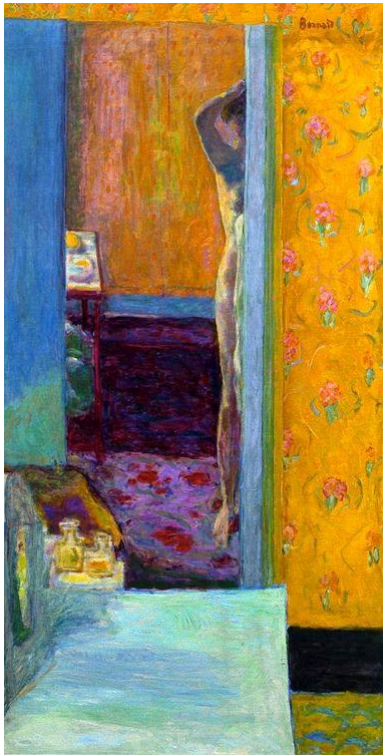


Bonnard's Bathers

It is often said that Pierre Bonnard's "bathers" are intimate paintings, as the women are caught unawares, glimpsed in an unguarded and private moment. But intimacy implies access. Especially after 1925, these women are half hidden behind walls and drapes, seen obliquely in mirrors, blocked by furniture. They merge into walls; fade into the light and into the furniture. Access denied.



Nude in an Interior, 1912-14

The putative model for these paintings is Marthe de Mélingy, Bonnard's mistress and later his wife. In 1893, when he was 26 and she was only 16 (she said), Bonnard formed a domestic partnership with Marthe, a woman with a lot of secrets. Her real name was Maria Boursin, and at the time they met she was 24; she was not of a family that would have a *de* in their name. She had occasional, secret meetings with her sister, but otherwise broke with her family. Writing in 1998, Timothy Hyman speculates: "Did she, like many girls who had 'got into trouble' in the provinces, come to Paris with a new identity?" There are so many secrets (her true name, age, family, her illusive ill health, her not willing to let her face be seen in public), kept for so long - until her death in fact, that one could be forgiven for wondering if she was on the lam from the law. Lithe and childlike, a gamin type in 1893, Marthe could get away with pretending she was eight years younger. Nude photos of her, taken by Pierre seven years later, show Marthe with a beautiful, womanly body. There is no question, as evidenced in the paintings, photos, and, later in his letters to Matisse, that Bonnard adored her.

By all reports, Marthe was temperamental, depressed, as well as secretive. Reclusive to the point of paranoia, she kept Bonnard from his family and friends. A circumstance that only got worse and worse. In a 1932 letter Bonnard wrote: "Poor Marthe has become completely misanthropic. She no longer wants to

see anyone, not even her old friends, and we are condemned to absolute solitude.” (Quoted by Isabelle Cahn, 2015) Writing in 1998, Sarah Whitfield states that she was, in fact, ill: Marthe had tubercular laryngitis, which at that time was treated with hydrotherapy, that drove her to her bath several times a day. Her diffidence, then, and Bonnard’s longing, account for the remove in the view. But she is not the only model for the bathers, and there is more to the story.

Twenty plus years into his relationship with Marthe, Bonnard also fell in love with Renée Monchaty, sometimes called Chaty, a painter, model, and younger friend of Marthe. Curators and authors differ on when it started, but all seem to agree that Bonnard was truly in love. Bonnard was in his fifties (Marthe too) when he met Renée, a beauty in her early twenties. They were both on the rebound. Renée from a serious relationship with Harry Lachman, and Bonnard from a light-hearted fling with Lucienne Dupuy de Frenelle. Lucienne was another irresistible, round-headed, bob-haired beauty. Bonnard met Lucienne around 1915, eventually became her lover. The affair ended about 1918, yet they remained friends. The war years were a giddy, frenetic time: Bonnard was showing at the best galleries, and it was the peak of Bonnard’s pride, when Marthe, Lucienne, and Renée were all part of his life.

It seems that all this was sort of OK with Marthe until the trip Bonnard and Renée took to Rome in 1921, leaving Marthe behind. Timothy Hyman writes that the purpose of the trip was to meet Renée’s parents to ask permission for Pierre and Renée to marry. Marthe, without money of her own, without a strong connection to her family, ill, and certainly without the protection of palimony laws in France at that time, dramatically, yet believably, threatened to kill herself if abandoned. Bonnard gave up Renée, and to reassure Marthe, Bonnard married her in August, 1925. Whereupon in September, Renée did kill herself, perhaps in her bed with a revolver, or as some authors have it, perhaps in her bath. [There is no fully researched biography of Bonnard, and many facts are murky.]

Thereafter, images of the bather stand for both Marthe and Renée, and perhaps also for Lucienne who died of an illness in May, 1927; the images are phantoms, avatars for women who are not there: two because they are dead, and the other because she was increasingly withdrawn into her illness and the massive toll it took on her personality. The restricted, ghostlike, almost transparent appearance of the bathers, blocked from the viewer, results.



The Bathroom, 1932

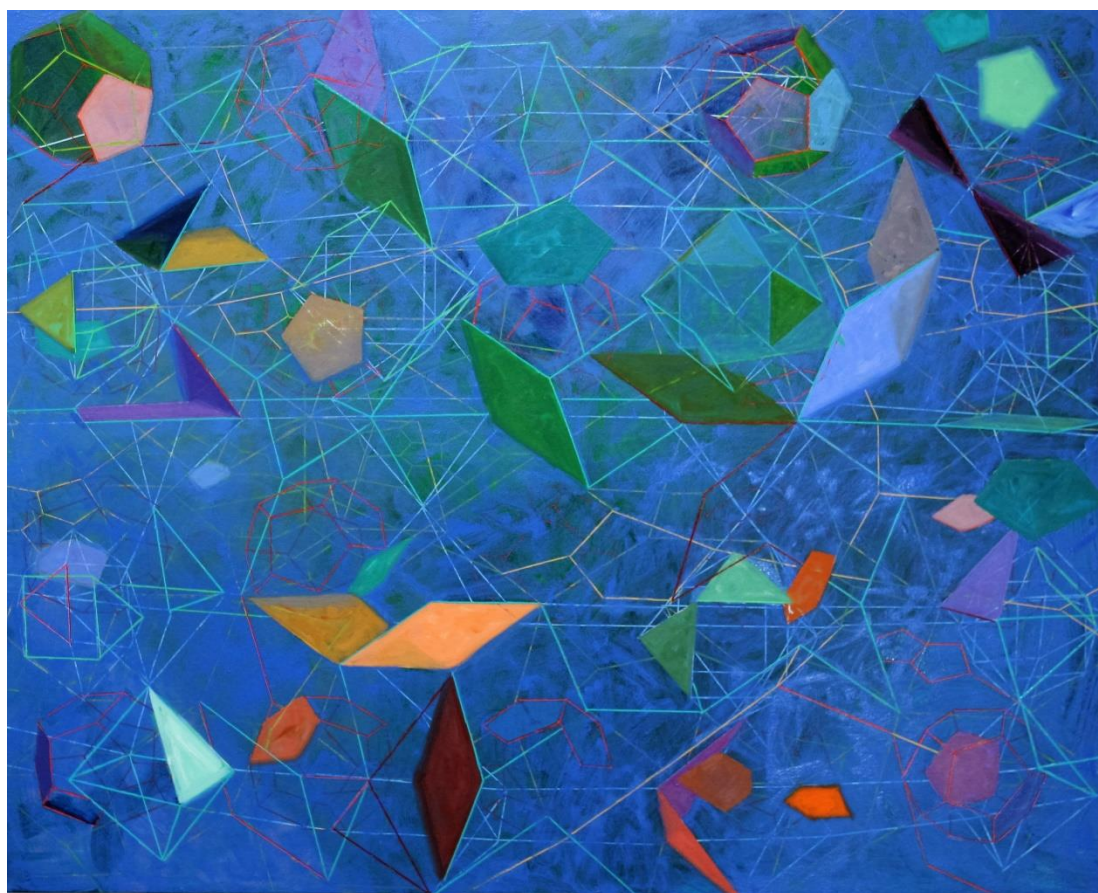
Pink Nude, Head in Shadow, ca.1919, is the exception that proves the rule: a much different woman and a much different painting. Young, happy, pink from the bath, her skin radiant, the model is shown full front and center. Everything else in the painting is behind her, pushing her forward. Because of this formal analysis, I concur with Marina Ferretti Bocquillon (2015) that this is a painting of Lucienne, though her head in shadow obscures her identity and merges her with the other models. Contemporary accounts describe Lucienne as charming and cheerful, and we see her delight in her perfect health and confidence. *Pink Nude* demonstrates the converse intensions of the other paintings of bathers.



Pink Nude, Head in Shadow, ca. 1919

An interest in Bonnard's personal life might seem prurient to some, except that it informs the paintings. Learning the painter's history, I now understand why I see so many of the paintings as filled with as much sadness and remorse as satisfaction and desire. There is an enforced passivity in the paintings. More yin than yang, ultimately the paintings are about yielding to life and accepting its crazy quilt of emotions. The

rewards for that passivity are transcendent “moments” (Bonnard’s word) of intense visual awareness. As Bonnard said in his notebook: “One does not always sing out of happiness.”



Tony Robbin, *2015-0-7*, 2015, 56 x70", oil on canvas