Touch and vision in Edgar Degas’s Darkfield monotypes

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the author.


Additional Information:

- This paper was published in the journal Print Quarterly and the definitive published version is available at http://www.printquarterly.com/8-contents/50-contents-volume-xxxi-2014.html

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/22243

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Print Quarterly Publications

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ Please cite the published version.
Touch and Vision in Edgar Degas's Darkfield Monotypes

Kathryn Brown

Edgar Degas's darkfield monotypes often sit uneasily in discussions of the artist's experiments with printmaking. On one hand, the acts of drawing directly on an inked plate with brushes, rags or fingertips and of transferring only one or two images to paper suggest a close affinity with the gestural work and unique products of painting. On the other hand, scholarship has shown how the execution of monotypes was central to Degas's serial works in related media. Noted aspects of this experimentation involved transferring freshly printed monotypes to lithographic stones in order to produce multiple images and reworking prints with pastel. ¹ Douglas Druik and Peter Zegers have examined the wide range of intermedial experiments stimulated by Degas's printmaking, arguing that the creation of hybrid works 'allowed him [the artist] to exploit the different advantages of the media involved' and thereby to engage in innovative acts of pictorial problem solving. ²

While it is undoubtedly correct to view Degas's darkfield monotypes as playing an important role in his broader output, this has often led to heightened focus on the works' functional role. In her pioneering study of the monotypes undertaken in the 1960s, Eugenia Parry Janis provided the foundation for this view. Through detailed technical analyses of the monotypes and their cognates, Janis argued that the striking contrasts between deep shadows and brilliant highlights in the prints furnished Degas with a 'tonal map' for his subsequent pastel compositions and that, in consequence, the darkfield monotypes are best viewed as unfinished works. ³ In contrast to this emphasis on the transitional role of the monotype in Degas's working method as advanced by Janis and many subsequent scholars, the aim of this article is to identify and examine some of the unique compositional opportunities that this medium offered the artist. In defending the idea that Degas undertook a distinctive set of pictorial experiments in monotype, I shall consider how typical sources of illumination (including lamps, fireplaces, windows, and mirrors) are used for the purpose of cancelling the standard role that light plays in the organization of visual representations. This is, I suggest, part of an important aesthetic inquiry that involves the posing of two related questions: first, what happens when a key enabling condition of visual perception (light) is removed from a two-dimensional work? Second, how might an artist depict the invisible in visual art? I shall argue that in their exploration of answers to these two questions, Degas's darkfield monotypes privilege the sense of touch over vision for the purpose of undermining conventions that attach to the organization of pictorial space. In the following discussion, the sense of touch will be differentiated, with the term 'haptic' referring to the use of touch to explore three-dimensional form and mass and the term 'tactile' referring to the use of touch to investigate the surface qualities of objects.

Degas's notebooks reveal a long-term fascination with ways in which lighting both structures and complicates the visual field. ⁴ Many of his observations are derived from direct experience of the technological innovations in lighting that had become familiar features of Parisian public spaces and domestic environments during the 1870s and 1880s. ⁵ Like other artists of the period, Degas

---

exploited the full range of oil, gas, and electric lighting technologies in his works for the purpose of communicating evocative notions of place, conveying the intimacy of the home and figuring the psychological states of individuals, families and communities.

Degas frequently gave form to his written observations about artificial light and its reflection in glasses and mirrors by exploiting the different tonal ranges of print media. Richard Kendall describes the lithograph, Mademoiselle Bécat at the Café des Ambassadeurs, for example, as a 'catalogue of contemporary lighting' and one of a group of Degas's works that took light as its primary subject matter (fig. 330). From the chandeliers and gas lamps of the café-concert to footlights and fireworks, different lighting effects dominate specific areas of the composition and visually upstage the performer. Dense background shadows offset the intensity of each light source, making the latter both 'brilliant and conspicuous', as Kendall puts it. The work thus gives precedence to the elaborate forms and shapes of the technologies themselves rather than to ways in which they might illuminate the surrounding darkness or provide certainty as to the architecture of the café-concert.

In contrast to this elaborate display of public lighting, the etching and aquatint Actresses in Their Dressing Rooms, produced around two years later, uses the effects of lamplight to construct an intricately compartmentalized indoor environment (fig. 331). The intersection of panels, doors, fabrics and mirrors makes the dimensions of the rooms difficult to determine, and oversized shadows create striking juxtapositions of scale within an elaborately designed, but compressed space. While the presence of light increases the viewer's ability to see all parts of the depicted scene, it fails to impose spatial clarity. The women's bodies are camouflaged against the wallpaper of their respective rooms, and the composition is dominated by an immaterial figure in the form of a shadow. In consequence, the interior becomes a precarious and kaleidoscopic space, the component parts of which threaten to coalesce into a new pattern at any moment by virtue of a change in lighting or unexpected movement of the actresses.

While Degas's lithographs and etchings frequently exploit different lighting technologies to form intricately composed, shifting environments, the darkfield monotypes are amorphous spaces that are devoid of the clarity needed to orient the viewer. Light sources in the form of lamps, fireplaces, windows and mirrors appear throughout these works, but they fail to illuminate the surroundings in conventional ways. They neither cast shadows in a consistent manner, nor structure perspectival compositions. The spatial organization of Woman Reclining on her Bed (fig. 332), for example, contrasts sharply with the intricate composition of Actresses in their Dressing Rooms. In the monotype, a lamp in the lower left corner forms a bright, but isolated patch of brilliance. It illuminates the woman's right arm, breasts and legs, but leaves the rest of the body and the foreground in darkness. Indeed, the woman's head (the part of the body nearest the lamp) virtually disappears from the composition. Repeated swipes of ink extend from the figure's torso and thighs to the lower right hand corner of the image and tip the body forward (the left foot seems to be suspended in mid-air), further destabilizing the structure of the work. While light and shade are combined in Actresses in their Dressing Rooms to create a network of intersecting geometrical patterns, the central figure in the monotype remains unanchored; light fails to impinge on the overwhelming darkness of the background or to indicate what prevents the woman from falling forward.

Some commentators have focused on the symbolic features of darkness in Degas's monotypes in order to explain such compositional uncertainties. The majority of the prints depict brothels, shadowy spaces that are recognized as integral to, but socially distinct from, the brilliantly illuminated public spaces of the nineteenth-century city. As Peter Parshall has noted, the interrogation of lighting effects in visual art of the period gave rise to an equally strong fascination with shadows, and the aesthetic properties of darkness in print media actively encouraged 'the exploration of shadowed kinds of subjects and indeterminate states of mind'. Illustrating Parshall's point, Hollis Clayson's interpretation of Degas's monotype Woman Reading argues that the woman's 'vigorous engagement with the text' in a darkened room renders her monstrous and misshapen, the act of reading being portrayed as 'a somatic rather than a cerebral event' (fig. 333). Clayson's comments capture some of the anxieties that attached to unsupervised female reading practices in the nineteenth century, and the ethical significance of this in-


7. Kendall, op. cit., p. 188.


The interplay between physical and psychological anomalies would not have been lost on nineteenth-century viewers. Anthea Callen makes an even stronger claim in her argument that the deviation from both classical ideals of beauty and anatomical science in *Woman Reading* suggests links between female promiscuity,

---

atavism and sterility. In my view, there is another way of understanding the degree of distortion to which the female form is subjected in this monotype and others like it. We know, for instance, that this is not how human bodies generally look: the head sits unnaturally low on a disproportionately broad back; the woman’s left forearm and wrist are larger than her upper arm; the left calf and, in particular, the left foot are swollen out of proportion. In the absence of an effective light source, the contours of the body appear mutable and uncertain. Within Degas’s œuvre, this style of representing the human body is characteristic of the monotypes. Xavier Rey aptly describes these renderings of the female nude as ‘dismembering’ of the body prior to its reconstruction in radically uneven proportions. As in Woman Reclining on Her Bed, bodily indeterminacy in Woman Reading extends to the spatial arrangement of the room itself: the viewer is presented with a mirror that fails to reflect and a background space that may suggest a corner or wall or that extends to an unidentifiable point.

My suggestion is that the physical distortions found in these monotypes are neither realistic representations of ‘monstrous’ bodies, nor metaphors for psychological or moral deviance. Instead, the works suggest how, in the absence of light, an artist might represent a body and its surroundings based on his or her haptic investigation of a particular environment. In other words, rather than conveying what it might be like to look at a scene and portray it in visual art, the work suggests what it might be like to feel one’s way around a space and then to depict a set of beliefs about the parameters and contents of the space based on that experience. Unorthodoxies as to spatial arrangement, proportion and bodily contours are, therefore, restricted to an interpretation based on ethical responses to the liminal space of the brothel. Instead, they constitute a means of expression that is unrelated to pictorial conventions derived from vision alone. While Janis describes Degas’s attraction to monotype as a ‘liberation’ from the specificity and precision of drawing, my argument suggests a more fundamental role for this style of printmaking in Degas’s œuvre. Working from a presumption of darkness (the black ink of the plate), the production of these monotypes enabled Degas to reconstitute the physical and ambient conditions required for pictorial representation and, in consequence, to identify touch (rather than vision) as the primary sensory experience from which images may be derived. If, as Kendall has argued, ‘light is […] an invitation to look’ in Degas’s works, my suggestion is that darkness functions as an invitation to touch.

In some monotypes, the acquisition of knowledge about an environment through haptic exploration is specifically thematized in the depicted scene. An example of this occurs in a complex work that features two women, The Fireside (fig. 334). In contrast to Woman Reading, there is a identifiable light source in the image (the fireplace), but the illumination derived from it is highly selective. The bodily contours of the women are difficult to discern in detail, and the furnishings of the room merge to form indistinct shapes. It has been suggested that the woman on the right looks at her companion, yet the angle of her head does not seem to support that proposition. The seated woman is curiously positioned, her left leg extending acrobatically towards the fireplace, left arm reaching towards the right foot, and head cradled on her right shoulder. The woman’s limbs extend into space in unexpected ways as she explores the surface and contours of her own body and of the physical environment that lies within immediate reach.

A similar, but more striking intersection between cutaneous investigation of the body and its extension into space is found in Woman by a Fireplace (fig. 335). The naked figure in the work is the nexus of various tactile experiences that range from the touch of the maid’s hand, the movement of the woman’s own body (left hand grasps left foot), and the experience of warmth from the fireplace. From a seated position, the woman thus receives information about her darkened surroundings, her companion, and her own body through the stimulus of skin and scalp and through the movement of her limbs. As Matthew Fulkerson notes: 'The

world does not come to us in touch; we must reach out and actively engage with the world in order to learn about it through touch. If, as I am arguing, the dark-field monotypes suggest that picture production may be derived from touch, *The Fireside* and *Woman by a Fireplace* stage a vital part of that process by depicting individuals as active agents who seek out and acquire information about their immediate surroundings through the use of a sense other than sight.

This further distinguishes the monotypes from the etching and lithograph discussed at the beginning of this article. Although *Mademoiselle Bécat* and *Actresses in their Dressing Rooms* exploit contrasts between light and darkness in order to create complex spatial arrangements, their subject matter is anchored in vision and in the spectacular life of the city: the singer performs on stage for an audience and the actresses look at themselves in mirrors. By contrast, the monotypes not only give precedence to the sense of touch, but also depict visual perception as a limited, tiring, or futile experience: readers hunch over papers or discard books, mirrors fail to reflect, and windows do not provide information about the outside world. In *Woman by a Fireplace*, the central figure is not depicted as looking at anything: her head is tilted upwards (away from the light source) as the maid performs her grooming tasks. The composition is thus designed to draw attention to the woman’s perception of sensory stimuli other than through vision.

Researchers in spatial cognition typically divide experience into personal space (involving the body and its surface), peripersonal space (a working space that is


within arm’s reach), and extrapersonal space (the physical realm beyond arm’s reach, but that can be accessed by moving there or by using a tool to reach it). The Fireside and Woman by a Fireplace are forceful demonstrations of the first two of these points and, as such, suggest a new way of understanding the unusual physical positions adopted by the female protagonists in these and other of Degas’s darkfield monotypes. Critical literature on Degas has usually associated the physical abandon of women in brothel scenes with either voyeuristic displays of the female body or the pleasures of auto-eroticism. Each of these arguments has specific implications for the act of looking at the works: the former suggests that the naked subject is objectified for the viewer’s erotic pleasure, whereas the latter gives precedence to the agency of the subject herself.

Charles Harrison’s discussion of Degas’s works on paper (particularly the monotypes and pastels) differs from these two approaches. He argues that these works test the viewer to imagine how individual figures depicted on a two-dimensional surface ‘might be imaginatively conceived as existing in a three-dimensional space; how the sense of an apparent dislocation and distortion might thereby be transformed into a kind of learning’. He argues further that Degas’s monotypes are structured so as to invite the viewer to identify with the individuals depicted in the works in a way that facilitates this learning process. Techniques for achieving this identification range, in his account, from the absence of a subject’s ‘outward regard’ (thereby nullifying the possibility of psychological exchange with the viewer) to the erosion of spaces into which an implied viewer might retreat in order to observe the depicted subject. The form of learning to which Harrison refers is not, therefore, simply the viewer’s development of an ability to impose visual order on complex or uncertain spaces, but ‘something closer to feeling just what it might be like to be the occupant of a body disposed’ in a particular position within those spaces. In the case of Woman Reclining on Her Bed, he suggests that this empathetic response is triggered by virtue of the fact that the woman’s ‘body [is] seen from the virtual position of its own head’.

Harrison’s account moves constructively past the dichotomy of objectification and agent-centered experience that has shaped critical approaches to Degas’s depictions of the female nude. I agree with his idea that the structure of the monotypes suggests a form of

21. C. Harrison, Painting the Difference, Sex and Spectator in Modern Art,

332. Edgar Degas, Woman Reclining on Her Bed, c. 1885, monotype, plate 199 x 415 mm (Chicago, The Art Institute).
‘learning’, but do not think that this is triggered by, or dependent on, the viewer’s identification with the depicted subject. Instead, I suggest that the works prompt a form of sensory education on the part of the viewer by illustrating how the world might be conceptualized through the experience of touch. Although they are works of visual art, they seek to divert the viewer’s attention from the sense of sight as the primary means of obtaining information about the environment. One consequence of this is the creation of an imbalance of power between the viewer and the depicted subject. While the seated characters in The Fireside and Woman by a Fireplace are pictured in the process of deriving information about their surroundings by using the sense of touch, the viewer’s experience is restricted to visual perception of the same scene. In consequence, there is a mismatch of perceptual information: the uncertainties of form and shape that impede the viewer’s comprehension of the darkened environments contrast with the tactile adventures of the depicted subjects: the subjects in the work have more sensory information about their environment and their own bodies than the viewer of the work who is restricted to sight alone.

In pursuing ways in which the sense of touch might inform both the experience and representation of physical environments, Degas’s montotypes work against an Enlightenment tradition that equated vision with knowledge. A central question, known famously as ‘Molyneux’s Problem’ (1688), considered whether an individual who was born blind and had learned to recognize a globe and a cube from the use of touch would recognize those objects visually if his or her sight were suddenly restored. While answers to this problem were debated in numerous essays on perception and aesthetics in the following century, Johann Gottfried Herder sought specifically to address the role of touch in a process of sensory education through which individuals gain knowledge about the world. In his essay on sculpture of 1778, Herder offers a narrative of this education, describing how children gain an understanding of their surroundings by ‘grasping, lifting, weighing, touching, and measuring things with both hand and foot’. In Herder’s account, it is through exercising our sense of touch that we acquire the concepts of depth and three-dimensionality. Vision is not absent from his analysis, but, crucially in this account, it must work closely with touch in order to convey complete and reliable perceptual information. Herder argues that ‘sight reveals merely shapes, but touch alone reveals bodies … [sight] reveals only visible surfaces – moreover not the surfaces of bodies but solely surfaces exposed to light’. In this view, what we need in order to appreciate our surroundings in their proper three dimensionality is a process by which the senses educate each other ‘like sisters’.

I mention these two key discussions of the relationship between touch and vision in order to situate Degas’s sensory experiments in monotype as part of a longer tradition in Western aesthetics. Degas’s interest in earlier art, in particular his commitment to copying and his attraction to history painting, has long been appreciated as key to his development as an artist. My suggestion is that the sensory experiments undertaken in the darkfield montotypes show how Degas’s interest in the art of the past went beyond these familiar examples. Rather, his engagement with innovative techniques of printmaking and his commitment to the depiction of contemporary life during the 1870s and 80s were also put to the service of solving aesthetic questions that had arisen from seventeenth and eighteenth-century discussions of the perceptual frameworks of art and experience. By pressing the viewer to reflect on the ways in which a visual representation might both thematize and be derived from the sense of touch, Degas’s darkfield montotypes propose an answer to Molyneux’s question in the affirmative. They make a further contribution to the aesthetic aspects of this debate by identifying a prominent role for touch in the appreciation of a two-dimensional work. Instead of seeking to link different art forms to specific sense modalities (painting and vision; sculpture and touch), Degas’s montotypes suggest that touch can displace vision as the primary means of producing a work on paper.

27. Herder, op. cit., p. 35.
I want to develop this point by considering the significance of the visible traces of Degas's own hands in the monotypes in the form of his fingerprints. To take just two examples, in The Fireside the artist's fingerprints are clearly visible around the body of the figure on the right and around the outstretched leg of the woman on the left; in Woman by a Fireplace similar marks are found on the body of the maid and in the lower right corner of the work. In each case, these marks break the unity of the background space and disturb the visual illusion of the depicted interiors.

The way in which these fingerprints intrude on the depicted scene raises an issue discussed by Richard Wollheim in Painting as an Art. Wollheim argues that there are two principal aspects of looking that come into play when we appreciate an artwork: we are simultaneously aware of the represented object in the work and the surface of the work itself (including, for example, features such as brushmarks and the weave of the canvas in the case of painting). This experience of 'twofoldness' can come into play in the case of the monotypes in various ways, ranging from the viewer's perception of creases and imperfections in the paper to residual evidence of the processes of inking, handling, and pressing the plate. Applying Wollheim's point in the current context, such material aspects of the works are not part of their representational content.

I accept that there is a difference between the representational content of an artwork and the visible traces of its production. I want to suggest, however, that the presence of Degas's fingerprints in the monotypes functions differently from either a brushmark in a painting (a feature of the work from which its representational content is derived) or a blemish in the background surface of the canvas (something that interferes with the visual illusion created by the representation). Pursuing the idea that the monotypes address the theme of touch rather than vision, my suggestion is that the fingerprints communicate the sensory experience in which the image is grounded and that is enacted by the depicted characters. In their possession of a signifying content that is related to the fiction in the work, the fingerprints function as direction markers, signaling to the viewer the sensory framework within which the works should be understood and interpreted. There is, therefore, a coincidence between the function of touch in the theme of the works (the actions of the characters), in the technique of the works' production (the handling of a plate), and in the perceptual experience from which the works were derived (the fingerprints as a metaphor for the artist's own haptic experience).

Recent work in analytic aesthetics has discussed the possibility of making 'tactile pictures' and the ways in which such pictures might prompt us to reconsider how we make, perceive and value works of visual art. The examples discussed are pictures created by people who are blind from birth; images are produced by drawing shapes on a sheet of paper covered with a special plastic such that ridges are formed from the impression of a pen. The ridges—and hence the picture—become visible when highlighted with colour. These 'tactile pictures' range from depictions of objects in outline shapes to more sophisticated images that suggest the apprehension of an object from different viewpoints and, in some cases, with limited perspective.

I raise this because one striking technique that Degas uses for the depiction of objects in the darkfield monotypes closely resembles a style of tactile pictures discussed in this literature, namely, the depiction of objects in bare outline or cross-section. In The Fireside, for example, the woman's right foot is drawn solely in outline with a pointed implement such as the end of a brush. In Woman by a Fireplace a similar technique is used to depict the woman's right foot and ankle; a jug and bowl also appear in similar ghostly outline in the right-hand section of the work. The latter are devoid of shading, and their scale is inconsistent with the bodies of the women next to them.

If one were to follow Janis's interpretation of the transitional role played by the monotypes in Degas's output, this aspect of the works could be understood as a form of notation, something that might be developed or 'corrected' in a pastel reworking of the composition. My suggestion, by contrast, is that this form of stylistic interpolation suggests a way of depicting objects that are invisible in the dark: the unseeable is made visible in a

32. See also P. Parshall's discussion of overlaps between tactile experience in the production of Degas's monotypes and in the themes of the works themselves in Parshall, 2013, op. cit., p. 164.
33. I am grateful to Alan Thomas for his input on this issue.
35. See the experiments and images described in J. M. Kennedy, 'Outline, Mental States, and Drawings by a Blind Woman', Perception, XXXVIII, 2009, pp. 1481–98.
333. Edgar Degas, *Woman Reading*, c. 1885, monotype, plate 380 x 277 mm (Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art).
bare outline that invokes a prior haptic investigation of shape and sensation of the object’s surface. It may be possible, for example, to run one’s hand over the surface of a jug or dish and, based on that experience, to draw the outline of the object’s shape, but it might be more difficult to locate that object accurately in relation to the size and arrangement of other things in the same space. Complementing the idea that the monotypes show how we might use the sense of touch to orient ourselves in a darkened room, these contours suggest a form of picture making based on the apprehension of the surface qualities of individual objects. Importantly for the purposes of this discussion, such experience is figured by a distinctive style of mark making on the inked plate.

I am not suggesting that Degas’s monotypes are literally ‘tactile pictures’: they do not have a raised surface and cannot be experienced solely through touch. I am arguing, however, that these works show that problems of vision (whether caused by an absence of light or by physical disability) do not preclude picture making. Instead, the use of other sensory experiences might actually expand the range of expressive possibilities in visual representation by, for example, facilitating the depiction of objects that cannot be apprehended through sight alone. Degas thus uses the monotype to work against an artistic and critical tradition that has

36. See also Fulkerson on various intersections and tensions between vision and touch in object recognition and spatial representation; Fulkerson, op. cit., p. 43.

37. As works that were dedicated by Degas to specific individuals, many of the monotypes were designed to be held and appreciated at close range. Save for the exhibition of a limited number of works at the Impressionist show of 1877 and at Paul Durand-Ruel’s gallery in 1893, Degas permitted only a few individuals (or specific dedicatess) to see his finished works in this medium. For further details see F. Cachin, “The Monotypes” in J. Adhémar and F. Cachin, Degas: The Complete Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes, translated by J. Brenton, London, 1986, pp. 75–76 and also R. Thomson, Degas, The Nudes, London, 1988, p. 87; Parshall, 2009, op. cit., p. 27; Harrison, op. cit., p. 94.
been dominated by theories of vision.  

The idea that art may be liberated from visual perception has profound resonance in light of the eye problems from which Degas suffered throughout his life. Kendall argues that Degas's photophobia and monocular vision were conditions that encouraged the artist to explore pictorial representation as a 'selective', 'artificial', and 'irregular' process in a way that liberated his compositions from 'any purely mechanical system of vision'. While Kendall's analysis shows how Degas transformed limitations on vision into the basis of innovative spatial compositions, this article has made a broader claim by suggesting that Degas's darkfield monotypes reveal the aesthetic possibilities of touch and its visual enactment in spaces that are devoid of light. This argument implies further that although the monotypes were important to Degas's experiments in other media, they should properly be viewed as finished works in their own right and part of a specific line of pictorial inquiry within the artist's œuvre. While the monotypes have been viewed in critical literature in connection with Degas's liberation from draughtsmanship and perspectival composition, they can also be understood as a release of the viewer from an oculocentric art historical tradition. By inviting reconsideration of the perceptual basis of picture making, Degas's monotypes demand that viewers examine their own critical commitment to visuality and conceive of themselves as fully embodied subjects (rather than simply as viewers) in their experience of the artwork. By privileging the sense of touch over vision, Degas's darkfield monotypes thus constitute not only an innovative experiment in the sensory foundations of printmaking, but a challenge to some of the orthodoxies of art history.