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ARTS & CULTURE

The touch that lingers from beyond

Contemplating presence, absence, and "desire full of endless distance" at the Art Institute's Camille Claudel exhibit

by **Irene Hsiao**
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Camille Claudel's *The Implorer* (large model), modeled about 1898–99, cast about 1905. Private Collection. Courtesy Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe
Credit: Image provided by Art Institute of Chicago

In 1893, the work of artist Camille Claudel was first seen in the United States in the French section of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago: a single sculpture, a bronze bust of Auguste Rodin, the artist whose name and work her own has been inextricably linked, if it is known at all.

Student, model, mistress, and muse to the "father of modern sculpture," Claudel created sculptures before, after, and in spite of her time in Rodin's studio. "**Camille Claudel,"** curated by Emerson Bowyer at the Art Institute (where it closes February 19) and Anne-Lise Desmas at the **Getty Museum** (where it travels this April) is the largest North American survey of her work since 1988. It encompasses 55 of the 90-odd surviving works by Claudel that extend in an expressive timeline of the artist's oeuvre—from portraits of her younger brother Paul, modeled when she was in her teens, to a bronze commissioned by the French state less than a decade before her internment at the behest of her mother and brother in a mental institution, where she remained for the rest of her life. The latter was salvaged nearly half a century after her death from the bottom of a pond (*Wounded Niobid*).

Over 130 years after it first arrived in the Americas, her bust of Rodin, brow in a long furrow as if channeling the energy from unseen heavens through his eyes and cascading down a beard that transmutes into the base of the bronze, sits side by side with her own portrait as imagined by Rodin, abstracted as *Thought*, the partially formed and lesser known counterpart to Rodin's famous *The Thinker*, monumentally muscular in his ruminations. ("What makes my Thinker think is that he thinks not only with his brain, with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back, and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes," said Rodin.)

In contrast, the image he created of her is a cool, hairless, colorless face emerging, dead or asleep, imprisoned from action in a marble block, not even a neck to turn her gaze. Although rendered in marble, it is easy to imagine the plaster in which it was originally formed, the modeling material that immobilizes bones as they knit together to an integrity or a paralysis. Side by side they gaze, not at each other, but at separate visions they alone can see.

"Camille Claudel"
Through 2/19: Mon 11 AM-5 PM, Thu 11 AM-8 PM, Fri-Sun 11 AM-5 PM; Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan, **artic.edu**, adults $32 ($40 Fast Pass, $27 Illinois residents, $20 Chicago residents), seniors 65+, students, and teens 14-17 $26 ($34 Fast Pass, $21 Illinois residents, $14 Chicago residents), children and under 14 and Chicago teens 14-17 free; Illinois residents free weekdays through 3/22.

The consonance and dissonance of what they saw is expressed in the collection of works tellingly placed side by side in the gallery: Rodin's plaster *Crouching Woman* is sensual and animalistic next to Claudel's

introspective renditions of the same, tensely wound in a self-protective gesture in plaster (*Crouching Woman*), then abstracted to a fragment in bronze (*Torso of a Crouching Woman*), with head, arms, and thigh sliced clean away.

Camille Claudel. *Crouching Woman*, about 1884–85. Musée Camille Claudel, Nogent-sur-Seine.
Credit: **Marco Illuminati**

Meanwhile, detailed studies of disembodied hands and feet—which Claudel often made for Rodin's sculptures—sit behind glass as if awaiting action or incorporation. In the center of the room, Claudel's *Young Girl with a Sheaf* sits demurely poised in blushing terra cotta, flanked by Rodin's *Galatea*, emerging milk white from her marble, every angle and curve of her anatomy—the tilt of her head, the curve of her abdomen, the angle of her knees—a mirror of her predecessor, magnified from peasant to myth through material translation. Seen together, the story of the sculptor who falls in love with his sculpture is refracted through a complex lens: she reshaped a fleshly form, he remade an ancient myth, and the truth of their relations in love or in labor is both eloquent and opaque, uttered in inanimate clay and stone.

Placed along the border dividing her work before and after Rodin, is *The Waltz (with Veils)*—a sculpture of a couple mid dance, heads tilting towards each other, hands about to clasp, as a fabric flows about their spiraling forms, enclosing them in one embrace and amplifying their vertiginous spin. As in many of Claudel's works, *The Waltz* is in the act of becoming: two bodies becoming one body, one body becoming a double helix, either about to float or fall, caught in the suspension of breath and motion.

Once two nudes, its sensuality scandalized early critics with the nearness of the embrace and the sense of shared space as legs entwine in a dance with a rhythm like a wave, a heavy fall and two light steps. Yet the flowing fabric is the connective tissue that transforms the waltzers into the waltz, as the dancers merge into pure motion, leaving this trace in the space where once they were. The sculpture is made of bronze, a material that transmits heat, electricity, and sound, a cold metal once warmed into something as light and insubstantial as a veil, as heavy as human flesh.

Camille Claudel. *The Waltz (Allioli)*, about 1900. Private collection.
Credit: Photo courtesy of Musée Yves Brayer

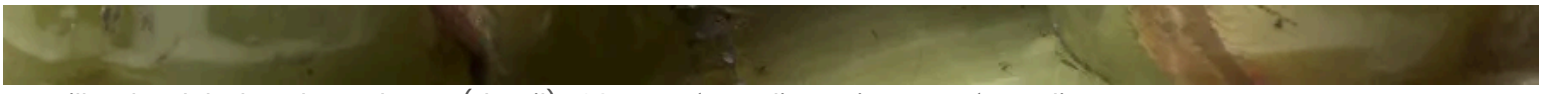
On the perimeter of a circular platform in the corner of the room dance three smaller iterations of *The Waltz*, as if revolving en masse upon a ballroom floor. (Disclosure: I speak on the AIC's audio guide for *The Waltz* , but I had to write and record before seeing the sculpture/exhibition in person.) Seen together, like frames of a Eadweard Muybridge sequence or silhouettes in a zoetrope, their subtle differences render motion: in 1900's *The Waltz (Allioli)*, a dancer's foot hovers weightless in the air, his head leans just a breath away from his partner's neck.

In *The Waltz* (1905), a molecule of air drifts between the dancers' hands, an instant before they touch. These distances are difficult to photograph, apparent in three dimensions but nearly invisible in two, as illusory and indiscernible as whispers. Throughout, their limbs linger on the gradient between body and veil, hybrid and hallucinatory, ever in a state of becoming other—embodying in idea and execution the magic of sculpture, that curious flickering between object and life.

These dancers and these distances appear again and again in the gallery like a signature: unwound from their dance, one dancer is presented alone as Perseus, eyes fixed to the mirror that shields him from Medusa, whose mortal head he holds high above his own shoulder (*Perseus and the Gorgon*)—the other dancer blindfolded and reeling, her toe poised to slip on the turning wheel as *Fortune*. Their precarity is present in the hovering of the toes in the air in *The Implorer*, a solitary figure not quite on solid ground; levitating from the earth in the ecstasy of an embrace in *The Abandonment*; near collapse in the large allegorical work, *The Age of Maturity*, which depicts Old Age wresting Man from Youth, on her knees, arms yearning towards his retreating hand—which many have read as autobiographical, showing Rodin deserting young Claudel for his long-time companion Rose Beuret. ("The achingly small distance between the man's outstretched hand and those of the imploring Youth is nonetheless vast and devastating in its finality. All of Claudel's emotional and artistic brilliance is distilled into those three hands and the charged space between them," writes Bowyer in the exhibition catalog.).

Camille Claudel. *Age of Maturity,* model 1899, cast 1902. © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt. Credit: Courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago

"Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances," as **Robert Hass wrote**—and yet such spaces can also be brimming with warmth and life, as Claudel shows in *The Chatterboxes*—four female friends, heads clustered, enraptured by a shared secret—and even redemptive in *Flute Player or Mermaid*, whose hands and lips verge upon the flute she plays in a rare joy, a self-sufficient woman reveling in the pleasure of her art, a sash garlanding her lone body lifting like a wing.



Camille Claudel. *The Chatterboxes* (detail), 1897. Musée Rodin, Paris. © Musée Rodin.
Credit: Christian Baraja

On January 6, in Fullerton Hall at the Art Institute, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and the Brentano String Quartet delivered **a radiant performance of *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire***, Jake Heggie's 2012 song cycle inspired by Claudel, with lyrics by Gene Scheer. Heggie's rendition of Claudel's story is beautiful for its intimacy of scale, a single voice and four strings describing in seven songs Claudel speaking to her sculptures on the day she knows she will enter the asylum.

Joyce DiDonato and the Brentano String Quartet perform Jake Heggie's *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire* at the Art Institute of Chicago's Fullerton Hall on January 6.
Credit: Courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago

In "Prelude: Awakening," the strings organize themselves into an eerie waltz that wilders—sometimes warm, sometimes rushing, sometimes fragmented—a dance that flourishes and limps, becoming plaintive as the voice enters in a dreamy recollection ("Rodin"), a quotation of one of Claudel's letters ("Last night I went to sleep completely naked . . ."). DiDonato's voice is alternately voluminous and rich, coordinating with the

quartet to evoke conversation, memories, the presence of others, then drifting into the bareness of a solo, soft and distant. Perhaps loveliest is *La petite châtelaine*, named for the portrait of a little girl Claudel first modeled in 1892, sometimes thought to represent Claudel's aborted child by Rodin, here a lullaby for what will never wake, a question that can never be answered.

"Every dream I ever had was of movement," she sings in the "Epilogue." "Touching. Breathing. Reaching. Hovering. Something always about to change . . . " Somewhere in the vibrato of voice and strings, a varying resonance, the retreat and approach to a note is a resonance that shakes walls and makes listeners tremble.

Afterwards, the gallery fills with the buzz of an audience unwilling to leave Claudel behind. In the exhibition, the juxtaposition of objects and their histories form a narrative as poignant for its absences as for what it includes, and to see it is to be as astonished by what is absent as what is present, what happened and what did not.

Claudel destroyed much of her own work and created nothing during her 30 years of institutionalization. As I walk once more near *The Waltz*, my yearning contemplation, still and close, is mistaken for touching. ("This is a no-touch gallery, ma'am.") Yet surely I am not the creator of this attraction, this touch that lingers from beyond.

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