


# Concepts on a new spectrum: modernity, realism and the Bellowsian male gaze

Conceitos sob um novo espectro: a modernidade, o realismo e o *male gaze bellowsiano*

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## Abstract

In this article, we are going to briefly analyze some pieces of George Bellows artwork, from the perspective of an inclusive modernity, which is fluid and less divisive, harboring pluralities, and, furthermore, regarding what does not come into effect in the scope of what is considered vanguard. We shall also tackle the concept of pictorial realism, and male gaze, and how these very concepts relate to the Modernity and to the forms of being, seeing and the idea of pleasure inside the Bellowsian's body of work, taking into account that the American art has, within its core, latent modernity.

**Keywords:** George Bellows. Modernities. American Art. American Realism. Male gaze.

## Resumo

No presente artigo iremos analisar brevemente algumas obras de George Bellows, sob a ótica de uma modernidade inclusiva, fluída e menos sectarizante, abrigando pluralidades e, inclusive, o que não entra no escopo do que é tradicionalmente considerado vanguarda. Abordaremos também o conceito de realismo pictórico e male gaze, e como esses conceitos se relacionam com o Modernidade e as formas de ser, de ver e de prazer dentro da obra bellowsiana, tendo a arte estadunidense, em seu bojo, a modernidade latente.

**Palavras-chave:** George Bellows. Modernidade. Arte estadunidense. Realismo estadunidense. Male gaze.

## Introduction

A work of art is a historical event. It is something that has happened in the past. However, unlike other historical events, a piece of art continues to exist in the present; it can be re-experienced. Like a historical event survives, a work of art is a primary evidence of the time, place and artist who has created it. This means that when interpreting a piece of art as a declaration of the past, we can learn something from the culture and the character of the artist who brought that work of art to life.<sup>1</sup>

Space and time are intrinsic barriers of this article, and these barriers easily lead us to the anachronism path, especially when it comes to enhancing works of art as *evidence*. Thus, following this Jules Prown speech, we begin this paper, which brings elements for us to understand a little bit more the concepts of Modernity and Realism, regarding George Bellows' body of work. Our intention is not using art as evidence, excuse or media, but seeing art as a historical event by itself; and as a historical event, it is linked, intertwined and it can help us to better understand concepts and ideas. At the risk of being anachronistic, we face the world around to dive into the imagistic world of Bellows.

For us to have a deeper understanding of George Bellows and also understand how these concepts relate to his body of work, we are going to briefly pass by how his art organizes and institutionalizes itself in the United States. It is worth noticing that it is not our focus to make any type of American art history review, only to position it for a better understanding of what is yet to come. The development of the United States of America as we know them today is deeply based on their constitution as a British colony. America's Northeast, known as New England, was the English gateway, being the area with the highest incidence of customs import, but the habitual production of English portraits from them took longer to be incorporated in the recently colonized continent<sup>2</sup>.

If we compare the American Western art to the Western European one, we realize that the American pictorial art is relatively recent. The English art was brought to the North American continent through colonization and was concentrated in New England, or the extreme Northeast of the United States, including the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and their frontiers of several of these states, with the state of New York also belonging to this very location. It is in this area that this European-inspired cultural production took roots, but only after a few decades, since the new settlers and the middle class did not have many resources for supporting art patronage. A lot of these New England based artists were not precisely new to the craft,

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<sup>1</sup> PROWN, Jules D. Winslow Homer in His Art. **American Art**, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Chicago, v. 1, n. 1, p. 31-45, Apr. 1987. Available on: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/smitstudamerart.1.1.3108970>. Accessed on: 19 Apr. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See CRAVEN, Wayne. The Seventeenth-Century New England Mercantile Image: Social Content and Style in the Freake Portraits. In: DOEZEMA, Marianne; MILROY, Elizabeth (Org.). **Reading American Art**. Dexter: Yale University, 1998, cap. 1. p. 1-12.

whereas several of them came directly from England themselves. They knew their craft very well, mostly the portraitists, with vast knowledge of color, composition, line and pattern.

Through the social perspective and a generalist form, the 16th and 17th artworks had almost a utilitarian purpose, and the American art in the Western manners relied on portrait production and landscape painting, as status and decoration items, respectively. As a way of reinforcing family as a sacred institution, portraits celebrated marriage, family lines and enhanced social status, as properly explained by Wayne Craven when stating “Family life was sacred, and American colonial portraits, husband and wife shrines, in particular, parents and children and only the offspring, they were anthems for that blesses institution.”<sup>3</sup>. Thus, we observe an American art that consolidates itself more whilst a portrait and landscaping art, than a vanguard and inventive art form like the French standards. It is important to highlight, however, that the American art (even the simplest style through the French view) brings up, in its core, the modernity, being a society built within fundamental principles and modern contradictions.

American Western society, born out of a strangely milder colonization, seems to have freedom, restart and possibility as its foundation motto, outlining an environment where the different ways of being and the inherent contradictions of the self are placed as a premise for an emergent artistic circle. It is also, however, with the contact with the French culture and its elements of consolidated impressionist character, that the American artists indulge themselves in the art of self-observation through the point of view of the other - I see in the other what I do not see in me, I see in me what I see in the other. And, without tracing dualities or deepen too much into comparative schemes, the preference for outdoorsy scenes, the pleasure for observation, crowds, the intimate immensity, has definitely its parallels in the United States. Furthermore, the concept of modernity becomes a subject in conversation circles and depicted on the easel paintings. The new way of life and of approaching life spreads to all classes, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the United States, it is defined by the technologic development and by the middle class as a consolidated group, celebrating the then daily routine labor, or the now claimed bourgeois idleness. It is in this new way of life that resides most of the American painters’ interest, especially members of the Ashcan School. In this movement of appreciation of the ordinary, we can see the interest in the akin, primarily, but also in the unique.

In this new format, idleness is not only possible now, but also something worth celebrating and necessary – a way of life induced by middle class’ consolidation, in which alienating and fast pacing work demands relaxation both for body and mind. The interest in the surroundings and in the pungent reality it is distinctive of many painters in between centuries. It is in this search for the particular, for the unique

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<sup>3</sup> DOEZEMA, MILROY, op. cit., p. 4.

and for the surrounding that the Ashcan School – led by Robert Henri and located mainly in New York – let itself be captured by the charms of bodies in delight, relaxed bodies and by moments of leisure. Nevertheless, it is not only of leisure that people lived by in this century, and the new way of work, the progress, the machinery and the new constant pollution fog taking over the cities were also depicted in these sceneries. The necessity of alienating oneself from the alienation itself dates back to a dialectic self-criticism, resuming the own individual existential questions thoroughly discussed by American writers of that period.

It is important to emphasize that the Ashcan School was not an Art movement per se<sup>4</sup>, there was not a manifesto like Breton proposed for the surrealists<sup>5</sup>, and it was never an official and fully realized and organized movement, but Henri posed himself as a beacon, always questioning about painting what one sees, painting one surroundings, noticing that this environment, placed itself, several times, as idleness, daily routine, self-reflection and introspection of an emergent lifestyle. Robert Henri, born in Ohio, has always been a free creative process devotee and understood the art school as a progress catalyst. He is one of the founders of the Ashcan School, as a professor and mentor of several of its members, including George Bellows and Edward Hopper – two names frequently linked to the insipid realism term.

When researching for George Bellows, whether in articles, on Google Scholar or in specialized books, one of the first associations is with the word realism. When we search on Google for the word *Realism* and look it up its available meaning, we can almost get an association with an artistic movement most of the time; a movement that drew on painting what one saw, as well as social flaws, being opposite of what is firmly known as Romanticism and several times exemplified by painter Gustave Courbet's body of work. We understand that these categories set us apart from something more productive, and limit historians, critics, artists and the public audience, thereby we will not detail the Romanticism as a highlighted case, but we also grasp that an understanding of a different realism allows us to not restrict ourselves to the canon's dictates.

Morris Weitz would say that the aesthetics is not seeking a finished theory but elucidating another concept on its own. He says that the aesthetics role is "Specifically, it is to describe the conditions under which we employ the concept correctly"<sup>6</sup>. Also, describing conditions strikes us as being a fair way to treat a movement which is so broad and complex. Realism, as we find over the internet, generically speaking,

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<sup>4</sup> By pragmatism, we meant the Ashcan School as a movement.

<sup>5</sup> See BRETON, André. **Manifesto Surrealista**. 1924. Available on: <https://www.colegiodearquitetos.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Manifesto-de-breton.pdf>. Accessed on: 7 Oct. 2021.

<sup>6</sup> WEITZ, Morris. The Role of Theory in Aesthetics. **The Journal Of Aesthetics And Art Criticism**. Santa Fe, sept. 1956, p. 27-35. Available on: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/427491?readnow=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A66bf7518c22088dd8bc6eec8823ea862&seq=9#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/427491?readnow=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A66bf7518c22088dd8bc6eec8823ea862&seq=9#page_scan_tab_contents). Accessed on: 20 Jan. 2019.

rooted in the daily lifestyle routine, in the daily labor, leisure, a movement that goes through art history (as observed by the American appreciation by the Flemish) and it is present in art textbooks is not wrong; there is only so much more than this. Edward Lucie-Smith helps us to explain the concept a bit better, as well as the conditions when he distinguishes and clarifies American's realism. To him, there were two types of realism, the perceptive and the conceptual. The first one "Perceptual realism is, in theory at least, entirely concerned with the business of sight: with the business of seeing things without preconceptions"<sup>7</sup> The later would be the one linked to the perception and to what we comprehend what we see, not what the things are in reality.

The conceptual realism, briefly developed by Lucie-Smith, would be the oldest and the one that represents the concept of something one would want to depict. It

can be defined as a kind of inventory of what the observer believes to be in front of him at a given moment. This inventory, and the way which is presented, are both to a large extent governed by experience, not only of things seen in the past, but the habitual ways of seeing them.<sup>8</sup>

Lucie-Smith made a long consideration on realism and the emergence of the photography, and how it influences our focus. On that note, we understand a little bit of George Bellows boxing scenes, which, oddly enough, we see as familiar, even though seen for the first time.

In *Dempsey and Firpo* [Figure 1], Bellows brings a scene of boxing with a face off between Jack Dempsey and Luis Angél Firpo (first American *Latino* to challenge a heavyweight boxer in the United States) – a memorable fight for boxing experts. The light focus that Bellows decides to showcase in his painting, this large mass of upper light with sharp geometric forms (whether with the ring lines or on the stocky bodies), and, mostly, the angle chose by Bellows, very similar with angles chose by U.S. movies (in there lies the unique familiarity) exposes his intimacy with the subjects and with the aforementioned techniques of realism. It is evident that, at this stage of life, Bellows already mixed them with his own interests, merging Robert Henri lessons on painting the ordinary man with dynamic symmetry theories (which we can explore on another opportunity) [Figure 2].

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<sup>7</sup> LUCIE-SMITH, Edward. **American Realism**. New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers. 1994, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



**Figure 1:**  
George Bellows  
**Dempsey and Firpo**

1924

Oil on Canvas. 129,5cm X 160,6cm

Whitney Museum of American Art

Source: H.V. Allison & Co. Website



**Figure 2:**

Boxeador argentino Luis Ángel Firpo  
nocauteando Jack Dempsey para fora do ring.

14 de setembro de 1923

**El Grafico**, n. 221. Source: WikiMedia.

The previous image, it is considered a photograph of this famous fight. Being real or not, it is undeniable there are some similarities. The faces in the crowd express the excitement of who were watching something unexpected. And we can also see that in Bellows, faces and bodies that demonstrate surprise and frenzy typically linked to a fight. Bellows decides to represent the fight from behind Dempsey, almost a low-angle shot (*contre-plongée*), showcasing Firpo's torso and a falling Dempsey. We are put as a viewer of the very moment, as part of the audience in the arena.

However, even before his contact with Hardesty Maratta theories on dynamic symmetry, and with Henri's even fresher ideas, Bellows already looked for ordinary people themes. In *Forty-Two Kids* [Figure 3] Bellows depicts a group of forty-two kids, mostly boys, bathing themselves in a river. In this work of art, more than ever, we can identify a convergence of Lucie-Smith concepts and Henri's advices: to see and to paint were likely the most important ones to Ashcanner. Also, George Bellows, even though being considered a traditional artist by many (mostly post Armory Show)<sup>9</sup>, brings techniques, frameworks and very intimate subjects connected to the American realism in his first Works, like in *Forty-Two Kids*, a small art piece compared to the open scene it represents, Bellows depicts forty-two bodies that could easily be slender ramshackle worms, bathing in the sun. This piece, besides being considered a milestone by many American art historians (including Lucie-Smith), shows Bellows appreciation for Thomas Eakins. Without further ado, *The Swimming Hole* [Figure 4] also showcases boys by a riverbank, ready to dive into it. With different nuances and apart from each work's particularities, the way that Bellows builds the bodies in clear contrast with the darkness of the nature behind them, brings back directly to Eakins body of work.

Taking up Edward Lucie-Smith, he sets Bellows as one of the pioneers of American realism in the 1930s and 40s. Speaking of Armory Show and how Bellows was considered a traditionalist, he wrote:

This was even more of an injustice than it seems at first sight, as there were aspects of Bellows' work which were in advance of their time, rather than abreast of or behind it. He can, for instance, be thought of as the true progenitor of the American social realists of the 1930s and 1940s. Cliff Dwellers (1913) decided to abandon the amused detachment of the artists of the Ashcan School [...]<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 3:**  
George Bellows. **Forty-Two Kids**, 1907.  
Oil on canvas, 106,7cm X 153cm.  
National Gallery of Art. Source: H.V. Allison & Co. Website.



**Figure 4:**  
Thomas Eakins. **The Swimming Hole**, 1884-1885.  
Oil on canvas, 70cm X 92cm.  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Source: Amon Carter's Website.



Other important point is the urban scenes. Under its own tag, *New York City* is one of the categories of Bellows' Catalogue Raisonné. If by being a realist painter – or even being part of the movement - one needed to showcase the raw reality, Bellows could be considered a born realist, at least at the early stage of his career. Having dedicated a good part of his early work to representations of urban centers and outdoors, Bellows depicts like no other the shared isolation. In 1909's *Blue Morning* [Figure 5], Bellows elicits how the progress and the noise are part of the scenery.

In this noisy art piece, in which seems to be an excavation going on, amidst smoke, cranes and buildings. In the foreground, however, in a simple image, we can notice a man, sat down alone, observing the main scene. And Bellows, who was never known as an introvert, but as charismatic, chatty and jolly person (always practicing sports, which helped him with his popularity), depicts better than anyone what we call shared loneliness. That unnoticed solitude, which is so ordinary that does not demand our attention. It does attract Bellows' though. Differently from his personal friend and fellow realistic artist Edward Hopper, who brings the open solitude (and already dissected in many studies), Bellows showcases sneaky aloneness, that distress that comes in gently, but settles in, mostly in our hearts and makes its home.

We see something similar in *Upper Broadway* [Figure 6], 1907. There are people strolling on the streets, buildings as a passive presence on the background, and the street, accentuating in the composition the feeling of depth. There are passers-by, but we do not know where they are heading to and who they are. It is hard not to compare it to Monet's *Boulevard de Capucines* [Figure 7], 1873, with the "black strokes/spits" filling in the canvas, instead of *Forty-Two Kids'* worms. In Monet, as in Bellows, the upper angle, of who sees without being seen, brings the modern feeling of someone who observes all. And it is not only in modern themes that Bellows approximates from Monet at certain aspects and moments.

Especially during his first career years, we can see Bellows experimenting more with techniques and styles. With faster strokes, *à la Monet*, he makes the thickness of the strokes compose the snow texture of Manhattan's streets; strokes that seem to follow this depicted lifestyle. And, in this New Yorker scene, with illustrious yet unknown bystanders, the man of the crowd of Edgar Allan Poe gets more space. In fact, Edgar Allan Poe, in his short story, *The Man of the Crowd*, establishes what Baudelaire called *flâneur*, and this very image could be placed in several of Bellows' artworks of New York sceneries. The short story is about a man in a coffee shop in London (it could be in U.S., where Poe was born) who gets intrigued by a specific bystander and starts to follow him through the streets of the British city. It is tough not to observe in this works the choking smoke of a reality which does not deny itself. Would it be modern to

**Figure 5:**  
George Bellows  
**Blue Morning**  
1909  
Oil on canvas,  
80,33cm X 110,17cm.  
National Gallery of  
Art, Washington, DC



**Figure 6:**  
George Bellows  
**Upper Broadway**  
1907  
Panell, 27,94cm X  
28,74cm.  
Private collection







**Figure 8 :**  
Claude Monet  
**Boulevard des Capucines**  
1873  
Oil on canvas. 80,3cm X 60,3cm.  
Nelson- Atkins Museum of Art

represent one's surroundings? What about representing the reality? What if a made-up one? Would it be modern to bring out the calm frisson of someone who sees bare naked versions of themselves? The interest in the other guides Poe's character through the streets and through his life, and also guides Henri, Bellows and most of the Ashcan School painters.

We demonstrate here, like a broken record player, that Bellows seems to see that type of sadness in people, the anguish of the rushed ones and steady ones, that distress already tamed, as some would say, which is typical of the modern society, in which the conception of time and of what is real pass by a whole review. And there is no difference in neither his nudes, or in his portraits. Perhaps his first and last nude do not possess this "soul restlessness", one for being too abrasive and authoritative, and the other for almost being an allegory and a reference of another work. However, both in *Nude with White Shawl* [Figure 8], *Nude With Fan* [Figure 9] and in *Nude With Hexagonal Quilt* [Figure 10] (to quote a few), Bellows represents these women with a grief that takes over the art pieces; with a dismay that takes over these bodies and afflicted souls. Maybe, this can be the phenomenon that many call apathy. It does not look like that, in those nudes and in many portraits, Bellows showcases an obvious sadness, but there is not also a pungent happiness, as we can see in some Luks works. Bellows brings up a melancholy that is typical of someone who agrees to look at a hidden yet hovering reality for more than thirty seconds.

**Figure 8:**  
George Bellows  
**Nude With White Shawl**  
1919  
Oil on canvas, 96,52cm X 76,20cm  
Private collection  
Source: H.V. Allison & Co. website





**Figure 9:**  
George Bellows  
**Nude With Fan**  
1920  
Oil on canvas  
86,36cm X 111,76cm  
North Carolina  
Museum of Art  
Source: H.V. Allison  
& Co. website



**Figure 10:**  
George Bellows  
**Nude With Hexagonal Quilt**  
1924  
Oil on canvas  
129,54cm X  
160,02cm. National  
Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC  
Source: H.V. Allison  
& Co. website



This apathy is not only an ambiance that surrounds Bellows, but the American society as well. Even the broader access to material things and goods, and a structure not seen in other countries, the lack of something seems to spread like wildfire; this “lack of something”, which appears to be an issue that afflicts not only Bellows’ women and men, but also the American society as a whole. Abraham Davidson, on the Ashcan School<sup>11</sup> remembers very appropriately of the poem of the American writer Edwin Arlington Robinson, called *Richard Cory* (originally published in 1897), that talks about a well-mannered attractive man, who was admired by many, but meets a tragic end.

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,  
We people on the pavement looked at him:  
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,  
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,  
“Good-morning and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—  
And admirably schooled in every grace:  
In fine, we thought that he was everything  
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,  
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head.<sup>12</sup>

This poem has given rise to the namesake 60s song by Simon & Garfunkel, and carries the message that although American society has it all, something is always missing. This theme seems to be a recurrent one in the American culture, with Hopper and also Bellows’ namesake, George Tooker as bearers of this pungent feeling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Edwin Robinson has other poems like *Dear Friends* and *Miniver Cheevy* in which, the same odd sensation of humanity is somehow lacking, seems to be replaced by the mechanical approach of a perfect lifestyle. If Bellows is, in fact, realist, that is undertaken by conceptualists, and for those who want to label everything. There is something very real in Bellows’ body of work, and, mostly in his nudes bring that distressing discomfort of women who could, at a different stage of life (or even another life at all) have the perfect suburban life.

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<sup>11</sup> DAVIDSON, Abraham A. *The Story of American Painting*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1974, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> ROBINSON, Edwin A. *Richard Cory*. Also available on: <https://poets.org/poem/richard-cory>. Accessed on: 19 Jul. 2021.



In one of his most powerful male portraits, *Portrait of My Father* [Figure 11], Bellows brings his father, George Bellows, who seems to be supported by a cane. As one of his early works, Bellows still has a very strong and meaningful stroke quality. We can already see his interest by the light performance as a facilitator of the depth. His forehead composed by skin-like pink and beige hues, reflecting the golden yellow typical of artificial lighting. This painting was made three years earlier than *Nude Girl Miss Leslie Hall* [Figure 12] and we can also notice certain similarities, even though totally differing ones. Leslie also has this raw stroke quality, and we glimpse, in both, Bellows using the paint texture as a way of give away the skin texture. Bringing up George Bellows senior, however, we go to another portrait, Thomas Eakins' self-portrait [Figure 13].

In this art piece, we see Eakins, in a usual portrait stance, the bust taking a little bit over half of the size of the art piece. Eakins looks at us without hesitation, with a gaze that combines the firmness of a clear mind and the fatigue of aging, exposed by his fair gray. His expression marks are there and they are not hidden. His creased forehead only confirms his witty mindset. The neutral background is present in almost every of his portraits and most of old masters'; however, we see in Eakins body of work a vitality that Bellows only incorporates in his work later. The varnish applied by Bellows in his art pieces (especially in primary pigments) gives a shiny touch in his latter nudes, nevertheless, we get something similar in Eakins, back in 1902, mainly in the lighter area, on his face and hair. The thoroughness that Eakins works in every strand of his gray hair, giving away luminosity where we would not expect and creating, thus, an image not only real, but also life-like, most likely something sought by Bellows. This portrait, more than the others, looks like it is about to leave the canvas, as *Nude with Hexagonal Quilt* and *Two Women* [Figure 14].

In both portraits, the intangible masculinity is there – whether because of the cane or whether by the age marks, it looks like the perfect combination of the Belgium and Dutch painters' dramatic value with the apathy of the modernities. Eakins and Bellows seem to seek out for something both in the represented women and men, extending the interaction between observers and portrayed. What we see is what we are.



**Figure 11:**  
George Bellows  
**Portrait of My Father**  
1906  
Oil on canvas  
72,07cm X 55,88cm  
Columbus Museum of Art, OH  
Source: H.V. Allison & Co. website



**Figure 12:**  
George Bellows  
**Nude Girl,  
Miss Leslie Hall**  
1909  
Oil on canvas  
152,40cm X 106,68cm  
Terra Foundation for the Arts Collection  
Source: H.V. Allison & Co. website



**Figure 13:**  
Thomas Eakins  
**Self-portrait**  
1902  
Oil on canvas.  
76,2cm X 63,5cm  
National Academy of Design



**Figure 14:**  
George Bellows  
**Two Women**  
1924  
Oil on canvas  
149,86cm X 165,10cm  
Private Collection Source:  
H.V. Allison & Co. website

It is quite clear to see these concepts in daily scenes, but what about in Bellowsian portraits and nudes? It is imperative nowadays to problematize the male gaze when it comes to female body and pleasure; it is something that is present at this search for understanding what is modern, understanding the other as part of us and what is realism. The female pleasure can still be taboo and relegated several times to a secondary level, but it starts to own its unique placement in art history. Duncan<sup>13</sup> speaks of the virility and female body portrayal by mid-century painters which brings the stereotype of women connected to nature, as something even more natural and native than men, who are normally associated with culture/society. This is not the stereotype that we see here with the Ashcan School – even though nature-related themes, like flowers and fruits, are part of many works. What we see in Bellows, and in many pieces by other Ashcanners, is the nude represented indoors and in many urban ambiances – a good combination of modernities with realities.

In his nudes, Bellows conveys women who are naked, but they do not benefit from their own body. These women seem stuck in imaginary worlds, of anguish and contemplation. Duncan talks a little bit about it as well, and despite her comments being aimed at vanguard art, at the symbolist and fauvist movements, we can notice something similar happening in Bellows body of work. Duncan expatiates on the *femme fatale* mystique, its enigmatic souls and darkness proper of occult forces; on female archetypes that the symbolists represent, she explains that “They are often possessed by dark or enigmatic souls. They usually act out one or another archetypal myth – Eve, Salome, the Sphinx, and the Madonna.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Bellows does not depict any Eve, no Sphinx and no Salome<sup>15</sup> (as his mentor Robert Henri, who portrayed them many times)<sup>16</sup>, although there is something about those women which evokes the tone of enigmatic souls.

In all his nudes, excepting *Two Women*, the models do not look at the viewer. And this means that they do not stare at Bellows. Since it is a pattern among nudes, this makes us wonder if it was a choice made by the artist. This non-gaze grants the models certain shyness, mystery and an inaccessibility that seems our quintessence. There is something about these women which men cannot access, and this can and must be seen as one of the several male fetishes, the one about the unattainable woman. By seeing those nudes together, we can realize how predominant sober tones are, with a lot of purple and pinkish

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<sup>13</sup> DUNCAN, Carol. Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Painting. In: BROUDE, Norma; GARRARD, Mary D. (Ed.). **Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany**. London, New York: Harper & Row, 1982. p. 293-313. Available on: [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/arthist/wolff/pdfs/week6\\_duncan.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/arthist/wolff/pdfs/week6_duncan.pdf). Accessed on: 30 May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> If someone really wants to fit Bellows nudes into those allegories, the closest approach would be Madonna, in *Nude with White Shawl*.

<sup>16</sup> See “Salome”. Robert Henri. 1909. Oil on canvas. 196,9cm X 94cm. The Ringling Museum.

blue hues: those very colors linked to the royalty, but also to spirituality and life mysteries. It is not by chance that Bellows use those colors here. It seems like his intention was to mark the introspection, the depth and the magic those women possess which was certainly effective.

But how can we attest those artifices are intended for male pleasure? Would not they be inherent to modernity? Would not it be the mystery that it does not unveil itself? What about the search that does not cease and the interest for the other that does not fade? It is rough to distinguish this Bellows' facet, but Chadwick discusses about this challenge, by saying that:

The difficulty of distinguishing between overly sexualized (i.e. voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilia) and other forms of looking, the issue of female subjectivity, and the identification of female body with nature, generation and the instinctual life have become important areas of investigation for the contemporary feminism.<sup>17</sup>

Even though this difficulty comes out as latent and pernicious, those women bear within themselves the mark of being portrayed through eyes of desire. We cannot recognize lust in those portraits, whether in the *femme fatale* one or in the woman on the grass – we see a woman immersed in a world of her own, less sexualized than another traditional pieces. In these paintings, the nude, yet clear and upfront, seems accessory-like although not by chance. We can identify the intentionality of those naked bodies, however they talk more about the inner storms of those beings, and, by undressing them, and it could be an efficient way, visually, of giving those buried feelings a bit of light and glory.

Bellowsian women representations appear distant from the ones by his namesake George Luks.<sup>18</sup> In these artworks, women bodies are perceived as active instruments of pleasure. And, even though the question of “whose pleasure are we talking about?” remains, we observe in these pieces (and in Bellows') endless sources of a search for the other.

These deep questionings about female bodies on artworks and representations, so varied yet so similar, take us to another issue that is long lasting: the question about the multiplicity of bodies and representations not being a mere casualty; or, if so, would it be this possibility of being casual an intrinsic part of the modern comprehension of the being? Our work started with this premise: with those long abandoned questions, which we could not, however, avoid once they are so resistant and enduring. Mainly because it is evident, in these Bellows nudes, more than the incarnation of sex, the incarnation of doubt, of what unrests us, like seen in *Blue Morning* or *Portrait of My Father*.

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<sup>17</sup> CHADWICK, Whitney. **Women, Art, and Society**. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc. 2012, p. 282.

<sup>18</sup> See *Morning Light*. George Luks. 1928~1933. Oil on canvas. 152,5cm X 122cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum and *Seated Nude With Bobbed Hair*. Undated. 101,6cm X 68,58cm. Private collection.

This is, for him [the modern man], a matter of withdrawing from fashion what it could contain as poetic in its past, extracting the eternal out of the temporary[...] The Modernity is the transitory, the ephemeral, the contingent, it is half of the art, being the other half the eternal and the unchangeable. There was a kind of modernity for each ancient painter [...].<sup>19</sup>

The modernity is transitory, ephemeral, fleeting, elusive, and instantaneous. But more than that, it is about being knowledgeable of one own ephemerality. Being aware of that makes one wonder about one's own time and finitude, since the notion of time becomes fluid and the present earns a new found importance. Life becomes centered in the human being as a producer, and time passage becomes humanity's time passage, no more a heavenly one. Here and now gets a meaning that spreads throughout all fields, bringing, mostly, doubt and self-criticism. When we realize that we are responsible for ourselves, we lose the external referential, and self-criticism becomes our best ally. However, with the vestiges of a life centered in divine redemption, within religious paradigms, we still seek out for idyll, which goes through time. We turn back to history to see what managed to resist time's martyrdom. It is this fragment of resistance that turns into the essentials, the eternal, even if the eternal has the possibility of vanishing. Thus, Baudelaire crafted one of his most iconic quotes, bringing up to our eyes the question of modernity in arts.

Greenberg<sup>20</sup> – who engaged in an extent debate over American art, and in the 1950s and 1960s – goes back to Kant, when he talks about the rationalization of artworks. Greenberg understands the self-criticism as an intrinsic part of being modern, and, for this purpose, all art that intend to be modern needs to question its mediums and means. Greenberg structures the dichotomous debate, setting up as opposites, figurative art and abstract art.

Shifting the way the world perceives as world, and how it perceives the other with the concept of *self* as the center of the world, we begin to see ourselves in the other, and seeing the other in ourselves. By seeing a possibility of connection, a possibility of identifying among two private worlds, of glimpsing the common life, something that cannot change even in its particularities, our curiosity remains and guides us through the *Boulevard des Capucines* of life.

The modernity, as well put by Baudelaire, has always existed. In every historical moment, time was modern for itself, it was concomitant to those who uttered the words, and allowed new ways of regarding points of view, of understanding and producing. But what does it make this given time,

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<sup>19</sup> BAUDELAIRE, Charles. **Sobre a Modernidade**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra. 1996, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> GREENBERG, Clement. Arte Abstrata. In: FERREIRA, Glória; MELLO, Cecília Cotrim de (Orgs.). **Clement Greenberg e o debate crítico**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1997.



between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a milestone Modernity-wise? Perhaps the rationalization revived in Kant holds the answer. Maybe the technology developing itself in high speed; or even Freud and the self-centered perception has led the way. Moreover, even the possibility itself of the existence of modernities, instead of a single one.

And we also bear within ourselves unanswered questions, such as: how could George Bellows seated nude portraits be considered modern? What is a realist painter? How to start a discussion on how male gazing relate to artists who use the other as resource? Even though Bellows had features quite different from what was considered modern in the period (although he flirted occasionally with certain so-called modern techniques), the artist exhibit subtleties that make us glimpse a possible modernity in his traits. Moreover, if we think about his nudes in a broader context, we see his art as part of the body of work of a complex and multitalented artist, who got touched by modernism. Furthermore, we do not believe in an artist-centric idea/motivation, or in an art that is better or worse, limited and divisive. We do believe in art that suits itself, that responds its own demands and questionings. Bellows art seems this way indeed.