

## How to Be Both

*Painting Photography Painting: Selected Essays*, **Carol Armstrong**, MACK, Paperback with flaps, 14 x 22.8cm, pp. 500

*'Art makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen.'*

- Ali Smith

At the heart of *Painting Photography Painting* – a new selection of essays by the art critic and academic Carol Armstrong – sits a short reflection on a picture by the English artist Cragie Horsfield. The picture is a still life photograph ('though it is also a print and looks like a painting,' Armstrong notes), showing a pair of vivid, electric-blue and purple cabbages, rippled and veined, sitting either side of a bright, orangey fish; the fish's mouth protrudes towards us, open, showing teeth, one (greenish) eye staring coldly from the speckled flesh, which seems at times more like the side view of a tulip, perhaps even a lobster tail. Behind this arrangement, the scene darkens and shadows, losing focus, barely revealing the sloped neck of bottle (or is it two bottles?), the same shade as the cave-like zone within the centre of the foremost cabbage, protected by its paper leaves. Armstrong writes about this picture briefly – just four-and-a-half pages – inviting us to watch her watching it, her vision and re-vision, teaching us not only how to look at something (an object, an artwork, a flower, a face), but also why this looking matters. 'To become involved with a work of art entails, to be sure, the experience of detaching oneself from the world,' wrote Susan Sontag in 1965, 'But the work of art itself is also a vibrant, magical, and exemplary object which returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched.' Armstrong's essays – Armstrong's *looking* – model this involvement with great generosity, offering a route to enrichment both within and beyond the artworks she writes about. Spanning more than thirty years, the sixteen pieces gathered here encompass the full range of Armstrong's academic interests, what she calls her 'career-long commitment

to the intersecting themes of gender, medium, and the phenomenology of materiality,' from feminist theory and the representation(s) of women through the visual arts to the ongoing trajectories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography. Time and again, her writing proves – to borrow a phrase from T. J. Clark's recent *Cézanne and the Present* (2022) – that 'Sustained attention to anything [...] transforms the parameters of seeing.' Whether writing about Diane Arbus, Helen Frankenthaler or Julia Margaret Cameron, she demonstrates that scrutiny and questioning, attention and enquiry (James Wood's 'Serious Noticing', perhaps) will always, without fail, *reveal*.

The majority of essays here consider aspects of photography, with particular emphasis on the practice of female photographers through the last two centuries. While her writing is grounded in the language of theory (Foucault, Derrida, Benjamin, Barthes), it is Armstrong's passages of sustained lyrical observation that bring her subjects and ideas to life, as if recreating them for us in language, lending significant weight to the American painter Fairfield Porter's sense that 'The best criticism is simply the best description.' A slice of Armstrong's writing about Tina Modotti's *Roses* (1924), worth quoting at length:

And the roses are all soft, poignantly past their best, the crinkled edge of each petal registered by the camera in delicate detail, marking its fall into imminent decrepitude, its vulnerability to time, material decay, and the demise of fleshly things. The photograph is subtle in its vanitas meditation, but gently precise too, for together the four flowers chart different stages of the rose, from the all-but-new bud at the lower left, to the two more open blooms above, one heavier, denser, and flatter than the other, to the large, loose, overblown blossom at the lower right, on its way to ruin and all but completely undone, especially in comparison to the tighter rose adjacent to it. It is in that respect that *Roses* is not transcendent in its opticality: it is too devoted to the frailty and mortality of what it records, and to the very temporality that the photograph is supposed to freeze and overcome.

Armstrong's eye moves, camera-like, over the photograph, 'gently precise',

slowing it down, revising its immediacy and all-at-once-ness, discovering textures and openings that might easily be overlooked. It is a mode of observation, of ‘meditation’, that recurs throughout *Selected Essays*, achieving clarity through Armstrong’s steady balance of careful looking and careful language, reminiscent – to my mind – of Elizabeth Bishop, whose poems so often seem to describe their own environments into existence. ‘Here is a coast; here is a harbour,’ begins Bishop’s ‘Arrival at Santos’ with disarming simplicity, ‘here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery’. ‘I would like to have had her quiddity,’ wrote the novelist Mary McCarthy, following Bishop’s death, ‘her way of seeing that was like a big pocket magnifying glass.’

As with her conclusion about *Roses* – that the photograph seems caught between permanence and fragility, restating, even paradoxically *proving* ‘the very temporality [it] is supposed to freeze and overcome’ – Armstrong’s magnifying-glass descriptions reveal her interest in the dualities inherent to photography, in the peculiar capacity for photographs to be more than one thing at once. The above essay pairs Modotti’s work with that of Edward Weston, particularly his close-up, stately photographs of objects, vegetables and body parts, a series of images that illustrate photography’s evocative (in Weston’s case *erotic*) symbolism, where ‘the meaning of a photograph is twisted out of the grip of its referent,’ writes Armstrong, ‘and given over to the photograph’s formal content, the sentiments of the subject or authored it, and the corresponding emotions of the viewer who sees it.’ Armstrong goes on to argue that photography shares something with the linguistic figure of the simile, whereby two like things are brought into conjunction without losing their wholeness. ‘[T]he simile always says “like” and never threatens to change into anything else,’ she suggests: ‘a cloud is *like* a sand dune is *like* a woman’s haunch is *like* a bedpan is *like* a shell is *like* a uterus is *like* a urinal is *like* a classical sculpture is *like* a beautiful woman, and so on back around again.’ ‘[W]hile it may be *like* a body in the throes of ecstasy,’ she concludes of Weston’s famous *Nautilus Shell* (1927), ‘[the] shell is still clearly a shell,’ whatever else it seems to be.

Further dualities arise in Armstrong’s writing about photographs. In fact, photography itself, in her assessment, is revealed to be a medium of *bothness*, where two ways of understanding or assessing an image – indeed

‘at least two,’ to borrow the language of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose writing Armstrong looks to in an essay linking Frankenthaler and Cézanne – are captured or available to us in the same instant. Armstrong cites Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Payne, ‘one of the Lincoln conspirators, taken on the eve or day of his execution,’ included by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), accompanied by its famous time-splitting caption (‘*He is dead and he is going to die...*’), further evidence of photography’s central temporal duality, the same ‘frailty and mortality’ somehow arrested in Modotti’s *Roses*. Elsewhere, Armstrong considers photography’s (again inherent) mixture of intentionality and chance, whereby the aesthetic and/or technical considerations of the photographer forever fail to shake off ‘the arbitrary and the unwilling, the accidental and the random,’ as in Henri Cartier-Bresson’s *Cardinal Pacelli* (1938), ‘apparently taken by holding the camera high over the head and shooting without any exact awareness of what the frame would include.’ Returning to *Fish, Cabbages, Bottles* (2003), we find that Armstrong’s treatment of Horsfield’s photograph precisely questions its procedure of ‘splitting and joining’, a strange tug of war, where the cabbages and fish are both separate and implicitly connected, full of apparent contradictions. ‘The two objects are uncannily more than themselves,’ she writes, the essay spilling over with duplicities and bothnesses:

For the side-by-side-ness of its animal and vegetable, its creature from the sea and its specimen from the earth, along with their combined liveness and deadness, familiarity and strangeness, mundanity and uncanny marvel, painterliness and photographicness, orangeness and blueness, projection and recession, morph and a-morph, form and fold, male and female shapes, internality and externality, volume and layered surface, indexical distinctness and the pigmented blurring of detail, together make point and counterpoint out of the joining and separating of visual and verbal cognition.

\*

Nowhere are these photographic dualities more apparent than in Armstrong’s explorations of the early status and conceptual understanding

of the medium. Several times, she draws attention to Julia Margaret Cameron's self-reflexive, allegorical picture *Cupid's Pencil of Light* (1872), showing a small, cherubic figure drawing with a pencil on a bright white tablet, an attempt by Cameron to present photography 'as something altogether different from technical mastery,' emphasising its essential status as a product of the natural world – produced by Nature, not the artist. In the lexicon of the mid-nineteenth century, Armstrong reminds us, 'the photograph was a "sun drawing," a "photogenic drawing," a drawing made by the "pencil of light,"' as asserted by the title of William Henry Fox Talbot's landmark publication, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46); in the text beside his picture of Lacock Abbey, Talbot describes the building as the first 'that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture.'

The peculiar, double-status of photography as both an extension of the natural world and the product of technical, chemical, and mechanical innovation collide in Armstrong's essay on 'botanographs', in particular the ghostly, Prussian blue cyanotypes of Anna Atkins. Produced without a camera by placing specimens directly onto chemically prepared sheets of paper (then exposed to sunlight), these 'botanographs' were understood as traces of nature, 'created through the contact [...] between an organic and a hand-prepared ground, between leaf and paper, botany and silver-salt chemistry'. Moreover, Armstrong shows, they appeared to be considered ('at least for a brief moment') to be a kind of drawing, as opposed to a new artform or a scientific discovery, a kind of 'drawing made by the tracing agency of light, with or without the camera – rather than "lines" made by the tracing action of the "human hand."' As Atkins put it in the preface to her famous *Photographs of British Algae* (1843), the first book to be illustrated with any kind of photographic image: 'The difficulty of making accurate drawings of objects so minute as many of the Algae [...] has induced me to avail myself of Sir John Herschel's beautiful process of cyanotype, to obtain *impressions of the plants themselves*'. As such, not only were these impressions seen as captured photographs as well as drawings, natural *and* man-made, it seems that the cyanotypes were understood to be a copy *and* the thing itself, somehow both at once. 'It is significant,' writes Armstrong, 'that Talbot also called [his] photographs a "specimen" [...] a term that spoke volumes about the way the photograph was thought of

then: as a natural art as well as a natural thing, something made *by* nature as well as a piece of nature, in the same way that a sample of seaweed or fern was a piece of nature, an example of nature's art, and a member of one of nature's species'.

If Armstrong's considerations of 'the medium-specific preoccupations' of the nineteenth century provide a valuable illustration – in more ways, fittingly, than one – of photography's capacity for *bothness*, it is perhaps her writing about Diane Arbus that best encapsulates its true hybridity. Considering the photographs of Arbus's collected in the *Aperture Monograph* (1972) – published for a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art the year after her death – Armstrong shows the pictures to be filled with figures trying to inhabit two personas or ideas at once, whether in costumes, masks or else performing for the stage or circus, to say nothing of her many cross-dressers and burlesque dancers, often depicted in the process of preparing themselves backstage, as in *A naked man being a woman, N.Y.C.* (1968), a photograph whose very title seems to fuse the standard binary of biological sexes: not a man *pretending*, but a man 'being' a woman. (Armstrong doesn't mention them, but I am always stuck by Arbus's *Teenage couple on Hudson Street* (1963), a sharply-dressed and made-up pair in smart shoes and ill-fitting jackets, whose faces seem uncannily child-like and adult at the same time; meanwhile, her *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp* (1963) seem comically to crave the best of both worlds: naked, yes, but sitting pretty in a mock-up living room complete with armchair, sofa, slippers and TV.)

Armstrong makes the case for Arbus's collapsing of divisions and binaries – whether of sex or gender, 'nature', 'culture', 'freak' or 'normal' – astutely recording the 'minor misalignments and asymmetries' apparent in her compositions until, 'In the end, it is obvious that there is no such thing as a "normal" – and that everybody is a slightly different "freak."' In always trying to be (*at least*) two things, we give ourselves away, confirming 'the essential "freakishness" of human nature', a gesture towards two-ness, towards 'splitting and joining', made visual in one of Arbus's best-known photographs, appearing on the *Aperture Monograph's* cover. 'But almost as immediately, indeed, almost in tandem with this perception of sameness,' writes Armstrong of *Identical twins, Roselle, N.J.* (1967), 'comes the

awareness of slight differences, brought on by the perception of sameness and all the *almosts* that go with it’.

\*

The discoveries of Armstrong’s essays always happen between ‘sameness’ and ‘slight difference’, particularly concerning her interest in artworks that resist straightforward categorisation. In ‘Painting Photography Painting’, this collection’s title piece, she begins with several definitions of the word *medium*. The opening definition serves to capture the recurring theme of Armstrong’s writing, investigations into ‘Something which is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes; [existing in] a middle state.’ Not only does this seem to account for her thinking about the nature of photography, outlined above, but explains, also, her interest in assorted works of art on paper (see ‘Women on Paper’, included here, written for MoMA’s groundbreaking publication *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (2010)), in mixed- and multi-media artworks, and even her consistent celebration of ‘other-than-white, other-than-male contemporary artist[s]’, especially the liquid, shifting, hybrid work of Ellen Gallagher, whose ongoing *Watery Ecstatic* series (2001-) forms the seabed of two essays here.

If nothing else, Armstrong’s writing about art reminds us, as she puts it, that ‘It is only with too great a faith in a theoretical premise [...] that the one way of seeing is the only one, rehearsed over and over, proven with every illustration chosen.’ That this seems a valuable thing to be reminded of, nearly a quarter through the latest century, is certainly curious, if not a little on the nose (in a concerning way). ‘That my wrestling with these matters has always run against the grain [...] should be evident,’ she writes in her introduction, to give Armstrong the final word: ‘That there might be an ethics hiding in plain sight within this intertwined set of contrarian commitments may be a bit less evident. And yet, without making too much of it, there it is: it is my fervent belief that both art itself and thought about art should offer us *openings*, rather than closings: ways out of reification, rather than further entrenchment within humanly harmful habits of mind.’