

1,500 Words
by John Keene

Keep Looking

Three decades after his death, DARREL ELLIS is the subject of a major retrospective at the Bronx Museum in New York this summer. Novelist and poet *John Keene* considers the art and writing of an artist whose work delved into the distances of time and memory



I am sitting here, looking at Darrel Ellis's photographs, his drawings, his paintings, his notebooks, which I have never seen in person, only in reproduction. Reproduction usually flattens, distances an artwork; instead, I find myself peering into the texture and depth of these images, their elusive but rich materiality. Would it be foolish to say that, as I look, I feel the impact of the world's loss of you, Darrel Ellis, at 33, to AIDS, and want to talk with these images and the figure behind them, the thinker, the dreamer, the sketcher, the painter, the draughtsman, the photographer, the reader, the philosopher, the poet, the lover, the traveller, the raconteur, this honey-eyed brother whose vision lies at the core of what I am poring through now, longingly?

Poring longingly and lovingly over your images, Darrel Ellis, I sense you searching for a new way to represent reality and experience the self and the world as multiplicity, to construct a personal and unanticipated archive, to move past the symbolic impasse that – as Antonio Sergio Bessa noted in *Darrel Ellis: Regeneration* (2023) – you in your genius devised. You consulted the *I Ching* to find answers to the questions you posed, and that life and your art were imposing on you, desiring to represent and be present in the work through 'craft and direct observation' (Bessa) and experimentation, to engage the dynamic languages of visibility, ultimately pressing, as I register in my looking, through the surfaces of the images into our vision, yours and mine, itself.

With these images of sketches, paintings and photographs, I sit before a vision, a futurity Ellis would ultimately never see, though in fact he had already achieved it in his practice of rephotographing his father's own photographic work. He referred to these acts of reconstruction as 'regeneration', taking what was there, 'one negative, many variations' as he aptly put it in a 1980 notebook, against the notion of a repetitive, unyielding mechanical reproduction – this was before the digital, which is alterable and infinitely reproducible – through sight and talent and apparatus, enacting transformation to produce something else: a tactility across a world of images that I can both see and feel. 'Feeling is residue,' he writes, amidst the transparency and lightness he also sought, and mastered.

Recently, I retweeted Ellis's portrait on Twitter in order to share this Black gay talent and beauty. He was not my 'discovery' though I wanted to claim it, this queer brother artist I had never heard about and who was not obscure (or was he?) but was part of a loving family scarred by loss (his photographer father killed by cops), a vibrant community, imagined and real, whose stories I knew a little yet not at all. In every image, the wash is gesture and mark, is trace of mind and heart and hand, as if I am saying something profound but I am trying to ground myself in this experience of looking, at holding close. This brother kept peering more fully into himself, especially at the

end of his life, drawing himself into being against the erasure of time and death, which is what artistic necessity truly looks like. I am thinking of the chromogenic prints or those diagrams in the notebooks where he layers image upon image, creating a *mise-en-scène* whose direction could go either way, forward and outward or backward and toward, warping and distending, giving the photographs not just a tactility, but a motility, movement in and against time, against finality or, at least, more so than it might already possess.

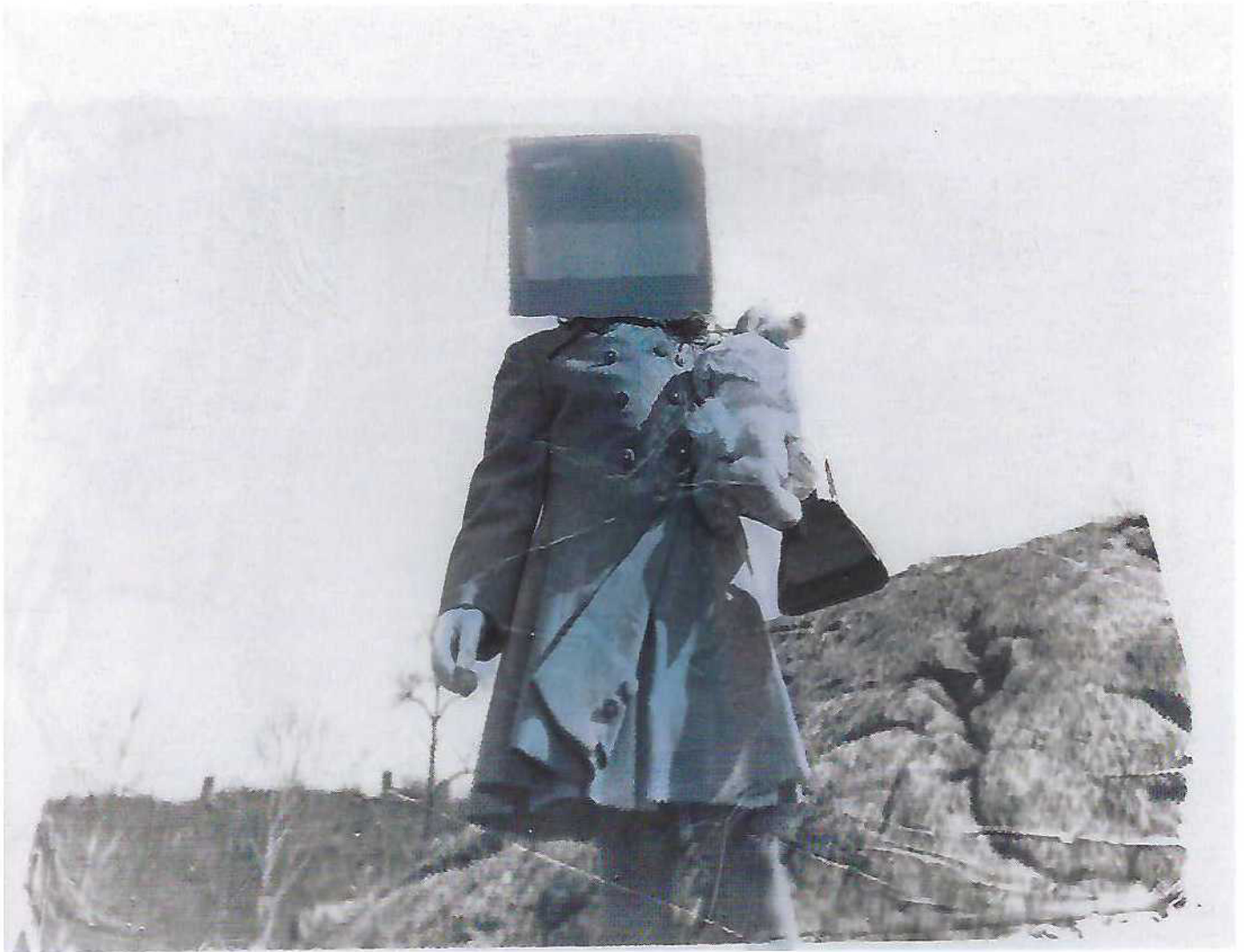
Not just a tactility, but movement in and against time. For what is art, David Joselit has written in *Art's Properties* (2023), but a site of alterity, of duration? As I look at Ellis's drawings, his rephotographs, they remind me that what he was aiming to achieve was 'personal', an 'individuality' that would counter, as he notebooked, the obliteration of the face. This approach, which he repeatedly employed, he described as

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representing the 'public', impersonality, the space beyond the contours of an 'I' that he was searching to capture and reveal – though the concealment also represented a not-looking, an inability to see the mirror of the soul, so to speak, an enduring trauma that accompanied him and his family all their lives (the police killing of his father): look away, look back, look into, look through and keep looking. I am holding close to me his grappling with this askance-ness and anonymity that many of these photographs instantiate, reflecting those 'generalities', the 'impersonal', as Ellis writes, that could not see him – Could they see him? Could he see them? Did he want to see them? – amid the specificity in those same photographs, their indelibility and the ways by which they imprint themselves in one's consciousness, or the sketches he undertook while working as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, his paintings based on his and others' photographs, like his drawings in graphite and charcoal.

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Darrel Ellis, *Untitled (Couple Embracing)*, c. 1980–1983, watercolour and black roller ball pen on paper, 45.7 × 30.4 cm. All images courtesy: © Darrel Ellis Estate and Candice Madey, New York

Opposite page
Untitled (Laure on Easter Sunday), c. 1989–1991, gelatin silver print with coloured ink



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I linger on his drawings in graphite and charcoal while thinking about how he realized what might be gained from the possibility of creating sculptural effects in photography, when he submitted with James Wentzy a fellowship application to MoMA PS1, and began projecting images and rephotographing them because he could identify beyond the plane of the image what this might mean, and look like, feel like. This led him to rephotograph his late father's photographs, this lineal and rhizomatic collaboration beyond death, out of time, in trauma and joy, a dialogue in silver gelatin. I may have the chronology wrong: I admit I am less interested in the chronology, crucial as it is, than in the story the artworks themselves narrate, revealing a network of associations that were invisible before and now extend outward, to the various catalogues and publications and essays and tributes and tweets about Ellis, to where I am sitting, here, with them and him, his brown fingers holding the pencil, the paintbrush, the camera, the lens, the hands of another, his arms, his head, his thighs, his heart, his soul and I am with you, looking and learning to see.

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Learning to see with Ellis, looking to see how his artworks offer and generate manifold layers of potentiality, how they represent hallmarks of queer temporality and futurity, slowing time and ribboning it, whatever direction, weaving aesthetic warp and woof, while in these images I find myself reaching out to touch what I cannot yet, what lies inside the images, his inner sight. Brother, I am thinking about how art represents and produces forms of knowledge, that there is something inside it that was not known before, something inside you. I am thinking about what your artworks show us, teach us, tell us, how they trouble the water, ring the changes, strum with those fingertips an inner chord, bringing to light your inner sight, as well as your charm and humour, your evident beauty, which led your peers to photograph and draw you, to leave

Opposite page
Untitled (Dog),
c. 1987–91, gelatin
silver print with
pen and brush
and coloured ink,
25.4 × 20.3 cm

records of friendship, desire, love and memory. I have barely talked about memory, Darrel Ellis, but your work is memory work, a remembering as much as a regeneration: your father's memory, your family's memory, Black memory, the memory of the time before and after your time. Like so many of your generation, you are gone too soon. Let us remember this radiant community you belonged to and bequeathed to us in these artefacts, disclosed in your brushstrokes and your hatching, your compositions and chiaroscuro.

Compositions and chiaroscuro: two terms I use as if I have an expert lexicon to draw from, though you show that you were fully aware of what drawing entailed. As I look, I am thinking about what it means to be and to become and to leave a legacy, particularly for a Black gay cis male artist whose historical innovations invite us to think about the questions of historical illegibility and of lost legacy. But you were not lost or forgotten or hidden, Darrel Ellis, and I keep following as my eyes proceed slowly from centre to margin, to edge, then back, thinking that you were making your art at the very height of post-modernism and anticipated and incorporated its lessons. Although I have that language in my head, I don't want to refer to it. Rather, I want to continue sitting with you, looking and thinking and dreaming and holding your artistry close, so close I can see the images disappearing into and out of the emulsion, the two men who are friends – lovers? – holding each other tight as a veil of paint covers their faces, hiding, as you once observed in a notebook, 'behind all immediate appearances [...] the underlying, hidden reality – an archetypal reality', which is where you have repeatedly been taking me.

Where have you repeatedly been taking me? I want to look at your art and think with it, to remember how you wrote in your notebooks 'the shape of the stretcher has itself a perspective' and the 'mind controls everything on the physical plane' and 'time = history, the past' and 'drawing the polar opposite of this is completely personal for me'. I want to acknowledge my regeneration through looking, the regeneration of art through your art, remembering how I am sitting here, looking at your photographs, your paintings, your notebooks, which I hope to see in person, though now only in reproduction ●

John Keene is the author, co-author and translator of a handful of books, including *Counternarratives* (New Directions, 2015). He is Distinguished Professor and serves as department chair at Rutgers University–Newark, USA.