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NONFICTION

Ways of Seeing

In “Affinities,” his latest book of essays, the critic Brian Dillon meditates on images by photographers, filmmakers, dancers and other artists, exploring their attractions and affiliations.

By Claire Messud

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AFFINITIES: On Art and Fascination, by Brian Dillon

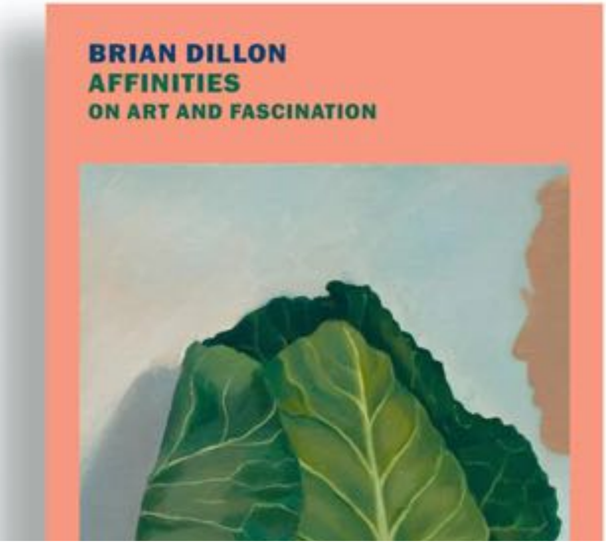
Brian Dillon’s new book of essays, “Affinities: On Art and Fascination,” forms, according to its author, a “loose trilogy” along with “Essayism” (2018) and “Suppose a Sentence” (2020). Dillon, an Irish critic and professor, writes frequently about art, and many pieces collected here first appeared in magazines such as Frieze, Cabinet, Artforum, The London Review of Books and The New Yorker. For this volume, Dillon has threaded the essays together with ruminations — 10 mini-essays — on the title, in the first of which he explains: “When I wrote *affinity* in a piece of critical prose, perhaps I was trying to point elsewhere, to a realm of the unthought, unthinkable, something unkillable by attitudes or arguments. … Something fleeting, in fact. … Something a little bit *stupid.*”

Dillon’s frankness, even humility, about the project is appealing, but only partially accurate. Late in the book, he confesses to “a constant suspicion, unchanged since I was a student: that nothing I write pursues an argument or is built to convince.” Rather, “I simply get into a mood about the thing I am meant to be writing about, and pursue that mood until it is exhausted.”

This constitutes not a shortcoming but a principled approach to critical work, one that illuminates connections without insistence, proposes without foreclosure and reflects, of course, the path of art itself: observations, juxtapositions, alliances — affinities, indeed — that resist easy determination. One might say, then, that Dillon makes of criticism an artistic practice.

Many of the pieces — examining subjects as diverse as an illustration of a stellar nebula by John Herschel, as interpreted by Thomas De Quincey in 1846; Jean Painlevé’s amazing 1972 documentary of hermaphroditic sea snails, “Acera, or the Witches’ Dance”; and the celebrated Japanese photographer Kikuji Kawada’s 1965 book “Chizu,” his take on the Hiroshima bombing, recently reissued in a new edition — are notably brief, strange, enticing aperçus that illuminate the juncture of science, art and philosophy. It’s as if, with these shorter pieces, Dillon were directing our gaze to particular constellations in the night sky, alerting us, with an enthusiast’s delight, to treasures easily overlooked.

At the book’s heart is a series of longer essays on figures of the 20th- and 21st-century art world, more or less known, many of them women to whom attention has only recently been granted. Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79) is a 19th-century outlier: A great-aunt of Virginia Woolf, whose Hogarth Press published a book of her photographs in 1926, Cameron was “a woman of considerable means,” “a tireless and even vulgar champion of her own work.” But her photographs, Dillon suggests, in their “deliberate effort to capture something evanescent but particular,” are analogous to Woolf’s fiction, as both women endeavored “to render as closely as possible certain fluxual states or (to use Woolf’s phrase) moments of being that threatened to turn into abstract blurs.”



Dillon celebrates the early-20th-century dancer Marie Louise (Loie) Fuller, who “aspired to the inhumanity of radiant matter” — the poet Mallarmé described her performance as “an intoxication of art, and, at the same time, an industrial accomplishment.” He illuminates the trajectory of the androgynous queer photographer Claude Cahun (born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob), who settled with her partner (and stepsister) Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe) on the island of Jersey, and there, during the war, engaged in “a secret campaign of counter-propaganda against the Nazis” that she later described to André Breton as “militant Surrealist actions.”

The neglected designer and architect Eileen Gray (1878-1976) is given her due. Dillon gives an account of E-1027, the house she codesigned at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in the south of France — “a feat of compression as well as design,” following her principle that “each person must feel alone, completely alone” — and for which she was long denied credit. He deems it “the fullest, bravest and saddest expression of Gray’s art.” Similarly, in writing about Charles and Ray Eames, he endeavors to turn the spotlight away, even slightly, from the celebrated man and toward his underrated spouse.

He writes wonderfully, too, about more renowned, even mythic, artists: the photographers Diane Arbus and Francesca Woodman (both died young of suicide, Woodman at only 22), and William Eggleston, whom he lauds as a master of form and color, explaining that “Eggleston’s portraits are not quite portraits. The sitters are as much excuses for exercises in style as the solid objects or empty vistas around them.”

Late in the book comes a delicious surprise in the form of two autobiographical essays, about Dillon’s mother and aunt. “The Charismatics,” embarking from a photograph of an evangelical prayer meeting in Dublin in the late 1980s or ’90s, enables him to muse on his mother’s autoimmune illness (“Her body hardened, even air and water hurt her”), her turn to charismatic Catholicism and her death at just 50. Flamboyant observance turned young Dillon against religion: “More than faith and devotion I feared, and then despised, your hope. For where did it get us, and what did it do for her?” His youthful rage against death manifested, in time-honored fashion, in a furious atheism.

In “For the Simple Reason Is,” we understand how his insufferable aunt’s lifelong pugnacity, spying on and railing against her neighbors, provoked Dillon to reject her (she disinherited him for good measure). But still, he finds he carries her legacy: “Her obsessive and solitary looking, her fretful listening, her poring over pictures and locking the world away so she could address it only in letters of complaint: It all feels quite familiar. You can pursue vigilance and attention into a kind of fugue state, almost hallucinatory.”

Dillon observes that he is interested above all in images that enact “blurring and becoming,” “becoming otherwise, in disguises and personae.” In this engaging and exhilarating Wunderkammer of a book, he offers us the world — in this case, the visual world — as he experiences it: his way of seeing, and of being, in a web of thrilling, sometimes unexpected, connection.

Claire Messud, a novelist, is also the author of a book of essays, “Kant’s Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write.”

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