

Balthus, King of Cats

by Gail Leggio

The life of the artist born Balthasar Klossowski (1908–2001) nearly spanned the twentieth century, yet he lived and painted his own, faintly anachronistic way. In a world shaped by modernism, he remained temperamentally aloof from it. His paintings, steeped in the past and beholden to the old masters, are as original and eccentric as anything produced by the avant-garde. The thirty-four paintings and forty pen-and-ink drawings in “Balthus: Cats and Girls—Paintings and Provocations,” an exhibition organized by Sabine Rewald at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (September 25, 2013–January 12, 2014), linger in the mind.

The installation introduced the artist in *The King of Cats* (1935), a rare self-portrait and a declaration of personal style. He strikes a pose as an austere dandy, with impossibly long legs, in saffron trousers, and the kind of razor-sharp cheekbones familiar in French culture stars Antonin Artaud and Jean-Louis Barrault (both friends of the painter). It is a romantic image, the twenty-seven-year-old genius—he had already presented a one-man show and raised some hackles—in his bare Paris studio. The title of the work appears on a stone slab leaning against a stool. In the catalogue, Rewald points out possible influences in Eugène Delacroix’s *Self-Portrait in the Costume of Ravenwood* (1829)—Balthus could see the roof of Delacroix’s studio from his window—and in Andrea del Castagno’s similarly low-angled portrait *Pippo Spano* (1448).¹ The signature feature of the work, however, is Balthus’s companion, a large striped cat who rubs his head against the artist’s leg. Totem animal, familiar, alter ego, cats are a recurring theme in Balthus’s work. As the exhibition title suggests, the artist’s muses were adolescent girls in contexts that are difficult to define—neither allegorical nor sentimental in a genre way, nor exploitive. The settings are domestic, the mood is uncanny, a perfect milieu for cats.

The exhibition devotes considerable space to one of Balthus’s favorite models, Thérèse Blanchard, an eleven-year-old from a modest family that lived a few blocks from his studio. He painted ten portraits of her between 1936 and 1938, including two of his finest compositions, *Thérèse* (cover) and *Thérèse Dreaming* (both 1938). While the other paintings in the series—which include several dark-palette half-length portraits and two scenes with her brother, Hubert, *Brother and Sister* (1936) and the more-elaborate *The Blanchard Children* (1937)—do not rise to that level of mastery, they clearly reveal what he saw in her. With her straight, short brown hair and serious face, Thérèse is not conventionally pretty, but she projects intelligence and individuality. Rewald recognizes Balthus’s ability “to capture two of the predominant feelings that pervade adolescence: boredom and rebellion. It is one of the artist’s great



Girl at a Window
1955
PRIVATE
COLLECTION

achievements to express in paint this state that is so much easier to describe in prose and poetry.”² For Balthus, the inscrutable sullenness of his model is very much a state of grace.

In *Thérèse* (1938), Thérèse Blanchard sits in an armchair, with a relaxed elegance that manages to convey not disdain, but simply the artist’s irrelevance to whatever she is thinking. Her face is turned toward the observer, but she seems to be looking past us. The sleeves of her tailored jacket are pushed up to reveal her forearms, and the languid hands—one resting on the curve of the chair’s arm, the other on her raised knee—make lovely arabesques. She slumps a little, crossing her legs, and the smooth lines of her limbs have a classical simplicity. Formally, the architecture of the composition is both rock-solid and dynamic. You could diagram the triangles of space, the straight lines and

curves, the play of light against dark (the oval face against the high back of the chair) and light against light (the hand and raised knee against the rumpled white tablecloth in the background)—and the result would be a fine abstract painting. But you would miss the human mystery at the heart of the work. Much the same could be said of one of Balthus's heroines, Piero della Francesca. That admiration underlies Balthus's remark, in a 1983 conversation, that he aspired to "timeless" realism.³

Another portrait from 1938, *Thérèse Dreaming*, is less austere, compositionally and emotionally. The model, her eyes closed, does not seem aware of the observer. She leans against a pillow, with her arms above her head, framing the face in cameo-like profile. One knee is raised up on the chaise, revealing a glimpse of a white slip and underpants. In the right foreground, a large white cat laps at a saucer of milk—is it a surrogate for the artist, projected into the space of the painting, or a guardian of the threshold? There is a tinge of the erotic, but the painting stops short of voyeurism. The serenity of the scene, the carefully balanced detail—Thérèse's red shoes look almost regal against her casual skirt and blouse; the background still life could come from the Spanish or Dutch Baroque—and the warm, subdued palette, all create an old master feel. The artist respects Thérèse's almost-mystical self-absorption. Thérèse is "young while the earth is old" and "subtly of herself contemplative." The Victorian poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti used that language in his sonnet "Body's Beauty," a companion piece to his painting *Lady Lilith* (1866–68, 1872–73). Some apparently accidental congruence of forms in an individual reveals a timeless, self-sufficient beauty.

Rewald uncovers some intriguing predecessors and analogues for Balthus's painting, several of Victorian provenance. In the catalogue, she reproduces a Man Ray photo-collage from *Minotaure* no. 3 (1935), the same issue in which Balthus's illustrations for *Wuthering Heights* appeared. Man Ray's figure of a coquettish little girl was taken from a Pears' Soap advertisement, which mimicked *Sugar and Spice* (1879) by the French painter Emile Munier. The dark-haired child in these images, like *Thérèse*, raises one leg and rests her foot on the chair she sits in, and she lifts her arms above her head. But despite these superficial similarities of pose, the figure in *Thérèse Dreaming* belongs to another world. The Pears' Soap girl is younger, not on the verge of adolescence, yet she stares provocatively at the viewer, a precocious little performer who seems to foreshadow Shirley Temple. Thérèse, lost in her own thoughts, radiates autonomous dignity and individuality. The feminist literary critic Nina Auerbach has argued that the Victorian woman-in-a-trance should not be read as an icon of passivity but as a figure of empowerment. These "mesmerized, somnambulistic, vampirized or variously transfigured women have shaken off the idiom of victimization along with the cover of the looming male magus."⁴ Auerbach includes Lewis Carroll's Alice in her pantheon of quietly subversive heroines: "Alice must submerge her power as dreamer/creator/destroyer of

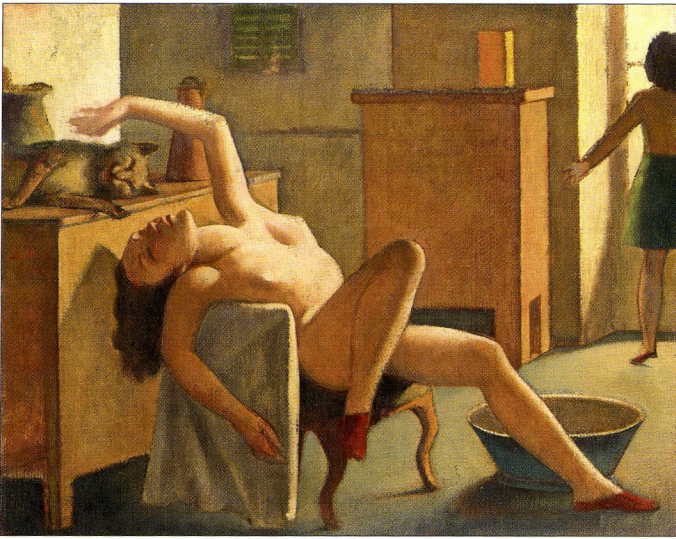
the worlds she invades within the frightened and deferential politeness of the helpless child.”⁵ Rewald discusses Balthus’s great admiration for Lewis Carroll and reproduces Carroll’s photographs of Alice Liddell.⁶ While it is unlikely Balthus knew the photographs (not generally published until the 1950s), Alice’s short dark hair and extraordinary aura of self-possession have a gravitas worthy of Thérèse.

Rewald fills in as much background as she can on Balthus’s models, continuing a trend to acknowledge the lives of artist’s muses. (In the catalogue *Julia Margaret Cameron’s Women*, for example, Stephanie Lipscomb contributed a section of “Sitters’ Biographies.”) Little is known about Thérèse Blanchard (1925–50) beyond the facts of her birth, marriage and early death. But Rewald finds an interesting story in Balthus’s favorite model of the 1940s and 1950s, Laurence Bataille (1930–83), the daughter of the writer Georges Bataille. Laurence lived with her mother and stepfather, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. She had an affair with Balthus and later married, had three children and took up a career in psychoanalysis. A photograph (c. 1948) reproduced in the catalogue shows a dark-haired young woman, thoughtful, with an off-beat beauty.

Balthus’s paintings of her are erotic in a stylized way, theatrical and mysterious. In *The Week of Four Thursdays* (1949), Laurence sprawls in an armchair, head lolling back, eyes closed, reaching up to pet the cat clinging to the back of the chair. She wears a loose white robe, and her extended leg makes a luminous diagonal across the lower third of the composition. Another girl stands at the tall window, with her back to the viewer, so small she seems far away, enclosed within the vignette of rectangles that establishes the room’s architecture. The title refers to the closing of schools on Thursday in France, a common practice at the time. *The Room* (1952–54) is a less carefree variation on the theme. The room is darker. The figure at the window, in Rewald’s phrase, “has morphed into an eerie imp tearing open the curtain.”⁸ The figure in the chair is naked and has a more mature body. The cat is now an observer, not a playful companion. We can just make out the feline form on a side table.

The most appealing of the series is *Nude with Cat* (1949). Laurence lays back in her chair, with a beautifully simple basin at her feet, in a light-filled room. The cat reclines on a bureau behind her and stretches with pleasure as she reaches to stroke him. Without a hint of caricature, Balthus captures an expression of mischievous delight on the feline face. Laurence and an exaggerated version of the cat appear together in Balthus’s fantastic *The Cat of La Méditerranée* (1949), painted as a sign for a Paris restaurant frequented by Balthus and his friends, an imposing roster that included Albert Camus, Jean-Louis Barrault, André Malraux and Georges Bataille. Laurence is the girl waving from the rowboat, under the rainbow, as Balthus—in the form of a robust cat—enjoys his meal.

The cat, dressed like a French sailor, sits regally at his seaside table, knife



Nude with Cat, 1949

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

and fork at the ready. Fish fall from the rainbow onto his plate, and a lobster waits as the next course. The human-cat hybrid has a ferocious glamour, and this sophisticated foray into folk art demonstrates Balthus's intuitive understanding of the feline temperament. Writers come closer to it, occasionally, as Rebecca West does when she admits to accepting a human husband, "since I could never be the mate of a beautiful tomcat who has for permanent wear a shining garment of silky fur molding to a symphony of sliding muscles."⁹ In *The Cat of La Méditerranée*, Balthus merges with his totem, his alter ego in a world where the cat is king. This painting, more than any of his others, celebrates imagination, but his realism is always leavened with a streak of fantasy. He is an assured figurative painter whose figures never seem academic, a student of the early Renaissance attracted not to its grand themes and humanistic clarity but to the strange, opaque corners of its iconography.

A whiff of occultism drifts through many of Balthus's paintings. In *The Game of Patience* (1954), a girl plays solitaire in a barely furnished, mostly white room. Under the table, a black-and-white cat reaches with one paw to swat a white ball. Yet the depiction of an apparently mundane pastime evokes ritual magic, cartomancy with a feline familiar. The diagonal of the girl's body as she leans over the table, the strong light from the right that casts her face and hair into deep shadow, the single candle on the table—all contribute to the sense that there are otherworldly currents animating the corners of everyday domestic life. *Girl in Green and Red* (1944), a portrait of the artist's first wife, Antoinette de Watteville, is more obviously hierophantic. Rewald rightly notes the resemblances to early Renaissance art and tarot design. Antoinette did not



*The Game of
Patience*, 1954
COLLECTION OF
BETTINA RHEIMS

like posing as a rule, but she bought the striking half-red, half-green top specifically for the painting. She sits behind a white-clothed table, and the objects in front of her are both domestic and ritual-ready: a silver cup, a loaf of bread with a protruding knife and a candlestick. Balthus casts one side of her face in shadow, using the vertical line of the two-color top as an axis. Both *The Game of Patience* and *Girl in Red and Green* are from private collections. Living with these formally elegant works, with their unfolding layers of slyly elusive meaning, must be—like living with cats—intensely pleasurable.

Both *The Game of Patience* (34 13/16-by-34 1/16 inches) and *Girl in Red and Green* (36 1/4-by-35 5/8) could be thought of as chamber pieces. *Nude Before a Mirror* (1955) also depicts a single figure in an interior, but everything about it is monumental, beginning with its size (75-by-64 1/2 inches). The model is subtly out of scale with her surroundings. Her waist is level with the white mantelpiece, which would normally be around shoulder height. The tight diagonal of the mantel establishes the room's perspective, but the placement of the girl against the back-wall wainscoting and wallpaper makes her look as if she were in an ancient frieze, walking like an Egyptain with flat, forward-pointed feet. The girl raises her arms to lift her long, dark, heavy mass of hair, obscuring her face. She gazes into the mirror, which we see as just a sliver, steeply angled. Balthus transforms the room, bathed in soft light, a comfortable bourgeois interior, into a luminous ritual space.

Balthus explored themes and gestures in a variety of ways. The frieze-like figure recurs in a number of contexts. In *The Dream* (1955), a blond girl glides on tiptoe toward a sleeping brunette on a striped sofa. Both figures are clothed, and multiple patterns cocoon the interior with the luxury of a Matisse. The moving figure, in profile, carries a red flower and raises the other hand, in salutation or to command silence, like an annunciate angel. *The Moth* (1959–60) has a very different look, in part because of the medium; instead of his usual oil paint, Balthus was working with layers of casein tempera on canvas, achieving a fresco effect. The nude woman, again in profile, in the lamp-lit bedroom moves like a figure from an antique wall painting. In 1961, André Malraux appointed Balthus director of the Académie de France at the Villa Medici in Rome. During the decade and a half of his tenure there, he restored the interiors “to create a setting,” Rewald suggests, “as austere as that in certain works by Paolo Uccello.”¹⁰ As the century of modernism rolled on, Balthus stayed loyal to his own vision of old master art. Peter Schjeldahl, in a review of the exhibition, calls Balthus “an anti-modernist beloved of modernists.”¹¹ The most-lasting influence on the largely self-taught artist were probably the frescoes of Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Masolino and Masaccio, which he studied on a 1926 trip to Italy, as Rewald notes. In his later years, having proved his devotion, however idiosyncratic, to his old masters in a lifetime’s worth of serenely enigmatic paintings, Balthus waved away accusations of impropriety—no one ever accused him of vulgarity—with a mandarin gesture of dismissal.

This exhibition is, by no means, a full retrospective, with just thirty-four paintings. A core of masterpieces from major museums anchors the show, but many wonderful works are from less-accessible private collections. There is a sense of intimacy, as the viewer is drawn into the artist’s world. Still, it would be interesting to see some missing paintings in this context, works that Rewald acknowledges in the excellent catalogue: the superb artists’ portraits *André Derain* (1936)—Balthus gives the heavy figure in his dressing gown the grandeur of one of Ingres’s notable personages—and *Joan Miró and His Daughter Dolores* (1937–38); *The Street* (1933), a curious stage-set townscape with figures—including Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and a disturbing sexual encounter—like marionettes; and a large-scale work, *The Mountain* (1937), where the hikers and dreamers feel disconnected from each other and look pasted onto the backdrop, in the manner of one of Balthus’s favorite artists, Gustave Courbet.

Also absent is Balthus’s most notorious painting, *Guitar Lesson* (1933), which caused a scandal at his first solo exhibition, at the Galerie Pierre in Paris, in May 1934. The girl in the picture lies across her female teacher’s lap; the woman strokes her genital area and pulls her hair. At the time, viewers objected not only to the overt sexuality but also to the blasphemy of the image: the girl’s pose mimics that of the dead Christ in the *Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon* (c. 1455), one of the treasures of the Louvre. Balthus’s picture is as formally

strong as it is disturbing, but he came to regret his épater-le-bourgeoisie moment. *Guitar Lesson* is something of an aberration in the career. Balthus was not unaware of the psychological and sexual preoccupations of his milieu, but he tends to approach them with a mix of oblique wit and magisterial restraint.

Balthus, a gifted self-mythologist, in the 1950s began styling himself Count Klossowski de Rola, after he left Paris, first for a turreted house at Chassy. His favorite model at Chassy was Frédérique Tison, his brother Pierre's step-daughter, a high-spirited girl who showed up with her favorite cat in a basket. Frédérique is the sleeper in *The Dream*. In *Girl at a Window* (also 1955), she poses on tiptoe, one knee on a chair, and leans out. The motif is familiar from Caspar David Friedrich, the back view of the introspective figure, but Frédérique's longings seem more impetuous than existential. Balthus's final retreat was an old inn, the Grand Chalet at Rossinière, where, like his Japanese second wife, Setsuko, he received visitors in Eastern garb. Rewald points out that his aristocratic fantasy life seems unnecessary. As the catalogue's chronology demonstrates, "the actual story is far more interesting than the invention."¹² His Polish father, Erich Klossowski, was an art historian and a painter; his mother, Elizabeth Spiro, known as Baladine, from a family of Russian Jews, was also a painter. She was a strikingly attractive woman, who had an affair and long-term relationship with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

Rilke encouraged the eleven-year-old Balthasar Klossowski in his first sustained art project, a series of pen-and-ink drawings about a stray cat named Misou. Rilke arranged to have them published in 1921, as *Misou: Quarante Images*, contributing a preface. The artist's name on the book is "Baltuz." The exhibition includes the full set of drawings, and they are extraordinary, not just as a demonstration of precocious skill but as heartfelt visual storytelling. Rewald quotes a contemporary critic: "the boy's ability to translate his feelings into graphic expressions is astounding and almost frightening."¹³ The ten-year-old Balthasar found the black-and-white cat while visiting Lake Geneva with his family. The drawings trace the journey—by foot, boat and tram—to the village of Conches, where the itinerant Klossowskis were staying. There are scenes of the cat playing, upsetting the dinner table, curling up with Balthasar in bed as he reads, posing for his father as Erich Kossowski paints, catching a mouse. Mitsou disappears briefly and is found, but eventually the cat goes for good, as mysteriously as it appeared. The final drawings, with the boy searching the streets with a candle, are deeply moving. The young artist grasps the power of negative and positive space, and employs pattern—wallpaper, floorboards, city buildings, plowed fields—with the economical zest of a Wiener Werkstatte graphic designer or a young Matisse.

This wonderfully original, sustained and emotionally rich work sets the stage for a life devoted to the mysteries of art and the human intricacies it attempts to translate into lasting form.

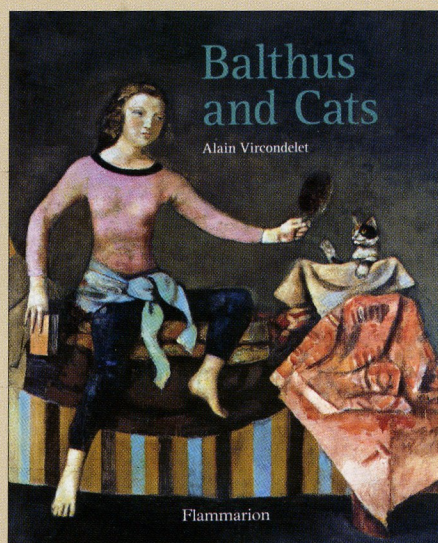
NOTES

1. Sabine Rewald, *Balthus: Cats and Girls—Paintings and Provocations* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2013), p. 62.
2. Rewald, p. 9.
3. Cited, Rewald, p. 100.
4. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
6. Rewald, p. 15.
7. Sylvia Wolf, et al., *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).
8. Rewald, p. 33.
9. *The Essential Rebecca West: Uncollected Prose* (Pittsburgh: Pearhouse Press, 2010).
10. Rewald, p. 44.
11. Peter Schjeldahl, "In the Head: Balthus and Magritte," *The New Yorker* (October 7, 2013), pp. 86–87.
12. Rewald, p. 19.
13. Rewald, p. 49.

Balthus and Cats by Alain Vircondelet. Paris: Flammarion, distributed by Rizzoli, 2013. Illustrated, 96 pages. \$29.95

Review by Gail Leggio

This beautiful little book is a portrait of the artist as magus, and Alain Vircondelet is supremely comfortable in the role of willing acolyte. Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski, 1908–2001) was one of the best figurative painters of the twentieth century, a modernist in his formal inventiveness and his exploration of ambiguity and anxiety, an astute interpreter of masters old (Piero della Francesca) and new (Gustave Courbet), and a canny self-promoter. From his final home, the Grand Chalet, a former inn in the Swiss Alps, he cultivated a persona swathed in mystery. Vircondelet was part of his inner circle, his biographer. Balthus dictated his thoughts to Vircondelet, who published the results as *Vanishing Splendors: A Memoir/Balthus* (Ecco/Harper Collins, 2002). *Balthus and Cats* focuses on a particular facet of Balthus's life and art, his identification with



the feline. A reader looking for critical distance on this enigmatic artist should turn to other sources, but Vircondelet's intimacy and insights are fascinating, and ailurophiles will surrender to the book's charms.

Balthus's affinity for cats is a leit motif, proclaimed in his self-portrait, *The King of Cats* (1935). He is an elegantly gaunt dandy—his sharp cheekbones give him a resemblance to the mad theater genius Antonin Artaud, a close friend in Balthus's Paris period—with a large cat rubbing against him. In his peroration on the painting, Vircondelet uses a ripe prose style reminiscent of fin-de-siècle writers:

Balthus chose his camp: that of the cat, venerated in antiquity, which harbors within an obscure, sometimes fearsome mythology that meant it was either persecuted or elevated into a god.... The cat thus became the go-between, the lookout and the guardian, knowing as it does the byways that thread through to the Great Secret.

This enjoyably overwrought passage does not capture the full experience of living with cats, which includes sheer fun and relaxed intimacy, but Vircondelet recognizes the uncanniness of felines and saw first hand how important individual animals were in Balthus's paintings and in his daily life.

Young girls fascinated Balthus as much as cats did, and he frequently brought them together in the same compositions. In *The Game of Patience* (1954), the girl leans over a card table, examining a spread of cards. A single candle on the table and the intense look on her shadowed face suggest cartomancy, an occult reading in progress. Beneath the table, a cat, playing with a white ball, stretches out a paw, in a similar gesture. The simple shapes and echoing gestures have an austerity that suggests the geometry—sacred and occult—of the early Renaissance. The erotic element in Balthus's work comes to the fore in *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938). The young girl on the bench raises her leg, exposing her underwear, but the stillness of the scene, her closed eyes—as if she were a medium in a trance—and the nonchalance of the big white cat, drinking milk at her feet, give the image a curious solemnity that precludes prurience. Vircondelet suggests it looks like a seventeenth-century painting, and the palette of brown, red and white has a Spanish feel, along with the superb table-top still life in the corner. Vircondelet's comments are personal and impressionistic throughout, rather than scholarly in a formal way, but they have charm.

Sometimes, too, the cat represents Balthus, a subtle surrogate in a private space. In *Nude with Cat* (1948–50), the naked model—more mature this time—leans back, reaching over her head to pet a stretching, playful cat. The cat has the same mischievous smile as the feline-headed protagonist in *The Cat of La Méditerranée* (1949), a self-portrait of Balthus as a dressed cat setting down to a café meal under a rainbow of fish. Painted as a shop sign for a Paris restaurant, the painting has the naive charm of great folk art. The cat sits like a king, knife

and fork at the ready, a fish on his plate, a glass of wine at his side, a lobster waiting as the next course and a girl waving from a boat, under a rainbow.

The book includes, in addition to a generous selection of Balthus's paintings, some of his wife's, Setsuko's, gouaches, simple images of household cats in heavily patterned interiors, and photographs of Balthus, his last studio and some resident felines. The photographs are particularly touching, capturing the quiet simplicity of Rossinière—the inn was neither architecturally grand nor luxuriously furnished—and the frail artist's irresistible elegance. The book also features the forty india-ink drawings for what Vircondelet calls *The Tale of Mitsou*, a picture narrative Balthus created at the age of eleven. The book was published in 1921, with a foreword by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The suite of drawings is a major highlight of the exhibition on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first public display for an extraordinary example of precocious genius.

Vircondelet discusses a number of works not in the Met exhibition, including the faux primitive *Cat with Mirror I* (casein and tempera on canvas, 1977–80) and *Cat with Mirror II* (oil, 1986–89). The composition is the same: a girl seated on a divan covered with printed fabrics looks at herself in a hand mirror, while an inquisitive cat rears up over the back of a chair, looking at her while she looks at herself. In the 1977–80 work, which has the texture of an old fresco, the girl is naked under her blue robe. Vircondelet calls her a “female Japanese warrior,” aptly if fancifully. But he saves his most incantatory language for the feline presence: “These pictures seem to have been here from all eternity, as if suspended in an inviolable, ritual pose that the cat, hypnotized in its turn, has occasioned or surprised.” Vircondelet misses the humor in this curious exchange. Balthus's cat, with his raised paw, could be from a child's storybook. But these pictures are also serious explorations of the nature of gazing, which lies at the heart of image-making, which is, in archaic societies, itself a magical procedure. *Cat with Mirror* graces the cover of this quirky little book, which anyone enamored of Balthus—as the author so clearly is—will want to add to the shelf, along with Sabine Rewald's splendid work of scholarship. Vircondelet's little volume, a combination of personal reminiscence and that currently underrated genre, art appreciation, would make a lovely introduction to one of the twentieth century's most intriguing artists.