

## The Promise of Cosmopolitanism: Contemporary Art, Ethics and Imagination in a Global World

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**Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination by Marsha Meskimmon, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 132 pp., 16 col. and 15 b. & w. illus., £65.00 hdbk, £20.99 pbk**

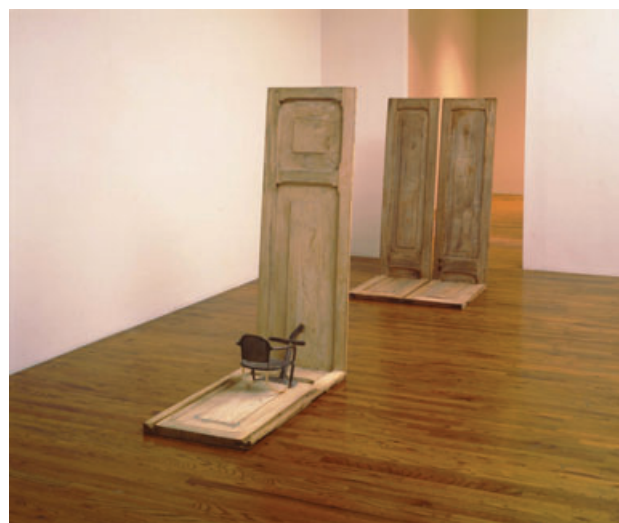
Marsha Meskimmon's elegantly written and carefully argued book is born out of her long-standing commitment to exploring the intertwining of subjects, spaces, objects, and ideas, especially in connection with women making art.<sup>1</sup> In particular, two observations shape this most recent study of hers. Firstly, she argues that materials, images, and spaces associated with the domestic have emerged as dominant motifs in international contemporary art, but considerations of the latter through the lens of the work of feminist scholars and artists on the domestic remain largely obscured.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, she maintains that contemporary artworks invoking the domestic are not necessarily concerned with bounded notions of home or the local, but with broader flows and exchanges characteristic of globalization.

Her fascination both with questions of how sexual subjectivity can remain unmarked in artworks evoking the domestic and with those of how artworks can engender the condition of being at home in an all-too-marked global world gives rise to the central concern of her book: how might art create a critical, yet effective, 'cosmopolitan imagination', enabling us to participate in, and potentially change, the political, ethical, and social parameters through which we negotiate the world? To be clear, Meskimmon is not attempting to salvage or recuperate the vexed concept of cosmopolitanism – derived from the Greek work meaning 'citizen of the world' and, broadly speaking, referring to the notion that we are or can be part of a single community. Nonetheless, she certainly does take it in exciting new directions. More specifically, 'cosmopolitan imagination' refers to an emergent

process – future-oriented but not forgetful of the past – which potentially enables profound changes in our relationship with the world and our place within it in the present. Through this process, an artwork interpellates active and inter-subjective participation with and within the world, and thereby produces subjects who are both response-able and responsible. In this way, Meskimmon productively links cosmopolitanism to both ethics and aesthetics.

To develop her ideas, Meskimmon engages in close readings of the work of an eclectic group of artists, including Doris Salcedo, Ni Haifeng, Yin Xiuzhen, Hossein Valamanesh, and Anne Graham, in tandem with feminist scholarship covering a broad range of topics – from ethics and aesthetics to situated knowledge and embodied subjectivity. Each chapter focuses on a few artworks and one really gets the sense that Meskimmon has taken the time to live with and through these works as she develops her cogent ideas; the artists she writes about are truly fortunate to have such a committed interlocutor. Meskimmon's art-historical practice not only encompasses close readings of art but also a 'writing with' art, too; she does not so much write about art as objects to be read and acted upon as write with art in combination with theory to formulate new ideas and concepts.

The book is structured through four conceptual and material tropes to facilitate these kinds of close readings of art with theory and to bring her dialogical process to the forefront: 'foundation', 'threshold', 'passage', and 'landing'. As references to the built



**1 Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda VI*, 1995. Wood, bone, and metal in three parts: 190.2 × 99.1 × 47 cm; 159.7 × 119.3 × 55.8 cm; 158.7 × 96.5 × 46.9 cm. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York. Photo: D. James Dee.**

environment, they are literally in keeping with the theme of the domestic. More importantly, they serve as evocative conceptual figurations to explore the connection between the materiality of a place, or home, and the act of emplacement, or making a home in a global world. For instance, 'foundation' is explored not only as a noun – the firm support of a building – but also as a verb – the act of founding, settling, and establishing. The subject formed at the interstices of this critical modulation is an embodied, embedded, and responsible subject, and home is no longer given or assumed but something at which one works.

To explain further, a typical reading of artist Doris Salcedo's *La Casa Viuda* (1995) (plate 1) considers the work a depiction of the political situation in Columbia, in particular the broader inequities of power brought about by the forces of globalization. Meskimmon points out that this type of analysis tends to create binary oppositions – local and global, domestic and foreign, home and away, past and present – and effaces the work's greater potential to rethink politics, ethics, and art. Meskimmon rethinks Salcedo's work as a threshold state, a process of liminal engagement, or a *segue*, which becomes a locus of possibility rather than marker between the aforementioned oppositional terms.

Meskimmon takes as given the speculative nature of her thesis that art can create ethical subjects, and consequently eschews making grand statements. However, the book does offer a powerful mode through which to realign the critical methods of art historians (as well as those of social science and humanities scholars more broadly). She ends her book with a compelling discussion of the praxis that informs her various case studies: what she refers to as 'affirmative criticality'. Drawing partially on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Meskimmon argues that critical thinking need not only be deconstructive to maintain its rigour, but that it should risk affirmation to achieve its fullest potential to engage with and transform the not-yet-here.

Meskimmon's concept of affirmative criticality implicitly highlights the often overlooked productive overlaps between the incisive criticality typically associated with Foucauldian deconstruction and the possibility for a more ethical and humane future to which Habermas' public sphere aspires. Indeed, Michel Foucault downplayed the philosophical differences between himself and Habermas in at least one interview, noting that 'one

must not be for nonconsensuality, but one must be against consensuality.'<sup>3</sup> Although Foucault's statement is admittedly abstruse, it suggests that the nonconsensuality of theories of discourse and deconstruction and the consensuality of Habermas' public sphere cannot be simplified to a facile Manichean opposition. Meskimmon's book undoubtedly makes significant contributions to theories on aesthetics, ethics, and cosmopolitanism as well as feminist philosophy, but her advancement of this compelling notion of affirmative criticality stands out for its potentially far-reaching implications for how we practice art history.

#### Notes

- 1 My title for this review is a slight re-working of the title of a paper Meskimmon delivered at the 'New Asian Imaginations' conference held at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore on 21 September 2011.
- 2 Meskimmon is careful not to gender the domestic or imply that the domestic as a site of inquiry is the sole purview of feminist artists and scholars. At the same time, she notes the undeniable discursive links between notions of home and femininity and woman, and that contemporary art exploring the domestic is deeply indebted to the work of feminist artists who began to explore the domestic at least as far back as the 1960s on a broad international scale.
- 3 Michel Foucault, 'Politics and ethics: An interview', *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, 1984, 379.