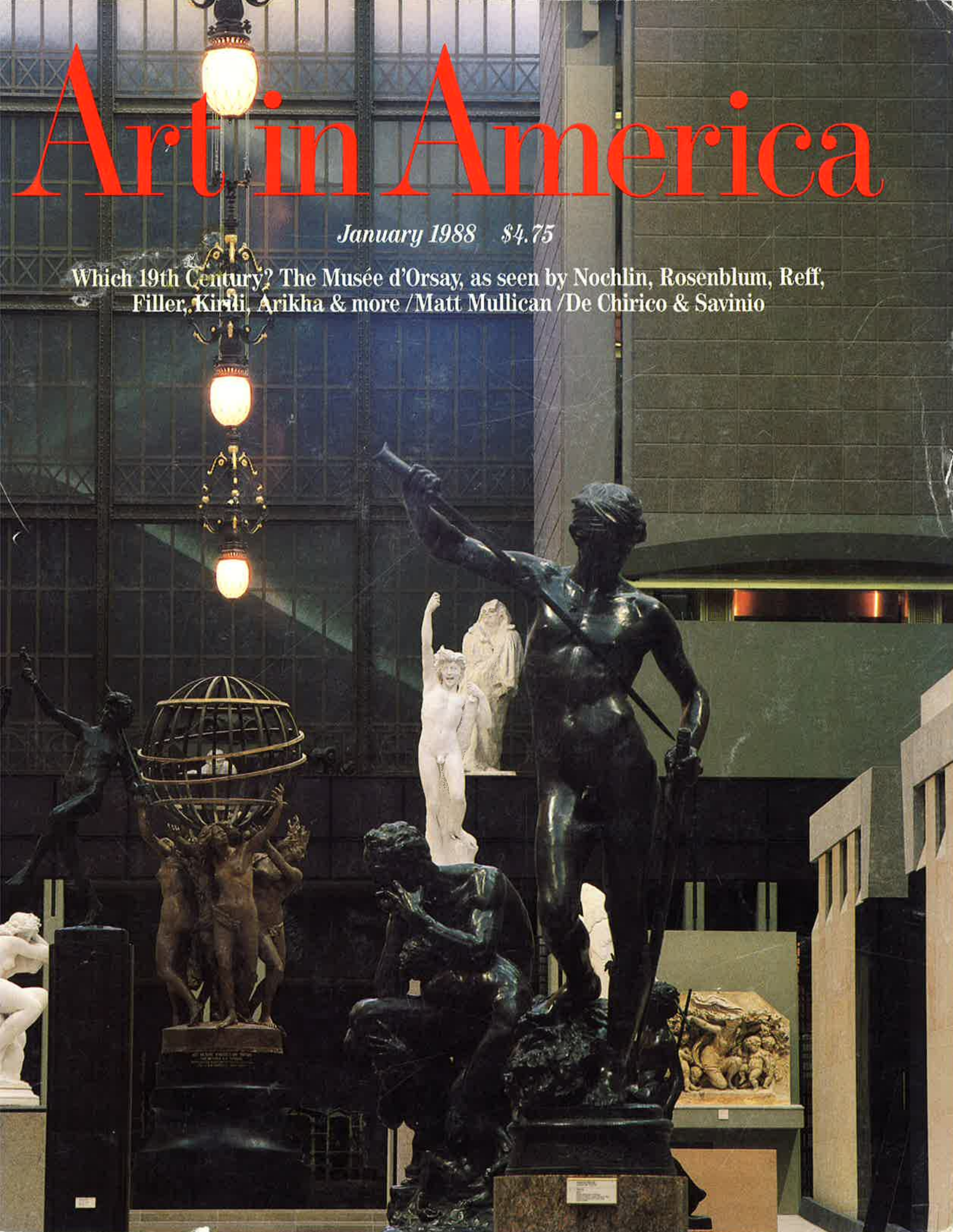


Art in America

January 1988 \$4.75

Which 19th Century? The Musée d'Orsay, as seen by Nochlin, Rosenblum, Reff,
Filler, Kirli, Arikha & more / Matt Mullican / De Chirico & Savinio



Critical/Mass

Taking the mainstream feature film as part of their subject matter, two new films by "downtown" artists—Swimming to Cambodia and Working Girls—aim for mass-market appeal.

BY VERA DIKA

While artists have been involved with the movies—avant-garde and mainstream—from their inception, two recent productions, Jonathan Demme's film of Spalding Gray's performance *Swimming to Cambodia* and Lizzie Borden's feature-length *Working Girls*, are of special interest for the insight they provide into contemporary artists' approach to the medium. In each case, an artist long associated with the "downtown" avant-garde has made a deliberate foray into mainstream filmmaking. Such a choice was motivated less by acceptance of the post-modern blurring of the distinction between high art and popular culture, or even by a desire to reach a wider audience, than by a conviction that the mass-market medium was crucial to the realization of their artistic goals, an essential part in fact of their chosen subject matter.

Much like his previous "documentation" of a Talking Heads concert in the film *Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme's film of Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* can be seen as a recording of a staged performance. But, like the Talking Heads film, it also represents a collaboration between Demme and Gray, almost a *pas de deux* between filmmaker and artist, between camera and performer and, ultimately, between film and performance art.

The film begins with Spalding Gray walking through the winter-dark streets of Soho on his way to the Performing Garage. Once inside the theater, Gray seats himself at an empty table and opens his notebook. A reverse shot confirms the presence of the audience, as does the sound of expectant chatter. This audience, however, will never be seen or heard from again. Instead, the film proceeds to record *Swimming to Cambodia*, one of Gray's most famous performance works, in a series of frontal shots; throughout, the camera keeps a relentless watch on Gray as he talks and talks and talks.

Gray's monologues are an almost seamless flow of words, in which a series of associatively joined but chronologically discontinuous memory "pictures" are used to recount a personal history. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, this string of memories constitutes cultural history as well. On a personal level, Gray discusses his girlfriend Renee and his crazy upstairs neighbor, but he also recounts his own experience both on and off the set of the motion picture *The Killing Fields*, in which he had a small role. The glowing, dark center of his monologue, however, is the history



Spalding Gray in his 1986 film, *Swimming to Cambodia*; directed by Jonathan Demme. Courtesy Cinecom.



Molly (Louise Smith) in Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls*, 1987.

of Cambodia itself, especially the effects of the 1969 bombing of that country by the U.S. and the resultant slaughter of the Cambodian people by the Khmer Rouge. In his performance, Gray provided a context to *The Killing Fields* which had largely been elided, or "forgotten," in the original film. By putting the performance on film, Gray and Demme give that film a new dimension. But since *Swimming to Cambodia* was a performance about the memory of a film, the metamorphosis of the performance into yet another film serves to dislodge one of the film medium's primary illusions: that it can present "reality," or "the truth," or even encapsulate history. (Current thinking, in fact, maintains the opposite—that film actually tends to eradicate history, to obliterate the real, and does so by replacing memory with a series of simulations.)¹

It is not irrelevant to note that the Pol Pot regime, which came to power in Cambodia in 1975, took as its goal the eradication of memory and history. Indeed, scenes in *The Killing Fields* depict the process by which not only the previous government and its supporters but all previous history and culture were erased. Intellectuals, professors and journalists, in particular, were systematically murdered not only for their perceived elitism, but because, as guardians of the word, they were professionally charged with thinking, analyzing, remembering. It is no wonder, then, that Gray, whose work depends on an almost compulsive need to verbalize memory, would have found the repression instituted by Pol Pot particularly appalling. To live in the eternal present is a terrifying prison for Gray. This attitude is evident in *Swimming to Cambodia*, where he strives to explode the illusion of closure achieved in *The Killing Fields*. He accomplishes this goal partly through a verbal account of events behind the scenes. What in *The Killing Fields* had seemed a complete, integrated rendition of reality is now disrupted. Gray's words serve to break the seamless flow of images, cracking them open like eggshells.

The film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* departs from the performance by intercutting footage from *The Killing Fields*. It includes shots of Gray in his role as a military attaché, and also scenes of combat and escape taken from the film. But now this footage is necessarily viewed with a different eye. Because of Gray's long-winded description of his obsessive desire to get the acting part in the film, of his subsequent inability to learn his lines and of the crew's exasperation with his efforts, the footage that includes his appearances in *The Killing Fields* is clearly revealed to be a simulation of reality by an actor, recorded by a film crew. Paradoxically, the combat and escape scenes are made even more poignant. Although Gray's monologue may have stripped these images of their original significance, and underlined their character as dramatizations, they have now also become markers of a more clearly understood historical moment.

The presentation of Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* on film is not then a mere recording of a previously staged event but a new work, one that actually extends and completes the ori-

The film of *Swimming to Cambodia*—a performance piece about the making of a movie—dislodges a primary illusion about the film medium: that it can present "the truth."

ginal aspirations of the performance piece. A similar completion is realized in Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls*. Always conceived of as a film, it is the product of an artist whose previous film, *Born in Flames*, is resolutely avant-garde, and whose basic intentions have found clarification in this later, more popular work.

Born in Flames was six years in the making, laboriously financed by grants and personal funds, and is constructed of found footage, documentary material and staged scenes shot in a pseudo-documentary style. Loosely strung together with the barest narrative thread, this film tells the story of a group of radical feminists on the brink of revolution. But the central theme of *Born in Flames* is the controlling presence of men in the workplace, and the impossibility of true freedom or liberation for women without equal pay and equal access to the mass media. *Working Girls* extends this project by taking as its subject one of the most male-controlled of women's professions—prostitution—and by delivering, in filmic form, a study of women and work. Important, too, is the fact that by making this film, a woman, Lizzie Borden, has herself gained access to the mass media, and done so not by pandering to its expectations but rather by subverting them.

Working Girls tells the story of Molly, a middle-class "girl," and her day at work at an uptown New York brothel. In a way that underlines the "typical" or the "standard" quality of the events portrayed, Molly is shown rising, eating breakfast and riding through the busy streets on the way to her job. Molly, of course, is atypical of most working women in that her lover is a woman and that she is a prostitute. But Molly's psychological motivation for choosing this profession is never explained. Instead, it is made apparent that Molly works out of financial need, to support her family (her lover has a child), to make ends meet. With this as her motivating force, then, we watch Molly on the job, one made up of the incessant flow of johns and of the continuous roll of banter among the girls.

The film presents a veritable text on work, not only the subtleties of a particular trade—its materials, methods and types of interactions—but also the economic relations at its base—overtime, cash flow, supply and demand, etc. But, above all, *Working Girls* is a film about power, power that increases up the ladder and, eventually, rests with the man—that is, the johns, the pimps, the Mafia. Not only do men control the immediate flow of business in prostitution, but they maintain an emotional control over women (the prostitute's typical emotional and economic

dependency on her pimp is here depicted in the relationship between the brothel's matron, Lucy, and her man), a set of conditions that allow an analogy to be made between prostitution and marriage. The relationship between men, power and money is then further underlined in *Working Girls* by the desire of several of the johns to see Molly on the "outside," to have her as a date and buy her dinner, or to have her as a mistress and set her up in her own house.

But the true force of *Working Girls* comes in the disjunction between the subject matter of the movie and the way that it is filmed. Although *Working Girls* at first promises to titillate on the level of its depiction of prostitution, it is shot so as not to be particularly pleasing to men (or to women, for that matter), and instead maintains a psychosexual distance from the material to encourage an intellectual response to the film. Much like pornography in that it presents multiple scenes of sexual intercourse (although not very explicit ones), *Working Girls* is also shot in a straightforward, no-frills style, with low-budget lighting that gives the images a somewhat greenish cast. Moreover, the actors are ordinary-looking women and, most often, rather repulsive-looking men, and so allow for little of the pleasure associated with viewing the ideally beautiful faces and bodies of the "stars" of major films. But, most importantly, there are no point-of-view shots in the film that take the Other, especially the woman, as the object of desire. Instead, Borden subjects everyone, female and male, to the clinical, dispassionate stare of the camera. The flow of bodies, of flesh, is so incessant that desire is, in effect, nullified.

Even so, we are forced to look—at Molly, in particular—and thereby to understand the potential sadism of making others objects of the gaze. Presented unflinchingly for the viewer's regard, unmediated by the characters' looks of desire, the physical abuse of Molly is *felt* by the viewer, as her body is exposed, used and reused, and so becomes a metaphor for her fundamental powerlessness.

With a method typical of much postmodern work, Molly's screen image is, in fact, presented in almost blank parody of "woman as object." The sheer amount of screen time allotted to her, and the audience's intense confrontation with that presence, create a crisis of consciousness in the viewer, and expose Molly's image for what it really is—an object. Yet Borden is not unsympathetic to her main character, whose point of view is dominant, at least by implication, throughout much of the film. Borden knows that the only real power rests in control of the media, not in being represented by it, and the fact that Molly is a struggling photographer is therefore significant. Molly's liberation rests on her ability to realize herself as subject—and as artist. Only then will she gain parity with Borden, her alter ego behind the camera. For, much as in the work of Cindy Sherman (whose images of women carry the same confrontational power to shock), we never forget the existence of the woman behind the camera. Lizzie Borden, as writer and director of *Working Girls*, is the controller of the image; her presence is acknowledged by the projection

Working Girls is a veritable text on work: the materials, methods and interactions of a trade, and the economic relations at its base.

of that image, and her power is affirmed by the camera's relentless stare.

In choosing to enter the mainstream, Spalding Gray and Lizzie Borden undoubtedly hoped to widen the audience for their work. But they have managed to do so without trivializing their intentions or yielding to popular taste. Recourse to a mass medium has, in fact, enabled the two artists to more fully realize their critical intentions: Gray does so by returning his performance to the popular film form that he is, in essence, critiquing, while Borden makes a confrontational film that almost thumbs its nose at the audience's desire to see what she promises but ultimately fails to deliver. Both have acknowledged film as the necessary means for their work and at the same time made the medium the object of their investigations. It will be interesting to see what they do next. □

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

Author: *Vera Dika is a film critic living in Los Angeles.*



A scene from Roland Joffé's The Killing Fields, 1984. Courtesy Warner Bros.

January 8 - February 6

JACK BEAL

Recent Paintings and Drawings

FRUMKIN/ADAMS GALLERY 50 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK 212-757-6655