

uses and abuses of commensality. With *Politics of Food*, Delfina Foundation presents a collection of resources for art historians interested in the social and material aspects of food in contemporary art practices.

- 1 Aaron Cezar, 'Forward', in Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows (eds), *Politics of Food*, exh. cat., London and Berlin, 2019, p. 10.
- 2 Tim Lang, 'Food, Brexit and Culture: What is Food Progress?', in Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows op. cit., p. 78.

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C. Oliver O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern Mind*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 2019, 253 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780271084640, £79.95.

Chloe Julius

The life of Meyer Schapiro spanned almost the entirety of the twentieth century; his intellectual contribution traced many of the century's major contours. This is the underlying premise of Oliver O'Donnell's book, which takes the neatness of Schapiro's lifespan as an invitation to consider the development of art history in the last century. That such a project is possible is testament to Schapiro's intellectual curiosity and cross-disciplinary approach as an art historian. Yet, it is the successful rendering of this portrait that makes Schapiro's admission that he never

synthesised 'an adequate, satisfying theory of art' so devastating. Opening and closing the book with this citation, O'Donnell uses Schapiro to puncture the triumphalism of the historiography of twentieth century art history, leaving his reader to question how the discipline fell so far below the intellectual aptitude of one of its chief architects.

The book's titular 'critical debates' offer useful placeholders to explore Schapiro's varied intellectual engagement with art and theory. Rather than narrating a series of debates in which Schapiro participated, these 'debates' provide discrete paths into well-trodden scholarly terrain, allowing O'Donnell to tame otherwise wholly unwieldy material. This methodology also emboldens O'Donnell to take on a sacred cow in the existing literature: Schapiro's Marxism.

Although Schapiro's ideas about art continued to develop until he passed away in 1996, his writings from the 1930s have been persistently reappraised, enjoying a notably healthy afterlife in the development of Marxist art history in Britain. Two essays in particular – 'The Social Bases of Art' (1936) and 'The Nature of Abstract Art' (1937) – proved foundational, and the extent to which either provided insight into the concept of artistic freedom (and thus the possibility of a politically engaged practice), beyond the context in which they were written, was regularly debated. While O'Donnell namechecks the 'academic quibbles' about the theoretical divide between these two articles – namely, Andrew Hemingway's gripe that T.J. Clark had characterised the former article as Stalinist – he ultimately presents both as having been mediated through Schapiro's active support of the Communist Party.

Crucially, the 'debate' around which the chapter on Schapiro's Marxism pivots is

pegged neither to 1936 nor 1937 but to 1941, the year in which Schapiro had published an article on Courbet that earned the ire of Max Raphael. As such, O'Donnell shifts the dial away from the 1930s – the main battleground for competing versions of Marxist art history – to the 1940s, when, following Stalin's Moscow show trials in the late 1930s, Schapiro's independence from the party had become clear. This enables O'Donnell to chart the progression in Schapiro's Marxism from practice – as understood by his engagement with the Communist Party – to the academy, writing that 'Marxism is not a cosmological and deterministic theory of human history but rather a theory that[...] can be engaged with experimentally and potentially confirmed or refuted'.¹

The book's portrayal of Schapiro's Marxism not in terms of political commitment, but rather as one of the many theoretical hats that Schapiro tries on – as, in O'Donnell's words, he 'shuttled' through different fields, time periods and geographical locales – is in step with the overall characterisation operative in this particular intellectual history. Under O'Donnell's treatment, Schapiro is rendered a twentieth-century traveller, propelled through history by a compulsion to theorise art. For example, Schapiro's turn *towards* psychoanalysis in 1956 is characterised as a move *away* from Marxism, with O'Donnell positing that Schapiro's perception that Marx failed to articulate the particularities of historical individuals drove him into Freud's arms. Along with Marxism, O'Donnell plots psychoanalysis as merely another point on the map of Schapiro's journey and subsequent chapters make stops at semiotics, phenomenology and poststructuralism.

O'Donnell does, however, establish one intellectual tradition that Schapiro carries with

him on his voyage: pragmatism, specifically John Dewey's lectures on aesthetics. For O'Donnell, Schapiro never strayed too far from Dewey's insights into the social implications of art in his own writing. The book thus unfolds as a series of moments in which Schapiro's pragmatism interfaces with a new intellectual tradition. These interactions, as O'Donnell notes of the counter-position of Schapiro's pragmatism with psychoanalysis in 1956, result in an argument that is 'irreducible to both'.² The sum of these dizzying efforts is a profound eclecticism, which, as O'Donnell concludes in the epilogue, was ultimately unsatisfactory: 'Schapiro's answers to these questions were more ad hoc than systematic, and in this regard they parallel the fact that he never developed his own theory of art, pragmatic or otherwise'.³

O'Donnell frames the twentieth century with the failure of one of its leading art historians to theorise art, and thereby significantly raises the stakes of his intellectual history. Imagining a response to Schapiro's shortcoming from Ananda Coomaraswamy – with whom Schapiro had a productive exchange in the 1940s – O'Donnell states that narrating art history without a theory of art is a 'perilous endeavour' that leaves art 'precariously open'.⁴ This is the closest we get to O'Donnell's own polemic, albeit under the guise of Coomaraswamy. In showing the eclecticism of twentieth-century art history, O'Donnell is able to demonstrate the degree to which its object – art – is left open. Indeed, when he engages Derrida's critique of Schapiro, in which Derrida resurfaced Schapiro's critique of Martin Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh's shoes, O'Donnell illuminates how art can suffer from an assorted theoretical load, portraying the original artwork straining under the weight of the multiple 'debates' in which it

found itself. O'Donnell recaptures the origins of those debates, plugging nuance back in in order to rescue art from the indeterminacy of multiple theoretical perspectives. That is the purchase of intellectual history, a genre whose relative absence from the field of art history, O'Donnell proves, is in desperate need of remedying.

- 1 C. Oliver O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern American Mind*, Pennsylvania, 2019, p. 67.
- 2 O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates*, p. 118
- 3 O'Donnell, p. 189
- 4 O'Donnell, p. 92

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'In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury', Art Institute of Chicago, 6 September 2019 – 12 January 2020. Catalogue: Ed. Zoë Ryan, Yale University Press, 2019, 236 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300247053, \$40.00.

Daisy Silver

A recent exhibition held at the Art Institute of Chicago offers a new perspective on Mexico's place in modernism. Curated by Zoë Ryan, 'In a Cloud' showcases an international group of creatives, including Ruth Asawa, Cynthia Sargent, Anni Albers, Lola Álvarez Bravo and Sheila Hicks to stage a narrative of Mexican design based on their relationship to the

linchpin Cuban designer, Clara Porset. Within the exhibition, Mexico is cast as a looming seventh protagonist and an international draw during the first half of the twentieth century. In its curation, 'In a Cloud' excels at mapping the fluidity of art movements through a web of archival materials which provide snapshot insights into the artists' careers. Drawn from Porset's maxim that 'there is design in everything', even 'in a cloud, in a wall, in a chair', the exhibition title bridges the diverse range of these artists' practices through their comparably inclusive and decidedly modernist approach towards their source material.¹

The first encounter staged within the exhibition space is with a row of Porset's signature Butaca chairs. In the 1940s and 1950s, Porset re-worked the design of the historic type, perceiving Mexico's design future – and its national character – as deeply tied to its particular 'handcrafts' legacy.² Predicated on Bauhaus ideals, Porset experimented with local materials and construction techniques stressing functionalism. The breadth of Porset's investigations are evidenced by the range of prototypes on show, fabricated variously with endemic leathers and plant fibres.

From its early recording in colonial inventories in the seventeenth century, the Butaca's lineage has been one of adaptation. The chair's shape and low height has been attributed to wooden pre-Columbian high-back seats, while its rigid structure and wooden joinery is connected to sixteenth-century Spanish royal chairs. Different permutations of the Butaca exist throughout Latin America as it adapted to local craft through Spanish trade routes. In its assimilation, Jorge Rivas Pérez argues that the Butaca was 'stripped of the symbolism' of a state or ritual chair and became merely