

Art by MOSES OJO

MARIE LAURENCIN WANTS TO KNOW WHY YOU STARE

by KRISTA BEUCLER

Her eyes are what hold me. In the painting there are three figures, seen in two windows. One stands on a balcony, looking out into the room where I am. Her gaze is intense, quizzical. Her eyes, dark. One eyebrow is quirked. Her mouth is drawn down, pursed, like she might ask me a question.

It's a long moment before I even look at the two figures in the other window. One is a nude woman, the other a man in a harlequin's costume. He faces her. She faces him and us, behind him.

But I can't keep my eyes on them. I'm drawn back to the woman on the left. The way she fills the window frame, imposing, the way her arms curve gracefully, the long line of her neck, the tilt of her head.

Eventually I turn to the wall label. I have to know more about her.

The painting is *La Maison meublée* by Marie Laurencin, and it is a part of an exhibition of Laurencin's work called *Sapphic Paris* at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. The exhibition

is the reason I am here today. I knew it was closing, and I wanted to know more about queer women artists. I'd never heard of Marie Laurencin.

I approach the wall label for *La Maison meublée*. It reads:

In this painting, which is divided into two vignettes, the single figure at left may represent Laurencin. She looks onto the other scene, where a nude woman sits with a man dressed in a harlequin's costume. The male figure might reference Picasso, who often depicted harlequins and acrobats in his early work. Laurencin's attitude toward this scene of seduction—or perhaps prostitution—remains unclear. The title may provide a clue, as “maison meublée” was another name for a brothel.¹

I read the text, and then I read it again. “She looks onto the other scene...[her] attitude toward this scene of seduction—or perhaps prostitution—remains unclear.”

I look back at the painting, frowning. I don't think the woman on the left, who might be a self-portrait of Laurencin, is looking onto the scene on the right of the nude woman and the harlequin.

I think it's pretty clear she's looking at me. Her defiant gaze is aimed out of the painting at the viewer. She is challenging me. She is asking me, *What right do you have to look upon this scene? To look upon this woman and judge her? To take from her the way this man—who the wall label suggests is Picasso—takes from her?*

I do not think Laurencin was painting her own “attitude” concerning “this scene of seduction.” She was asking us what ours is. Are we, as viewers, complicit, participants in this voyeurism that so many male artists perpetuated?

When I leave the exhibition, I wander through the many more packed rooms that house the Barnes Foundation's permanent collection.

The Barnes Foundation displays the extensive art collection of Albert C. Barnes, replicating the particular way he arranged the works he collected. The walls of the museum are crowded; impressionist, post-impressionist, and modern paintings rub shoulders with decorative metalwork, Native-American jewelry, Greek antiquities, and African masks.

And nudes.

There are so many nudes. I have nothing against nudes. I even like quite a few of them. The first time I visited the Barnes Foundation several years ago with my family, my mother expressed a faint disgust at Renoir's nudes, of which the museum has many. Back then I rolled my eyes. My mom has always been an art critic but never very knowledgeable about art.

But today, standing before Renoir's *Bathers in the Forest* or Matisse's *The Joy of Life*, I feel Laurencin's gaze on me still, from rooms away. And I begin to understand what my mother could not put into words.

The nudes in the Renoir and the Matisse are joyful, graceful. They lounge, they frolic, they lean into one another, they giggle, but they are aware, always, of the viewer's gaze on them, specifically the male viewer's gaze on them. They are seductresses, reclined just so. Always in

the most flattering pose. Because though they are bathing, what they do is not private; they smile coyly, shyly, seductively, and they invite the viewer in. They want the viewer to watch. They expect the voyeur. They are performing for him.


The nude in *La Maison meublée* leans toward the harlequin, one hand at her temple, the other at her neck. She does not have the effortless grace of the Renoir girls. She is a little awkward. Her gaze is direct on the harlequin, as if she is there to do a job, to fulfill a duty—*la maison meublée* was another name for brothel, after all. The French literally translates to ‘furnished house;’ in this case, the house is furnished with girls, with prostitutes, there to serve men, like furniture, like any other object.

There is a basket on the table between the figures, but it's empty. No picnic here, no flowers fresh from the meadow where the bathers frolic. There is a weight, a darkness around the nude's eyes, her brow. She isn't inviting the viewer to look at her, not like those Renoir and Matisse nudes.

No. We are intruders, and Laurencin on her balcony on the left has caught us. *What are you doing here?* She asks us. *Why do you stare?*

I'm struck throughout the Laurencin exhibition by this feeling of intrusion. The exhibition does not contain a bathers painting, but another—*The Elegant Ball, or the Country Dance*—strikes me as similar. It shows two women dancing, their skirts diaphanous, swishing out, their legs long and feet bare, another woman playing a musical instrument. All three of the women look out at us.

We have stumbled once again upon a scene of female pleasure, but unlike Renoir's or Matisse's scenes, it is not a performance of female pleasure for male consumption. It is an act of female pleasure despite men, without men. These women do not strike *come hither* poses and invite the viewer into the glade to appreciate their beauty. These women know their beauty, their worth. They do not need it confirmed. They look out on the intruder-viewer with calculating expressions, wondering our intentions. Will we come join the dance? And if we do, will

we dance only for ourselves? 

¹ Wall text, *La Maison meublée*, Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA: