

Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over, by Nell Irvin Painter. New York: Counterpoint, 2018. Pp. 320. \$26 (hardcover); \$15.59 (electronic).

Reviewed by Sari Edelstein, University of Massachusetts, Boston (sari.edelstein@umb.edu)

Early in her memoir, *Old in Art School*, Nell Irvin Painter describes her experience commuting to Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers in what she refers to as the “eternally dissed state of New Jersey” (11). Peppered with abandoned factories, the city of Newark is “fascinating and beleaguered” (11). Perhaps surprisingly New Jersey serves as a metonym for Painter’s experience of what it feels like to inhabit the category of “old” in art school. Put bluntly, New Jersey, like old age, signifies all that is not trendy or fashionable—in other words, all that is not glittering New York City. Over the course of this original and exhilarating book, Painter destabilizes this hierarchy and the value system that it upholds.

A prize-winning US historian and author of seven acclaimed scholarly books, Painter retired from Princeton University at the age of sixty-four and embarked upon a rigorous art education, completing a BFA (at Mason Gross) followed by an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. *Old in Art School* is a chronicle of this education—a story of an artist’s becoming, or *Künstlerroman*—but it is also more than that: a reckoning with how race, gender, and age prejudices shape the art world.

Shortly after she arrives at Mason Gross, Painter begins to see art differently—not just to interpret works of art in relation to politics and history but also to attend to form and material. Along with this development in Painter’s perspective, however, comes the revelation that people see her in much more reductive terms: “Being seen as an *old woman* added a new way of seeing myself as reflected in the eyes of others” (11). Now, along with the marginalization of being a black woman, comes the added burden of old age, as the art world is a space rife with—even premised on—ageism.

For one of her courses, Painter is required to transcribe the work of an established artist, a painstaking exercise intended to hone specific skills, such as

composition and color mixing. Noting that “art history offers relatively few depictions of old people, and very few of those are women,” Painter opts to transcribe a large nude self-portrait of Alice Neel at age eighty (73). That Painter chooses to transcribe this particular work signals her broader refusal to acquiesce to the invisibility and homogenization so often leveled at older women. Like *Old in Art School* itself, this transcription is Painter’s way of reckoning with her identity as an older person, frontloading this status rather than diminishing or concealing it.

A narrative of hard work and engagement, Painter’s memoir is a refutation of the conventional wisdom that retirement should involve repose or retreat. But it is not about how art can keep you young or about how to retain a youthful spirit as you age; Painter is not interested in such pop-culture clichés nor does her book claim to offer advice. It is an intensely personal account of Painter’s evolution as an artist; she chronicles her changing ideas about artists like Andy Warhol and Kara Walker but also writes candidly about her sense of herself (whether to dye or straighten her hair), about the challenges of caregiving for aging parents, and about the negotiation (and dismissal) of prevailing Art World expectations.

It is somewhat tempting to consider *Old in Art School* in relation to the notion of “late style,” which Edward Said, drawing on Theodore Adorno, defines as the “moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it” (8). We might, for example, read Henri Matisse’s cut-outs in this vein, as a radical break from his prior work, a kind of liberatory aesthetic project, a product of old age and disability. Just as Matisse shifted mediums, Painter’s book signals her turn away from traditional academic history toward a mixed-media aesthetic; the book is infused with Painter’s own impressive paintings, drawings, and collages.

And yet such a characterization belies the continuities at work in her career: her commitment to bringing her historical knowledge to bear on her creative work and her abiding interest in textuality. The subtitle of her book is a

“memoir of starting over,” an embrace of the idea that aging does not only involve closure or resolution or the development of a single skill set. On the contrary, this brilliant book is a reminder that growing older can involve the acquisition of expertise as well as experimentation with style, craft, and identity.

WORKS CITED

Said, Edward. *Music and Literature Against the Grain*. Random House, 2006.