

[Original French: *Larissa Fassler prend Orsay : un « État des lieux » au XIX^e siècle à hauteur d'humain*, by Vincent Delaury at this [LINK](#).]

English translation:

Larissa Fassler Takes on Orsay: A Nineteenth-Century “State of Play” at Human Scale

by Vincent Delaury

Decidedly, for some time now (the Bridget Riley exhibition, *Point de départ*, is still on view until January 25, and we have not forgotten certain successes from the past, such as *La peur d'aimer. Orsay seen by Tracey Emin* in summer 2019; Sophie Calle and her guest Jean-Paul Demoule — *The Ghosts of Orsay* in spring 2022; Peter Doig, *Reflections of the Century* in autumn 2023; or again *Le jour des peintres* on September 19, 2024 — a meeting between 80 contemporary painters and the public in the museum galleries), the best things in contemporary art — I mean off the beaten track, with real depth, looking toward the (arrival of the) future while taking into account the heritage of the past — are happening at the Musée d'Orsay. But I am not saying it too loudly. Because word will get out, and we will soon see arriving — all the more so since Beaubourg is currently closed for renovations — all the buffoons of official, corporate, bling-bling contemporary art!

Here, it is the Canadian artist Larissa Fassler, born in 1975 in Vancouver (Canada), who takes this on, with talent and finesse, through an aptly titled *État des lieux* of the museum (on view until March 22), devoted to the nineteenth century, a period bubbling over in both the arts and sciences and technologies, at a time when this immensely prestigious Parisian institution is planning major renovation works — which have, in fact, already begun to some extent. But rest assured: unlike the Centre Pompidou–Paris, sadly closed until 2030, our beloved public museum — an early-1900s former railway station still partly in its original state — will remain open throughout the entire operation, scheduled from 2026 to 2028.

What about her intervention? It is minimal, modest, and respectful of the site. After all, as Nathanaëlle Herbelin already warned us, “Being here is a splendour”, so there is no need to overdo things in the face of such intimidating forces as Courbet, Manet, Monet, and Van Gogh, to name only a few. In situ, the visual artist Larissa Fassler occupies the space discreetly — one can easily pass by without seeing her work at all! As far as I am concerned, I discovered this exhibition purely by chance, because although it officially opens only on January 6, everything is already in place, visible without any heavy-handed emphasis. It unfolds quietly, almost secretly, on a wall split down the middle, located near the monumental model of the Opéra Garnier, which reveals to the curious eye the stage, walkways, pulleys, and backstage machinery — witnesses to nineteenth-century theatrical engineering.

Heir to “psychogeography”...

What results, for walking through and looking at, are two “scenographic” sections presenting on their walls three large cartographic drawings alternating images, symbols, and text, plus a few sheets with a confident line, akin to sketches made “in the field” — and that is all! The whole is nevertheless accompanied by clear captions to guide the viewer through the graphic works, which in fact stand perfectly well on their own (their mystery is alluring), as well as by an explanatory panel laying out, without obscure jargon (thankfully!), her “conceptual” yet sensitive approach — the two are not mutually exclusive! Leonardo da Vinci is proof enough — situated at the intersection of visual art and public architecture, and accessible to ordinary mortals.

What does Larissa Fassler generally do? I should note that I first discovered her adventurous work — cosmopolitan, she lives and works in Berlin — during one of her solo exhibitions at her Paris gallery, Galerie Poggi, the third at that sharp-eyed venue: *Ground Control*, which took place, as I still remember, from January 23 to February 27, 2021. Fassler’s process unfolds in series, each anchored in a specific urban site.

She devoted several years to Gare du Nord, which she explored through a remarkable model presented in the GduN series (Paris, 2014–2020).

An heir to “psychogeography”, she maps the city through physical experience: her own body becomes a tool of measurement, perception, and analysis. While her work clearly dialogues with architecture, it rests above all on a set of sensory surveys and lived impressions, later condensed into vast graphic compositions, models, or sculptures. At Orsay, in a deliberately restrained choice, she presents for her most recent project only compositions in varied formats, oscillating between cartography and rhizome: a constellation of signs in motion, on the edge of profusion. This approach recalls, to borrow Michel Houellebecq’s terminology in *The Map and the Territory* (2010), the irreducible gap between representation and reality: the map is never the territory, and any attempt to grasp it remains partial. With Fassler, place is always conceived with — and through — the human. She focuses on what unfolds there bodily and socially: tensions between flow and constraint, between noise and silence, between coexistence and indifference.

With *Ground Control*, she notably studied Gare du Nord, alongside sites such as Columbus Circle in New York (2017–2020) and Moritzplatz in Berlin (2017–2018). Three new works — a large pared-down model, a monumental drawing, and a sound piece — shown at Poggi, examined the daily use of this “nerve-centre” station, crossed every day by hundreds of thousands of people. Fassler highlights the symbiotic relationship between architecture and its users, revealing how places affect bodies, both physically and physiologically. Beneath the surface, her work addresses major political and social issues: security, control, violence, precarity, poor housing, and also the persistent divide between the heart of Paris and its margins beyond the périphérique.

Her approach, at the crossroads of art, urbanism, geography, and sociology, rests on methodical and embodied observation. The press release sums it up as follows: “Unlike traditional maps, Fassler draws what takes place in the interstices of architecture. It is the social body, in all its contradictions, that is represented — and above all spatialized.” The artist fully embraces the subjectivity of her process. She draws on her sensations during her wanderings: smells, colours, fragments of conversations, clothing details, mundane gestures, or instructions overheard in passing. These micro-events feed a fine-grained analysis of public spaces, far from neutral, where social tensions find spatial expression. By traversing these sites for hundreds of hours, combining field observations, archives, and online research, Fassler transforms “experienced” space into genuinely lived territory.

This approach echoes the notion of the “non-place” developed by anthropologist Marc Augé in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1992). These transit spaces — stations, airports, shopping centres — are characterized by anonymity and the absence of lasting relationships. One could now add certain museums to this category, increasingly standardized and subject to consumer logic. Fassler, precisely, seeks to fracture this apparent neutrality in order to reveal what unfolds there, humanly and politically.

When art scrutinizes the crowd: the politics of museum visits

The Canadian artist Larissa Fassler, who empirically maps public spaces to reveal interactions between these spaces and their visitors, was invited to conduct her research at the Musée d’Orsay as part of renovation works aimed at improving visitor circulation. Opened in 1986 in the former Gare d’Orsay, the museum was initially designed to welcome 1.5 million visitors per year. Forty years later, it receives more than 3.6 million people annually, drawn by its collections, its unique panorama, and its temporary exhibitions. To better manage this influx and improve the visitor experience, the museum has launched major works.

In this context, Fassler was tasked with observing and recording how the museum functions prior to its transformation. From September to November 2023, she traversed the building daily, using her body as a

measuring instrument to create preparatory sketches of each space. On these drawings, she traced visitor routes: blue dots for stops, dotted lines for movement, turning red when the atmosphere became tense or “blocked”. She also noted sounds, conversations, postures, clothing, and moments of friction or pause. Her work constitutes a precise and invaluable *État des lieux*, offering a living reading of the museum before renovation.

The large work *Dress the Monsters with Ornaments: Level 5* (2025), shown on the first wall, focuses on level 5, where the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist collections are displayed, with Van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Odilon Redon. Fassler conducted small in situ studies, observing visitor behaviour: quick selfies, crowds forming and dispersing, certain paintings ignored in favour of the most famous ones. The second part of the diptych, *Dress the Monsters with Ornaments: The Nave* (2025), explores the tension between idealization and realism. It places side by side two large academic paintings — Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus* and Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence* — and two realist icons — Manet’s *Olympia* and Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* (currently under restoration). Fassler also includes a minimalist drawing evoking nineteenth-century Orientalism, questioning narrative clichés and colonial representations, in the spirit of the exhibition *Le Modèle noir* (2019–2020), which blended humour and social critique.

Mapping gazes: the museum as playground

At Orsay, Larissa Fassler offers nothing less than a palimpsest-work, revealing a cartography of a top-tier institution with treasure-laden collections, deploying a reticular organization, a decentralized system oscillating between centrifugal and centripetal forces, composed of signs and regimes of images (from pictogram to applied linear drawing to virtuoso sketch) to approach — like a treasure hunt, allowing visitors to extend their museum stroll by following her cues — both beloved modern works (the Impressionists) and long-disliked ones, banished for years to purgatory. Those fashioned — and often lazily shunned by our supposedly hip contemporaries — by the *peintres pompiers*, with their polished brushwork, who followed the rules of the Académie des Beaux-Arts and decided what those rules were. These are often large canvases, rich in detail, intended as history paintings representing past events. Academic painters depicted great moments of history and religion, with a marked taste for Greek mythology, antiquity, and ruins. For the Académie des Beaux-Arts, history paintings were the most important.

Larissa Fassler dialogues — and invites us to do the same — with artworks through elective affinities (or questions). Are we still allowed to love Thomas Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence*? Of course we are! The era of vertical authority, telling us what we must like or dislike, is over. Long live the citizen freedom of the web — I know what I mean. And you probably do too.

Here, a handful of works emblematic of the rift between modernity (raw realism and Impressionism) and the nineteenth-century identity of the museum (focus on artistic and social life in the nineteenth century, against a backdrop of latent academicism) are addressed. All the better! Otherwise, to grasp everything would require a book-length slab unfolded across the walls — a near-impossible task.

Certain selected works are redrawn — quite skilfully — by Fassler, who very simply, like a schoolgirl (albeit a diligent one), uses pen, graphite pencil, and coloured pencils on paper or laser prints to revisit Manet, Gauguin, Couture, Cabanel, and Caillebotte. Alongside these “artistic” images, she weaves her cartographic web — the resulting network evokes a spider-like interlacing — of remarks, witty or absurd, relevant or off-kilter, overheard during her artist “residency” visits. These range from “A father explains to his son that Degas was obsessed with ballerinas [a huge group of six-year-olds surrounds Degas’s *Little Dancer* sculpture]” to “Where is Peter Doig?” to “A man shouts: ‘Leonore! Leonore!’ He yells: ‘Leonore!!!!’ The guide scolds him: ‘My wife! She’s lost!’ His wife appears.” It is quite funny — and between us, one cannot help thinking of the famous remark by the Goncourt brothers (Edmond and Jules), but shh, I did not say anything, I do not want

to sound snobbish: “Perhaps what hears the most foolishness in the world is a museum painting” (*Ideas and Sensations*, 1866).

Alongside the selected image-works and overheard verbatims, there is also, by the meticulous “seismograph” artist, a reuse of the colour and typographic codes of the museum’s ageing signage (opened in December 1986 in the presence of French President François Mitterrand), soon to be renovated. Hey, Orsay, do not renovate it too much — it is fine as it is, in its original, “unaltered” state, majestically curling in the endless play of its retro flourishes (a former station with the “noodle-like” charm of Art Nouveau, heralding the train of modernity of Jules Verne, the Impressionists, and Gustave Eiffel).

As for this temporary exhibition, it is delightful, moving between fetishistic miniature, topographic survey, poetic map, background landscape rendered in pointillist touches (Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, attracting all eyes like a black sun radiating, is referenced), and reflective speculation: where is art in a museum? Is it only — and I say this somewhat basically — the works designated as such that participate? Or is there something else, of a human order, of flesh-and-blood encounters (from casual flirting to group guided tours of all ages), that also takes place? I naturally lean toward the second option.

And if one is going to embrace subjectivity wholeheartedly, one might as well declare one’s love for the museum. By the way, if Larissa Fassler has clearly chosen here, through an illuminatingly subjective reading of the collections, a sample of significant Orsay works (*Burial at Ornans* by Courbet; *Romans of the Decadence* by Couture; *Birth of Venus* by Cabanel; *Olympia* by Manet; the sublime *White Horse* by Gauguin — anecdote: its Tahitian pharmacist patron rejected it, judging the horse too... green! — not forgetting the Orsay clock; then *The Lady with Fans* by Manet; *The Origin of the World* by Courbet; *The Barmaid* by Manet; *The Floor Scrapers* by Caillebotte; *Self-Portrait with the Yellow Christ* by Gauguin), for my part, among my favourite works in the museum, if I had to choose only one, I would undoubtedly select the still too little-known *Woman with an Orchid* (1900), an oil on canvas by the Nantes-born painter Maxence (1871–1954). For me, it is the museum’s Mona Lisa — and an even more beautiful one, both in the delicacy of the painted surface and in the woman portrayed, slightly provocative and impertinent. Everything about it is sublime: what a pictorial epiphany! It pierces the wall.

In the chiaroscuro of the canvas, with a sibylline backlighting effect, a red-haired flower-woman stands, charismatic and aloof, her burning gaze both gentle and insolent. Draped in a delicate veil that sings the moiré of fabric, she bears the orchid like a halo at the extension of her milky, graceful neck, and holds her cigarette with the subtle ease of a free, independent, magnetic young woman. This Symbolist portrait — a true masterpiece, what assured draftsmanship — combines sensual beauty, worldly refinement, and mysterious elegance, making the woman vibrate as a figure both embodied and almost enchanted. It is a sulphurous innocence. She ignites the fire in the viewer’s eye, which makes the painting — as is well known.

And you, dear readers, is there a work, ultra-famous or little-known, that particularly moves you at the Musée d’Orsay? Your feedback is most welcome, whether or not you pass through the ephemeral artistic proposal of the talented Canadian Larissa Fassler, supported here by the Musée d’Orsay team, from leadership to the “little hands” responsible for the hanging, as well as by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Cité internationale des arts, and Galerie Poggi. One last point: if, rounding a corner or tracing a pencil line, you find yourself smiling to yourself, it is because the museum has just whispered its secret to you.

**Larissa Fassler exhibition, *État des lieux*, January 6 to March 22, 2026.
Musée d’Orsay, Paris.**