REINA GATTUSO

The Futility of Touch

Caillebotte’s *Man at his Bath*

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HE SUBJECT OF GUSTAVE CAILLEBOTTE’S *MAN AT HIS BATH,*[[1]](#endnote-1) a nude man at his toilette, presents us with an intriguing proposition: we are invited to look at a man at a moment of physical intimacy, yet his back is turned to us in a way that keeps us distant from him. It might be easy, in other words, to assume we are catching a full glimpse of a man in a vulnerable and even eroticized moment: he is nude and we are interrupting his privacy. Indeed, Caillebotte’s painterly emphasis on the man’s body tempts us to see *Man at his Bath* as voyeuristically erotic, and perhaps indicative of an unsettling power imbalance between a painter and his subject. Admittedly, the painting is, to varying degrees, all of these things. But it would be simplistic to assume that Caillebotte merely intends to furnish his own or his audience’s pleasure. Caillebotte’s 1884 impressionistic painting instead delineates the limits of physical intimacy: the subject’s very sexualization surprisingly alienates us from seeing him and thus from having a real sense of knowing him. That is, the painting is erotic to demonstrate the limits of eroticism; it is voyeuristic to emphasize what cannot be spied upon; it is imbalanced to indicate that we cannot wrest intimacy even from a man caught in the nude in a private space. The initial interpretation of the painting points us toward a more considered reading: that erotic knowledge itself is not sufficient; that the artist cannot know the bather by apprehending his body; that eventually art becomes a barrier to full knowledge of the subject. The erotic and aesthetic distancing implicit in *Man at His Bath*, in other words, helps us question painting as a medium for intimacy. By portraying the bather as sensual but inaccessible, Caillebotte has composed a sexualized painting that inherently limits intimacy.

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o say that our knowledge of Caillebotte’s subject is inherently limited is not to argue that our initial glance at the painting is necessarily wrong. *Man at his Bath* is fundamentally about access: the kind of access Caillebotte and we as viewers have to the bather certainly seems intimate. The painting’s premise forces us into a stranger’s personal moment even as it suggests that the artist and the subject are not themselves strangers to one another. Caillebotte constructs this assumed familiarity through the painting’s title and setting. The room is, noticeably, a bathroom, a private location that suggests a site of confidence, a place that is consummately interior. This setting suggests that the painting’s subject is consummately interior as well, and that seeing such a scene invites us to see the man as he really is. He is nude, caught at what could be argued is a frozen eternity: the daily rite of the bath situates the scene outside of time, in which the day, week, month or year is irrelevant. Indeed, the activity of the bath is ritualized to the point of banality. Caillebotte, it seems, has captured a secret moment; in turn, we seem to have entered a space that is as banal as it is intimate, as daily as it is timeless. Caillebotte’s intimacy gives us the initial impression, in other words, that the painter can bear witness, and that we can follow suit.

This initial reading of intimacy and even carnal knowledge of Caillebotte’s subject is reinforced by the painting’s detailed delineation of the scene. These details all seem to invite us into the bather’s physical and emotional space. The crumpled fabric, for instance, indicates a process of undressing, but it also indicates invitation. Whatever garments the bather has shed, from the white fabric in the foreground to the dark fabric on the chair in the background, are bits of history. They seem to allow us to trace the bather’s progress: first, the boots removed by the chair; then, the clothes left on the floor; finally, the dark trail of water soaking the bathmat, tracked across the wood. These details are evidence of the kinetic, the process of undressing before this frozen moment, but they also are evidence of what draws us in, what welcomes us into an experience that normally goes unseen. They point to the voyeuristic nature of the painting; the disrobing allows us to feel, rather uncomfortably, that we have just watched the man undress. The hint of undressing here points to the artist’s familiarity with his subject and suggests sexual undertones.

Let’s look closer at that assumed familiarity in *Man at His Bath* on a formal level, and particularly Caillebotte’s use of curves and colors to reinforce the illusion of invitation. Take the fabric, for instance, which has fallen in inviting arcs, sideways c-shapes opening toward us. The rounded lip of the tub, the curve of the seat, the cutout detail on the chair, even the bottom of the towel on the bather’s body—they all mimic this shape. Caillebotte formally contrasts these curves with the linear drapes, the walls, mat and floor, as well as the strong vertical line of the bather’s body. The walls, meeting at a corner, box us in, suggesting the sense of enclosure of the space. The deliberateness of this composition and its precise geometry—for example, the bather’s elbow perfectly intersects the dado—preempts the argument that Caillebotte is merely painting what he sees; he is in fact constructing a scene of intimacy for us.

The bather’s body, and especially Caillebotte’s formal rendering of him, only reinforces the apparent intimacy of the artist’s gaze. Caillebotte paints the man in neutrals, with soft bluish shadows highlighting the bather’s muscles. What appears to be morning light glows through the curtain, imparting naturalness to the scene unadulterated by artificial illumination. Emphasizing a tender sensuality, Caillebotte pays significant attention to the bather’s neck and back, where he uses blues and grays to delineate the man’s wing-like shoulder blades, the hollow at his back’s center, and the protuberant vertebrae on the back of his neck. Such careful, deliberate and arguably loving attention seems the prelude to a kiss. Perhaps most significant is the smallest body part; the bather’s ear, a minute, barely noticeable appendage, is painted with intimate detail—a gentle, even beloved whorl. Caillebotte obviously applies much care to the bather’s body, creating the illusion that we can intimately know the bather through the artist’s representation of his physicality. The scene and its detailed delineation, and the nude man and his painterly rendition, all make the initial reading of *Man at His Bath* as a scene of intimate familiarity all the more convincing.

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owever, a reading that would favor such intimate familiarity ultimately proves misleading. The attention to detail, we can argue, falsely implies a connection with the individuality of the subject. In fact, the detail in *Man at His Bath* might actually distance the viewer through its focus on the sensual instead of the internal, on the surface instead of the substance of the man; even the artist’s careful application of paint is mere artifice. In other words, the tenderness of the artist’s portrayal becomes insufficient. We are still viewing the man naked and from behind; have still walked in on someone else’s moment; are still mediated by light and paint. The sense of intimacy conferred by the artist’s apparent familiarity with the bather’s body is false. While Caillebotte’s portrayal of the man suggests familiarity with the bather’s body, the appearance of carnal knowledge here is a problem, not a solution; it ultimately prevents an apprehension of the bather as an individual: by drawing our attention to the invasive closeness of the scene, Caillebotte also invites us to question it.

One way to articulate the problematic closeness of *Man at His Bath* is to say that there is an inherent limit to the erotic. In other words, it is precisely the pungency of the bather’s eroticization, and Caillebotte’s painterly attention to it, that indicates our necessarily limited knowledge of him. We can look at the way Caillebotte has rendered the bather’s back with deliberate care, but we can also say that the bather flinches in a self-protective gesture away from that same artistic gaze. As the chair, tub, walls and fabric turn toward us, perhaps inviting us in, the subject here flinches away. He leans, his torso contracts as his neck strains forward, and his back lengthens. Where the curves were once read as invitation, they can now be read as protective arcs; the man can be said to be folding in on himself, shielding himself from view. Even his arms, bent at the elbow, crease away from whoever is watching him, consolidating the front of the body as a space intended for the bather alone. The towel pulled taut across his back forms a kind of cocoon, containing him. Perhaps most notably, though the viewer is privy to large swathes of the bather’s body, he is denied access to the bather’s face. Backs, legs, and buttocks can belong to virtually anyone; facial features are distinct. In fact, the artist—and by extension, the audience—has access to everything but this prime physical signifier of the subject’s identity. His face remains private.

We can argue, in other words, that sensuality in *Man at His Bath* is a distraction. This might be best articulated by considering the possibility that to look at the subject of this kind of nude painting is to sexually appropriate him. Such a reading is not entirely without cause: the artist’s gaze, as we have seen, attends lovingly to the bather’s body. There would seem to be an undertone of erotic domination in the scene because of Caillebotte’s focus on the bather’s rear: the triangular space of the subject’s stance, framed by splayed feet and muscular legs, comes to a point at the bather’s buttocks and the shadow of his scrotum. The bulges of the calves and the backs of his thighs mimic the focal point of his muscular rear, while shadows outline his legs, torso, arms and shoulders. It is here, near the center of the painting, that the light seems focused on the bather’s bottom, contoured by shadow, each rounded cheek highlighted with a slight rosy flush. The dark crease between the buttocks is the highly sexualized center; visually speaking, we are perfectly positioned to enter the man from behind. Yet to sexually appropriate the bather, to heed the erotic reading here, would be to remain emotionally without; in Caillebotte’s painting, any suggestion of sex preempts a vision of the bather’s face. It would rob the bather’s most indicative signifier of himself. His face, once again, always remains private. At best, any presumed intimacy between the viewer and the bather is incomplete.

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t this point it is pertinent to call attention to Caillebotte’s painterly touch in a way that brings this discussion of intimacy and knowledge to a larger sphere of suggestion. Ultimately, the element of Caillebotte’s painting that most distances us from the bather is painting itself: facture, the quality of paint on canvas. Indeed, the aesthetic experience of Caillebotte’s painting, as well as the impression of intimacy it initially gives, derives from the artist’s soft touch: we see the marks of the paintbrush as light reflects from the gleaming oil paint. We see a sensuously fresh painting, one that trains the eye on the bather’s skin as a kind of reflective surface, an aesthetic vision of the body that situates the figure in patches of darkness and light. In this sense, the kind of sensuously fresh painting employed by Impressionists such as Caillebotte potentially reduces the human figure to a set of formal elements: lightness and darkness formally composed. In other words, even beyond the alienation of erotic voyeurism, which distances viewers from the internality of the bather, viewers must also contend with the alienation of artistry. To look at art is itself voyeuristic.

We thus stand at a double distance when confronting *Man at His Bath*: the sexual and the representational, the aesthetic and the erotic, may seem to invite us to know the bather, but they ultimately alienate us. The dual alienation points to broader issues in the relationship between sexuality, artistry and intimacy. But by undertaking a formal analysis of the painted bather, can we understand him on a level any deeper than if we had sexualized him? The answer Caillebotte seems to offer is no. In painting a highly sexualized portrait that ignores the bather’s individuality in favor of eroticism, Caillebotte presents knowledge defined by its limits, drawing attention to the falseness of that knowledge. The painting’s sensuality and suggestion of physical familiarity is, in fact, a red herring, a false claim of intimacy. To access him is impossible: whether through erotic appropriation or formal analysis, we cannot know the man at his bath.

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Endnote

1. Gustave Caillebotte (French, 1848-1894). *Man at His Bath*, 1884. Oil on canvas; 144.8 x 114.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 2011.231. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)