

ON EKPHRASIS: AN INTERVIEW

This interview was conducted in August 2007 for a journal of ekphrastic writing no longer in print.

1. When and why did you first become interested in the ekphrastic mode of writing?

In my copy of *Visual Poetry: The Drawings of Joseph Stella* I have the following sentence highlighted: "Stella's first youthful ambition was to become a poet, not a painter." It was the opposite for me: my first youthful ambition was to become a painter, not a poet. After taking a Contemporary Poetry class my freshman year of college I realized I was working in the wrong genre, and stopped contemplating the blank canvas and began contemplating the blank page. Anne Carson has a great quote in *Economy of the Unlost*: "Simonides says that painting is silent poetry while poetry is painting that talks." The latter, using poetry to make painting talk, grew more appealing to me to the point where now it just seems like a natural mode and tool available when I write.

I also have a background in Art History (it was one of my undergrad majors), and found early on that the act of describing a work of art in the context of an essay was quite pleasurable, taking the reader on a guided tour of the object at hand, the object in question, pointing out its details, giving the thumb-nail sketch of the work but going further as you analyzed its composition. My first stabs at ekphrasis (though I did not know that's what they should be called at the time—I did not encounter the term until I was writing my honors thesis on Derek Walcott's paintings my senior year of college) happened in those undergrad years, sitting in Art History lectures and looking at slides. I think my first ekphrastic poem was about a Cycladic idol. I was probably drawn to its minimal but strong contours and the mystery of it, what purpose it served, the poem an attempt to imagine how it came into being with the hope of, through the act of writing the poem, arriving at an answer to its meaning.

So the "when" would be the mid-to-late 1990s (I first encountered the term in 1999) and the "why" would be a lifelong obsession with visual culture and the act of painting, which to me is really an act of seeing, re-presenting your experience of the world for others to see, holding up the world and analyzing it, pointing out the details that the average viewer or casual passer-by may miss. It's partly why I turn to art in any form: to have the world given back to me through someone else's eyes, to have a world I never knew existed shown to me, and through that art-act making the world fresh for me again. Ekphrasis is a way to engage another's way of seeing and it has the effect of extending meaning by introducing your own way of seeing and interpreting another artist's way of seeing. For that reason I like to think of ekphrastic poems like palimpsests, texts written over texts but both the original and the inscribed visible.

2. As a poet, what function does the artwork play in your ekphrastic poems? In other words, how do you hope the link between the art and poetry is received by a reader? What does this link mean for the poem and for the artwork? Does the artwork compliment the poem, vice versa, or both?

The artwork plays multiple functions in a poem, the most obvious of which are to provide subject matter and imagery. I'm very interested in the poem as essay and so like to use a painting as a jumping-off point to think on the page, the subject matter I am trying to make meaning out of or a claim for. Again, for me it's all about ways of seeing and getting the reader to look at the world in a way they haven't before. I'm also always trying to find new ways to approach the ekphrastic mode, to see what else it can do. I experimented in *The Erotic Postulate* with mixing the political and autobiographical into the ekphrastic act, so that when I chose a painting like David Hockney's *Two Men in a Shower*, I was ghosting my description of the painting with my own experience of what it depicted, even breaking the fourth wall to address the viewer's voyeurism in its companion poem "Two Men on a Bed" based on a Francis Bacon painting. For that particular project I was choosing queer artists as an act of claiming an aesthetic lineage and that's where the political dimension came in. I wanted the reader to see a link in the act of selection, the painters or photographers I was selecting, and then a link between how I was seeing the world and the affinity I felt with how these visual artists saw the world. Shared experience, and yet connecting my contemporary experience with the a work done twenty years ago or forty years or sixty years ago—using the work via the poem to connect the present to the past.

I think both poem and painting compliment each other and in the end each should stand on its own as an individual work that can function without necessarily needing the context of the other. But the poem for the most part comes after the fact of the painting, and so I tend to think of the poem, while its own thing, dependent on the original in that it comes second. I don't think of the poem as a secondary text—it is primary, a new thing in the world, but it does explore and converse with something that already exists. Both painting and poem are enriched, the painting by having its meaning extended, almost as if the poem is the perfect vehicle for engaging a work and allowing its meaning and significance to continue to evolve. My biggest fear is obscurity or the reader not finding an entry point and I bristle when I read ekphrasis described as "the most snobbish and exclusive of all sub-genres," that it's removed from the "every" man or common person and holed up in an ivory aesthetic tower. I was trained to think of poetry as an act of thinking, and so process has always ruled supreme for me to the point of recreating process on the page. I think that is partly why I am drawn to writing about paintings because you can see an artist's signature in the brush strokes and colors and to imagine how they painted, the actual process of creation through the poem, generates unexpected ideas and images. For me that is a primary act and not snobbish or exclusive at all. How we imagine the world is central to our relationship with it, and engaging how others have imagined the world helps us understand our own place, our own take on it, and what is possible.

3. When you have engaged in ekphrasis, did you pre-select the art pieces, or was it something more spur of the moment?

It's a combination of both as I've experienced both pre-selection and spur-of-the-moment equally. When I was working on a sequence about the Brooklyn Bridge I actively sought out the early American Modernists and their different visual interpretations of the iconic structure, and created a long catalog from which to work. But often I find a work chooses you. This usually happens to me when I'm in a museum, most recently at the National Gallery in Jamaica when I found myself taken by a Barrington Watson painting *Mother and Child*. I do what I usually do when I find myself enamored with a painting I might want to write about: I first sketch the painting in my journal (which is a quick, physical way to understand a composition by trying to recreate it) so I can return and re-inhabit it later when I'm ready to write about it. Second, I try to buy a reproduction of the image, which I post on a bulletin board over my computer so I can live with it for an extended period of time. And last I look to see if others have written about the image. In this case I found that my former teacher Lorna Goodison had already written a poem about this painting: "Studio IV Barrington Watson" in her series of poems about Jamaican painters, so I'll probably engage her exploration as a departing point to explore a different interpretation. I did this for my poem "This Is Not About Pears" where I read a poem that began "Cezanne was right" and I immediately thought, "No, Cezanne was wrong" which then became the opening line simply because of my need to negate an interpretation I did not like.

On a side note that's connected to this question, when I teach poetry I always have my students do an ekphrastic exercise subtitled *Ut Pictura Poesis*: "As Painting [goes], so Poetry [goes]." I define the genre for them, telling them an ekphrastic poem "confronts a work of art by taking an art object as its subject," and how the poem "does not merely try to reconstruct the work of art in words, but to recreate the experience of that work of art, how that work of art 'speaks out.'" Some colleagues tell me it's self-indulgent (I also have them write dramatic monologues, another mode I often work in), but I find they write some of their best poems out of this exercise. Basically I require them to go to a museum, usually whatever exhibit is going on in the campus galleries, and find a work that speaks to them. Having to use imagery is one of their biggest problems, so forcing them to engage a pre-made image often opens their eyes to the act and art of description as I describe the form as being "part description, part interpretation, the interpretation arrived at through the act of describing." So they have freedom in choosing the work they want to write about, but the very exercise itself dictates that they are writing in response to a work of art in the first place.

4. To what extent is your ekphrastic writing grounded in theory and to what extent are you self-taught? I.e., what resources did you or do you read before poetically responding to artwork?

Since my background is in Art History my eye is already trained to read the language of

compositions when I'm looking at a painting, so I have a pretty good grounding in theory. As for my process, though, I often read an artist's journals or consult my Art History library to know more about a period from which a work came, more about the artist's life, and to see if there is any information available about the work. Jon Berger in his "Ways of Seeing" essay cautions against the intervention of the curator and the text that accompanies a work, noting how their interpretation or notes can influence your understanding of a painting and perhaps predispose you to see the painting the way they see the painting. I like to engage the work first without seeing any accompanying material, and then when I think I understand the work (whether by sketching its composition or describing it in as much detail as I can) I turn to the supplemental material to flesh out my understanding, sometimes engaging that material as a means of generating the poem, whether by arguing with it or simply using it as an observation or fact with which to start.

5. When so many ekphrastic poems elaborate on the visual imagery within artwork, what role do you think abstract art has in the field? How does it "fit" with an overall definition of ekphrasis?

I think abstract art plays an essential role in the field; in fact it's often more interesting to me than traditional, figurative art as it is more open to interpretation. A composition is a composition, whether it is figurative or abstract, and as a student of Modernism I'm interested in color and shape and process, the basic geometry of the picture plane, and the calling to attention of the materials used to make the work ("it's just paint," "they're just words") rather than the work being transparent where you "see through" the process and tools that made it and only see what it describes. When I write a poem I don't want the reader to ignore the texture of the words, and I'm drawn to Modern and abstract art for similar reasons because they call attention to the fact that it is a constructed thing with seams and errors and a life of its own. I often grow bored by a veneer that is too perfect and seamless, too "natural," by a work with a surface that doesn't want me to consider its materials and how it was made.

6. Do you have any additional insights, comments, or suggestions that may help our research?

Some texts I've always wanted to explore are on a list in Anne Carson's *Economy of the Unlost*; the list can be found in the footnote on page 46 regarding authors who have issued theoretical discourse on the comparison between poetry and painting. And I thought maybe a short list of my favorite ekphrastic poems might be interesting (I'd be interested to know what others like): the tapestry in Book III of Spenser's *Faerie Queen*; Keats' "Ode onto a Grecian Urn;" Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo;" Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter;" Mark Doty's work ("Murano," the ekphrastic poetic essay of *Still Life With Oysters and Lemons*). More importantly (given my background and the fact I still dabble with painting), I'm interested in poets who also paint and have always wanted to write more about Elizabeth Bishop's watercolors in

Exchanging Hats and how they connect to her poems. As I mentioned, my undergraduate honors thesis was on Derek Walcott and I have a chapter on how he creates an artistic lineage with artists such as Gauguin and Pissarro first through his poems and then through his own paintings (almost every book Walcott's put out in the past twenty years has a watercolor he's done as the cover art) culminating with *Tiepolo's Hound*, which has twenty-six of his own paintings interspersed through the epic poem obsessed with the detail and history of a dog in a painting. But those research and "further reading" interests aside, I would just encourage practitioners of ekphrasis to continue to push its borders and take the mode into new territory, especially with how widespread the form has become the charge to "make it new" becomes all the more important to keep it fresh and relevant.