic to New York has just begun, Rose, a young, upper-class woman originally from Pennsylvania – home to two of the most successful American painters in the late nineteenth century, Mary Cassatt and Thomas Eakins – thinks her room "needs some color," so, together with her maid, she decides to

² See Armstrong, Carol. *Manet Manette* (New Haven / London, Yale University Press: 2002), p. xi.

³ On several occasions, Greenberg wrote: "the evolution of modern painting from Manet on." See, for example, Clement Greenberg, "The crisis of the Easel Picture," in Clement Greenberg, *The collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols., University of Chicago Press, vol. 2, p. 222.

hang her Modern painting collection on the walls of the elegant Titanic, the largest ship of its time. Iconic Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Cubist paintings – such as Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907); Degas’s *L’Étoile* (1876); and a painting from Monet’s *Water Lilies* series (1905-1926) – appear as her property. In turn, less well-known examples in art history are also reproduced in the scene, such as a still life by Cézanne – which in this case contains a remarkable depth as opposed to the flatness that largely opened the way to a more advanced type of Modernism – and a Braque portrait.

As the artist had on past occasions – by interpreting scenes from Cameron’s Titanic through installations and performances to raise questions about the place of reproduction, pop culture, and the contemporary art spectacle – Bitran reinterpreted the scene where Rose hangs her painting collection at Y Gallery (New York) last July. In the performance, titled *There’s truth but no logic* (a phrase from Rose’s monologue), Bitran played the casually chic protagonist, dressed in white with a black belt and high-heels. Emulating a twenty-first century Rose who may well be the owner of a gallery located on Upper East Side specializing in European Modern Art, the artist shifted Cameron’s scene temporally and spatially, placing it in the gallery space and thereby entering the Art Market at present. When he enters the scene in the Cameron film, Rose’s fiancé Caledon Hockley arrogantly, but not unexpectedly for his time, calls it “finger painting.” Against that backdrop, from a current perspective, Bitran tells us, with plenty of humor, about the change in style, taste, and value in the art market, ironically referring to the spectacle, not so much of Hollywood, but of the “art world.” And beyond that, her performance correlates with a rather sociological reading, in line with Sarah Thornton’s research. And beyond that, it becomes involved in a discussion about format that remarks on accessibility to art (*Les Femmes d’Alger*, a painting considered by many as the most important work at MoMA, appears in Cameron’s film and then in Bitran’s *There’s truth but no logic*, two times smaller than the original), and then the desire for contemplation that evolves in the passive spectator, and then the bourgeois art system. What matters is Cameron’s selection of Modern paintings and Bitran’s interpretation of it, which signals again and again the performativity of gender and Manet’s legacy against the conventions of images.⁴

Hence, in *There’s truth but no logic*, Bitran flips the role of the maid with the role of art handler, in this case a young man rigorously dressed in black. Again, similar to the case of the kissing scene on the bow of the ship, where Bitran, who is always Rose, recalls passionately kissing a Jack who is at the same time heterosexual, lesbian, and queer, the artist intervenes into the maid’s gender by employing a male art handler, just as Manet had when posing subjects for his paintings. What’s more, as in *Olympia* (1863) – where Manet references Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), retaining the servant, but not her race – Bitran does not alter the hierarchical relationship that exists between the different classes. Rose’s maid in Cameron’s famous and award-winning version is now the employee of the gallery in Bitran’s video. In revealing that

⁴ For more information on the “art world” from a Sociological perspective, Thornton, Sarah. *Seven days in the art world* (London: Granta, 2008); and Thornton, Sarah. *33 artists in 3 acts. Seven days in the art world* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014). For more information on the bourgeois art system of the kind in the current text, see García Canclini, Néstor. *Arte popular y sociedad en América Latina : teorías estéticas y ensayos de transformación* (Grijalbo: 1977)

relationship for the public at Y Gallery, which does not usually see the installation of an exhibition, Bitran does not alter the historic class distinction, but certainly the gender distinction, reproducing Manet's characters' inconsistency, unnoticed for so many years, in contemporary art.

Therefore, the answer as to why talk of Manet is related to emphasizing his literal absence, which at the same time casts a shadow: it's what goes beyond the purely visual through cues. *Olympia* is an example: in Cameron's version, Manet's painting appears in Rose's pose, which her beloved Jack reproduces in charcoal, while Bitran does so with her own naked body, reenacting the scene through simulated art school drawing workshops. Thus, how could one not think of the painting of *Olympia*, which is known to have caused a scandal at the Salon des Refusés in Paris for representing a prostitute, Victorine, covering her genitals and exposing hair in unsuitable places, such as her belly? Is it not like the drawing of the one-legged prostitute with the armpit hair that Rose, although suspicious, celebrates Jack for in Cameron's film, and that Bitran reproduces, though not literally, through Jack's sexually variant body and Rose's multiple desires? Clearly, *TITANIC: A Deep Emotion* is an innovative and playful visual model, full of spatial and temporal multiples that unceasingly reproduce in the viewer the inexhaustible desire of images and the gaze. And obviously, the many questions that Bitran's video and performances also raise, reference not only pop culture and the questionable validity of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle today, but also the relationships between gender, Modernity, and contemporary art that I have attempted to identify in this short text, and undoubtedly imply a case study open for further discussions about Bitran's work.