

Ekphrasis: A Poet's Dance with Art

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Ekphrastic poems are written for works of art—paintings, sculptures, music, dance, and film. These poems may interpret, describe, confront, address, respond, and otherwise engage with the subject piece. The earliest and best-known example of ekphrasis is the lengthy description of the shield given to Achilles that is found in Homer's *Iliad*. In ancient Greece ekphrasis was a term linked to the ability to describe something with vivid detail. In contemporary poems poets may include themselves in the poem by describing memories, feelings, and associations evoked by the piece thereby linking ekphrasis with the autobiographical tradition in poetry writing. Autobiographical information may be presented directly or indirectly and the description of the work of art may be limited and then augmented by elements of fact, consideration, and emotion drawn from the poet's personal experience. The writing of poetry for art is explored in detail by James Heffernan (Heffernan, 1993) and by John Hollander (Hollander, 1995).

Through the process of writing ekphrastic poetry a student's understanding, appreciation, and interpretation of works of art may be enriched. In this regard ekphrastic poems are a useful, pedagogical tool. As Oughton explains, "Poetry is one way to tell us exactly what someone makes of a painting, in a voice and imagery that, rather than simply describing, attempt to evoke the writer's response in another" (2012, p. 78). White goes farther and describes ekphrasis as a form of art criticism that he employs "to hone student skills in analysis and critical thinking" (2017, p. 55).

For the past eleven years I have been part of a collaboration between the Long Dash Poetry Group and studio artists of the Women's Art Association of Canada. Poems are written in response to paintings that resonate for the poets. Sometimes the artists create new works in response to poems that have touched and inspired them. This productive endeavour culminates in an annual poetry reading and art exhibit featuring the paired poems and paintings. This unique, long-standing association has benefitted artists and poets alike. Over the years this ekphrastic writing has supported me as I probed challenging life events and has nurtured insights as well as emotional healing. Art has been a gateway to approaching ideas and feelings from a different angle as well as to seeing the world with heightened clarity, colour, and texture. Many of the poems in my new collection, *The Seeker Ascends*, were born of this artistic exploration and dialogue.

What draws the poet to a particular painting? How does the painting assist and support the poet's creative process? For me the attraction to a particular piece is often visceral—a sense of connection and understanding deep in the gut pulling me to know the work more fully and to put words to what I am sensing. Other times a poem may be aimlessly wandering in my psyche and a particular painting helps me to tame and focus the thoughts and images. Lastly, there have been painful personal moments shouting to find the page and yet the writing has been too hard until, with the guidance of the right painting and the emotional truth that the artist has transferred to the canvas, the verse is written. Such was the case for my poem, "The Seeker Ascends", that resonates with the powerful painting by Mary Lou Payzant entitled "Fear of Falling #4" (2014). In this painting a naked woman climbs an arch of piled boulders that rises above stark turquoise waters. Beyond this, everything is blood red. The colours and forms are rich and laden with symbolic meaning that awakened my memories and feeling. Emboldened by Payzant's piece I approached the page and rose while expressing my own truth.

The Seeker Ascends
in response to Fear of Falling #4 by Mary Lou Payzant

Freed of pretense the woman scales the boulders
bowed above delusion's waters:
the aqua vortex twisting fact, its spoken solace.

She persists, pushes higher
until she enters the vastness –
a crimson cavern.

Crouched, hesitant,
seeking a presence
she climbs closer.

The woman approaches the girl that she was,
that dark-fringed child squinting tentatively
into the camera's twitching eye,

palms protective on brother's shoulders
as she kneels behind him.

Keep him safe.

Who shields her from Dante's minotaur,
his boozy breath knifing away childhood?
Who sees her blowing like fine, straight hair in the wind?

All blind to her cringing.
She keeps her secret trembling,
hides the stains his hands

leave on her skin's saga.

A pact of silence.

The years' mist slicks the rocks.

The woman tenders this girl,

consoles her

in embrace,

hears her speak,

listens to the savagery again and again

until with bloodied lips

the child expels the beast

prowling the lifetimes inside her throat

and reclaims her prepotent note.

(Nudelman, p.56)

In contrast with the bright shades and stark images of the Payzant piece, Beryl Goering's watercolour collage, "Falling Leaves" (2013), is a melange of gentle fan-shaped ginkgo leaves arranged in a constellation of soft colours on a pale background. The beauty and delicacy of this painting spoke to me of the cycles of birth, death, and renewal as well as of strength and timelessness. Native to China, ginkgo trees have existed on the earth for millennia and they figure prominently in Asian art. The ginkgo tree is able to live for a thousand years and has an astonishing ability to survive extreme hardships. The ginkgo leaf has been used to symbolize longevity in Japanese decorative art. Inspired by Goering's piece, I used the image of tumbled leaves to respond to her work.

The spherical motion of the May rake

For Falling Leaves by Beryl Goering

breaks their clutch, its tines churning

ghostly leaves blanched winter-dumb,

others thinly yellow as hymnal pages,

umber edges grasping the few

still stained red with falling memory.
Spent pine needles dull as a dowager's hair
submit to twigs, their sturdy treeness.
Exiles in phantom darkness meek leaves, quills, and cones

rouse pell-mell from frosty encounters,
thaw's confusing embrace,
fumble asunder for space

in skewed plans.

The land stutters;
winds tamp them reverent.
An ancient bliss ignites
the honeyed glint in their bitter veins,

shakes them wild with colour's cornucopia
fanning away all cowering.

Wanting to craft a poem about the passage of time and life's mysteries, I turned to an abstract, hand-woven tapestry by Carolyn Jongeward titled "One-Seventh" (2017). At the bottom left of her tapestry is a superimposed succession of creamy tan peaks with a three-tiered fuchsia triangle at the core. The peaks reach into deepening shades of blue and above that, dipping into the blue and dwarfing the peaks, is part of a giant tan orb decorated at the centre and sides with geometric patterns of blue, gold, and fuchsia. These peaks speak to me of the ancient Egyptian pyramids in the Valley of the Kings and the orb with its evocative patterns hints of otherworldly spheres. Using the image of the hourglass and incorporating nuances from Jongeward's piece, I wrote my poem.

I Shall Know Why When Time Is Over
after a line by Emily Dickinson

in resonance with *One-Seventh* by Carolyn Jongeward, hand-woven tapestry

Through the hourglass
beat by beat
particles of being pass.

First the separations:
the squeeze and spark
slipping weeks

onto fine threads.
Alchemy,
sand.

When next sensed
it perplexes
this shift that hints

of the underside's
unsolvable riddles
vitreous curves,

holograms flickering
on walls, the sweet
ring of atoms.

Time's questions
twist and turn.
Truth flickers.

Hourglass,
elliptical breath,
cryptic future past.

Setting aside the metaphysical and turning to the material world, I embraced Wenda Watt's painting, "Spring VIII" (2017) to help me shape a poem about India. Bombarded with sensations and ideas while touring Rajasthan, I knew that I wanted to write about this compelling place. I re-entered the clamor of sound, shape, timbre, smell, and contrast through Watt's imposing abstract acrylic painting. Her piece is wide like a landscape and her brush strokes are strong. The paint has been applied thick and luxuriously so that you can almost taste the beauty. Primary colours are her palette with rich blues, ochre, and wine red juxtaposed with varying blocks of white. The vibrant tones mirror my sensory experiences and the shaded white whispers the spiritual words spoken by Mahatma Gandhi that begin and end this poem in italicized font.

The Hundred Steps
for Mahatma Gandhi

in response to *Spring VIII* by Wenda Watt, acrylic on canvas

*There is
an indefinable
mysterious power
that pervades
everything.
I feel it
though
I do not
see it.*

(i)

Veiled supplicants offer garlands (marigolds with red roses),
ring the brass bell suspended from entry's pale dome.

It sings long strains and *Aum* oscillates across
Makrana marble walls, down lilies, honeysuckle stems
up to the celestial vault binding
incense threads, whispered prayers.

(ii)

Rajasthan—dusty landscape, cement-grey shops and homes
cheered by imagination's colour wheel—

crimson, citron, tangerine,
plum, peacock, emerald green sarees
grace women on muddy lanes, in fields harvesting,
sweeping roads with stout sheaves, side-saddle on motorbikes.
Queenly head-scarves billow; colour splashes humid air.
Rajasthan where the *pagri* crowns a man. Shade for station,
nisus—saffron valour, alabaster peace,
celebration's cinnabar. Silk *pagri* rich with gold.

(iii)

Through Delhi streets brash autorickshaws, scraped cars, bulging
buses snail as cows amble the curbs, cross congested roads to graze.

Ganesha, Lord of Good Fortune, sits cross-legged on dashboards, sniffs
petrol fumes through his elephant trunk, tunes generous ears to horns' cacophony.

He, remover of obstacles; the one who blocks your path

Lord of Letters and Learning

rounded like the sacred primal sound,
harbinger of creation and he, *Aum's* embodiment.

*My life
is
my
message.*

The collaborative creative process came full circle with Mary Lou Payzant's painting "African Sunset" (2017). I had written a poem triggered by an article that I had read regarding an incident that took place at sunset in a South African village. My poem inspired Payzant to create her painting "African Sunset". Her round piece is a deep orange like the setting African sun. There are two female masks painted in black over this flaming backdrop. There is a zigzag pattern between the masks. Payzant's forceful painting enchanted me and I used her images to concretize and explore a spiritual experience that I'd recently had. I adopted the concept of the female ritual mask as the central image of my poem and integrated her colours and their emotional connotations to describe this incident. The evocative zigzag path is represented by the shape of my poem.

Masked Regression

in dialogue with *African Sunset* by Mary Lou Payzant,
acrylic and mixed media on a round canvas

Misty with morning
she steps into shower,
shuts sight

as water purifies
the slopes of her skin,
clearing light.

She inhales the pause.
 That scent.
 Ethereal blooms,

 perfumed souls
 dust her golden palms
 pressing skyward.

 Towelled, creamed,
 she tints cheeks, kohls eyes,
 rouges lips prominent.

 Feathery hair frames
 her reflection benign.
 Fierce features tame.

 There, the ancestral path
 flits while she slips into
 skirt, sling-back shoes.

 Vapours lift
 and mask settles.
 Ritual robes drape.

Around her the world
 burnt orange,
 screaming.

The collaboration between the Long Dash Poetry Group and studio artists of the Women's Art Association of Canada has nourished, instructed, and inspired the participants. Artists involved in this endeavour have said of the ekphrastic poems that they “sometimes brought new value and intensity to the paintings, that we “got” what they intended, or even added new significance” (Oughton, 2012, p. 83). Sometimes the poems provided the impetus for the artists to paint something different or to write a poem. The art consistently stimulated the poets to stretch their vision and craft new poems.

“Ekphrasis is invitational, experientially oriented, and it involves creative risk-taking.” (White, 2017, p. 57). After years of writing ekphrastic poetry my poems have evolved and the breath in my work has expanded. Influenced by these gifted artists, I have been motivated to take greater leaps in style and to share my insights using broader brush strokes. Art has provided me with another door to the subconscious and to my inner voice. The visual aspect of my poems has become more important to me as well so that the shape of a piece, how it sits on the page, the amount of white space, the line breaks, and stanza lengths link not only to breath, rhythm, and sound, but also to sight, silence, reflection, and movement. Ekphrastic poetry has provided me with many productive lessons and has enhanced my knowledge and appreciation

of art and the creative process.

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