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Colophon



*Shimmering Jubilee*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
72 × 84 in.  
182.9 × 213.4 cm

# Honor Titus's Moral Imaginations

## Klaus Ottmann

Observer, philosopher, *flâneur*—call him what you will; but whatever words you use in trying to define this kind of artist, you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of the eternal, or at least more lasting things, of heroic or religious subjects. Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.

—Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”<sup>1</sup>

I call any creature “happy” that can love [...] I wholly deny that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral.

—John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*<sup>2</sup>

The portraiture and genre scenes of everyday life by the poet, musician, and self-taught artist Honor Titus share the emotive, intimist quality of paintings by the turn-of-the-century artists known as Les Nabis. Titus has acknowledged the French Nabi artists Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, and Félix Vallotton, as well as Edward Hopper, the American painter of unfulfilled longing or nostalgia, and the stylized portraits by Alex Katz and Kehinde Wiley as influences. Bonnard, Vuillard, and Vallotton were among those artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who, influenced by the flat colors and bold patterns of Japanese prints as well as the teachings of Paul Gauguin, embraced decoration as a primary function of painting, challenging the traditional boundaries between the decorative and fine arts.

Like Bonnard, Titus is a “music-maker of color,” to use an expression by Duncan Phillips, who founded the first American museum of modern art in 1921, The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., and considered the paintings of Bonnard a link between Impressionism and Expressionism:

Each of his pictures is a personally chosen fragment of a world full of animation and loveliness. Each is a fastidious record of some immediate and intimate visual occurrence to which his eye, mind, and hand had been at one time or another dedicated. Bonnard is [...] as significant a

1 “The Painter of Modern Life,” in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 4.

2 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume II, (Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1888), preface to the re-arranged edition (1883), xiii, and part III, section I, chapter II, 11.

revelation of our times as Cubism and far closer to the fundamentally emotional core of art.<sup>3</sup>

Like Bonnard, Titus's paintings bring us closer to the emotional core of contemporary life. As the French landscape painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot wrote in his notebook:

Reality is part of art, but it is feeling which makes it whole [...] Faced with any particular landscape or object, we are moved by a certain elegance or grace. We should never let go of that emotion.<sup>4</sup>

The world evoked in Titus's paintings is grounded in the style of the past, yet it is decidedly timeless. They are at once engaged with art history, in a Nabi-like romance of everyday life to the point of banality (what Baudelaire called a “forme banale de l'originalité”), and narrating moral tales of social longing. Titus's paintings are invested with an air of cinematic melancholy and forlornness, depicting places of solace and solitary figures at leisure—playing tennis, reposing in a flowering meadow, or sitting at the shore of a lake at sunrise.

His most recent body of work, *Bourgeoisie in Bloom*, with its focus on debutante and cotillion balls, brings to mind the society paintings of James Tissot who, like no other artist of the late nineteenth century, embodied the spirit of the Baudelairean modern painter and celebrated (mostly female) beauty and fashion while at the same time mocking the vulgar affectations of the Parisian upper class. Titus's debutante paintings may have been inspired by the romance between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ginevra King (one of the “Big Four” debutantes of the Chicago social scene during World War I) that produced one of the greatest novels of the Jazz age, *The Great Gatsby*. Depicting both white and Black debutantes, Titus reminds us that debutante balls, or cotillions, which became popular in England in the late eighteenth century as a means to introduce marriageable young woman to eligible bachelors, were not exclusive to the white upper classes. The first official Black debutante ball took place in 1895 in New Orleans.

Titus's Black debutantes inevitably call to mind E. Franklin Frazier's controversial sociological study on the Black middle class, *Black Bourgeoisie*, which attempted a demystification of the “world of make-believe into which the black bourgeoisie can escape from its inferiority and inconsequence in American society.”<sup>5</sup> And it would be remiss not to mention here *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (Miss Black Middle Class), a persona created by the artist Lorraine O'Grady for an impromptu performance in 1980 at the New York avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown, who wore a costume made of 180 pairs of white gloves and a white cat-o'-nine-tails decorated with white chrysanthemums. Like O'Grady's performance, Titus's paintings can be read as both a celebration of societal acceptance and a reminder of racial oppression.

As in Titus's previous exhibition, *For Heaven's Sake*, the decorative backgrounds in his new paintings carry the same weight as the figures: the white chrysanthemum fireworks in the dark-blue sky and the marbled balustrade behind

3 Duncan Phillips, “Pierre Bonnard,” *Kenyon Review* 11 (Autumn 1949), 563.

4 *Art in Theory, 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 535.

5 E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 174.

the woman wearing a black dress and white long-sleeved evening gloves who looks wistfully toward the viewer in *Shimmering Jubilee* (2022, p. 57), or the black and white striped wallpaper and balloons behind the dancing couple in *Dance with Dizzy* (2022, p. 45). Titus's egalitarian attention to decorative elements brings to mind Maurice Denis's famous statement that "it is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote or other—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."<sup>6</sup>

Like Vallotton's 1898 *Intimités*, his series of voyeuristic woodcuts that explores the complicated dynamics of intimate relationships, *Bourgeoisie in Bloom* both celebrates and unmask the disquieting ritual of young women being thrust into their social "blooming."

With this new body of work, Titus demonstrates that he is not merely a *laudator temporis acti* (one who praises past times), but a painter who understands the "moral meaning of colour, of contour, of sound."<sup>7</sup>

In *An Essay on Man*, his introduction to a philosophy of symbolic forms, the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer has written:

In every age and in every great artist the operation of the imagination reappears in new forms and in new force. In the lyrical poets, first and foremost, we feel this continuous rebirth and regeneration. They cannot touch a thing without imbuing it with their own inner life. Wordsworth has described this gift as the inherent power of his poetry:

To every natural form, rock, fruits or flower,  
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
I gave a moral life ...

But with these powers of invention and of universal animation we are only in the *anteroom* of art. The artist must not only feel the "inward meaning" of things and their moral life, he must externalize his feelings. The highest and most characteristic power of artistic imagination appears in this latter act.<sup>8</sup>

Percy Bysshe Shelley, in "A Defence of Poetry," had already recognized this ethical basis in imagination:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination ...<sup>9</sup>

6 "Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme," in Maurice Denis, *Théories: 1890–1910* (Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin, 1920), 1; my translation.

7 "The Salon of 1859," in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 234.

8 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021 [1944]), 154.

9 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems, Essays, and Letters*, edited by Ellsworth Barnard (New York: Odyssey Press, 1944), 540.

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* one finds one of the most significant statements made on art in the early twentieth century, in parenthesis no less, almost as an aside: "(Ethics and aesthetics are one)." It relates to an earlier remark by Wittgenstein jotted in his 1915–16 notebooks:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis* [in relation to the eternal]; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics.<sup>10</sup>

The archetypal psychologist James Hillman sees this eternal connection between aesthetics and ethics as one that brings us together with the cosmos itself:

How does your own particular aesthetic response connect with the cosmos? To begin with, the Greek word *kosmos* is originally an aesthetic term; [...] [it] means that all things are on display, show themselves, and are presented to the senses [...] Thus your aesthetic responses are cosmological, not merely personal [...] Our aesthetic responses are inherently related to the actual world and to the primary way that we take part in it. To suppress these responses is to cop out of the political, that is, out of the common, shared world. My final point is that ethics alone is not enough to make a change in the world. Alone, ethics without aesthetics doesn't hold [...] beauty evokes love.<sup>11</sup>

Hillman connects Wittgenstein's notion that any creative practice has to contain an ethical component, and any political activism, an aesthetic component, to a cosmically felt sense of beauty that is based on a shared love of, and care for, the soul of the world.

Titus is a painter who, like Bonnard and Corot, is gifted with a poetry of the soul that nourishes his prose of ordinary life. His unique style of creating a moral tension between abstraction and figuration endows art with soul while grounding it firmly in life.

A poetical "rewriting" of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by the young Danish poet Signe Gjessing, *Tractatus Philosophico-Poeticus*, published this year in English, begins with:

1 The world looks out,  
then arises, in beauty.  
1.01 *Here* is the world.  
1.011 Reality slips right through *here*.  
1.0111 Possibilities discover  
reality's shortcut:  
The world arises.<sup>12</sup>

In Honor Titus's paintings, the world looks out, then arises in beauty.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Tagebücher 1914–1916," in *Werkausgabe in 8 Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 1: 178 (October 7, 1916); my translation.

11 "Aesthetics and Politics," in *Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, vol. 2: *City & Soul* (Putnam, Conn.: Spring Publications, 2006), 153.

12 Signe Gjessing, *Tractatus Philosophico-Poeticus*, translated by Denise Newman (London: Lolli Editions, 2022).