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The Ekphrasis of Abstract Paintings through Oulipo and Other Critical Techniques

Patrick Wright

Abstract:

This article emerges from a larger project: to develop new modes of responding, in ways that might be understood as ekphrastic, to modern and especially abstract works of art. It posits different ways of looking, in contrast with the poet believing that they know where to look and what is to be considered important. I want to emphasise the point that unknowing can be a creative device. Methodologically, I draw on Georges Perec and art historian Giovanni Morelli. What they have in common is a concern for how attention is directed and how to cultivate methods that enable an even or free-floating perception, where all elements of the image are given equal weight. Employing a pedagogic approach (where my poem might focus on trifling or marginal details, or show other ways of looking), and procedural and Oulipo techniques, I demonstrate an innovative mode of ekphrasis.

Keywords: ekphrasis; modern; art; poetry; image; abstraction; subjectivity

Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux observes that “images are more urgent [for poets] in the twentieth century than ever before” owing to what W.J.T. Mitchell called the “pictorial turn”, “from a culture of words into a culture of images that began in the late nineteenth century” (Loizeaux 2008: 2-3; Mitchell 1995: 11-34). At the same time, while she identifies an upsurge in poets responding to art in a variety of modes, their prompt is usually one that pre-dates, often by some time, the major formal innovations associated with modern art, such as abstraction (Loizeaux 2008: 2-5). I acknowledge that, among the many and wide-ranging examples of ekphrasis during this period, there is a scepticism towards the artwork and how we should look at it, or, as Loizeaux writes, “a heightened emphasis on the provisional nature of the truth pictures convey [...] a wariness, too, of the viewer’s ability to see ‘right,’ and of the illusion-making nature of art that further complicates the difference between ‘seem’ and ‘is’” (Loizeaux 2008: 23). Nevertheless, even though poets have toiled with the uncertainty of modernist images in the twentieth century and up to the present day, I notice that there remains a preference for figurative rather than abstract art.

I am aware that “figurative” and “abstract” are in no way a strict dichotomy and the region in between is highly nuanced (actually, there are many semi-figurative examples); thus, I want to clarify that by “abstract” I have in mind images with no trace of figures or the referential world, that are dominated by colour, brushstrokes, or formlessness. This might apply, then, to Mark Rothko’s Seagram murals or Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915), but likewise to early precedents, such as J.M.W. Turner’s late and often considered “unfinished” seascapes.

Barbara Guest, influenced by the principles of Abstract Expressionism, was able to find related and corresponding possibilities for poetry. A perceived rupture in the

tradition of figuration, evinced in the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, led her to a poetry that “extended vertically, as well as horizontally”, and refused to “remain motionless within a linear structure” (Guest, in Ford and Winkfield 2006: 17). While this suggests direct engagement with an abstract image and re-presenting its formal attributes, poets responding to such artworks often move swiftly away from its surface. Instead, they tend to write about historical context, the biography of the artist, or their own life. Examples of this instinct to move away or outside the frame are: Jorie Graham, associating outwards, from the red of a Rothko’s colour field painting to the red of a bird in the speaker’s immediate vicinity (“For Mark Rothko” [1979: 85]); Tamar Yoseloff’s *The City with Horns* (2011), where the social and cultural milieu around Pollock’s abstract canvases is the focus of her poems; Ocean Vuong’s “Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952”, where, aside from the title, there is little in the poem that refers to Rothko’s painting (Vuong 2017: 47); or the poet can sometimes look to the space around the artwork, the gallery, or other images in the exhibition, and incorporate the visitors or staff. One instance of this is Gillian Clarke’s “The Rothko Room”: “In this, the last room after hours in the gallery, / a mesh diffuses London’s light and sound. / The Indian keeper nods to sleep, marooned / in a trapezium of black on red” (Clarke 1997: 106-107). Each time, the abstract image itself seems to be circumvented.

Similarly, I have identified a gap in criticism on the ekphrasis of abstract art. It is likely that James Heffernan has figuration in mind when he puts forward the idea that ekphrasis is “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan 2004: 3). This bias is also implicit in the criticism of Mitchell and Murray Krieger (Mitchell 1995; Krieger 1992), while Shahar Bram asserts that ekphrasis is “tied up with the mimetic tradition” (Bram 2006: 372).

There has been a shift in recent decades from understanding ekphrasis as an act

of representation to one of *re-presentation*, or the production of a new work of art, resulting from the dynamic interaction between the poet and the image or artist (Kennedy 2012). However, even if poets are now more likely to think in terms of finding a “response” or “answers” to an image (rather than representation or description), they are still usually reliant on figures or narrative, even if this is partial or discreet (Brandon 2018).

Accordingly, I would like to address the seeming evasion of the abstract image, and how to stay with this image, rather than (as is often the temptation) to move outside or beyond it. It may be the case that context is useful in the process and finds its way in, at some point, but I want to propose techniques to work against skirting the image in a way that is premature, where first we begin by looking with new and critical perspectives. Though such techniques can also be applied to figurative images, they are perhaps more easily utilized with artworks where we are unsure of what we are seeing, that are subject to guesswork and indecision, or lack critical consensus as to their meaning. And, despite our proclivity to find form (as attested by the experience of pareidolia), looking at a monochromatic painting, for example, makes overt the fact that we have no script to follow. The figure/ground distinction is vague or non-existent, and the image becomes a screen on which to project our interpretations.

The new ways of looking I propose have emerged from my reading of existing scholarship. James Heffernan understands ekphrasis as a “paragonal ... contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image” (Heffernan 2004: 6). Finding this too restrictive and emblematic of what David Kennedy refers to as the “representational model” of ekphrasis, I am persuaded, like him, to think more in terms of an “encounter” between word and image, opposed to rivalry or competition (Kennedy 2012; Kennedy

and Meek 2019). So too, my idea of an encounter is inspired by Camille Guthrie who cites Barbara Guest’s meditation on Juan Gris in “Roses” and Kevin Young’s “Cadillac Moon” (Guest 2016 [1973]: 128; Young 2003: 10). For Guthrie the relationship between poet and artist is not adversarial: it is based on “an interaction that doesn’t require a winner... It revels in the image, even if the artwork is ironic, a spectacle. It asks, it reveals, it wonders” (Guthrie 2013).

With Guthrie’s understanding in mind, I would like to develop ekphrastic modes that begin with a stance of humility and openness, allowing ourselves to be receptive and let the image guide our looking experience. This is because knowledge can be an obstacle in producing new writing: it can direct attention in a way that limits the scope of what can be perceived. As an alternative, I suggest an “unknowing” approach, which means looking at the artwork without imposing preconceived ideas or laying stress on certain signifiers. Similar to how a psychoanalyst can listen to a client’s speech with evenly dispersed attention, without assuming the meanings or weight of words and phrases, it is possible to view an image in a way where everything is perceived as having equal value. For Wilfred Bion this meant “the capacity to forget, the ability to eschew desire and understanding” (Bion 1970: 51-52). Though this attitude of mind can be challenging, and the viewer might still be swayed by prior or supplementary knowledge of what should be deemed important, it can yield new insights or perspectives on the image.

Regardless of the approach or the kind of artwork the poet works with, we must deal with what we already know about the image, the artist, and other poems with the same or a similar prompt. This calls to mind Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton’s idea of “ekphrastic inheritance”: “when a writer composes a new ekphrastic poem while cognisant of previously published ekphrastic poetry on the same artwork. In such cases, the previous poems

become part of the ekphrastic tradition informing the new poem” (Hetherington and Atherton 2023: 16). This “knowing” approach can result in a recurrence of tropes or bringing well-travelled motifs to the fore; and this is the subject of satire in Julia Deakin’s “After Rothko”. In this poem, clichés are pronounced only to be denied in the style of *via negativa*: “This is not the night sky, teeming with more than we know. / This is not the abyss. Not a black hole. Not unremitting black” (Deakin 2018: 77). Such inheritance can allow us to see art in a way that is reflexive or ironic; not disavowing what we know but writing through it. Yet, the time is ripe for a methodology that may help us to see new and familiar images with fresh eyes.

I have thus furthered ways of working with or subverting what I know of paintings in a way that brings about new insights into the self, ekphrastic modes, and inventiveness in poetry. Indeed, though I agree with John Hollander and George Raitt in casting doubt on whether ekphrasis illuminates the image, and poetry arrives at a supplementary “truth” about artworks (Hollander 1988: 209), I think that poetry can illuminate the experience of seeing, the writing process, and the writer who sees. Raitt makes this distinction, and the important point that the poet responding to visual art can allow meaning to emerge at the limits of signification (Raitt 2006: 14-26). To do so, the poet needs to restrain from believing that they know what they are seeing or where to look. While it is impossible to view the artwork without any knowledge whatsoever, I proceed with the argument that new ways of writing about abstract art can be expanded through alternative ways of looking and critical techniques of engagement.

In what follows, I present strategies for steering my attention away from what I assume to be of vital importance in the image. This also means outlining the ways in which different modes of poetic ekphrasis can lead me away from where my lyric “I” might take me; how by prohibiting some ways of looking, I facilitate others. I draw then on the

Oulipo school and procedural methods (Motte 1986; Conte 1991), while suggesting that a systematic or rule-based approach could be one way of dealing with the ekphrasis of abstract images. I also examine how a more deliberate use of critical writing on images can alter my lyric habits, direct my awareness to seemingly insignificant details, marginalia, or the paratext. This can provide new ideas and language to work with, resulting in a poem that looks different from what I usually write. One example is the effect of collaging texts or quotations together. The idea of a found text (at least as a starting point) is thus discussed, along with the cento form.

My proclivity to take flight from the image can be seen as part of a contemporary interest in moving beyond representation or testing its limits. I have been motivated in this endeavour by my reading of Anne Carson, Emily Berry, and Deryn Rees-Jones — poets who, through their ekphrasis, do not gesture to figures or narrative. Instead, the prompt is used to generate the poem (as formally analogous, as a source of inspiration, as a metaphor for lyric themes, and so on) (Carson 1998, 2006; Berry 2017; Rees-Jones 2012). Simultaneously, I am inspired by poems like Moniza Alvi's "I Would Like to be a Dot in a Painting by Miró": to include the lyric within my experiments with form and to promote ways of seeing which might be considered subjective (Alvi 2008 [1993]: 20). Rather than begin with or studiously incorporate knowledge of the artwork, I associate Alvi's poem with poets in the habit of trying to look naïvely or playfully misperceiving what the artist intended. Another example is Susan Fealy's "Gouache, Sheep Skulls, Fence Bracket". She writes: "Look closer. / The skulls are singing, / More like bird-beaks than sheep" (Fealy 2017).

Like other poets responding to modernist art, such as Tamar Yoseloff in *The City with Horns* and Mary Oliver (see her poem "Franz Marc's Blue Horses"), I often rely on biographical or historical details to compensate for the absence of

referents (Yoseloff 2011; Oliver 2014: 43). In "Nocturne", for example, I employ description and have recourse to the imagination and wider milieu. I was inspired by Charles Simic's *Dime-store Alchemy* (2011) and Pascale Petit's *What the Water Gave Me* (2013). In these ekphrastic collections, while there is still occasional reference to a figure or object (in the work of Joseph Cornell and Frida Kahlo, respectively), the art serves as a springboard for the poet to make use of extraneous content, such as biography, history, or literary context. In "Nocturne" (based upon Whistler's simplified composition, tonal relationships, and atmospheric effects), I move from reflections prior to research in the first stanza ("Over the Thames are ghost trails of rockets / reflecting like stars on the water's edge") towards a more "knowing" attitude *vis-à-vis* the painting, after having read about it, in the final stanza ("In the courtroom, it was hung upside down"):

Nocturne

After James McNeill Whistler

*Over the Thames are smoke trails of rockets
reflecting like stars on the water's edge —
cinders showering down, a Rorschach test.*

*They say this is a cause to celebrate:
the paint vague, stirring the mind's
slideshow —
dabs of green, yellow. They double, cascade,*

*coalesce into a Manhattan by night.
Or are they strip-lights seen through fabric?
Much begins with deliberate accidents.*

*Spectators gaze, blinkered by their habits.
Pale to themselves, not quite transparent.
In the courtroom, it was hung upside down.*

To counter my instinct to move outside the abstract image and reach for context, I put into action strategies that allow me to stay inside the frame, at least to produce a first draft. With Rothko's murals in mind, it is easy to move away

from the canvas and assume there is little to describe or respond to beyond colour. I understand this in contrast with figurative works such as Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560), where my eyes are drawn in towards the ploughman, the sun, the ship, and so forth. This could be due to several factors, such as knowledge of the painting and the "ekphrastic inheritance" of well-known poems that have instilled partial bias. W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (2007: 57) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (2000: 212) are canonical examples, the latter underscoring the key visual features: "Icarus", the "farmer", and the "sea".

To bypass or at least become aware of my visual prejudices I explore free-floating or evenly dispersed attention. This includes an effort to look closely at the image over time, bracketing preconceptions, not knowing where figure and ground are situated, where the focal point is, what is central and peripheral, and so on. I have thus read the Oulipo poets, whom I see as advancing ways of looking that are "flat" or even and open to the possibility that everything in the visual field could be of interest or the locus of meaning. Particularly apt is Georges Perec's proposal in his essay "The Street":

*Note down what you can see.
Anything worthy of note going on.
Do you know how to see what's
worthy of note? Is there anything
that strikes you? Nothing strikes
you. You don't know how to see...
You must set about it more slowly,
almost stupidly. Force yourself to
write down what is of no interest,
what is most obvious, most common,
most colourless (Perec 2008: 46-56).*

I have also repurposed the thoughts of nineteenth-century art historian and critic Giovanni Morelli. His attitude to looking involved observing clues in trifling details (an ear or hand for instance) rather than in composition, narrative, and subject matter, which would likely be the foci for students, copyists, or imitators. As Carlo Ginzburg

explains, the Morellian method involves working like a "detective", "discovering, from clues unnoticed by others, the author in one case of a crime, in the other of a painting" (Ginzburg 1980: 8). As such, the artist's identity is paradoxically disclosed most reliably in details least attended to. In my writing, I am less concerned about the artist's identity. Instead, the method I describe helps to shift my focus away from what I assume are the significant components of the artwork and towards the parts to which I had not yet attributed meaning.

Other than myself, at least one poet has looked to apply such a strategy to abstract art. Liz Cashdan, observing her tendency to "find representations of objects" in Angela Baum's abstract paintings, regards my approach of "seeing flatly" as innovative and has successfully re-utilized it within her series of poetic responses (Cashdan 2019). Here, like in my poems, elements in the image are itemised in the poem in a way that appears disinterested. I found this deceptively "objective" recording useful in galleries, where my attention span was rather short (if my interest was not piqued). Additionally, even when time and attention were given to the act of seeing, my visual literacy skills were at times impeding. My knowledge of where or how to look, particularly regarding composition, modelling, or the picture plane, resulted in overlooking certain details, such as marginalia or curios. This led me to ponder whether these aspects (those originally missed), rather than figures or narrative, could serve as the wellspring of a poem.

I tried to look at what I assumed were insignificant or trivial marks when viewing first-hand the work of Hughie O'Donoghue and Henry Moore at the Whitworth Art Gallery, but I later rejected these as disinterested exercises. My initial thought was to arrange to view the images privately in the hope that distraction would be kept to a minimum (e.g., background chatter). But I later found inspiration in the unwanted stimuli. The space itself, whether in the research room or in the holdings, offered

additional points of interest, such as a sense of surveillance. The *in-situ* experience was, however, only successful in producing a first draft; and I was naïve in my belief that under such conditions my focus on the artwork would be intensified. I now see this as a conceptual stage through which subtle details emerged, and in later revisions I re-integrated personal themes.

Sina Queyras writes how the ekphrastic poet “doesn’t ... try to read a painting from the top left corner, describing it square by square the way an artist might have blocked it in”, but she then goes on to wonder “what that would be like” (Queyras 2010). I have also been directed by my reading of Cole Swensen, who, as Kenneth Goldsmith notes, has tried to “get beyond the ‘emotions recollected in tranquillity’ paradigm.” She sees this as what “conceptual poetry” in its widest sense looks to accomplish. For Swensen, in fields of visuality, the ways in which we see and “read” have not changed much, based, as they are, on the primary figure/ground distinction. What has changed is the subject matter:

Increasingly, the visual arts and some poetry have worked to distil subject matter so that core structural elements and their dynamics are laid bare or at least made much more apparent. But it seems that the visual arts have been more successful at this than poetry, and in part, it is because, after a very promising start [translating cubism’s geometric and perspectival shifts into writing], poetry took a turn which confused distillation with simplification, turning away from that which would expose underlying dynamics apparent through rhythm, echo, and juxtaposition, and towards simpler language, where “simpler” was understood to be both “clearer” and “truer,” with the result being poetic language dominated by subject matter (Swensen, in Goldsmith 2008).

I like how Swensen posits that “ekphrasis as a tool can help poetry by historically analysing how the visual arts have achieved this” (Goldsmith

2008). I understand “this” as referring to how modernist art has been successful, through techniques of abstraction, to emphasise and make overt its formal construction. Moreover, with the images I have in mind, “form” can be indistinguishable from “content” (the figure/ground distinction collapsing).

Thus, ekphrasis can be a re-presentation of the formal elements of the image, without looking to reduce the poem to subject matter. Recognizing an affinity with Swensen and linking her evaluation with my own interest in answering to the forms of abstract art, I applied the idea implied by Queyras. I started by placing a grid over a painting by Wassily Kandinsky, then studied each section in turn, cataloguing elements in a systematic manner.

Given the degree of nebulousness, I was led to respond pareidolically to each part, seeing for instance “a ladybird in disguise”, “a snail on the pavement”, and a “black swan”. Initially, I gave six sections of the painting equal treatment and engaged in freewriting activities (provoking the aforementioned images). I discovered that my written observations were incongruous, though were ultimately brought together under a unifying lyric theme (like in my poem “Abstraction”, below).

I then played with swapping phrases around, corresponding with the formal arrangement of the image.

I also recalled the Comte de Lautréamont’s statement: how such juxtapositions are often as “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella” (Ducasse 1953 [1869]: 327). I began by seeing the picture as though anything could be as exciting as anything else. Soon, however, some parts became more alluring, and my openness to finding unintended forms and shapes meant that any narrative I imposed was illogical. My poem only emerged when I began to write in a lyric mode, taking the parts I mis-perceived and weaving a more personal theme around them. What I retain in the final version is a

tabulated form, a schema that is suggestive of a canvas with no centre, that has several foci which are also coordinated:

Abstraction

Alongside Alma Thomas

*the greatest truths I’ve found are
that god is a ladybird in disguise*

*Hades will
remain mute to my protests
after the apocalypse I must nail
meaning down through inscape*

*the choice to
go on living arrives
when I feel vertigo over a cliff*

*the sound of
immanence can be heard
as the rain blitzkriegs my glass*

*one meaning
of martyr is to bear witness
when I save a snail on the pavement
I save humanity*

*at least Christ
only had one crucifixion
I need a ghost in the machine*

*science is just a line of paradigms
I need my black swans and white crows*

*my
words must serve as a requiem
love is beyond Aristotle’s categories*

*all these
are variations on a theme*

Looking to undo standard dichotomies of figure/ground, centre/margins, and form/content required practice and inspired unorthodox methods. For example, I rotated some artworks sideways or turned them upside down: simple actions in themselves, yet highly effective ways to defamiliarize the artwork and subvert expressive modes. This was easier with abstract or “formless” artworks, such as Turner’s final seascapes. With these, I began by shuffling and reshuffling a set of postcard reproductions on the surface of a table: creating new images and

simulating a personally curated “exhibition”. Deidre Lynch links this method and my poem (below) with the “scenic myriorama: a parlor amusement from the 1820s, which was touted to its purchasers as being the source *in potentia* of a multitude of landscapes” (Lynch 2024: 4-5):

Imaginary Museum

*On this Sunday autumnal morning
I arrange a set of postcards on the table’s
surface — all Turners from the 1840s
with billowing waves and detonating suns.*

*I juxtapose them in ways entirely my
own —
I rotate them in the style of a gyre:
the ships and shorelines disappearing
till all that’s left is one big creation
myth —*

*like how once everything we
know
was crammed inside the size of
a dice.*

*All this at some remove from
the Clore
with its taut ropes and
exclusion zones.*

*Under my hands I see
the paint sail
outwards and into the
grain — the edges
fizzling away and
atmospheres escaping
into the larger lozenge:
the place of prayer.*

I also tried adopting a Martian attitude, which relied on a state of negative capability, making things strange, or “resting in doubts and uncertainties” (Keats 1958 [1817]: 193-194). In doing so, however, I found that I was still applying knowledge to my poems. Indeed, I distinguish my dispersed attention tactics from the Martian poets and how they immediately saw objects as “foreign”. In Craig Raine’s “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home”, books are “Caxtons” and “mechanical birds

with many wings" (Raine 2000 [1979]: 95-96). This poem could be said to belong to a romantic tradition: returning to a child-like perception of the world. Though the Martian poets were projecting personal content ("Caxtons" and "mechanical birds" are not "objective"; they say something about the poet), my initial phase usually involves procedural rules. Rather than have, from the beginning, the imagination in operation, a system helps to avoid making the image a screen for fantasy (at least initially).

I find that employing a system works against my ego-based habits and the aspect of the lyric mode that emphasizes personal themes. Eschewing the romantic myth of "innocent" vision or finding a deeper truth, I embraced the postmodern tenet that I can only represent another mediation of what I see and can never gain access to the image *in itself* (outside of language or cultural frameworks) (Jay 1994: 8). Though I will always see by way of lenses, it has been crucial to draw attention to these while looking at how they might be exchanged for others. But I find it necessary to re-introduce a lyric element in my final poems (if there has been an initial phase of self-effacement). Not only are aspects of my life always present to some extent (whether I like it or not), inserting these into my poem gives it an emotional core.

An example of the approach I outline is "Black Square": a poem based on Kazimir Malevich's painting of the same title (below). I chose this image because it has no clear figures or centre; as such, the principal areas of focus are prohibited, and I am forced to look for details I do not normally seek out. I am faced with an image characterised by flatness, aside from physical properties such as the frame, the brushstrokes, the texture, and so on.

With Perec's method I became aware that, in terms of surface area, white is just as prevalent as black. The title is also misleading: the picture is not black but contains a sprinkling of colours ("Closer ... this is only a semblance of black").

Neither is the painting a square: this fact is in plain sight (though we might not notice it at first and may need a critical source to point it out). These initial impressions, after looking "stupidly" as Perec suggests, shaped the form of my eventual poem. It looks like a slightly distorted square with use of lineation and space: the borders of the image determine the line breaks of the poem.

The white space around the words hints at traces of hues and craquelure; while the space around my poem's edges signifies the white bezel that surrounds the "black" centre. I have considered the size of the margins, and these are just as important as the words and are a vital part of the poem. It is a "hybrid" poem, as Hetherington and Atherton read it, which employs aspects of the prose poem while combining these with the concrete poem's deployment of the right margin (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 161-62). Aside from the formal aspects, much of the poem is concerned with seeing flatly. I noticed my reflection in the glass covering the artwork, which tempted me to write about myself in a way that increased self-awareness. Though I wanted to resist this, and I announce: "I don't want to see myself seeing back, not seeing black" despite my call to "see flatly, the way Freud listened", I reveal my angst in what the blackness evokes ("the starlessness between galaxies") and how "sense deprivation" gives rise to forms in obscurity (e.g., a running "buffalo"). Likewise, I notice my associations outside the canvas (Gallipoli, Suprematism, Russian icons, or references to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*) (Dostoyevsky 2008 [1869]: 228-229). The formal aspects of the poem contain the imaginative leaps, while my questions express doubts (in contrast to the assumed academic authority of art historians). While my poem is, in part, a reflection on the failure of the disinterested attitude I began with, my questioning seeks to elaborate what I see in terms of unknowing (as defined earlier). The accuracy of my recollections is unimportant, giving a fictive and notional quality to the final poem:

Black Square

After Kazimir Malevich

*In this light the surface is a black mirror
I don't want to see*

*myself seeing back not seeing black
Behind cut glass a black*

*cat in a coal bunker fur curled in a
corner Learn to see flat*

*see flatly the way Freud listened
Does matt paint glisten*

*a sea-creature? or is this Vantablack
sense deprivation*

*an anechoic chamber? The only sound is
the nervous system*

*heart hurtling inside my cranium Here
I see the starlessness*

*between galaxies the black of
nothing quite happening*

*of consciousness closing fastening
Could this be a Madonna*

*and Child figures excised (Suprematist
and still a mother*

*and child)? This black has a dead
Christ uncanniness*

*(Holbein's panel for Prince Myshkin)
This is also Gallipoli*

*field artillery (out into history) Closer
this is only a semblance*

*of black a rainbow the web of
a shattered phone*

*A buffalo torso legs a head hurrying
towards some wilderness*

Another method was to make use of free association over successive viewings. This led to a series of poems divided into numbered stanzas. I made use of the temporal device (seeing the image at different times) to work against the idea of a unified, humanist model of the self and what Swensen sees, succeeding Wordsworth, as the "emotions recollected in tranquillity paradigm" (Swensen, in Goldsmith 2008; Wordsworth 1989 [1801]: 73). Pursuing this rule, neglected details are brought to the fore. By unknowing what I am seeing, re-discovering the image with each viewing, I become aware of other particulars.

Although prior knowledge can be an

obstacle in producing new writing, I also see potential in becoming more cognizant of how critical writing can have an auxiliary role in the poetry-making process, as I will now illustrate. The distinctiveness of modern, especially abstract, art lies in how its meaning often depends on critics, theorists, or art historians. The discourse surrounding the image or object not only informs our viewing but also plays an integral role in defining the artwork (Krauss 1986: 162). Thus, my ekphrasis can sometimes be understood as a triangular relationship between image, poem, and criticism — where the last item subverts what I know (or think I know) about the image. The knowledge I imbibe through critical texts can then be employed during a phase of freewriting or assembling a preliminary draft. Examples include how an essay on an artwork might be incorporated into my poem, responding to a quotation, distilling ideas in an exhibition catalogue, or the use of the paratext. If my initial draft has an academic tone, I will subsequently blend this with a personal engagement.

One case here is my poem "Portrait of Katherine Mansfield" (below). Notes were first gleaned through a visual analysis of a portrait by Anne Rice, then through commentaries by art historians and critics. This has been useful as a technique during my first phase of writing. I was inspired by the cento form, since this demonstrated how a poem could be constructed in fragments and cobbled together in a way that produces meaning and elicits new insights. This involved collating and condensing quotations and phrases, rearranging and editing them, which then became a spur for a second phase of writing. My re-ordering is inspired by collage and is a way of linking my poems with the spirit of Modernism. This is evident in my poem on Mansfield:

Portrait of Katherine Mansfield

Alongside Anne Rice

I never dreamt of coughing blood the colour

of this dress.
 Nor spending the English winters abroad. I
 only dreamt
 of ending stories abruptly, using words the
 way a cello rises
 and falls. As a girl my dreams were an atlas.
 To escape windy
 Wellington, leave on a liner, find my fictive
 home. I wrote
 of jazzy palettes, low-neck bohemian garb.
 How life could
 be all syntax, experiment. From Wilde's
 prose and a Maori
 breast, I adored the fetish, torn between
 gestalt and imago.
 My red dress fills most of the canvas. As an
 émigré, I'd share
 a cigarette, strut in a kimono. At parties, I'd
 laud suffragettes
 or write vignettes in bold strokes like the
 Fauves. Aroused,
 I'd return from the colonies, my personas
 piling like a house
 of cards. I'd be polyamorous, endless rhythm.
 I'd embody
 the fleeting and contingent. In the end, I'd
 ride a falling star.

In this instance the form can be construed as a prose poem that resists narrative. Sentences are provided as statements of equal bearing, resembling the flatness of Rice's canvas.

I began *in medias res*, suggesting no single focus. Parataxis and vivid imagery were employed to parallel the vibrant colours of the Fauvist style. I opted to experiment with dramatic monologue; I speak in the voice of Mansfield and make use of prosopopoeia, as if she were speaking from a moment after her death. I did so to subvert my lyric voice, which, by this point, I felt had become too predictable. I saw the techniques I was developing as a means of writing poems that looked like someone else had written them. This can feel like a creative achievement, and it often comes about as an effect of unknowing the artwork in the way I describe (along with relinquishing elements of my style or identity) and

integrating other sources in the process.

Particularly valuable has been initial research into images, artists, or ways of looking, which then suggested alternative points of view, a precise lexicon, or an unintentional ekphrasis by a critic, which functioned as a starting point for my poems. While, as I have said, my eyes are often directed or certain signifiers are privileged, critical writing has illuminated parts of the image that I had not yet seen or could not see. This includes criticism that reads the life of the artist or how they worked. John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" has set up a precedent in this regard, since it provides a meditation on Parmigianino's working methods and Mannerist ways of looking (Ashbery 2007 [1975]: 68-83).

My poem "Lessons on How to View a Mondrian" has similar (though less ambitious) aims. I began with a blog article on Mondrian by James Elkins, which I stripped down to prominent phrases. Next, I focused on the line, paying attention to cadence and rhythm, cutting words, and using synonyms when internal rhyme was possible. I then re-ordered lines, again looking for rhyme, but also to convey skittishness and disjunction. The process of adaptation went on until I had a first draft. Here the poem emerges out of a pre-existing text and the dynamic is triangular rather than dualistic: my poem fuses my own idiosyncratic way of looking at the image with observations imparted by the critic (Elkins 2010). I end with lines that comment on the seemingly more comprehensible activity of a painter in comparison to that of a poet, like Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" (2005 [1957]: 112):

Lessons on How to View a Mondrian

*First glance simple, though it's a
 masquerade.
 Off-white, black stripes, pale lemon. The
 canvas
 is the whole universe, with nothing beyond
 it.
 Stop and a world unfurls from a bud:*

*scarabs,
 teeth, X-rays, halos. Luscious surfaces,
 rubbed
 to a weave. At the borders of stripes, they
 aren't
 just lines where black meets white or blue or
 yellow. At the cordon you'll see how he's
 changed

 his mind. If you bend down, look up against
 the
 light, it shows the warp and weft at forty-
 five
 degrees to stripes. A closer look shows a
 stairway
 of paint. In some parts, there's been no paper
 to
 guide him. He's kept his hand from
 wavering,
 joyed in the tremble and feints. When you
 put
 up an easel in a museum, everyone talks to
 you.*

*If you sit and write a poem, nobody
 does.*

I have also been led to work this way through my reading of Anne Carson, especially in what is often called "the lyric essay". Her work "The Glass Essay", for instance, can be seen as a poetic form marked by lineation and organised in tercets and quatrains (Carson 1995: 1-38).

This form is open to experimentation and often comprises what Lia Purpura understands as "provisional responses" as opposed to certitude (consistent with the questioning attitude I set out earlier) (Purpura 2007: 97). Polyvocality and code-switching may also feature, and I value how these techniques enable a personal or objective tone, even within the same poem.

I am working, then, within an established postmodern lineage of poets writing critically and self-reflexively about images and/or the act of representation. Again, in this context, I have Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" in mind. While my poems focus on abstract or modernist artworks, I have found Ashbery's poem

useful when writing in a way that is open about my act of looking and the process by which I work. This can often occur on site, while I look at the image and record my techniques of looking in a notebook. This is important as a generative strategy, and when revised into a poem the result can resemble an *ars poetica*, one that reflects on my thoughts and concerns (e.g., "Black Square"). "Ars Ekphrasis" (inspired by a poem of that title by Paul T. Corrigan [2019]) is another example. This has Turner's late seascapes in mind, but it also serves as a condensation of my larger project.

Ars Ekphrasis

*Is my subject broad or specific? Does it
 include dreams? Does my focus extend to
 scenes of sketching by the sea & things in
 galleries? Can it evoke prints yet to exist?
 Should I say 'abstract', 'liminal', 'non-
 figurative', 'colour field'? Are such pictures
 even finished? A key question seems to be:
 Does spending long on detail suggest
 illness? Is it perverse to spend time with
 shadows? Should my poems be written
 in sittings? Do I forbid words & efface the
 trick? Is the world there to interpret? Is the
 author dead or merely asleep? Is a poem a
 provisional system? Might I write theory
 elegantly & done in a few syllables? Should I
 care if there never was a Shield of Achilles?
 Should I have fun playing with the partial &
 indistinct? Do I see cloud patterns or draw
 ovals in sand? If I find a border, is this
 happenstance?*

To conclude, I have presented different ways of looking. These are: looking as free-floating or evenly dispersed attention; observing clues in trifling details (an ear or hand for instance) rather than in composition, narrative, or subject matter; looking in a way that seeks to undo the standard dichotomies of figure/ground, centre/margins, and form/content; seeing the artwork over successive viewings; and regarding the critical discourse surrounding the image as integral to it, and using this material as a way to direct or inform the ways in which I look. I see these as vital for poets to know and practice because they work against preconceptions or prior

knowledge of what is or should be considered significant to the artwork. In other words, they can be useful in unknowing the image: to pave the way for new discoveries or highlight aspects that we might not have seen otherwise. Each tactic either subverts what we think we know or offers new perspectives as a way of inviting new modes of writing. These ways of looking can also overcome the idea that there is little to write about on the abstract image: the poet feeling stuck or limited. In such instances, they can act as a foil against the urge to reach for context or to project aspects of the self onto the artwork.

Even if the latter is seen as desirable, the techniques I describe can warp or alter habitual or unconscious lyric impulses, such as reflexive distancing from the artwork. To stay with the image, at least for a while, allowing what and how we see to shape our poem (suggesting a dialogue *with* the artwork), can also affect the eventual form; and it is important to emphasise that in my poems, form and content are not a simple dichotomy. Formal rules are linked to content to the extent that this apparent dualism breaks down into a “system” or what is often understood as “procedural form” (Conte 1991). I set out initially to write in a way that was disinterested with the assumption that this would help transform my poetic voice. Not only did I find, however, that disinterestedness was difficult to attain, but I also found that it rarely led to a successful poem. What it did result in was a first draft that involved novel insights on abstract art; it was only after I revised this, though, with the lyric in mind (personal thoughts and feelings) that it felt like a meaningful poem. Likewise, as I pursued a system of procedural rules, I would eventually — like a Möbius loop — re-inscribe aspects of my identity in the process of self-effacement. I do think though that it was first necessary to apply the techniques I have presented, and then, only then, to bring in personal themes (in the manner of a dialectic), to construct a different kind of ekphrastic poem.

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Wright has a poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her* (Eyewear), which was nominated for the John Pollard Prize. He has also been twice shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland*, *Poetry Wales*, *The North*, *Gutter*, and *London Magazine*. He has a second collection, *Exit Strategy*, which is scheduled for publication by Broken Sleep Books in January, 2025.

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