Review
Reviewed Work(s): Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism by Todd Cronan
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However thoroughly Cooke's Moreau is embedded in his social and cultural milieu, the author takes pains not to normalise the artist, but rather to return us continually to the excessive qualities of his work. Steering clear of psychoanalytic theory, Cooke is nonetheless sensitive to the psychodrama in Moreau's art, its 'repressed erotic and emotive charge' (p.14). He locates sexual anxieties in the gendered Spirit-versus-Matter conflict that structured Moreau's imagination, and he offers a compelling case for reading certain works as ambiguous allegorisations of psychological conflict. The seductive and disturbing manner in which the artist, aptly characterised as a 'fundamentalist of history painting' (p.16), obsessively projected that conflict as a spiritual and artistic combat of epochal significance retains its powers of fascination today, as Cooke's absorbing new book demonstrates.


Reviewed by BELINDA THOMSON

ELIZABETH CHILD'S LONG-AWAITED book on colonial Tahiti is the fruit of extensive research and several field trips to the Pacific. While some of its scholarship has appeared in earlier articles and essays, as a whole the book offers a refreshing alternative to most publications on Paul Gauguin in the South Seas, deliberately so, for it refuses to give him the central role or to make Parisian Modernism its main cultural field. Instead Childs stresses the 'place-idea' of Tahiti, offsetting Gauguin's experiences there with those of two of America's, the writer and statesman Henry Adams and his travelling companion, the artist John La Farge, who narrowly preceded Gauguin to Tahiti and Moorea, albeit staying for only four months as against Gauguin's eight years. The comparison is well worth pursuing. All three men, of roughly similar age and career stage, brought to their time in the Pacific mature, if somewhat disillusioned, individual outlooks reflective of their origins. Although differently inflected, all three had accepted the then prevailing belief that Tahiti was a 'vanishing paradise' whose inhabitants, unlike the more vigorous Samoan islanders, were irreversibly in decline. We are given fascinating glimpses of their personal stories. The notion that Gauguin, in pinning his hopes on this imagined tropical paradise, was seeking an escape from recent disappointments in his career as an artist, financial difficulties and domestic chaos in Europe is familiar: he left behind a wife and five children, adamant that he did so with their best interests at heart. But it is surprising to learn that Henry Adams, taking a hard-earned rest after completing a nine-volume history of the United States, also carried emotional baggage: a romantic entanglement with a married woman and, not unrelated, painful memories of his own wife's recent suicide by drinking the chemicals she used for photography. This detail gains ironic force given photography's centrality to Childs's argument, uniting the three foreign visitors' experiences of what was by then a remarkably modernised Tahiti.

An early chapter helpfully traces the development of Tahiti as 'place-idea', a theoretical concept taken from anthropology. From the arrival of the first European sea captains, Wallis, Bougainville and Cook in the 1760s, Tahiti's accretion of cultural myths necessarily produced a complex set of expectations in the minds of each of the travellers, La Farge apparently being the best read of the trio. Separate chapters on each weave their parallel histories around a common cast of Tahitian characters past and present, with particular emphasis on the Teva clan, rivals of the more familiar Pomares who had opportunistically assumed royal status in the 1840s during the troubled years of missionary in-fighting. More recent Tahitian in-fighting, provoked or stoked by colonial and missionary activities, complicates the picture: we learn that when the two Americans arrived in Tautira in spring 1891, hard on the heels of Robert Louis Stevenson (having, indeed, been furnished by the Scottish writer with letters of introduction), they were given a warm reception. To judge from his writings, a self-regarding snobbishness characterised Adams's attitudes. He was dismissive of an honorific Tahitian name offered by his Tautira host, Ori-a-Ori, because the latter was a 'lesser' chief and the name was so similar to the one previously bestowed upon Stevenson. Yet he and La Farge incautiously allowed themselves to be adopted into the 'grander' Teva-Salmon family, accepting similar titles from them. As Adams became entangled in a web of favours expected in return (writing up the family's history with a view to legitimising their land claims, and being touched for financial support), the different Tahitian minds of each of the travellers, La Farge in particular, grew to look upon Tahiti with increasing scepticism. While La Farge's first watercolours made on the spot were fresh and colouristically daring, for this reviewer his later reworkings of these scenes from memory or blatantly using photographs serve essentially as a salutory reminder of the path not taken by Gauguin, whose own use of photography as source material is illuminatingly discussed by Childs. There are fascinating new details about the Polynesian photographic displays at the Paris Universal Exhibition.

A welcome and reliable contribution to the scholarship on Tahiti, with insights into both the entrenched and the changing perceptions of the island during this high colonialist period, Vanishing Paradise is particularly well documented on the period 1889-1900. It helps to demystify the experiences of Gauguin, while offering in addition thoughtful, informed and occasionally amusing insights and occasional amusing insights and occasional amusing amuses about Tahiti's status today, no tropical Eden but a French terroir d'outre-mer admirably adapted to modernity and the demands of mass tourism.


Reviewed by LEE HALLMAN

THE TERM 'AFFECTION', a philosophical concept concerning pre-cognitive levels of feeling, has so pervasively entered the discourse of critical theory over the past two decades as to prompt some scholars to diagnose an 'affective turn' in the humanities. With no equivocation, Todd Cronan announces his position vis-à-vis this critical shift in the title of his ambitious, polemical book, Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism. When works of art are perceived primarily as sensory vehicles - 'affectionate machines stripped of knowledge and context' (p.43), as Cronan writes - then the balance of artistic exchange is transferred from creator to beholder, diminishing the role of the artist's intention. The consequences of this suppression of agency, Cronan insists, are not
only aesthetic, but political: ‘Without an appeal to intention [. . .] there are no grounds for disagreement’ (p.17). As Cronan repeatedly informs us: you cannot argue with feeling.

You can, however, argue with the indifference to intention and representation that such a position entails, as Cronan emphatically does when he declares his mission to ‘dismande the affective turn’ in the humanities at large, and in Matisse scholarship in particular. On the roster of opponents in Cronan’s book-length debate are some of the more formidable voices in contemporary critical theory, including Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard and a slew of recent Matisse interpreters including Yve-Alain Bois, Alastair Wright, Mark Antlfiff and J.M. Bernstein. ‘Against the claims of affective formalism’, Cronan announces, ‘I will argue that the beholder’s affective response to a work of art is irrelevant except insofar as those affects are taken to be intended by the artist’ (p.27). To overturn the affective bias of Matisse studies – frequently predicated upon the artist’s own avowed fantasies of art’s potential for direct expressive transfer – Cronan promises to demonstrate that Matisse’s art was in fact an inherently sceptical project in which the artist ‘continually thematized the representational limits of his practice’ (p.2).

Cronan proceeds with his demolition plan from the art-historical ground up, necessitating, as it turns out, an extended and circuitous theoretical exposition over two chapters before an actual work by Matisse is finally invoked. To take us back to the roots of the affective turn means returning to the radical foundations of Modernism, with its dreams of unmediated aesthetic experience. Cronan traces how these dreams gathered into the conscious force of an anti-representational ethos motivating some of Modernism’s most experimental innovators, from Baudelaire, Gauguin and the Symbolists to Antonin Artaud’s ‘theatre of cruelty’, before veering its way into critical orthodoxy in the aftermath of Roland Barthes’s Death of the author (1967). The point when the theoretical tables publicly turned from the linguistic emphasis of deconstruction towards the current preoccupation with affect and embodiment, according to Cronan, can be traced to the late twentieth-century study of the philosopher Henri Bergson, whose theories are often linked to Matisse. Dedicating an entire chapter to a revisionist account of Bergson’s writings and reception, Cronan argues that, ever since the 1988 reissue of Bergson’s Matter and Memory alongside the English-language publication of Deleuze’s Bergsonism the same year, the writer’s complex views about agency and intention have been systematically distorted towards a discourse of affect.1 Although in certain texts Bergson apparently wrote from an anti-representational impulse, Cronan contends, he, like Matisse, ultimately refused the terms of such a position.

By the time Cronan finally confronts Matisse head-on in chapter 3, his argument is entirely configured in terms of the Bergsonian frameworks he has painstakingly reclaimed: