

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* by Todd Cronan

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Source: *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 157, No. 1345, Art in France (April 2015), pp. 273-274

Published by: Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43858483>

Accessed: 03-04-2023 14:21 UTC

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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.

Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti. By Elizabeth C. Childs. 329 pp. incl. 15 col. pls. + 122 b. & w. ills. (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2013), £34.95. ISBN 978-0-520-27173-9.

Reviewed by BELINDA THOMSON

ELIZABETH CHILDS'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 Americans, 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), one begins to sympathise with his plight. Clearly there was no such thing as a disinterested Tahitian naming ceremony.

The naivety of these seemingly urbane Americans is not lost on the author. It makes a telling contrast to the arguably more savvy behaviour of Gauguin towards his fellow islanders (Fig.45), espousing and idealising the mythic savagery of the elite Ari'i for his artistic ends, yet simultaneously moving easily among both the ordinary Tahitians and the rougher elements of colonial society disdained by Stevenson, Adams and La Farge.

Clearly written, the text nevertheless has some unfortunate repetition and although generally well illustrated it would have benefited from a detailed map. Aesthetic criteria sit uneasily within the socio-anthropological context but at times it feels as though the author had taken a self-denying ordinance, so determined is she to treat La Farge and Gauguin evenhandedly and avoid qualitative judgments. While La Farge's first watercolours made on



45. Tahiti, late nineteenth century. Photograph by Charles Georges Spitz.

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 salutary 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 asides about Tahiti's status today, no tropical Eden but a French *territoire d'outre-mer* admirably adapted to modernity and the demands of mass tourism.

Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism. By Todd Cronan. 336 pp. incl. 20 col. + 69 b. & w. ills. (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013), \$30. ISBN 978-0-816-67603-3.

Reviewed by LEE HALLMAN

THE TERM 'AFFECT', 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 – 'affective 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 'dismantle 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 Antliff 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:



46. *Carmelina*, by Henri Matisse. 1903. Canvas, 81.3 by 59 cm. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

'In the next section I follow the threads of Matisse's conflictual mimesis, considering four discursive variants – traumatic repetition, possession and merger, ecstasy and absorption, imbibing and impregnation. . .' (p.168). How, precisely, 'imbibing and impregnation' help us to understand Matisse's aims is left something of a mystery, however. Cronan is more persuasive when he can directly connect Matisse's textual rhetoric to that of his theorising peers, Bergson, Sigmund Freud and Paul Valéry. (It is surely strange, considering his readiness to delve into these intellectual and historical cross-currents, that Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* (1985), with its chapter on Picasso and Bergson, goes entirely unremarked by Cronan.)

The book's interpretive highpoints come when Cronan releases himself from the muddled antinomy of affect versus cognition long enough to attend closely to Matisse's actual paintings. Finding evidence of Matisse's mimetic experiments in his earliest productions, Cronan brings a fresh eye to the artist's lesser-known, pre-Fauvist studio-based works. Full of visual devices such as framing, mirrors and portraits-within-portraits, paintings such as *Still life with two bottles* (1897; private collection) and *Carmelina* (c.1903; Fig.46), cannily address the tensions between absorption and outwardness, proximity and distance, involved in different types of viewing and perceiving.

But after 120 pages of theoretical treatise, Cronan's attempts to move from concepts back to images feel regrettably tentative. Like his acknowledged academic mentor Michael Fried (to whose extended studies of embodiment this book owes a clear debt), Cronan also feels the continual need through the book to reassert his agenda, recapitulate his argument, foreshadow his next move: 'In the next section. . .', 'As I have been suggesting. . .', 'I have traced. . .'. These reiterations of his own

authorial intentions feel didactic and inelegant, as if the sensorial pleasures of the writer's craft are trapped within his own impressively wrought conceptual scaffolding.

Despite the organisational drawbacks and stylistic distractions, Cronan's book is an important contribution to the enormous corpus of Matisse studies and a bold counterclaim to the dominant affective strand of aesthetic theory. That said, a more confident integration of critical agenda and original visual interpretation would have rendered *Against Affective Formalism* more effective in its disputatious aims.

¹ H. Bergson: *Matter and Memory*, transl. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, New York 1988; and G. Deleuze: *Bergsonism*, transl. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam, New York 1988.

The Curatorial Avant-Garde: Surrealism and Exhibition Practice in France, 1925–1941. By Adam Jolles. 288 pp. incl. 25 col. + 68 b. & w. ill. (Penn State University Press, University Park, 2013), \$89.95. ISBN 978-0-271-06415-4.

Reviewed by ROBERT RADFORD

ADAM JOLLES CONTENDS that the Surrealists merit greater recognition for their 'avant-garde' approaches to the mediation of art between artists and critics and the public, which had a lasting effect on curatorial practice. He does this by setting their activities within the international context of interwar exhibition strategies.

The founding Manifesto of Surrealism notoriously foresaw no role for painting as conventionally understood, on account of its resistance to automatism and its questionable revolutionary impact. Nevertheless, the first show of Surrealist painting was held at the Galerie Pierre, Paris, in 1925. Augmented by a number of 'adopted' Surrealists, including Klee and Picasso, it was conventional in format except for the addition of an absurdist narrative linking the paintings, written by André Breton (which was not widely approved). Only Miró came up with what seemed to offer a radical response to the problem with his *tableaux-poèmes* that attempted to capture the successive images of the dream in a shared pictorial space with a swiftly applied, calligraphic poetic phrase.

The first distinctively new approach to curating that Jolles points to concerns the Surrealists' attacks on de Chirico. When de Chirico moved on from the early work that had first won him the adulation of the group into more Neo-classical and romantically metaphysical painting, they reacted with a campaign of vituperative insult, including the reproduction of one of his offending works, defaced with the violent graffiti of the censor. In the Galerie Surréaliste, a window display was mounted, ridiculing his 'Furniture in the