

Multiple Gravities
by Matthew Newton

It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.
-Herman Melville

We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention.
-Simone Weil

Gravity is ultimate authority, a singular presence that defines or distorts the movements and activities of independent bodies within its pull. We understand gravity equally as an actual physical phenomenon and an analogy to non-physical phenomena such as desire and authority. We are both physically pulled downward to the largeness of the earth and consciously and socially bound to obligations that exceed our control. That is, physical matter is known to function on gravity and perhaps consciousness does as well.

In either case, to observe gravity is to observe distance and separation. Before its final work of consolidation, gravity is a portrait of at least two conglomerates of matter or intent, each substantial enough to be self-defined with their own gravitational force, but simultaneously attracted to one another in a perpetual reciprocity and codependency. We therefore treat singular gravity, like ultimate authority, as myth while we currently relate to forces of attraction and obligation. We are for the moment suspended within relationships of multiplicity of which we are active participants and creators.

As independent thought and artistic liberty pervaded the 19th and 20th Centuries, artists began to understand singular authority and binary relationships as myth particularly well and many important works through this time can be understood as

escape mechanisms from previous power dynamics. More broadly, by beginning to ignore the expectations of authorities, both natural and social, these paintings seek to create a space of their own, distinct from ours though reflecting it; a place in which our laws of physics and obligation do not apply. In so doing they give themselves a new mass, a new dent in space-time, and their own gravity to which our tangible world must then respond and to which we are attracted but never meeting; two masses orbiting one another, our material world with its downward pull and that of the painting.

The space written onto the surface of these paintings, however, never fully detaches and maintains the codependent relationship present in all such orbits—like an astronaut circling the earth, still dependent on its resources for survival. In fact, such works may more closely mimic the known natural world than whatever new world it seeks to create and occupy. A painting does not actually create mass, no real matter is generated, not even true consciousness is erected of its own. Ultimately derivative, they form strange hybridized automatons built of human and earthly parts but not self-actualizing in any true sense. For veiled reasons, or perhaps retaining belief in the communicative ability of their objects, their makers remain bound to the known and recognizable. They maintain gravity's ultimate work, consolidation, by propelling from our gravity with an energy that promises an orbit of ulteriority but never reaches escape velocity.

In their efforts to push away and establish their own mass, we find ourselves mimicked and haunted. Like the moon silently and blankly floating around the earth, they are our pale doppelgängers. These works, which specifically detach themselves from our understanding and shut themselves away while also clinging to our world for

sustenance, bare the strain and characteristics of existing between multiple gravities: theirs and ours. Their substantiation refracts and flexes around ours like light in space-time, bending as it comes in proximity to gravitational bodies. From the artists' mechanisms of detachment, but more directly on their surfaces, we can define the characteristic tensions that these intermediate, self-contained, consolidated, deformed masses occupy between multiple gravities.



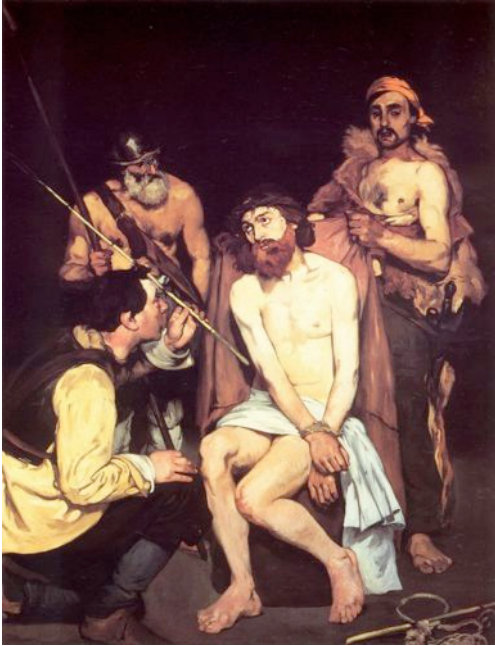
Silent/Ignoring/Haunting

Manet's *Olympia* offers an early example of a painting beginning to deliberately ignore its contextual world and unhitch itself from recognizable imagery and associations. Although Manet's contemporary culture expected a painting's surface to "offer a rich, exaggerated play with normal identities," something about *Olympia*—"altered and played with identities the culture wished to keep still" (Clark 100). While current historical reading nearly unanimously sites Olympia's direct gaze and professional nudity

as calibrated attacks by Manet upon bourgeois good taste and its veiled hypocrisy, *Olympia's* unsettling comes through a far more haunting and gnawing silence.

Manet's figures often wear looks of distant thought or detachment. *Olympia* as well, rather than a direct gaze, looks nowhere in particular. Her left eye seems to be looking slightly to the left and her right eye peers right through us. Her incongruous blank stare and arched eyebrows signal boredom or detachment more than confrontation. She looks in our direction but not at us, as if we, and not her, are too insignificant to come into focus. Rather than objectifying the viewer, we voyeurs may not be there at all and are therefore completely inconsequential. In this insistence on avoiding us altogether, Manet allows *Olympia's* space to be self-determined, not reliant on our participation to complete the relationship. He institutes the gravitational weight of her world by kicking us just outside of it and thus establishes the separation necessary for us to relate to her from a distance.

From this distance, *Olympia* is silent, anything she might have to say is out of range. Our only option to communicate with her is to take her as she is, to yield to her newly procured authority. Derrida describes such a relationship in Christian mythology in which "God holds me in his gaze... while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allows me to respond... by making a gift of death" (33). While it may be a stretch to describe *Olympia* as a deity, she does insist on her own incarnation and our subordinated, distanced relationship to it that may only be bridged through the viewer's submission. Her silence and detachment command our response, and yet the only response available is acknowledgement that she does in fact exist in exactly the ill-formed and odd state we find her.



James H. Rubin identifies Manet's silence in the first lines of his book: "a sense of stillness and silence pervades Manet's painting. His... forms appear to exist absent-mindedly in a world seemingly removed from discourse" (11). But where Rubin ties this to a primacy of the visual, Manet actually believed in the weight of the world he had created in *Olympia*. Manet included a few lines of a Zacharie Astruc poem with *Olympia's* catalog entry for the salon which described her as "the august young girl in whom the fire burns" (Clark 83). Manet earnestly submitted *Olympia* to Paris clearly marked as distinguished, respected, and eminent! She is the authority of the world he created for her, a world that looks like ours but is someplace else, a world whose burning fire allures us from a distance we can't quite touch. Additionally, the painting was shown in the 1865 salon with his one other submission that year, *Jesus insulted by the soldiers*; obviously not a flippant subject meant to house only the visual, nor a subversive maneuver as many have taken *Olympia* to be. Manet therefore, quite logically perhaps, presented the god of one world along with the "august" authority of the other.



Distinguished as he may have seen her and as she has now come to be seen, Olympia does look strange as she silently hovers; a peculiar form which is at once deftly rendered to look human and spookily inconsistent to our expectations. Her nipples, for example, are almost completely left off her body (an odd choice if she were meant to be a provocative rimshot to the Bourgeoisie). While her eyelashes and jewelry are rendered, her fingers trail off with no fingernails, which one might expect from a proto-Impressionist image except that Manet did include such detail in *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere* painted a full nineteen years after *Olympia*. Manet simply doesn't concern himself with completing the image evenly as it registers to our understanding of the human form. He didn't disclose certain visual information because in the world of *Olympia*, part our reality, part some other, it doesn't exist. Olympia is of our world in that we can identify her and make all sorts of important claims about her communicative meaning to ourselves, and she is of her own world which is in no way bound to our conventions of perceiving or acting correctly. She haunts the awareness we have of ourselves, mimicking us, following us, but never speaking directly to us and possibly ignoring us completely.



Eroticism/Prostration/Levitation

Of course, it is impossible to avoid recumbent *Olympia's* eroticism, that burning fire, however distorted it may appear. Eroticism itself decouples its art object from the world that looks into it. The sexualized domain of a harlot or anyone else communicates a private place where one either belongs or specifically does not. Almost exactly a century after *Olympia's* creation, Nancy Spero moved with her young family from the midwest United States to Paris where she created a series of paintings called *Lovers*. In them we see two loosely gendered human figures in sets of intimate postures surrounded by an encasing swirl of dark paint. The paintings look like capsules for an isolated and detached moment between the two lovers. Spero, who felt the weight of a troubled world particularly acutely, seems to have given her lovers a time out from the regular assault and gravitas of place and circumstance in a non-space. The figures levitate, as if in a zero gravity environment, horizontal in wide-frame canvases.

"Overwhelmed by and subordinated to their roles vis-à-vis one another" (Lyon 59) all other gravitational forces disperse from the couple and we are left with a very simple sustained non-hierarchical binary. The painting is its own universe with its own

dynamic forces and yet we feel the absence of the outer world whose decay we have temporarily neglected. Like *Olympia*, the significance of the painting is both buried within itself and also inextricably tied to the idea of something specific existing separately outside of it. Spero, who ultimately became an exterior-oriented artist par excellence, carves out a decidedly interior world for her lovers that presciently "simmer in an atmosphere of resistance" (Breerette 9). The words of Simone Weil, the French philosopher and Catholic mystic who expired her own life on efforts for others, offer a crisp description of Spero's little worlds: "Far from thinking of the values to which we are attached, with all the intensity of which we are capable, we must preserve an interior void" (70).



Preserved as they may be, Spero's interior voids are on display. As source for the lovers' poses, she cited the erotic wall frescoes of Pompeii which also wed informal intimacy and public exhibitionism (Lyon 60). The Pompeii frescoes appear surprisingly casual and unceremonious, as if we see not an archetypal surge of erotic energy but a prosaic and somewhat awkward fumbling. In Spero's *Lovers* and the Pompeii frescoes, the figures are common love makers, amateurs like most of us, not normally meant to be

observed but offered on display nevertheless. Interestingly, they closely resemble present-day couples' private home videos of intimate moments. Framed at a static distance but within a secure and sealed place, they informally record couples in the chore of sex, if not always its celebration. We, the now levitating specters in a corner looking in unnoticed, see a world apart from ours though one that we may know well. It is a familiar place but not from this angle. From here, we may only feel as outsiders made privy to someone else's intimacy.



Again, like in *Olympia*, a tenuous line is drawn between *that* world and *this* world, distinct but connected, separate but codependent. Spero creates a similar environment within the world of each painting as well. In the dark galaxy of the canvas two distinct bodies orbit one another. Often we have difficulty determining where one figure ends and the other begins though obviously more than one occupies the space. Each one's gender also slips in and out of focus further melding their identities. Like a continuation of *Olympia's* understated sexuality, Spero often eliminates breasts and genitalia altogether, leaving sexual contact to mean holding one's ankle, intertwining legs, or hovering over the other. As described in a catalog essay for *Lovers*, "Firm strokes bring out heads, arms, and legs, but not quite the naked bodies, nor the points

where they touch within the tempestuous flow. This reticence is clearly not prudishness, but a way of treating the recurrent theme of separation, and therefore of fusion, in a new way" (Breerette 13). That unsure separation and fusion of the lovers parallels our own unsure relationship to the painted plane which we recognize but only as a foreign double.



Doubling/Procreating

The theme of doubling ran consistent for Spero and also carries importance in our gravity analogy. In art objects, the double portrait complicates binaries. Rather than be bound to a singular gravitational attraction, the double suspends us between multiple destinations: each of the two portraits, the world that they have excluded, and our own presence which gives the two their meaning and activates their correspondence. One specific doubling, motherhood, continues in Spero's paintings in Paris. The idea of childbirth is a kind of two-fold double portraiture, with the child embedded in the mother and eventually both parents appearing in the child. Curiously, Spero's erotic doubles of

the early 1960's were created along with images of mothers with children. Sex and procreation appear to exist concomitantly for her as a young wife and mother at the time.

In *Mother and Children* of 1962, the style and execution of the painting is identical to the other Paris Black Paintings, *Lovers*, except that the canvas orients vertically along with its now-upright inhabitants. The somber mother's expression shows distance and melancholy much like Olympia's. In another *Mother and Children* painting of 1956 that predates the family's residence in Paris, the monolithic mother's square body fully occupies the canvas while her arms both protect and present her two supine offspring. The children's small exposed bodies are early examples of Spero's levitating figures which became staples of her erotic imagery a few years later. Her *Mothers* and *Lovers*, painted concurrently, each occupy "the dual processes of doubling and splitting, and individuation and reproduction" (Lyon 64). In the interchanging roles of the feminine protagonist and in the floating children becoming floating lovers, we see a new miniature life cycle created within her paintings.



The coexistence of sexuality and childhood found home in an early portrait by Oskar Kokoschka as well called *Children Playing* of 1909. Kokoschka apparently used the double portrait of young siblings as a field to work out an elaborate amalgamation of

his own personal sexual history, confession, and early modern understanding of child sexuality (Shapira 504). The composition of the painting, uncannily predicting that of Spero's *Lovers*, shows two blankly staring children in repose, nearly floating, their bodies touching slightly, surrounded by loose swirls of paint. The amorphous ground both suspends the children in a "spatial and psychological tension" (Shapira 514) and, much like Spero's matriarchs, adopts "the protective function of the mother in relation to her baby child" (Shapira 515). The hazy isolation and charged interaction of the children present them as both vessels of sexuality and coddled babies. As with *Olympia*, *Children Playing* elicited a caustic response from its first audience in Vienna who apparently picked up on and were unsettled by its cross pollination of sexuality and childhood (Natter 108).



In another commissioned portrait of a client's child the same year, Kokoschka painted infant Fred Goldman. This time the child floats alone except that one of each of its parents' hands supports its levitation. The gesture, very similar to Spero's *Mother* of 1956, imbues the child's identity with the parents' and therefore its own generative cycle.

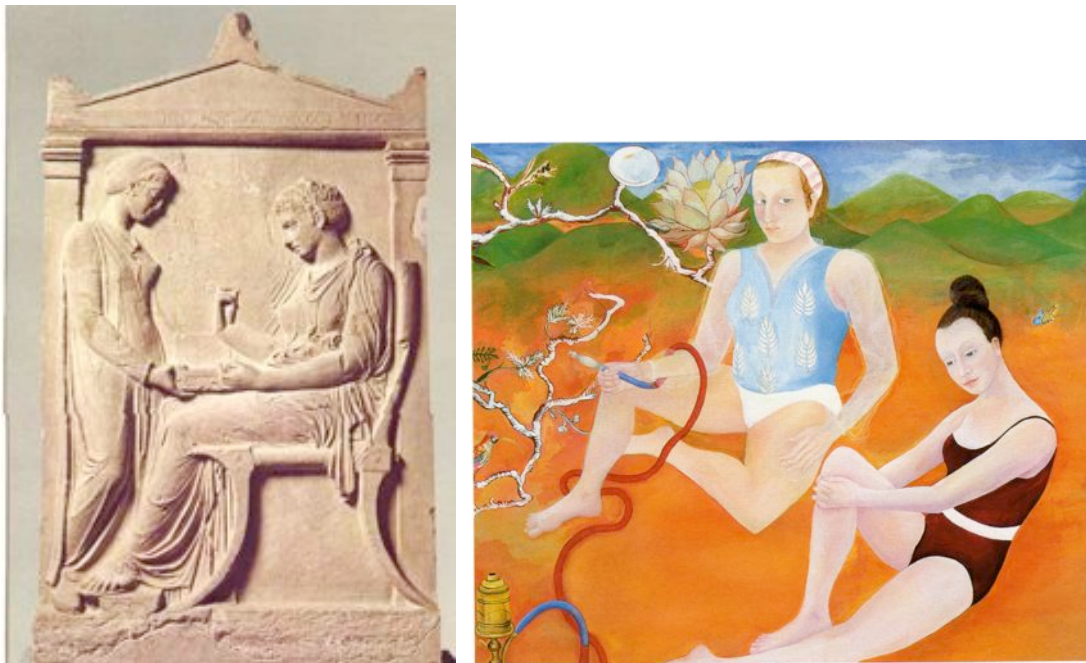
Spero and Kokoschka transfer sexuality into childhood and back again all within the isolated worlds of their canvases. Their images mimic our life cycle with parents producing children and children becoming like parents, but in each case, the spare grounds, unfocussed vision, and hallucinogenic movement of the figures clearly mark their otherworldliness. "Just as the figures double one another, so too do the works function as mirrors or doubles of the waking world" (Lyon 59)



Dying/Imagining

Spero conjured her doubles from her imagination, working without models alone at night after putting her family to sleep (Lyon 51). The gravitational pull stretches further in this case as she leaves the observable natural world and turns into her own mind for source imagery. There seems to be a relationship here between imagination and delaying death, gravity's final work. Spero's *Lovers* for instance directly precede her engagement with themes of violence and death in her War Series, which she called an "exorcism" (Lyon 76). The figures made in Paris inhabit the pre-exorcised interior mind of the artist, invented phantoms shrouded in a space immune, for now, from coming destruction.

Still, death never feels far off in the Black Paintings. Spero's *Mother* of 1962, in addition to her unwavering solemnity, bears striking resemblance to the deceased woman in *The Stele of Hegeso*. The famous Athenian gravestone memorializes its dead in a carefully rendered but stilted pose, staring blankly as she reclines in diaphanous cloth with her maidservant (Crane). The scene, like Spero's *Lovers* and *Mothers*, imagines and recreates a phantom version of daily life, poignantly turning its normalcy to oddity.



In Katharina Wulff's dreamy visions of humanoids in fantastical landscapes, oddity and disjointed similarity offer the alluring but finally empty promise of escape from natural termination. Her characters are young, erotic, healthy, with smooth skin often thinly draped with lace. Her landscapes are in bloom and in technicolor. Drawing a veil over her myriad sources (Hutchinson 3), personal or not, Wulff deliberately creates otherworlds inhabited by people, plants, and animals ostensibly living lushly but appearing strangely stiff. In one of her paintings from 2003, we find three of these figures, perhaps a mother with two children. The mother and one child are rendered

transparent in ghostly white outline much like some of Spero's *Lovers*. The one solid figure looks curiously to her incorporeal counterparts as if speaking the work's title: "*Where Do You Come From?*" The alien ghosts are clearly figments of Wulff's imagination but associate casually with the living nevertheless.



All of these imaginative mimicking worlds both nod to death's presence yet exist as efforts at avoiding it. Not unlike the supernatural places we envision to cradle our souls after our bodies are pulled into the earth, these works create spaces of imagination that appear immune from heartache and bodily decay. By refusing to proceed toward the inevitable, the images become stuck in time like a record skipping in its tread, constantly repeating a familiar but meaningless statement. As our time-bound world clicks on, their incessant repetition becomes a foreign language and their worlds, foreign places. Derrida identifies a similar "speaking in tongues" by Melville's character, Bartleby, who answers every request, "I would prefer not to" (75). The indeterminacy of his unflinching response

eventually completely isolates him from any tangible function of the natural world and living human relations. We may understand the imaginative surfaces of Spero, Hegeso, and Wulff to be repeating a similar line: "I would prefer not to – die." But, like Bartleby, they never quite say the last word. They don't fully acknowledge the ultimate pressure of our world and thus speak on behalf of some "indecipherable providence" (Derrida 75). Their final authority, not death which they have concealed, commands from afar in a secret language to which we don't have full access.

Conclusion

That distant place and our relation to it defines gravity as we experience it existentially and in the artworks here under inspection. Each of the works, whether through silence, eroticism, doubling, or imagination, seeks to put a chasm between their world and ours. And in so doing, they simultaneously define their own space and bring greater awareness to the one left behind. For they always look back, in blank stares, across the void.

We may finally understand each work as a forced pocket of the supernatural. They are near Heavens, straining to exist just as we do, against the dominant pull. By looking into them, we look just outside of ourselves and begin to perceive our limits of existence and clearly feel the ultimate gravity at work in our bones. They help us "to grasp that there is a limit and that without supernatural help that limit cannot be passed, or only by very little and at the price of a terrible fall afterward" (Weil 53). They exist in that place Weil describes, just a little past our natural limits, temporarily achieving weightlessness before the terrible fall.

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