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Review of A. Knight Powell. Depositions: Scenes from the late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum

John Decker

Georgia State University, jdecker@gsu.edu

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Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum. By Amy Knight Powell. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2012. 370 pp. \$34.95 cloth.

Amy Knight Powell's thesis is that late medieval images of the Deposition of Christ contain an under-diagnosed iconophobia that prefigures, "the imminent iconoclasms of the Protestant Reformation" (10). Representations of the lifeless Christ, and the liturgical act of "burying" them at Lent, she argues, assert a fundamental "deadness of the image" that portends twentieth-century modernist discussions of the "death of art." To demonstrate this, Knight Powell uses a bifurcated chapter structure in which she discusses early modern images and then follows up with a "vignette," taken from high modernist art, to bring her observations from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries into the twentieth. Such juxtapositions are possible, she states, because most of the early modern images under discussion are currently housed in museums in which they come into contact with works from all periods. This contact, she asserts, is facilitated by the concept of pseudomorphism, which describes a surface-level likeness between objects without any structure that links them other than that likeness. Unlike many art historians who express concerns about comparing things simply because they look alike, Knight Powell embraces the Surrealist George Bataille's approach in which pseudomorphosis is, "the unconscious mechanism that keeps both desire and the narrative moving" (11). Ostensibly, museum patrons create this narrative by bringing late medieval and modern images together in their minds. For Knight Powell, this is preferable to the art historical endeavor of situating images in their period milieus. She challenges the practice of contextualizing images by stating, "the discipline [of art history] tries to forget that its objects never in fact belonged to their original contexts, that they have always exceeded those contexts precisely because they are lifeless things, which neither live nor die along with the people who make them" (260).

In each chapter, she examines both early modern and modern art through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as Walter Benjamin's neo-Marxist critique of material culture. As she builds her case, Knight Powell supplements her use of twentieth-century theorists by turning to the writings of church fathers like Augustine and Gregory, reformers such as Luther, Karlstadt, and Müntzer, and various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources. These play out across two main divisions in the book. Section 1 is titled "The Deposition Rite" and discusses statues of the crucified Christ, which she claims exemplify the iconophobic suspicion that they are mere "dead images." Section 2 is "Paintings of the Deposition" and applies the conclusions she draws from the first section to paintings of Christ's deposition from the cross.

Knight Powell's study offers an alternative means of analyzing early modern religious images and seeks to integrate them into the history that succeeds them. Her approach acknowledges that the reception of images and objects changes over time and that this change necessarily alters how such items become part of larger discourses. Her choice of the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Benjamin allows her to situate the reception of images within a twentieth-century frame. This anchors the modern examples she discusses to their early modern predecessors but, in exchange, requires that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century images and objects accurately predict their twentieth-century successors. For Knight Powell, this predictive quality is accounted for through the pre-figurative aspects she finds in the images and objects she describes. The author sees the Protestant skepticism toward dead images as being a necessary precursor to the concept of the death of images posited in twentieth-century art theory. By declaring certain religious objects "dead," however, Knight Powell claims an absolute status for them somewhat at odds with early modern Christian worship. It also sees death as a purely linear process, which does not fully match early modern attitudes on the subject either.

The “deadness” she attributes to images of the crucified Christ—especially sculptures used in deposition rites—is predicated on the inanimate nature of created objects. The statue’s inability to move on its own, the author claims, is a clear sign of its deadness. When placed in a sepulcher as part of the deposition rite, such lifelessness constitutes an iconoclastic statement because, for the votary, its inability to reanimate asserts its object-ness and, hence, uselessness for salvation. According to the author’s own accounting of the rite, however, the deposited item is retrieved from the grave, placed on view again, and treated as a living thing. For fifteenth-century Christians, the liturgical year was cyclical and the “revival” of the holy image was as foregone a conclusion as its “death.” This non-linear approach to death also held outside the confines of the deposition rite. People believed that those who died could return as ghosts, dreams, or temporarily reanimated bodies seeking justice. The insistence on a purely linear approach to death appears to contrast with early modern Christian views that accepted and expected the idea of resurrection/ reanimation. The deadness of images makes sense when viewed through the objections of Protestant theologians, but such objections were not universal even among the reformers themselves. On the whole, rank-and-file late medieval Christians appear to have employed images happily albeit with a few reservations. For the author, however, these considerations come under the rubric of “original context,” which she rejects. Ultimately, Knight Powell’s work is a deconstructive project in which the work of art is not an expression of the society in which it was made but is, instead, a screen upon which modern viewers project their inner subjectivities.

Though not her stated goal, the key contribution of this study is that it begins to describe the complex changes confronting artists and their patrons in the early sixteenth century. By laying out the doubts, contradictions, and dangers bound up with image making and image breaking in the early years of the Protestant movement, Knight Powell points out the difficulty of producing works of religious art in a social atmosphere that was becoming hostile to such an enterprise.

John R. Decker
Georgia State University