

ART HISTORY PROGRAM

Lecture Series

UC DAVIS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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SPRING QUARTER 2009

CATHERINE ANDERSON

“Embodiments of Empire: Imperial Bodies in Victorian Painting”

By the end of the nineteenth century, many British citizens considered themselves members of an “imperial race,” descendants of ancient “Aryans” who were destined to conquer and rule the majority of the world’s peoples. While Victorian paintings can seem merely to uphold such imperial and racist ideologies, artists who visited and worked in the colonies also played a role in the formation of racial theory in this period, during a time when Britons increasingly defined themselves in the context of their colonized subjects. Anderson examines images as diverse as classical subject canvases and colonial battle paintings in the framework of British imperialism, arguing for the centrality of these works in Victorian self-definition. Military subjects, for instance, offered an opportunity for artists to display the heroic male body in a modern context, picturing idealized white figures in combat with non-western “savages.” Classical paintings, on the other hand, often depict recognizably Victorian individuals in the guise of ancient Greeks or Romans, supporting the popular notion that modern Britons were the descendants of an antique Aryan race, destined to dominate peoples of color. While these genres have been considered non-canonical in much twentieth-century scholarship, Anderson argues for their significance in shaping Victorian racial consciousness—the ramifications of which remain with us today.

Catherine Anderson recently received her PhD from Brown University.

Thursday, April 9th • 3:10 pm in ART 210D