

©2012

Anne Keefe

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

WORDIMAGE:
LYRIC EKPHRASIS AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

ANNE KEEFE

A Dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program of Literatures in English

written under the direction of

Mark Doty

and approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Wordimage: Lyric Ekphrasis and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century

By Anne Keefe

Dissertation Director:
Mark Doty

My dissertation challenges how we conceptualize the relationship between verbal and visual within the ekphrastic encounter. Beginning with the modernist lyrics of H.D. and Marianne Moore and extending to the contemporary poetry of Natasha Tretheway, Sharon Dolin, Siri Hustvedt, Mark Doty, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, I argue that the voice, form, and content of the ekphrastic lyric is a productive site for understanding the poetics of aesthetic politics. Dominant theories of ekphrasis such as the rivalry between the sister arts and models of confrontation between poet and painter foreclose on the possibilities of the mode as a political space in which the differences between word and image allow poets to engage in new ways with the solitary, embodied, and viewing lyric voice. While feminist and conceptual poetics have privileged the fragmented, multi-vocal poem as the most political form for negotiating subjectivity, my focus on more humanist lyrics engaging fixed forms and lyric selves illuminates an aesthetic for the 21st century in which modern problems connecting vision and identity such as the gaze, the loss of aura, the uncanny double, and viewer passivity, become transformed into opportunities for rethinking subjectivity and desire.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Rutgers University and the Graduate Program of Literatures in English, as well as the Mellon Foundation for their support in the writing of this project. This dissertation would not have been possible without sustained intellectual conversations about these poems and ekphrasis in general with my committee members: I thank my director, Mark Doty, whose poetry has been a lifelong inspiration and whose generous and thoughtful reading of my work has helped me to articulate my thoughts as both a poet and a critic. I thank Jonah Siegel, whose work on the museum and the figure of the artist greatly influences my own understanding of how these two key concepts affect contemporary ekphrasis and whose acute reading of my manuscript has helped me to refine my ideas. I thank Harriet Davidson, whose encouragement about the worth of my insights kept me going when I was not sure where to go. And, I thank Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, whose graduate seminar on Poetry and the Visual Arts at the University of Maryland first opened my eyes to the wonder of ekphrasis, and whose study of contemporary ekphrasis has reshaped the field of ekphrastic studies for younger female scholars.

To my parents, Delia and Frank, for their unfailing support of all intellectual and artistic pursuits; to my older brother, Dan, and his wife, Susi; to Aidan and Safi; and in the memory of my younger brother, John, whose vibrant life was cut short too soon; my gratitude to all of you for your unconditional love and for getting what it means to be a Dr. Keefe! I dedicate this dissertation to you all; and, to my husband, Tyson Lewis, who spent many hours in deep conversations about de-framing on our nightly walks through the park and who understands me like no one else.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
What is wordimage? Toward a Phenomenology of the Ekphrastic Sensible	
Prologue	12
Ekphrastic Antagonism and the Medusa	
Chapter 1	28
Model Women Beyond the Frame: Feminist Ekphrasis, Beauty, and the Uncanny Pose	
Chapter 2	81
The Ecstatic Embrace of Verbal and Visual: Lyric Beyond the Ekphrastic Paragone	
Chapter 3	122
Near Distances: Ekphrastic Aura from <i>Wunderkammer</i> to Still Life	
Chapter 4	164
Visionary Ekphrasis and the Mind's Eye: Image-Making through <i>Enargeia</i> and Synesthesia	
Epilogue	200
Wordimage <i>Concordance</i> and the Poet-Artist Collaboration	
Works Cited	204

List of illustrations

Unless otherwise attributed, all images are reproduced via the Rutgers University Libraries' subscription to ARTstor Digital Library. Under the ARTstor terms and conditions, these images are only approved for use in a student dissertation. No reproduction or distribution of these images without permission from the copyright holder is allowed.

1. *Medusa* (c. 1600), Galleria degli Uffizi, 16
2. Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863-65), Musée d'Orsay, 28
3. Jean Auguste Ingres, *Mrs. Charles Badham* (1816), National Gallery of Art, 39
4. Parmigianino, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (ca. 1523-24), Kunsthistorisches Museum, 42
5. Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Back from Market* (ca. 1739), Louvre, 47
6. Edgar Degas, *The Laundresses* (1844), Musée d'Orsay, 51
7. E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912), from *Storyville Portraits*, 55
- 8 and 9. E.J. Bellocq, two untitled photographs (1911-13), The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 56
10. E.J. Bellocq, untitled photograph (1911-13), The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 57
11. E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912), from *Storyville Portraits*, 58
12. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852), Tate Britain, 63
13. E. J. Bellocq, *Storyville Portrait* (c. 1912), Williams College Museum of Art, 63
14. E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912), from *Storyville Portraits*, 69
15. Richard Diebenkorn, *Sea Wall* (1957), 96
16. Richard Diebenkorn, *Poppies* (1963), 100
17. Joseph Cornell, *Medici Slot Machine* (1942), 137
18. Joseph Cornell, *Medici Princess* (n.d.), 138
19. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled [Bébé Marie]* (1940s), The Museum of Modern Art, 140
20. Joseph Cornell, *The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)* (1943), 145
21. Albrecht Dürer, *View of the Arco Valley in the Tyrol* (1495), Louvre, 150
22. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Kiki Smith, *Concordance* (2006), Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions. Courtesy of the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, 201

Introduction

What is wordimage?

Toward a Phenomenology of the Ekphrastic Sensible

So, I continue to calculate my house, its significance as a holding place for something to look at (image,/word), building would illustrate.

--Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Safety" (*I Love Artists* 125)

In the epigraph above, contemporary poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge builds a complex metaphor comparing the "calculating" (or perhaps, imagining) of material, three-dimensional space with the two-dimensional work of word and image, the typographically visual and aural "(image,/word)."¹ In doing so, Berssenbrugge both spatially and temporally builds a real house atop the imaginary, a "holding place," a "building [that] would illustrate" in the mind's eye a visual metaphor for the affective sensation of safety that she explores in this poem. Berssenbrugge's conflation of material form and image is challenging, but in many ways representative of the 20th and 21st century poets discussed in this dissertation, all of whom engage in a radical recasting of vision and language through their reinterpretation of ekphrasis. More often mentioned than studied in depth, ekphrasis is usually defined as "poetry about art," or "writing that cites a work of art," or, merely, "description" (the exact inversion, some say, of illustration), or perhaps (as James Heffernan has it), "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (3). Yet, while ekphrasis seems deceptively straightforward, in the wake

¹ In quoting Berssenbrugge here and in the in-depth discussion of her work in Chapter 4, I follow the convention of printing her sentences as they exist with a slash (/) to indicate the original line break. While *I Love Artists* is oriented in landscape for printing such long lines, it is one of several recent works of Berssenbrugge's to abandon the convention of indenting when the margin has dictated the line break. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these line breaks are in fact deliberate and therefore need typographical indication of such. See Jonathon Skinner (np) for a further discussion of this.

of abstract expressionism's influence on visual art, contemporary poets find in the ekphrastic mode ways of investigating, celebrating, and submitting to the enigma of the visual that are far from simple. Indeed, ekphrasis draws poets to a lyric mode open to the enterprise of *ars poetica* and therefore central to the study of modern and contemporary poetry. The poets in my dissertation give voice not only to the experience of viewing, but also offer in their own poetic lexicons critical concepts that vivify the self-conscious practice of poetry in our day.

Jacques Ranciere has usefully characterized the 20th century as bringing about an "aesthetic regime of the arts" which, unlike former artistic regimes, breaks rules of hierarchicalization, crosses borders between legitimate and illegitimate subject matter, and erases divisions between high and low art: "The aesthetic mode of art is the one where the arts are no longer distributed hierarchically according to their proximity with the power of words to make us see, where instead they are equivalent as languages" ("What Aesthetics Can Mean" 24). In the case of ekphrasis, this aesthetic redistribution enables a re-vision² of both the verbal and the visual, and contains within itself the progressive political promise of democracy, thus asserting a fundamental equality that ruptures hierarchical boundaries of aesthetic forms and human subjects. Although Ranciere has theorized multiple modes of aesthetic mixing and contamination, he doesn't engage with the one paradigmatic lyrical mode that has, since Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*, enabled poets to challenge the social and aesthetic divisions that organize the perceptual field. Ekphrasis anticipates the larger transformations identified by Ranciere, becoming in the hands of modern and contemporary poets a

² I use the term "re-vision" as theorized by Adrienne Rich in her influential essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision." For a detailed reading of ekphrasis as re-vision in Rich's poems, see Loizeaux, 93-108.

particularly powerful aesthetic form for realizing the democratic promise that he theorizes. Ekphrasis ruptures the boundaries of the frames of art (the actual frame, the museum, and the boundary between subject and object), and dissolves perceptual frames that partition what can and cannot be seen and heard.

I identify the aesthetic politics of ekphrasis as played out in relation to various strategies of what I call *de-framing*. Understanding ekphrasis in this way can transform the fixed frames of the supposed battle zone between word and image into a border zone, one that has all the productive potential of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the border zone. Explored in this dissertation through a trajectory of feminist theorists including Hélène Cixious, Susan Stanford Friedman, Julia Kristeva, Anzaldúa, Adrienne Rich, and Susan Sontag, engaging with ekphrasis as a border zone opens up a critical space where gender, sexuality, power, and poetics are shaken from their original categorical and binary relationships. Allowing for fuller exploration of wonder, strange beauty, multiplicity, harmony, and dissonance, I ultimately demonstrate that ekphrasis is a kind of phenomenological research into the nature of perception. Using the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I argue that the ekphrastic poem attempts to capture the poet's "motor intentionality" as he or she gains a "maximal grip" on an object or an image, through all the senses including sound, taste, touch, and smell. I argue that the situation of ekphrasis demands a relationship between a perceiving body and an image or work of art. As such, to read ekphrasis is to read sensation-in-language, and the role of the critic is not biographical explanation or the parsing of visual description so much as a phenomenological reconstruction of the scene of sensing. Thus, ekphrastic poems act as reconstructions of specific sites of sensual/perceptual encountering. What I want to

explore is how ekphrasis should become a privileged form for phenomenological research wherein the body schema of the poet attempts to adjust itself in order to maximally access the being of the object. It is this being that shines through the ekphrastic poem as a kind of aura, or an enlivening of the senses that infuses both verbal and visual with new energy.

Contemporary Ekphrasis as wordimage

Using the logic of de-framing as both a method for the critical investigation of ekphrasis and as a description of what ekphrasis can do phenomenologically, this dissertation advances a new model of ekphrasis, which I call *wordimage*, a model of ekphrasis that breaks the mirror through which we view the Medusa in safety and requires both viewer and reader to account for the fractured discourses and multiple contexts taken up in the ekphrastic moment. The concept of wordimage is related to Jacques Ranciere's idea of the "sentence-image:"

By sentence-image, I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image. The text's part in the representative schema was the conceptual linking of actions, while the image's was the supplement of presence that imparted flesh and substance to it. The sentence-image overturns this logic. (*Future of the Image* 46)

In other words, Ranciere argues that there is no longer a predetermined, set relation between word and image. Whereas words once provided meaning for images and images passively illustrated these words, the sentence-image no longer sets the verbal and visual in a hierarchical relation of meaning and illustration. However, in the case of lyric ekphrasis, I will push beyond Ranciere's sentence-image in order to propose wordimage as a phenomenological tool for theorizing both the situation of the writerly composition of the ekphrastic poem and the situation of the readerly reception of the ekphrastic poem

as a bodily phenomena. Wordimage is itself both word and image, and eliminates the restrictive typographical distance of the slash (/) or hyphen (-) in order to allow the word “wordimage” to function as a whole in advance of understanding its parts, just as readers of an ekphrastic poem or viewers of an art object most often experience the poem or object as a whole aesthetic--verbally, visually, and viscerally--before deciphering “meaning” by means of critical, logical, or visual investigation and/or comparison with the corresponding poem or image.

Moreover, in contrast to sentence-image, which privileges the syntactical logic and unit of the sentence, I qualify ekphrasis as lyric in the title of this dissertation because wordimage is able to account for poetic lyricism, semiotic wordplay, and spatial hybridity within the ekphrastic poem. Wordimage is more than either verbal or visual, it contains the sensory excess of that very combination of word and image that exists in the space and time of the ekphrastic moment. I propose below that wordimage releases ekphrasis from the theoretical limitations of the sister arts and Medusa models while still holding true to insights gleaned from both: the intimacy from the sister arts model and the engagement with otherness from the Medusa model are conjoined in the wordimage. De-framing as a model for both the work ekphrasis can do and a theoretical model for our discussion of ekphrasis breaks through the constraints of these dominant modes of criticism and embodies the very aesthetic form of ekphrasis in wordimage, which constantly moves beyond hierarchical boundaries, searching for new relations across differences.

Wordimage is not a collapse of word into image or image into word but rather an embrace that is both intimate and distanced, revealing the imagistic excess in words and

the verbal otherness of images as perceived by the viewing body, which is, also, the body of the ekphrastic poet. As such, wordimage raises questions surrounding lyric subjectivity and the construction of the lyric voice within and through language, but ultimately requires that we understand perception as a phenomenon that anticipates the subject/object distinction. Reading the poets discussed here as an act of the critical de-framing of ekphrasis itself can reveal the power of wordimage as a lyric mode that is increasingly able to support the political and ethical commitments of contemporary authors to redistribute the organization of binary oppositions that currently define ekphrasis.

Chapter Outlines

In each of my four chapters, I examine different ekphrastic strategies used by modern and contemporary poets to explore the politics of the wordimage. Wordimage is a concordance of senses in the act of perception; it is a totality, but one always already interrupted and complicated by discordance. The difficulty of putting language to our perceptual experience demands that this element of dissonance always disrupts the whole. With this relationship between concordance and discordance scaffolding the following discussion, my first two chapters consider a coming together of the senses within and through the body; at the same time, these chapters consider a dissonance within the concordance, a problematic that interrupts the totality of our perceptual experience in order to force the poet out of the process of perception and into logic and language. The second two chapters move toward a concept of wordimage that enlivens the sensory experience of both poet and reader, and suggest why ekphrasis is such a compelling mode

for modern and contemporary poetry. Thus, while Chapter 1 considers wordimage beauty, it does so with the intrusion of the uncanny. Similarly, as Chapter 2 considers wordimage embrace and ecstasy, it does so in the midst of the confusion to the senses offered by abstraction. In Chapter 3, wordimage assemblage is both invited and complicated by the act of wondering, leading to the (re)production of ekphrastic aura. Finally, in Chapter 4, visionary wordimage is imbued with the power of *enargeia*, offering a phenomenological understanding of ekphrasis as a fully realized representation of perception, albeit within the limitations of poetic language.

In more detail, my first chapter questions the traditional understanding of beauty as simple harmony captured in the sister arts tradition of criticism. This chapter examines ekphrasis as a feminist re-historicizing strategy in Eavan Boland's poems on Chardin, Degas, and Ingres, and Natasha Tretheway's book-length sequence of poems *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), all of which seek to imagine the life or perspective of the artist's model within the image. In his influential chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other," W.J.T. Mitchell claims Medusa as "the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other." But, Mitchell admits that "All this would look quite different, of course, if my emphasis had been on ekphrastic poetry by women"—a challenge that this first chapter addresses directly. Reading Eavan Boland and Natasha Tretheway as exemplars of ekphrastic beauty gives us a new model for re-envisioning not only the relationship between the verbal and the visual but also for re-defining the relationship between self and other—a relationship that need not model itself after the Medusa's monstrous looking. While critics have struggled to reconcile the formal beauty of these poems in relationship to their content—assuming that poems about working class women and even

prostitutes should look and sound “ugly”—I argue that both poets’ discordant insistence on formal beauty through the use of regular meter, rhyme, and fixed forms is a political strategy for presenting uncanny dissonance to the reader. Encountering the extraordinary archive of images on which Tretheway’s persona of Ophelia is based enables me to show that what emerges from a practice of reading the poems alongside their referent images is the uncanny root of the beautiful itself, wordimage beauty—a model of harmonious differences that do not battle for power but rather share it.

My second chapter is an in-depth examination of an entire book-length ekphrastic project, Sharon Dolin’s *Serious Pink* (2003). Dolin’s poems address non-representational, figural, and abstract art in three groupings based on the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn, Joan Mitchell, and Howard Hodgkin. In this chapter, I challenge Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis as “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (3), arguing that especially in response to abstract art, the verbal may not seek to represent mimetically. In these poems in which lyric abstraction parallels visual abstraction, ekphrasis is a hybrid form that moves within and between the nexus of verbal-visual-aural, thus encompassing what I call wordimage embrace. Ekphrasis acts as *ars poetica*, a way of reflecting on the art of poetry through Dolin’s own image of the “ecstatic embrace.” For Dolin, the ekphrastic lyric is hybrid in terms of both space and time, an abstraction of the binary categories associated with the verbal-visual encounter, one that functions within the open visual field of the material page. Dolin’s work offers a challenge to the critic who tends to efface the look of the poem itself as a visual element. Paradoxically, the abstract image calls attention from the eye and fixes it on the ear, the sonic; one result of the abstraction of modern art is that semiotic word play enters the ekphrastic aesthetic. In this chapter

and throughout the dissertation, I argue that we need to reconsider the boundaries of ekphrastic binaries in the 21st century—moving ekphrastic criticism away from a logic of “either/or” and toward an embrace of “both/and” in the phenomenological construct of wordimage.

In my third chapter I discuss the social function of ekphrasis. Noting that Joseph Cornell’s work has drawn more ekphrastic responses from contemporary poets than any other singular artist, I argue that the poet’s enchantment with the artist resides in the intimate viewing elicited from the spectator of the box construction. Reframing found objects that have been commodified, Cornell invites the viewer to cross the boundary of the box and imagine individual, non-commodified relations to the objects he has collected. In keeping with use of the term “assemblage” for the work of collection that Cornell exemplifies, in this chapter I develop a concept of wordimage assemblage. In a study of “Nine Boxes,” a nine-part lyric sequence by contemporary poet and art critic Siri Hustvedt, I argue that wonder is the energizing force of this intimate relationship between viewer and object, a further extension wordimage that engages what she calls the “pleasure of bewilderment.” Hustvedt’s recontextualizing of the three-dimensional art object acts as a challenge to Walter Benjamin’s argument that public display of the object enforces distanced viewing and the loss of aura. Placing this poem in a history of ekphrasis that extends from modernist poet Marianne Moore’s ekphrastic poems on collection and imaginative ownership to Mark Doty’s *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), I argue that this poetics of wonder redefines commodification such that the relationship between image and viewer is a relationship of not only of wonder, but of love.

My final chapter seeks to recover a dimension of ekphrasis built into the Greek word's etymology and relating the power of description to bring the image to the mind's eye. Curiously, the critical tradition's definition of ekphrasis as an act of description never sufficiently attends to the dynamic between poem and reader. Many 20th and 21st century poets are drawn to ekphrasis because of a deeply spiritual connection with the visual that, in my interpretation, is also intimately linked with the power of verbal description to tap into a viewer's visual imaginary. In this chapter, I connect modernist poet H.D.'s use of what I call visionary wordimage with a postmodern example of the visionary in the work of contemporary poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, whose title to her new and selected poems, *I Love Artists*, suggests a different type of relationship between poet and painter that neither the Medusa model nor the sister arts model can hope to capture. H.D. anticipates the work of many contemporary ekphrastic poets for whom the boundary between ekphrastic description and perception is fluid and ever-changing. Berssenbrugge's poems perform a complex of affective responses to the visual; she acknowledges, "often the form emotion takes appears to me as a visual image." Through analysis of the use of specific works of visual art in the poems of H.D.'s *Trilogy* and her deep connection to Van Gogh as a figure of the artist in *Bid Me to Live*, I also demonstrate how H.D.'s act of translating vision in *Tribute to Freud* parallels her own ekphrastic project. H.D.'s imaginative interpretation and re-working of visual symbol opens the possibility of new spiritual meanings, especially for female mythic personas and, finally, for the female poet herself.

My dissertation concludes by considering a volume that bridges the divide between the verbal and the visual. This collaborative volume entitled *Concordance*

(2006) contains poems by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and visual artwork by Kiki Smith. I take this work to be a three-dimensional embodiment of wordimage. While my overall project exposes a trajectory of antagonism, discord, and dissonance, ultimately the concept of concordance is always in tension with that discord. There is always the possibility of the dissonant note throwing off the chord, always the possibility of the clash between things that are both familiar and strange. At the heart of the wordimage is the simultaneous act of seeing within the other the difference of the self. At a moment of post-identity politics, the power of ekphrasis to negotiate the beauty of difference in aesthetic forms and human subjects will continue to establish the mode as one central to our understanding of 21st century poetry.

Prologue

Framing: Ekphrastic Antagonism and the Medusa's Strange Beauty

Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone...

—Shelley, “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery”

There are three ways of conceptualizing ekphrasis in relation to the frame. The first traditional framing of ekphrasis contains two models—that of the “sister arts” and the Medusa model, both of which are dependent upon binaries based on the assumed antagonism of word and image. Secondly, there is the possible feminist response to the hierarchical binaries established by the Medusa and sister arts models (more fully developed in Chapter 1), in which difference moves between and even within existing binaries, inverting power dynamics and challenging hierarchies. A third method is the de-framing position of the phenomenological field of perception and the body. This is the most interesting possibility for ekphrasis, as I will argue, because it pre-exists these binaries in favor of a wholeness of perceptual experience that resists but is also enlivened by being put into language by the ekphrastic poet. In this prologue, I aim to give a background understanding of the traditional frames into which ekphrasis has been categorized. Then, through a close reading of a canonical example of the Medusa model, Shelley’s poem “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,” I will show how even within a poem traditionally read as an example of framed ekphrasis, the internal dialectic of the poem moves from rigid hierarchies (or frames of reference) to a re-framing of those very same hierarchies and, finally, to a third possibility—that of de-framing the Medusa beyond these existing models. Thus, while Shelley’s poem has been used to justify a critical reception of ekphrasis weighed down by the power dynamics

adherent to the subject/object binary, when read through a phenomenological lens, it anticipates this possibility of de-framing ekphrasis that I carry through to the 20th and 21st century poems discussed throughout the dissertation.

First, I will begin by challenging the two dominant and traditional critical frames that fail to fully conceptualize contemporary ekphrasis. The “sister arts” model of ekphrasis is traced by Jean Hagstrum in the 1958 study *The Sister Arts*.³ This model, dating back to Horace’s “ut pictura poesis” (as a painting, so a poem), is based on similarities between poetry and painting, and emphasizes how the beauty of the two genres is the same in that both use artifice to mirror the beauty of nature. This model does include antagonism, however, as the two arts, poetry and painting, are put into a relationship of sibling rivalry,⁴ and hierarchical relationships between the intellectual work of poetry in language and the manual work of painting or sculpting dating back to the Renaissance still seem to linger in the power dynamic between word and image.⁵ The problem with this model for capturing the work of contemporary ekphrasis is that it deliberately erases difference between word and image and thus becomes nostalgic for a kind of harmony across form that no longer exists for the contemporary viewer who is comfortable in a postmodern version of what Guy Debord has characterized as the “society of the spectacle,” where viewers possess an awareness that our relationships with word and image connections are always already commodified.

The second model, currently the most accepted theoretical characterization of ekphrasis, is a model of antagonism in which the Medusa takes center stage. Medusa is

³ For further discussion of Hagstrum, see chapter 2.

⁴ See, for example, Lesley Steven’s “Sister Arts or Sibling Rivalry? Cezanne and the Logic of the Senses,” *Word & Image* 24.2 (2008): 152-161.

⁵ See Hagstrum (66-70) on the renaissance origin of the paragone between poet and painter.

particularly attractive as a symbol because she embodies such distinctive contrasts.⁶ Her horror and her grace, her deadliness and her beautiful laugh, all seem to fulfill and to obliterate the desires of those who engage with her story. As Marjorie Garber and Nancy Vickers point out, Medusa has an “intrinsic doubleness:” “at once monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy, the woman with snaky locks who could turn the unwary onlooker to stone has come to stand for all that is obdurate and irresistible” (1). As such, Medusa embodies a critical tension that constantly reveals itself along with “the twin strands of feminism and misogyny that have attached themselves to retellings of the Medusa myth throughout the ages” (1). This intrinsic tension makes the Medusa a compelling and useful figure for the understanding of complex interactions between others, such as the interaction between word and image within the space of ekphrasis. It is fitting, then, that Medusa herself has come to serve as an emblem for the ekphrastic encounter between the verbal and the visual, a relationship

⁶ The beautiful and dangerous image of the Medusa has been a seductive subject for the imaginative eye of poets, painters, and many of our most influential critical theorists. A Gorgon transformed into a monster by the jealous Athena, she has simultaneously captured both the fears and desires of a wide spectrum of viewers, many of whom have gone on to appropriate Medusa as a figure for their most complex aesthetic, political and cultural concerns. Karl Marx figures the Medusa as the monster of capitalist production, lurking behind a social veil which blinds and protects, and which Marx aims to “raise...just enough to let us catch a glimpse of the Medusa head behind it” (20). Indeed, Marx figures society as a Perseus, shielded by a magic cap that we draw “down over eyes and ears as a make-believe that there are no monsters” (20). So, too, does Walter Benjamin highlight society’s weakness in the face of the beautiful monster of modernity: “The face of modernity itself blasts us with its immemorial gaze. Such was the gaze of Medusa for the Greeks” (23). Freud’s famous parallel between the Medusa’s decapitation and the fear of castration (“To decapitate = to castrate”) cast the Medusa forever as monster, her snaky hair and ability to turn to the male viewer to stone becoming the ultimate embodiment of the dangerous female other. Freud also saw Medusa’s double nature, extending his appropriation of the myth to include Medusa’s apotropaic qualities, allowing the Medusa to shield the self (as the Medusa’s head shields Athena) through a claiming of the head as a symbolic protector, for “what arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself” (“Medusa’s Head”). Conversely, in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” French feminist Hélène Cixous claims the subversive power of the Medusa image for an altogether different goal, a project of reframing the Medusa’s deadly powers as a potential source for a radically innovative feminine language. Medusa is here embodied as an agent for radical political change; in place of the horrifying and dangerous female image Cixous claims a Medusa who is beautiful and laughing. See Chapter 1 for further discussion of Cixous’ re-visioning of the Medusa, itself an act of reframed ekphrasis.

that is often an expression of gender difference, desire, and anxiety. James A. W. Heffernan identifies “the Medusa model” within ekphrasis as a moment when “the conflict between word and image becomes a conflict between male authority and the female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten” (108). Particular poems engage in this model when staging “a duel between male and female gazes” (1). W.J.T. Mitchell claims the Medusa as “the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other who threatens to silence the poet’s voice and fixate his observing eye” (*Picture Theory* 172). Her dual nature as both “horror” and “grace” allows her to embody a duality of desire inherent in the ekphrastic project of representing the visual image in language.

Essentially, the Medusa model captures the male poet’s anxiety and desire to control (and to silence or to speak in place of) the dangerously seductive female image—a relationship of conflict reworked as a hierarchical antagonism between the verbal and the visual. The poems treated by many critics consider women only as visual objects within the art, as seductive or monstrous Medusas, never as speaking, writing, empowered Medusas.⁷ The problem with this model’s emphasis on difference is that it not only overlooks the diversity of contemporary poets writing ekphrasis, but also negates a de-hierarchicalized collaboration between word and image and thus ignores the possibility of beauty—a kind of harmony that is accepting of difference—as a political strategy. In my first chapter, I will demonstrate how feminist poets have countered these initial frames with their own structures of re-framing, captured in the border-crossing abilities of the Medusa herself. However, I will ultimately suggest an alternative model

⁷ The ekphrastic lineage that Heffernan traces, for example, establishes the canonical examples of ekphrasis from major male poets. Poetry by Homer, Virgil, Dante, Ovid, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Williams, Auden, and, finally, Ashbery, carves out a useful historical arc in the history of the tradition, but ignores female-authored ekphrasis, except for passing references to Sexton and Rich.

that synthesizes yet moves beyond the sister arts and the Medusa model and beyond feminist re-framing of those models. This model of de-framing ekphrasis in order to access wordimage will accept difference while finding in difference not antagonism, but embrace, not anxiety but love.

I begin with a reading of this poem by Shelly because this is an emblematic poem for ekphrastic studies, often used as a canonical example of the Medusa model that could not be more fitting since the subject of the painting is Medusa herself (see fig. 1) but, as I will demonstrate, this poem actually anticipates some of the major concerns of modern and contemporary ekphrasis in its relationship between the speaking “I” and the seeing eye,⁸ its concern with gendered power and the gaze, and its turn toward ekphrasis as a way to investigate wonder and spirituality. The poem captures a complex act of perception, but is especially unique in that it is taken from an unfinished transcript that leaves gaps in the diction at crucial moments of description, thus opening up an imaginative space to consider the possibility of multiple interpretations.⁹



Figure 1: *Medusa* (c. 1600), Galleria degli Uffizi

⁸ I develop this thread on lyric subjectivity further in my discussion of the lyric speaker in Sharon Dolin's work. See Chapter 2.

⁹ For this reading, I use the transcription of this poem as reproduced by Heffernan in *Museum of Words*, 119-20. It is also important to note, also, that while this painting is originally attributed to Da Vinci, it was later discovered to be the work of an anonymous Flemish painter.

As this reading will model, one thread of the dissertation concerns itself with the simultaneous consideration of the ekphrastic poem as a lyric poem. This stilling of the intellect, the “turning to stone” captured in the Medusa model is complicated by the poet’s turning inward toward intimate reflection. Unlike Mitchell who, for example, reads the voice of Shelley’s famous “On The Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” as “an anonymous, invisible, and passive poet who has himself been imprinted by Medusa” (173), we can read the speaker as a lyrical voice, a persona of the poet whose raw and immediate confusion over the simultaneous desire to look and fear of looking at the Medusa is soothed and protected within the space of the poem through the act of language expression. More than a mere mediator between image and word, the ekphrastic poet engages intimately with the art object and, even when facing a dangerous and complex image, reveals the phenomenological process of perception as mediated by language, which, I will argue, is itself a method of constructing lyric subjectivity. It is not the Medusa who stills the intellect in the moment of encounter between poet and art object, but rather the act of perceiving itself, a pre-linguistic process during which we halt and stutter as we attempt to translate our multiple sensory impressions into language. The ekphrastic poem, then, becomes a space in which the poet takes time to shape language not as mere description of the immediate encounter, but as a mediated desire of the self to express both the beauty and difficulty of the encounter.

Notably, the very first stanza of the poem plays with a double meaning, which initiates the poem’s performance of anxiety over the Medusa’s ability to be multiple, to mean doubly. The first pun on lying reveals the poet’s distrust and fear of the image as

the decapitated Medusa's head lies, both as it rests on the ground and as it tricks the spectator with what appears to be an active and lively gaze:

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
 Upon the cloudy mountain-peak supine;
 Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
 Its horror and its beauty are divine. (ll. 1-4)

The landscape in the background of the painting, "seen tremblingly," suggests that the poet's body trembles in response to the painting's horror and beauty. To identify the horror and beauty embodied by the Medusa as divine hints at the poet's engagement with the lyric as a response to awe. Casting the Medusa as divine elevates her to the unexplained mystery of the gods, allowing the poet to perceive her from a safe distance at which he need not have all the answers. The lie continues as the lips and eyelids reveal a life force and indeed a beauty that death has not erased:

Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie
 Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
 Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
 The agonies of anguish and of death. (ll. 5-8)

In these lines, the subject of the sentence, "loveliness," is almost lost in the inverted poetic syntax. The arrangement of the sentence seems to allow, if only for a moment, that the reader see both lips and eyelids as lying, so that those focal points that usually captured the male poet's gaze and were dwelt upon in praise of beauty are here cast as deceptive and dangerous, capturing a "fiery and lurid" struggle, exposing "the agonies of anguish and of death." It would seem, then, that the Medusa's lie, her subversion of the truth, is her uncanny ability to resist death even as she lies dead.

The second stanza complicates further the Medusa's multiplicity as the lyric voice qualifies the source of the disturbing nature of the image in her beauty, rather than, as we might expect, her horror:

Yet, it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone.
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
Are graven, till the characters be grown
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,
Which humanize and harmonize the strain. (ll. 9-16)

There has been much discussion over the antecedent to the "it" in the first line of this stanza,¹⁰ whether the "it" is the Medusa's head as carried over from the previous stanza, or the shift of the "yet" forcing the reader to consider the image from a different position. I would argue for the second reading, that the "it" shifts from the head, as the voice indicates. This "it" is now the thing that disturbs. We hear the lyric voice's inner struggle to identify what it is that arrests the spirit. The "it" question greatly determines the reading of the gazer's identity in line 10; critics such as John Hollander read the gazer as the spectator of the painting, while James Heffernan radically combats this with a reading of the gazer as the Medusa's head. Heffernan supports this interpretation with the claim that only the Medusa's head can gaze in safety, since all other spectators would be subject to being turned to stone, including the poet (121). I would argue that the poem engages multiple gazers. While I agree that the Medusa herself does gaze in the first stanza, in the second, I read the gazer as a regular spectator of the poem. I differ from Hollander in this interpretation, though, in that I see the ekphrastic poet in a third position—not placed as mere spectator as he or she turns to stone and not embodying the

¹⁰ See Heffernan 120-121 and John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit*, 143-145.

position of the Medusa's head, but standing in a third relation to the painting through the work of the poem. That work of the poem is to throw "the melodious hue of beauty" over the relationship between gazer and image, to "humanize and harmonize the strain." This anticipates the work of sound in the synesthetic experience of ekphrasis. In this moment, when the poem forces the reader's gaze to the "horror," it simultaneously seeks to soothe that dissonance with sweet sound—sound that both turns the monster human, and turns a dissonant clash between beauty and horror into harmony, what Mei-mei Berssenbrugge might call "concordance" (see Epilogue).

The third stanza shifts to give agency to the snakes themselves, which "mock/ The torture and the death within, and saw/ The solid air with many a ragged jaw" (ll. 22-24). Then, in the forth stanza, Medusa's companion creatures are introduced, emphasizing her dark, inhuman nature. These creatures, the "poisonous eft" and a "ghastly bat" are able to view the Medusa without being turned to stone. While the eft "peeps idly," the bat seems driven insane as it "flit[s] with mad surprise/ Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft" (ll. 28-29). It is in the final two stanzas, however, in which Shelley acknowledges the thrill inherent in looking on the Medusa's dangerous image:

'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
 For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
 Kindled by that inextricable error,
 Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
 Become a [] and ever-shifting mirror
 Of all the beauty and the terror there— (ll. 33-38)

The "[] and ever-shifting mirror" —or—the space of the ekphrastic poem is described in that enchantingly unfinished phrase; at times revealing the terror of the image, at other times reflecting the Medusa's uncanny beauty, and in still other moments, forcing the lyric speaker to face his own anxieties in response to the ever-shifting and double

meaning of the Medusa image. The blank space represents visually what cannot be said. As such, it breaks the frame of our lyric expectations, introducing the unknown and unsaid into the poem. While Mitchell and Grant F. Scott see Shelley's poem as an example of "ekphrastic hope," "a gesture that eliminates the borders between feminine object and male observer as well as between the senses" (Scott 35, see also Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 152), I would argue that while the poem does expose these borders, it does little to erase them. Moreover, the desire to erase these boundaries, which allows Scott to claim that "In the end, Shelley makes Medusa's defiance his own" (41), is itself an act of protective shielding. The boundaries are not erased "by inscribing the image of the Medusa on [the poem's] own text, writing it into the very language of the stanzas" (Scott 18), but rather intensified and multiplied by the "[] and ever-shifting mirror." While Shelley's poem on the Medusa is perhaps different from other framed examples of ekphrasis in that the anxiety over the image's multiple meanings is not repressed, it still maintains the frame of male poet responding to anxiety over a disconcerting and dangerous female image by appropriating that image and controlling its relationship with the reader. In fact, its very tension is that it insists on the Medusa's *beauty* as the seductive danger, rather than her hideousness. However, in a strategic move that foreshadows the kind of re-framing feminist poets do with ekphrasis (as discussed in Chapter 1), Shelley uses the space of the ekphrastic poem as a shield for the lyric I/eye to view the Medusa in safety, which enables that speaker to see not only the Medusa as both monster and divine beauty, but to point towards her ability to move fluidly across the boundary between life and death:

It is a trunkless head, and on its feature
Death has met life, but there is life in death,

The blood is froze—but unconquered Nature
 Seems struggling to the last—without a breath
 The fragment of an uncreated creature. (ll. 44-48)

In these lines, while the lyric voice still inhabits a framed defensive position, he is able to distinguish “the fragment of an uncreated creature,” a Medusa who appears living, empowered and beautiful as she simultaneously lies frozen and stiff, a headless monstrosity. In sighting/siting the Medusa as “uncreated creature,” Shelley’s ekphrasis on the Medusa, while working with framing and reframing strategies, also suggests the possibility of de-framing the Medusa.

The most accepted modern definitions of ekphrasis suggest that ekphrasis is, at the very least, an act of confrontation between two entities with discrete and limited borders. These categories of art, even while mingling on the “wrong” side of the divide within the space of an ekphrastic poem, somehow always maintain a rigidly drawn boundary between themselves according to these definitions. I suggest that we need to allow for more fluid boundaries between the verbal and visual in order to move beyond this insistence on antagonism and open up the multiple possibilities of understanding ekphrasis which have been repressed in the repeated critical emphasis on binaries such as verbal/visual, male/female, self/other, hetero/homo, gaze/glance, speaking/silent, time/space, and so on. To move beyond antagonism of verbal/visual means that we must use ekphrasis as an entry point for investigating the phenomenological field below and before the initiation of such conceptual binaries. This is the interactive, embodied and embedded space/time of perception itself, the moment when we are face-to-face with the Medusa.

From Reframing to De-Framing: The Medusa as Border-Crosser

Grant F. Scott's assumption that as readers of Shelley's poem we are all "prospective Perseuses" (27) highlights that the appropriations of the Medusa myth discussed thus far are not only male-authored, but envision primarily male viewers as those facing the Medusa. The myth itself, however, suggests further possibilities of symbolism for the figure of the Medusa, that of the figure of revolt and protection of the self. In considering the ways in which ekphrasis engages with the lyric subject, John Berger's argument in *Ways of Seeing* is especially helpful for understanding the relationship between word, image, and voice. He argues, "Seeing comes before words....It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (7). This unsettled gap between what we see and what we know, what we perceive and what we are able to name through language, is precisely the space and time of perception captured in contemporary ekphrasis. This is also the phenomenological experience we cannot name because we experience the perception as a totality before language. To ascribe language to our sensation is to partition the sensible, to force it into a syntactical and denotative logic when it pre-exists that logic in our bodily experience, even pre-existing a relationship between subject and object. It is a space to which we have applied binary constructions, frames, and categories to try to bridge the gap between language and experience, and yet it emerges as a space unable to be contained within these prior frames, a pre-conceptual space of perception that defies the very categories used to explain it. In this way, the phenomenological perception of the object connects with

feminist theories of border-crossing and hybridity, allowing us to move beyond the frame of ekphrastic antagonism into a border zone that is both between and within.

The metaphoric possibilities of the Medusa capture imagistically a goddess with the power to explode categories, to cross borders, and to subvert hegemonic power dynamics. Indeed, the Medusa herself can be envisioned as a kind of border-crosser, with her double nature mirroring the qualities of border crossing as feminist Chicana poet and critic Gloria Anzaldúa has defined it. As Anzaldúa points out, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (25). These are the kind of dividing lines that exist between word and image in a traditional framing of ekphrasis. However, “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa 25). Envisioning ekphrasis as a borderland opens up the possibility of new ways of seeing ekphrasis that do not depend on antagonistic struggle between word and image nor on a harmonious cohesion of the sister arts. Ranciere’s partitioning of the sensible is also important in this respect. A partition is not simply a border but also the *sharing* of a border, and thus a space of potential disruption and transformation.

Susan Stanford Friedman outlines for feminism “a new geographics,” a metaphor of mapping that “figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges” (19). An emphasis on intersection, on what she describes as “the ceaseless change of fluidity” is currently lacking in criticism on ekphrasis. Borders,

according to Friedman, embody a dialectical process. Like the Medusa, they mean doubly, containing their opposites:

Borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection. . . . But borders also specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrecognition. They also invite transgression, dissolution, reconciliation, and mixing. Borders protect, but they also confine. (3)

Friedman's argument for locational feminism uses a visual metaphor to approach multiple locations by mapping and border-crossing. When applied to ekphrasis this locational method allows not only for re-framing of the Medusa model as the poets in Chapter 1 do by inverting the traditionally framed power dynamics, but also provides a model for *de-framing* ekphrasis altogether by conceptualizing it as an open space, a partition in which the verbal and visual commingle, conjoin, and interact in the moment of holistic perception, a symbiotic type of relationship that is neither harmonious nor antagonistic but rather energetic.¹¹

Thus, while Heffernan rightly claims that the Medusa model "simply will not work as a master theory of ekphrasis," he nevertheless maintains that the Medusa model should be "reconceived as a *strand* in the fabric of ekphrasis, one of several ways in which ekphrasis manifests the antagonism of word and image" (109, emphasis original). I take issue with Heffernan's insistence on maintaining the characterization of ekphrasis as an antagonistic struggle between word and image. The consistent application of the Medusa model's frame limits the analysis of desire and subjectivity to essentialist constructions of gender and heteronormative desire. Contemporary ekphrasis reveals a more complex intersection of identities and subjectivities—one that cannot be reduced to

¹¹ For the most part, critical treatment of ekphrasis and gender remains mired in the confrontational struggle of the Medusa model, despite many examples of feminist "re-framed" ekphrasis in which this model is inverted in favor of a revision much like Cixous's (see Chapter 1).

a simple binary of male/female or self/other and thus requires critical models that do not focus solely on gender as the determining factor of analysis. Moreover, when looking at the relationship between verbal and visual we must not insist on fixed boundaries or strict categories, which tend to reinforce hierarchical rankings between art forms and repress moments in which the verbal and visual work together in close relationships, crossing borders and expressive modes, often redefining the nature of the border or eliminating the frame completely. Heffernan and Mitchell's insistence on the antagonism between word and image consistently reduce ekphrasis to a battle zone. Applying theories such as Anzaldúa's border crossing, Ranciere's notion of the politics of the aesthetic, and Friedman's locational feminism to the study of ekphrasis can expand the fixed boundaries of this battle zone into a border zone, a liminal, de-framed space and de-framing time that will allow for fuller exploration of the wide variety of relationships of wonder within contemporary ekphrasis.

I end this prologue, then, with a turn toward the phenomenology of perception as illuminated by Merleau-Ponty. This brief reading of Merleau-Ponty's own ekphrastic discussion of Cezanne serves as an introduction to a broader conceptualization of the situation of ekphrasis as an act of perception. Merleau-Ponty argues that Cezanne's "painting was paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement" (12). He goes on to explain, "In giving up the outline Cezanne was abandoning himself to the chaos of sensations" (13). The painter's abandonment of the self in the moment of perception moves beyond/before the subject object dichotomy,

what Merleau-Ponty calls “the painter who sees against the painter who thinks” (13) in order to privilege “the process of expressing” (17). Ekphrasis is also a process of expressing and, in this dissertation, the phenomenological process is what links poets across and within chapter boundaries. While Ponty says, “only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual rebirth of existence” (18), this dissertation takes up the two threads of lyricism and strangeness in the first half of the discussion. In the second half of the dissertation, the process of perceiving/expressing is traced back to desire—the need submit to chaos and wonder, and the desire to re-create imagining within the reader. At the same time, poets across chapters—Boland, H.D., and Moore—give us examples of Ponty’s distinction between logical thinking in language (which these poets explore through scientific and geometric ways of looking) and the “fevered” experience of language:

What [the painter] expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought.... ‘Conception’ cannot precede ‘execution.’ There is nothing but and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said. (19)

Similarly, all of the poets discussed in this dissertation depend on as sense of the figure of the artist. Ponty argues, “The truth is that [Cezanne’s] work to be done called for this life....we are beyond causes and effects; both come together in the simultaneity of an eternal Cezanne who is at the same time the formula of what he wanted to be and what he wanted to do” (20). In what Jonah Siegel has called “The conflation of the arts with their makers” (146), modern and contemporary poets of ekphrasis are drawn to the figure of the artist as a model for the perceiving body. In this project, we will see poets who participate in this conflation in order to push the limits of perception in language.

Chapter 1

Model Women Beyond the Frame:

Feminist Ekphrasis, Beauty, and the Uncanny Pose

“Try that posture, it’s hardly languor” (l. 2), commands Olympia, the speaker of Margaret Atwood’s 1993 ekphrastic poem. “Manet’s Olympia” poem goes on to characterize the “indoor sin” (l. 10) of the prostitute in her own bed and the discomfort of the model’s posing body, all artifice and sharp angles. Then there is the gaze of the maid who, according to Atwood, looks on the nude form judgmentally thinking in “an invisible voice balloon: *Slut*” (l. 13). But, Atwood wants her reader to see something the late-twentieth or twenty-first century viewer may miss, something that captures what was so subversive about this infamous Manet painting (see fig. 2) in the first place.



Figure 2: Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863-65), Musée d’Orsay

As Janet Malcolm puts it, “Manet’s *Olympia* shocked viewers at the Salon of 1865 because instead of a rosy, complaisant nymph rising from the waves surrounded by cherubs, it showed a pale, self-assured prostitute lying on her unmade bed” (12). Indeed, Atwood asks the contemporary reader¹² to:

Consider the body,
unfragile, defiant, the pale nipples
staring you right in the bull’s-eye.
Consider also the black ribbon
around the neck. What’s under it?
A fine red threadline, where the head
was taken off and glued back on.
The body’s on offer,
but the neck’s as far as it goes. (ll. 14-22)

Here, Atwood’s biting witty reversal of the gaze allows the model’s nipples to “star[e] you right in the bull’s-eye,” forcing you, the reader, to consider the body’s very materiality, a thing defiantly “on offer” but only as far as the neck. The uncanny head that’s been “taken off and glued back on” like the head of a broken doll, becomes both object and agent by the end of the poem, but not before Atwood has identified another viewer of the image, “someone else in this room./ You, Monsieur Voyeur” (ll. 26-17). Here, the second person addresses to the reader become the “you” of the voyeur, a “you” that encompasses the gaze of the male artist and our own looking as readers/viewers in one final gesture of defiance. Perhaps not surprisingly, that gesture is speech:

*I, the head, am the only subject
of this picture.
You, Sir, are furniture.
Get stuffed. (ll. 30-33)*

¹² A viewer much less likely than the 1865 Salon viewers to feel shock at the nude woman who stares back from the painting.

In speaking back to the gaze (here gendered male), this poem is an inversion of what has been called “the Medusa model” of ekphrasis. The Medusa model casts the image as still, silent and feminized, offered up for the taking of the male poet’s verbal control. In a study that looks at male-authored, canonical examples of ekphrasis, James A. W.

Heffernan identifies the Medusa model as a moment when “the conflict between word and image becomes a conflict between male authority and the female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten” (108). Atwood works directly against this model by inverting its power dynamics to overtly challenge traditionally gendered representations and rewrite the subaltern into a position of empowerment, here by giving voice to the silent posing woman as she imagines Olympia telling the viewer/voyeur to “get stuffed.” As Natasha Tretheway, one contemporary author of feminist ekphrasis discussed below, has put it, “Historically, women’s roles in the service of art is [sic] clear in how mad people were at Victorine Meurant, who was the model who posed for Manet’s ‘Olympia.’ Rather than really getting mad at Manet, people got mad at her because she was this brazen hussy who dared stare out of Manet’s painting” (Haney 28).

While “daring to stare” is perhaps not so shocking for the 21st century viewer, I argue here that the situation of contemporary ekphrasis in a digital age, an age in which images are freely available via the internet, media, public and even virtual museums, is unique in its demand that readers simultaneously read the poem as we re-read/view the image. Because of this overwhelming availability of images, creating/recreating shock itself becomes a tool of the ekphrastic poet to fix the reader’s attention on the image in question—that is, to force the reader into taking the time to reconsider his or her own perception, as Atwood does in making what may seem like a traditional silent nude to

many viewers into a strange, disturbing, and funny encounter—an uncanny broken doll, an angry speaking picture, a defiant and sarcastic woman in full possession and embodiment of the meaning of her posed body.

Through an analysis of Eavan Boland’s ekphrastic poems on Ingres, Chardin, Degas, and Natasha Tretheway’s book-length ekphrastic project *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, I will suggest a new method for understanding ekphrasis and its relationship to feminist poetics by demonstrating how these female poets recast the confrontational model of poet versus painter by highlighting or focusing in on inconsistencies, illusions, or the uncanny—that which is simultaneously familiar and strange—within the representation. These poets use ekphrasis as a political tool to teach readers a new way of seeing the image that directly confronts genre hierarchies and power dynamics between subjects. As discussed in the Prologue, the confrontational Medusa model has its roots in social hierarchies that assigned poetry a high art value over and above the value of the image. This model also has a social dimension that painters began to challenge during the Renaissance. As Jean Hagstrum puts it, “poetry...had after all come into the curriculum through the door of rhetoric and logic and had never suffered from the stigma that its practitioner dirtied his hands in physical labor [as does the painter]....In an age of supreme achievement in painting and sculpture it was inevitable that the tradition of treating its practitioners as social and intellectual inferiors should be roundly challenged and finally destroyed” (67). While the contest between poetry and painting may seem resolved, it lingers, as I have argued above, in critical receptions of ekphrastic poetry. Moreover, as critics have convincingly seen the ekphrastic “confrontation” between verbal and visual as a way to

understand the confrontation between others in a social world, their arguments have largely ignored female-authored ekphrasis.

This chapter illuminates what ekphrasis can achieve politically when the subject traditionally located in the position of other speaks within the ekphrastic poem or as the ekphrastic poet. As Barbara K. Fischer argues, in reference to W.J.T. Mitchell's claim that "All this would look quite different, of course, if my emphasis had been on ekphrastic poetry by women" (181), that when female poets write ekphrastic poems, those poems do much more than "look different" (147). Turning to Eavan Boland and Natasha Tretheway as the focus of this chapter, we can see not only the limitations of the sister arts and Medusa models for understanding contemporary ekphrasis written by women, but also the possibility of a third model, a model of ekphrastic beauty that is neither simply a retreat into the fantasy of essentialist natural beauty nor the antagonism of opposing forces. I will show that what emerges from a contemporary practice of reading the poems alongside their referent images is the uncanny root of the beautiful itself, a model of harmonious differences that do not battle for power but rather share it.

Reading Boland and Tretheway as exemplars of ekphrastic beauty gives us a new model for re-envisioning not only the relationship between the verbal and the visual but also for re-defining the relationship between self and other—a relationship that need not model itself after the Medusa's monstrous looking, in which the mirror of sameness is the only safe option, but rather an uncanny relationship of difference and sameness within the dyad. Exploring difference and especially the uncanny, these authors use two aesthetic strategies: first, a political reframing of the Medusa model, working within antagonism in order to reveal the uncanny at its heart as does Atwood; or second, de-framing both the

sister arts model and the Medusa model so as to avoid assuming the priority of one over the other, and instead working beyond these individual frames through a reconstruction of beauty itself.

By employing these strategies, both poets emphasize the discomfort of the pose as an uncanny performance of not only female subjectivity, but of race and class identity. Moreover, both poets strategically use poetic form to assign a high art value to the unwritten, ignored, and condemned domestic activities of women, and even, in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, to prostitution itself. Boland's poems suggest the argument that rewriting the Medusa model is about more than upstaging the "duel between male and female gazes" (Heffernan 1)—rather, re-framing ekphrasis embodies a strategically essentialist political act that aims to give voice to the silent, erased histories of women whose images lack contextualization for contemporary viewers. However, even as Tretheway's *Bellocq's Ophelia* engages with dynamics inherent in the Medusa model by re-framing looking and desire along traditional lines, it also goes beyond the Medusa model in order to de-frame and disrupt the system of binaries that has become the dominant narrative of ekphrasis. By providing multiple counter-narratives that question the truth of what we think we see, these poems trouble our tendency to limit and categorize the relationship between verbal and visual as they push us to revision gender, race, and class binaries, revise assumptions about desire, and embrace hybridity and multiplicity rather than reinscribing the traditional dyads of verbal/visual, time/space, male/female, speaking/silent, gazing/glancing, desire/resistance, self/other—those dual relationships often thought to "duel" within the ekphrastic moment.

The distinction I make between reframing and de-framing here might be best explained by referring to the “methodologies of the oppressed” explained by Chela Sandoval as representative of “a late-twentieth-century shift in conceiving of power away from a vertical to a horizontal plane” (73). This shift replaces metaphors of “subordinate” or “elevated” with “horizontal alternatives that describe oppositional movement occurring ‘from margin to center,’ ‘inside to outside,’ that describe life in the ‘interstices’ or ‘borderlands,’ or that center the experiences of ‘travel,’ ‘diaspora,’ ‘immigration,’ ‘positionality,’ or ‘location’ on the grid” (73). Thus, the difference between reframing and de-framing is that reframing merely inverts a vertical construction of difference by relocating the object traditionally in the subordinate position into a position of power, often as the subject/speaker of the poem. De-framing, however, explores a horizontal construction of difference, which I will analyze here using a methodology put forth by Susan Stanford Friedman as “locational feminisim,” a method that allows us to trace the borderland between word and image within the ekphrastic poem. Thus, when poets engage in reframing, they enter into a discussion with the tradition of the gaze and tend to speak (or stare) back within that framework. However, at other times, feminist ekphrasis explodes that framework and moves into de-framing its own boundaries. The emphasis on daring to stare, even if these female poets are unaware of the Medusa model as such, demonstrates that they actively participate in a conversation about the lack of agency for the female subject within the vertical framework of power that adheres to the traditional male gaze.

If, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, the female subject is unable to act under the gaze of the male viewer’s construction of her, then these poets insist on agency against or

within that gaze.¹³ So, “looking away to look back,” “whatever you do don’t turn,” “Train yourself not to look back”—all of these warnings from within the poems themselves become symptoms of the female poet’s awareness of the dangers of this exchange and her own anxiety in creating a project that provides a different construction of the subject both historical and imaginative.

In contrast to these warnings—which read as echoes of a lineage of women taught to politely keep their knees together, to stand up straight and suck in their stomachs, to speak only when spoken to—the act of giving voice makes the ekphrastic poem a compelling tool for the political projects of so many female poets, from Christina Rossetti’s “In an Artist’s Studio” to the poem with which I began by Atwood, both of which cut through our perception of beauty in order to complicate our historical understanding of the painting and force us to reconsider the contextual situation of the woman depicted. This prosopopeia, or giving voice to the silent art object, often emphasizes historical details of the model’s life (such as in Rossetti’s poem which catalogs the many recurrences of Elizabeth Siddall’s face in D.G. Rossetti’s canvases) or imagined thoughts of rebellion and distrust of the male artist/voyeur (as we have seen in Atwood’s “Manet’s Olympia”) in a project of re-historicizing famous works of art by providing a new perspective and a counter-hegemonic narrative to challenge the reader’s

¹³ See Mulvey’s canonical essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. 14-26. Mulvey’s essay establishes the gaze as a mode of looking that is tied up in gendered power relations. She begins by discussing the female as the representation of the castration threat as well as the figure of the symbolic. She also discusses Freud’s scopophilia and the pleasure in the act of looking both narcissistically and voyeuristically. In the second part of the essay, Mulvey turns to film to identify ways in which the camera directs the gaze toward the female body. Mulvey refers to the viewer as male throughout this essay (though she returns in a later essay to address issues of the female viewer) and emphasizes the way that he becomes active through the movement of the camera and identification with the male hero of the story. Meanwhile, the female is passive as an erotic object for both the characters in the story and the viewer in the theater.

understanding of the artwork. This project of rewriting our interpretations of the image is not unlike the feminist strategy of Hélène Cixous's 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," which rewrites a monstrous Medusa as "beautiful and laughing." Cixous's prosopopoeia of the Medusa inverts the traditional dynamics between male-authored voice and silent female image.

Asserting that women have been convinced by social constructions that their voices are monstrous—"Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives...hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" (2040)—Cixous invents a voice for the Medusa that will encourage other women to speak: "woman has never had her turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (2043). Here, envoicing the Medusa changes what was imagined to be a silent scream into an empowered laugh, and that laugh will be the impetus for social change, a laugh that requires these poets to allow their model women not only to dare to stare, but to speak. Further, it is particularly important that the way these two feminist poets speak is both beautiful and accessible. While many feminist poets have followed Theodore Adorno's lead in assuming that only the most radical poetic forms can capture the political truth of suffering or oppression,¹⁴ both Tretheway and Boland write in traditional, fixed forms, regular meter, and distinctly poetic syntax and diction which leads to a highly-crafted artifice of beauty. Critics have struggled with what appears to be a contradiction in that the beauty of form does not mimic the ugliness of the content, and

¹⁴ As Adorno argues in his 1977 essay "Commitment" (*Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 177-196), "The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people...contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it" (189).

yet, following the method of Gyatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism"¹⁵ we can read these poems more accurately as examples in which poets risk essentialism by assuming the voice of the unknown model with the conscious strategy of allowing the subaltern to speak, an overtly political act cast as beautiful and accessible poetry.

In light of the political project that these poems take on, W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of ekphrastic indifference or ambivalence is more useful than the fear and anxiety which traditionally mark the Medusa model, as it leaves open the possibility that the ekphrasis itself, like the laugh of the Medusa, might engage in some process of change:

Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with others. Ekphrastic indifference maintains itself in the face of disquieting signs that ekphrasis may be far from trivial and that, if it is only a sham or illusion, it is one which, like ideology itself, must be worked through. This 'working through' of ekphrastic ambivalence is...one of the principal themes of ekphrastic poetry, one of the things it does with the problems staged for it by the theoretical and metaphysical assumptions about media, the senses and representation that make up ekphrastic hope, fear, and indifference. (*Picture Theory* 163-164)

Mitchell's notion of "working through" ekphrastic ambivalence suggests that the space of the ekphrastic poem can lead the reader to consider a change in their viewing assumptions. Contemporary ekphrasis reflects such a practice, especially when poets appear to seek out complex or confusing images as sources for their ekphrasis. I'd like to suggest that ekphrasis of the strange, the uncanny, or the disturbing image is a particularly compelling subject for politically committed poets because, like the abstract image's inviting openness to interpretation (which will be discussed in chapter 2), the

¹⁵ In *Outside the Teaching Machine*, Spivak defines strategic essentialism as "The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker, or the name of a nation [which] is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized" (3).

uncanny image has the effect of drawing the viewer into its oddity and disturbance.¹⁶ The viewer, ultimately, wants to make “sense” of the uncanny image. Through an ekphrasis of the uncanny, the poet can engage the viewer-as-reader in two major ways: first, by providing a construction that explains the disconcerting unknown (a re-framing explanation that smooths over whatever is in excess of the ekphrastic poem’s new narrative about the image), and/or second, by forcing the reader of the poem into a confrontation with the uncanny image, allowing the uncanny to take over the frame in a face-to-face engagement with disturbance that does not allow the viewer to look away.

Model Women and the Uncanny Pose

Eavan Boland’s revisionist re-framing of ekphrasis involves a verbal interpretation of the visual which forces the reader into a confrontation with the uncanny and opens up a space in which the work of the poem transforms our viewing in order to *make* the image strange. For example, while the poem “Woman Posing” is still staged as a confrontation between word and image, it elicits a larger and more disturbing exposure of the strange (dis)connect between who Boland imagines Mrs. Badham to have been as a historically real person and who she appears to be based on the posed positioning and representation of her body by Ingres. That is, the image and text appear to connect only through a *disconnect*. The experience of the poem is an uncanny experience neither of mirror reflection nor of antagonism (as the two modes of ekphrasis would dictate), but rather of a strange neighboring relationship between word and image. The poem

¹⁶ Indeed, Lacan’s definition of the gaze found in “Anamorphosis” comes out of an ekphrasis discussion of Holbein’s anamorphic image *The Ambassadors* (1533), which required that the viewer look at the painting askance in order to see the uncanny skull that juts out of the portrait only when viewed from the “wrong” angle.

challenges traditional definitions of ekphrasis by exposing rather than repressing disturbing slippages between reality and representation. The drawing of Mrs. Badham that Boland reacts to is not overtly or immediately recognizable as “uncanny” portraiture (see fig. 3). However, when we look more closely at this image, we begin to notice some visual disconnects—the softness and delicate rendering of the face in contrast with the more rapid and impressionistic sketched form of the body and clothing, the parlor chair set not against the studio backdrop but against a view of Rome.



Figure 3: Jean Auguste Ingres, *Mrs. Charles Badham* (1816), National Gallery of Art

Still, it is not until we encounter Boland's poem that we really begin to question the nature of the representation. We can think of *this* ekphrasis as a mode in which the poet, like Hoffman (the author creating the story) in Freud's analysis of the uncanny, is in a position of power over the image, deciding whether or how to expose the repressed strangeness of the image. The reader of the ekphrastic poem, then, is subject to the writer's, and in this case, the poet's interpretation. As Freud puts it:

To the writer, however, we [the readers] are infinitely tractable; by the moods he [sic] induces and the expectations he arouses in us he can direct our feelings away from one consequence and towards another, and he can often produce very different effects from the same material. (*The Uncanny* 157-58)

The poet is in a decidedly empowered position in this case, a position that in many ways repeats the same problematic verbal dominance over the visual that characterizes the Medusa model. However, taking control over the image does enable the poet to use his or her mediation of the image as a political act, challenging the viewer's assumptions about the image, even replacing or over-writing their initial response to the image with a new narrative or lens for interpretation.

In part, the disturbing nature of the uncanny lies in Freud's casting of it as "something familiar that has been repressed, and then reappears" (152). Boland's poem asserts from the very first couplet that the familiar aspect repressed within the portrait of Mrs. Badham is the domestic: "She is a housekeeping. A spring cleaning./ A swept, tidied, empty, kept woman" (ll. 1-2). Indeed, Freud's discussion of the heimlich/unheimlich distinction associates the familiar, the heimlich, with the comforting space of the home, the tame, dear, and intimate domestic space. Boland continues to draw out this domestic familiar as the poem progresses such that the reader begins to see the material body of Mrs. Badham as posed and artificially rendered in the portrait. The

“unkempt streamers” (l. 3), the “pressed lace” (l. 6), the “ruching hardly able /to hide the solid column of the neck” (ll. 6-7)—all “silly clothes” (l. 10) that cannot possibly conceal, in Boland’s eyes at least, the fact of a real working body, a “common sense” body (l. 8), awkward and uncomfortable beneath the delicate frills of “reckless fashion” (l. 8). Boland calls into question the relationship between representation and artifice, suggesting the painter’s role as master in arranging and stylizing the model, selecting the background, interpreting the facial expression—in other words, exhibiting a kind of possession and control of the woman as if she is non-human—a doll to be dressed up, a clockwork woman not unlike Freud’s automaton. For Boland, a poet whose work continually opens up the domestic space to poetic reflection, this repression and even erasure of the domestic is an erasure of Mrs. Badham herself.

And yet, we cannot assume the painter’s role as master—certainly, Mrs. Badham may have dressed herself even if she poses unconvincingly. She may have requested the Roman backdrop as a record of her travels. In any case, the image claims Mrs. Badham as a woman of leisure. Boland’s poem, in sharp contrast, insists on Mrs. Badham as a working housewife, masked by the visual stylization of the image but revealed in her uncanny pose:

There’s no repose in her broad knees.
The shawl she shoulders just upholsters her.
She holds the open book like pantry keys. (ll. 12-14)

The material body asserts itself above all else. The poem attempts to flesh out a physical body that is merely sketched over by the artist. The fabric and folds of her garments and the gloved hands barely reveal the skin underneath the drapery. Thus, it is the clothing that becomes increasingly uncanny because it represents the displaced body that neither

the image nor the poem can quite get at. Just as Hoffman's mechanical woman is reduced to her clockwork mechanisms leaving the reader to question whether she is alive or not, here, Mrs. Badham is reduced to her ill-fitting outfit, leaving the reader to wonder at her "true" identity. A comparison to Parmigianino's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (see fig. 4) on which John Ashbery's famous poem is based, is useful.



Figure 4: Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (ca. 1523-24), Kunsthistorisches Museum

The Parmigianino is overtly strange in its distortion of the body viewed through the concave reflection of the mirror. In this decidedly more canonical example of the poet's engagement with the uncanny within the ekphrastic tradition, Ashbery uses the eye-catching distortion to call into question other kinds of representations—the self portrait, poetry, art, artifice—and ultimately our own constructions of ourselves and the world around us that are complicated by viewing this image. More subtly than the awkward hand that takes over the convex image, the layered clothing and the book as prop in the

Ingres stick out in the poet's vision, unable to be reconciled with the historical person, imagined as she is. In the Parmigianino, it is easy to see why the ekphrastic poem is a productive and even seductive space in which to contemplate and react to the uncanny image, the image that is both familiar and strange by Freud's definition. Both of these methods of "working through" the uncanny (that is, writing an ekphrastic response to the overtly uncanny image, or writing an ekphrastic response that works to make the image uncanny) establish the ekphrastic poem as a space in which the primary function is not the confrontation of verbal and visual, but rather a larger "confrontation" of difference with the aim not of erasing that difference, but of constructing the self.

Both of these poems suggest that distortion is inherent in all portraiture. That, as Ashbery claims, "This otherness, this/ 'Not-being-us' is all there is to look at/ In the mirror" (ll. 475-477). Thus, while Boland's project attempts to locate the "true" person of Mrs. Badham, what is actually revealed in the (dis)connect between image and poem is the impossibility of ever representing the true Mrs. Badham—rather, the "true" Mrs. Badham only exists in distortion through the lenses of both the verbal and visual, or the absent excess that exists between the two. The Parmigianino self-portrait is not really about representing the self, but representing the mirror through which the self is always refracted; the portrait is a portrait of the lens.

Ultimately, we can see that Boland's re-framing of the dueling binary between self and other in the Medusa model recasts a traditional relationship between female model and male artist as a complicated erasure of the domestic, thus calling into question our assumptions as viewers and challenging our acceptance of the portrait as representation. While this poem doesn't dissolve the borderline between verbal and

visual, it does claim that re-framing lends itself not to empowering poet over and above the image, but rather to moving beyond the question of power into the space of the uncanny as a space of radical uncertainty or shock—calling into question all assumptions related to who has power, who has a right to depict history, who has a right to gaze and to name.¹⁷ That Boland’s own imagined persona of Mrs. Badham may be no more historically accurate than the portrait of her is of little concern when the process of the confrontation of what is “lost,” “indistinct,” and “hazy,” is what matters. It is clear that the image of Mrs. Badham is a vehicle both of rejection and identification for the female speaking voice of this poem, presumably Boland herself as viewer.

In other words, Boland’s poem is less interested in accuracy than it is in challenging the reader to consider the alternative way of viewing both the self and other that arises in the shared uncanny space of absence/presence that I’m here calling “ekphrastic beauty.” “Woman Posing” asserts that while the verbal and visual are put into an apparently confrontational relationship, a hybrid space in-between verbal and visual, the gap, slippage, and (dis)connect opened up by the ekphrastic encounter, make ekphrasis an appealing mode for the act of feminist revision. With similar political purpose, Boland’s poems, “Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening” and “Degas’s Laundresses,” use the visual field of the canvas as a field of measurement between the positions of two bodies: painter (always male in Boland’s poems) and model/object

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the effect of the uncanny in *Strangers to Ourselves* is applicable here: “...strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who *shocks* me—I do not even perceive him [sic], perhaps he crushes me because I negate him. Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel “lost,” “indistinct,” “hazy.” The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy” (187, emphasis added).

(always female), thus challenging the traditional time/space binary (in which verbal moves through time and visual is still in space) thought to be essential to the ekphrastic exchange.¹⁸

Boland locates the visual scene for her reader in a moment where the painter's brush has yet to finish or even to begin its touch on the canvas, isolating the moment when the painter is interpreting the visual scene before him. This is a moment for which no visual representation of the scene exists, and therefore a moment of imaginative possibility for both the painter and the poet, who revisits the scene in order to narrate it and point out new possibilities of interpretation. John Hollander has specified "notional" ekphrasis as verbal description of imaginary or lost art objects, such as the famous urn in Keats's "Ode."¹⁹ However, W.J.T. Mitchell has argued that in some ways, all ekphrasis is notional. That is, all ekphrasis, whether describing a real art object or an imaginary representation, seeks to "make [the object] disappear in favor of the textual image being produced by the ekphrasis" (*Picture Theory* 157, note 19). While I trouble this dominance of text over image in my next chapter, for Boland the attraction to ekphrasis as a poetic mode is the wealth of imaginative possibilities it provides, most especially in terms of revising the power narrative between male artist and female model or art object. That this possibility of revising the social dynamics of ekphrasis maintains the generic hierarchy between word and image needs to be categorized as a strategic decision on the part of the poet, rather than an unconscious lapse into essentialism.

In "Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening," for example, the speaker narrates a scene in which the painter, Chardin, is depicted as he watches a woman that "he has been

¹⁸ This space/time binary comes from Lessing's discussion of the Laocoon, in which he aligns poetry (word) with the time and visual art (image) with space.

¹⁹ See *The Gazer's Spirit* (7).

slighting.../in botched blues, tints,/ half-tones, rinsed neutrals” (ll. 5-7). This poem is most likely a notional ekphrasis according to Hollander’s definition because it does not name any particular painting of Chardin’s as a reference point.²⁰ It may be that eschewing the traditional one-to-one relationship between poem and painting allows Boland more imaginative freedom to explore the relationship between painter and model, and therefore this model who stands in as “Chardin’s woman” within the poem is somehow an amalgam of all of the women posing in Chardin’s oeuvre (as Ophelia will represent all of the women posing in Bellocq’s photographs in Tretheway’s poems discussed below). In this poem, for example, Chardin is not representing the woman fully, according to the speaker of the poem and the watered-down and lifeless colors she describes. However, in another of Boland’s poems referencing an actual painting by Chardin, explicitly titled “From the Painting ‘Back from Market’ by Chardin” (see fig. 5), the speaker’s attitude toward the painter himself is much more understanding, while the woman’s daily tasks and actions as represented by the painting are not as subject to scrutiny from the poet.

²⁰ And while the practice of writing an ekphrastic poem without naming the painting is quite common, it is usually Boland’s practice to indicate the title of the painting in some way, either in the title of the poem (as she does most overtly with the poem “From the Painting ‘Back from Market’ by Chardin”) or in an epigraph.



Figure 5: Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Back from Market* (ca. 1739), Louvre

However, in “Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening,” there is a distinct contrast to between Chardin’s somewhat sloppy visual representation of the model (as imagined by the poet) and the way in which the model herself is very precise and exacting in her measurement of the visual scene:

before your eyes
before your eyes
in my ankle-length
summer skirt

crossing between
the garden and the house,
under the whitebeam trees,
keeping an eye on
the length of the grass,
the height of the hedge,
the distance of the children (ll. 30-40)

The insistent repetition of “before your eyes,” like the repeated verbal structure in lines 38-40 (“the length...the height...the distance...”), seems to emphasize points of view

within the poem. Chardin's looking is direct and entitled, while the model's is a sideways glance that takes in the concrete elements of the scene but does not lay eyes on the painter. In *Vision and Painting* Bryson describes the relationship between gaze and glance—the privileged gaze in contrast to the glance occupying a position in the margin:

The Glance takes on the role of saboteur, trickster, for the Glance is not simply intermingled with the Gaze...but is separated out, repressed, and as it is repressed, is also constructed as the hidden term on whose disavowal the whole system depends. The flickering ungovernable mobility of the Glance strikes at the very roots of rationalism, for what it can never apprehend is the geometric order which is rationalism's true ensign....Before the geometric order of pictorial composition, the Glance finds itself marginalized and declared legally absent.... (121)

In an overt act of reframing the hierarchical dynamic between gaze and glance, Boland complicates looking within the poem by describing Chardin in a way that seems to demonstrate his *lack* of understanding of the visual scene; at the same time she describes, and indeed *becomes*, the model woman with a critical eye for the visual scene. Boland bestows the type of power that comes from a geometric understanding of the visual, the power of an essentially indubitable truth or “rationalism,” on the character who is historically figured without that power or knowledge. Moreover, Boland's move toward embodying the female model by the end of the poem through prosopopoeia serves to give a voice to the previously silent female, even if what she says is just an odd assertion of her ordinariness. What had been repressed as a figure of the glance not only returns to gaze, but to speak:

I am Chardin's woman
edged in reflected light,
hardened by
the need to be ordinary. (ll. 41-44)

By rewriting the trope of male artist and female subject such that the male's body and position of looking are visible while the female's agency is audible, Boland upsets the system of codependence of the gaze and the glance.

Like Chardin's woman, in the poem "Degas's Laundresses," the women—this time laundresses—are being watched and painted as they enact their daily domestic ritual of hanging sheets out to dry. As the speaker addresses the laundresses in "Degas's Laundresses," the diction is elevated with an emphasis on repeated sounds and internal, slant rhyme:

You rise, you dawn
roll-sleeved Aphrodites,
out of the camisole brine,
a linen pit of stitches,
silking the fitted sheets
away from you like waves. (ll. 1-6)

Brian Dillon has objected to this seeming misrepresentation of the laundresses as mythological Aphrodites: "Most laundresses might agree that fitted sheets do not shake out 'like waves.' More to the point, Boland, not Degas, imagines the women as Aphrodites: the painter's subjects are caught in their acts of toil....Degas's working class women are [to quote Dunlop] 'objects to be treated objectively as an artist might paint a landscape or a still life. They are not objects of desire'" (318). It seems the women must be categorized as some kind of object, either desired bodies like, say, the bodies of ballet dancers, or still life objects, like fruit. Obviously, for a poet interested in feminist revision, these options aren't very attractive. Boland's revision allows her to establish a counter-narrative of working bodies by visiting the actual scene of the painting and imagining what it might have been like for the laundresses to be "caught in their acts of toil." Still, Dillon's defense of Degas is not without merit. As Dillon points out, Boland

takes imaginative license with the story of the laundresses by casting them as Aphrodites in poetic language while emphasizing the predatory voyeurism of Degas. Art historians would tell us that both Degas and Chardin were among the first of their peers to begin painting ordinary people and working-class situations. While the representation of these women is problematic to a contemporary feminist viewer because of the differences in power, wealth, gender, and social station between artist and model, the inclusion of these women in works of high art, even as marginal, represented the possibility of the rupture of the uncanny existence of the erased domesticity into the frame of the male gaze. Thus, that which was traditionally disavowed already contains a certain rupturing element available to the poet's emphasis.

By writing the women into the poem, Boland re-writes Degas's move to represent the women realistically at their chore and chooses to raise the laundresses to high art, thereby overtaking a tradition of painting in which the models for divine goddesses and virgins were often working class women and prostitutes.²¹ This time, the speaker does not take on the voice of the model; she takes on a voice that reads as one voice with that of the poet. Thus, the trope of female model and male artist is turned on its head as female artist (poet) reclaims female subject. This upending gives Boland the authority she needs to apply a sexualized reading of desire onto the Degas painting (see fig. 6).

²¹ See, for example, Griselda Pollack's *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art*. New York: Routledge, 1988.



Figure 6: Edgar Degas, *The Laundresses* (1844), Musée d'Orsay

Boland figures Degas's looking as a dangerous gaze, one that implies the death of the subject. This sense of danger is evoked in the repeated line "Whatever you do don't turn" (ll. 21, 23, 24) and in the description of Degas's positioning of his body:

See he takes his ease,
staking his easel so,
slowly sharpening charcoal,

closing his eyes just so,
slowly smiling as if
so slowly he is

unbandaging his mind. (ll. 25-31)

Aphrodite is not the only mythological character at play here. "Whatever you do don't turn" reads as an incantation towards the laundress who suddenly occupies a position like that of Orpheus leaving the underworld, a position she may well share with the speaker. But just as Orpheus's music could not save him from the loss of Eurydice, all Boland's

efforts in the musical use of language cannot save her laundresses from the experience with Degas, who--also like Orpheus--will not resist the desire to look directly, to gaze even when the gaze is dangerous to the other. Whether or not Degas's actual presence was as threatening in the scene of the painting as it is when depicted in the poem, the result is still the same—the “blind designs” on the women's winding sheet, the canvas that wraps their bodies in death and paints their history not as their own making but as Degas's creation. For Boland, an unauthored, silent history of women is in itself a loss like death. While Dillon's critique of Boland is grounded in the idea that Boland may not understand the actual lives of the laundresses any better than Degas does, Boland's ekphrasis reveals that the poet does not require of herself that she represent the lives of these women or men as they might have actually happened, but only that we imbue the visual with a connection to human life that corresponds with a new viewing context for the contemporary reader. This way, these women who have been seen as symbols of sexuality or domesticity in the collective mind are restored to an existence of individuality, one where the reader, like Boland, can imagine a personal history: seeing in the mind's eye more than just the laundress at her work, *seeing the laundress at her life*. Still, an excess exists in the space between word and image that disrupts both the traditional narrative of the Medusa model and Boland's own re-writing of that narrative. In this moment the empowered subject shifts as the comparison to Orpheus shifts positions—from the laundresses, to the painter, to the poet herself, and back again. This multiplicity slips away from Boland's controlling hand toward a de-framed relationship between subject and object (and word and image) that is more fully apparent in the work of Natasha Tretheway.

Photographic Ekphrasis: From “Reality” to Imagination

“Three Photographs,” from Natasha Tretheway’s first book *Domestic Work*, uses a three-part structure to imagine the voice of the photographer, the voice of the subject, and finally, the voice of the viewer/poet in response to the image. The first lyric “Daybook, April 1901” reveals the photographer’s somewhat condescending objectification of the subjects (“two Negro men, clothes like church,/ collecting flowers in a wood” (ll.5-6)), who “make such good subjects./ Always easy to pose,// their childlike curiosity” (ll. 11-13). The second lyric, written in the inner voice of this photo’s subject, a cabbage vendor, gives an imaginative insight into what this woman might have thought in posing for Johnson:

Natural, he say.
What he want from me?
Say he gone look through that hole—
his spirit box—
and watch me sell my cabbages
to make a picture hold
this moment, forever. (ll. 1-7)

Here, the questioning of what it means to pose “natural” along with this distinctive voice speaking in dialect and the superstitious understanding of what the camera’s power might be in capturing time foreshadows some of the concerns that Tretheway will take up in her second book, the book-length ekphrasis of a series of E.J. Bellocq photographs discussed below. The final lyric in this three-part sequence, however, focuses on the experience of the viewer in response to Johnson’s photo of “Wash Women.” This poem begins by claiming that “The eyes of eight women/I don’t know/ stare out from this photograph/saying *remember*” (ll. 1-4), and quickly allows the poet-as-viewer to map her own memories onto the faces “common/ as ones I’ve known” (ll. 6-7) so that she can

“picture wash day” (l. 10) and “hear the laughter” (l. 17). But, by the end of the poem, the imaginative leap into the poet’s own memory, initiated by the photo but then moved outside of the frame, is brought back into the context of viewing the image: “in his photograph,/ women do not smile” (ll. 32-33), but instead walk with their laundry “Shaded/ by the light of their loads.../ their gaze ready through him,/ to me, straight ahead” (ll. 39-42). Here, the difference between what Tretheway is able to imagine as the washer women’s lives outside of the frame of the image is so much richer and more engaging than the final stanza in which the women merely stare back. As Tretheway herself explains it, “I’ve often thought if you look at a photograph, if you really study the gestures and expressions that the people have in the photograph, you could see the rest of their lives, everything that’s to come” (Petty 364). This inspiration of the photographic image that allows the viewer to imagine a life outside of the frame is precisely the project Tretheway takes on in *Bellocq’s Ophelia*.

The photographs taken by E.J. Bellocq and later printed by Lee Freidlander for a Museum of Modern Art exhibition and the book collection *Storyville Portraits* are themselves striking for the contemporary viewer (see fig. 7).



Figure 7: E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912), from *Storyville Portraits*. This image is also the cover photo of *Bellocq's Ophelia*.

As Janet Malcolm observes, while a contemporary viewer looks on a nude with some awareness of the artist's gaze, Bellocq's photos themselves resist any typical understanding of this relationship of power:

[T]hat they were extraordinary photographs was immediately clear. Although the issue of 'the male gaze'—the unpleasant way in which male artists have traditionally scrutinized women's bodies as they painted or sculpted or photographed them—had not yet been raised as such, the friendliness of Bellocq's eye, the reciprocity that flowed between him and his subjects, could not but forcibly strike the viewer....Today, of course, it is impossible to look at a female (or male) nude without weighing the question of the artist's attitude toward his or her subject. Bellocq's mysterious photographs pass the test of good attitude so triumphantly that they seem anachronistic. (Malcolm 12)

Susan Sontag also interprets the friendliness of the photographer's gaze (see figs. 8 and 9), asserting that "what is decidedly unfashionable about the pictures: the plausibility and

friendliness of their version of the photographer's troubling, highly conventional subject" (7).



Figures 8 and 9: E.J. Bellocq, two untitled photographs (1911-13),
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Malcolm points out how Bellocq moves away from the conventions of the nude photo:

Bellocq's nudes astonish us in the way they diverge from the conventions by which nude photography—both the dirty and the arty variety—was ruled in its day. Instead of women strainfully posed amid veils, drapery, fruit, flowers, classical columns,...Bellocq presents women in relaxed attitudes photographed in ordinary nineteenth century American rooms with patterned wallpapers, floral rugs, chests or drawers with runners on them, wicker settees, silk souvenir cushions." (12)

Even so, within the comfort of the models' attitudes and the ordinary settings, the historical fact of intentional damage to the plates at around the same time of their construction makes the re-printed images disturbing (see figs. 10 and 11). In the introduction to the second, expanded collection of the Friedlander prints, Sontag claims that "The only pictures that do seem salacious—or convey something of the meanness and abjection of a prostitute's life—are those...on which the faces have been scratched

out....These pictures are actually painful to look at, at least for this viewer” (8). Indeed, a contemporary viewer of the images sees the violent wear that both age and deliberate defacing have wrought on the plates.



Figure 10: E.J. Bellocq, untitled photograph (1911-13),
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts



Figure 11: E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912),
from *Storyville Portraits*

Further, we see the “printed out,” literally unframed, uncropped image as Friedlander reprinted them, which begins to establish a new kind of viewing context—a context far from the cropped vignettes that Bellocq likely had in mind. Even the material book of images tries to develop a new, though historically grounded, context for the images by providing an imaginary dialogue between Friedlander, several jazz musicians, and “Adele,” a former Storyville prostitute who claims to remember Bellocq. This dialogue

ends up constructing Bellocq as the Toulouse-Latrec of Storyville when, as Rex Rose points out, he was much more normal than that, average height, perhaps a bit plump, with a normally shaped head instead of the physically deformed dwarf who many assume would have wielded the camera's eye like one who intimately understood the position of the exotic other.²²

As Sontag admits that some of the images are painful for her to look at, she highlights the uncanny position of the viewer, who sees both the violent and the beautiful, who looks with full awareness of the social positioning of the women depicted and is still enticed:

But then I am a woman and, unlike many men who look at these pictures, find nothing romantic about prostitution. That part of the subject I do take pleasure in is the beauty and forthright presence of many of the women photographed in homely circumstances that affirm both sensuality and domestic ease, and the tangibleness of their vanished world. How touching, good natured, and respectful these pictures are. ("Introduction" 8)

Indeed, Sontag points out that we can gain this understanding of the images precisely because we have a group of them: "That they are part of a series is what gives the photographs their integrity, their depth, their meaning. Each individual picture is informed by the meaning that attaches to the whole group" (8). As Sontag's reaction demonstrates, what the contemporary viewer sees when looking at the series of images drastically contrasts with how Tretheway has constructed only one singular persona—Ophelia—a woman based on many faces repeated in many portraits. However, what seems like a reduction of a series of images of different women into a singular persona also opens up possibilities for new ways of seeing for readers, as encouraged by Tretheway's openness to different voices and different contexts for the poems (both as

²² See Rex Rose, "The Last Days of Ernest J. Bellocq."

intimate diary entries and as letters). This practice contrasts with Boland's, in which the poet wants to determine our viewing for us, to change and forever complicate our associations with the image. This gap (that even Sontag tries to smooth over and contextualize) between what we see as contemporary viewers and what Tretheway constructs is shockingly uncanny in its wholeness. The singular, fixed identity of Ophelia seems like a repression of the very lack of information about these women—their names, their stories, sometimes even their faces and body parts scratched away. However, de-framing ekphrasis allows us to understand Ophelia as a tripled project of construction—Ophelia constructing the self within Storyville, Tretheway constructing Ophelia from the material remnants of a history, and the reader constructing through the process of reading, narrative accumulation in time of the signs and symbols of Ophelia's subjectivity, but also when reading alongside the images. Tretheway opens up a multiple, unbound, non-hierarchical, de-framed space of imagination in which we define for ourselves the type of reading we are meant to do.²³

In a project of ekphrastic imaginative recreation such as *Bellocq's Ophelia*, it is the conflict between reality and imagination that becomes uncanny. According to Kristeva:

...uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased. This observation reinforces the concept—which arises out of Freud's text—of the Unheimliche as a crumbling of conscious defenses, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other—the “strange”—with whom it maintains a conflictual bond....(188)

²³ Questions of accuracy and inaccuracy that thread through this discussion really boil down to trying to help the reader to navigate disturbance—to bring up what has been repressed, or to construct something new to give one potential explanation. Just as Freud does in his ekphrastic essays on Michaelangelo and DaVinci, these constructions don't require historical accuracy, they are about imaginative connection specific to the reader or viewer that has at the core a need to recognize what's disturbing about the self. See Freud's “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” (1910) and “The Moses of Michelangelo” (1914).

Erasing these boundaries between imagination and reality is in part what attracted Tretheway to the project, and, further, it is what helps to move ekphrasis away from the “conflictual bond” between word and image, self and other. In Tretheway’s own words, “When I saw these [photos], I was immediately struck by the power of the images. They were stunning, they were compelling, they were filled with the ‘punctums’ that Roland Barthes talks about--those little things within a photograph that often will draw you out of the immediate action of the photograph to contemplate all that is behind or outside of it” (Rowell 1028). Tretheway describes her process as moving from the punctum, what Barthes calls “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27), into the imagination:

I found it was best if I began by looking at what is suggested as fact in the primary documents and then trying to describe the photographs in objective terms. I would start there, looking at them and then relying on that idea of the punctum—the thing in the photograph that draws you outside the frame. That would be the moment that allowed me to enter the realm of the imagination, away from simply describing the primary document, the photograph. And so I would begin in the photograph and move to the imagination, which is an act of interpretation. (Rowell 1028)

While Barthes argues that the pornographic image has no punctum, he asserts that the erotic photograph, in contrast, “takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me” (59). For Barthes, viewer and subject occupy a kind of intimate relationship of viewing, one that animates even as it stills. He continues, “The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of being, body and soul together” (59). That this “absolute excellence of being, body and soul together”

is both desire and fantasy, a fiction that Tretheway struggles with through the persona of Ophelia.

Freedom to Travel beyond the Narrative Frame

In the title poem of *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Tretheway compares Millais's famous portrayal of Ophelia to the nude photograph of a reclining woman, one of the "Storyville portraits" taken by E.J. Bellocq in the red-light district of early 20th century New Orleans and brought to the art world's attention in 1970 when Lee Friedlander exhibited new prints of the forgotten and time-ravaged plates. For Tretheway, Millais's Ophelia is less Shakespeare's tragically crazed maid who gives herself up to a suicidal drowning than she is the real woman²⁴ who modeled for the painting: "the young woman who posed[,]/ lay in a bath for hours, shivering,/ catching cold..." (ll. 5-7) and whose "final gaze/ aims skyward, her palms curling open/ as if she's just said, *Take me*" (ll. 10-12). As she does with Millais's painting, the poet questions the history behind the pose in Bellocq's photograph and suggests the unequal relationships of power inherent in the exchange between nude female model and male artist, asking "How long did she hold there, this other/ Ophelia, nameless inmate in Storyville,/ naked, her nipples offered up hard with cold?" (ll. 19-21). The poet's characterization of both of these model women as being offered up for the taking, a cold objectification typical of the male gaze, is common in the feminist ekphrasis I have discussed so far in which the female poet uses the poem to re-imagine, revision and re-historicize the lives of women outside the frame of the image.

²⁴ This woman was Elizabeth Siddall, model for so many of the Pre-Raphaelite painters and the subject of Christina Rossetti's poem "An Artist's Model."



Figure 12: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852), Tate Britain



Figure 13: E. J. Bellocq, *Storyville Portrait* (c. 1912), Williams College Museum of Art

Tretheway's opening poem casts both Millais (see fig. 12) and Bellocq (see fig. 13) as voyeurs: "The small mound of her belly, the pale hair/ of her pubis—these things—her body/ there for the taking" (ll. 21-23). To end the poem, Tretheway challenges ideas such as those expressed by Heffernan when he claims that the Medusa model stages "a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (1), by opening up a space that will allow Ophelia to do more than merely stare back at the viewer, but to speak for herself:

....in her face, a dare.
 Staring into the camera, she seems to pull
 all movement from her slender limbs
 and hold it in her heavy-lidded eyes.
 Her body limp as dead Ophelia's,
 Her lips poised to open, to speak. (ll. 23-28)

The poems that follow this initial framing make literal the dare in the final lines; they take the form of letters and diary entries in the lyric voice of Ophelia. As an imagined persona based on Bellocq's female models, many of whom were likely mixed-race prostitutes confined by law to their location in Storyville, Ophelia embodies a confrontational project allowing the female model to speak back in the face of the male artist's gaze. This project develops over the course of the volume into a complicated and layered narrative about women, art, race, and the desire for freedom—a narrative that ultimately challenges our structural understanding of ekphrasis and subjectivity. My discussion of Eavan Boland's feminist ekphrasis demonstrated ekphrastic reframing carved out by inverting the binaries that have become essential to our understanding of the verbal/visual encounter—that is, troubling the traditional positions of male and

female, challenging the assumptions of who can speak and who is silent, disrupting the codependence of the gaze and glance, undercutting assumptions about hierarchies in artistic genres and social classes, and overturning the structural relationship between space and time. As I hope this discussion will demonstrate, Tretheway further complicates and even de-frames other traditional binaries such as white/black, erotic/pornographic, lyric/narrative, and imaginary/historical through a reconsideration of the ekphrastic relationship as it develops over a series of poems and images.

In challenging the structure of these binary narratives, I follow Susan Stanford Friedman's method in her argument for locational feminism, which asserts, "gender is only one among many axes of identity" (35). Friedman uses spatialized metaphors of mapping and border-crossing to argue that the future of the feminist interest in identity "lies...in a turning outward, an embrace of contradiction, dislocation, and change" (4). Friedman focuses on narrative because, as she claims, "identity is literally unthinkable without narrative. People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others" (8). Such is the case for Tretheway, who has indicated that writing these poems in the persona of Ophelia helped her to explore her own racial identity. "I found Ophelia," she recalls, "...because I was searching for a persona through whom I might investigate aspects of my own mixed-race experience growing up in the Deep South. I believe that a persona poem can help you get closer to yourself in some ways—because the mask is even thicker than the mask in...autobiographical poems" (Rowell 1027). In speaking through Ophelia's mask, Tretheway moves fluidly across the boundary between self and other as she challenges contemporary viewers' and readers' assumptions (including her own) about being, looking, and being looked at. In Ophelia's

story, the male artist isn't rewritten simply as a dangerous voyeur (as the initial poem might suggest) but also as a collaborator and teacher. Similarly messy border crossing occurs as the female model crosses into her own agency by becoming the artist, the woman who can pass for white becomes commodified for her blackness, and the photos which appear simultaneously pornographic and artistic become a lens through which contemporary readers can view a forgotten history.

In this way, Tretheway's project becomes an example of what Friedman calls a narrative of relational positionality, a type of script that

regard[s] identity as situationally constructed and defined and at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification.... Within a relational framework, identities shift with a changing context, dependent always upon the point of reference. Not essences or absolutes, identities are fluid sites that can be understood differently depending on the vantage point of their formation and function. (Friedman 47)

Formally, the poetic structure of the volume supports a shifting relational framework by maintaining hypotactic linearity according to chronological time that doubles back on itself—once as letters and then again as diary entries—allowing Tretheway to find multiple iterations of the same voice, each revealing as much as it conceals. Speaking to a female friend and former teacher, Constance, the letter poems offer a version of Ophelia as she presents herself to an intimate listener who is mostly sympathetic but at times judgmental of Ophelia's "fall" into prostitution. These epistolary lyric narratives reveal as dramatic monologues do, positioning the reader as eavesdropping on a private conversation in which the listener never speaks—that is, in this scenario we never hear Constance's replies except for the few moments when Ophelia quotes from Constance's previous letter. In conjunction with a second set of diary poems written in a more

intimate voice, the reader is able to piece together an understanding of Ophelia as a person both singular and ever-changing.

Moving within and between the two sequences of letter and diary poems and through repeating threads of memory and image, these lyrics begin to break down another perceived binary, that of lyric and narrative. *Bellocq's Ophelia* is both narrative and lyric, and as such supports Friedman's argument against this binary in which the formally radical lyric is privileged as more political than narrative. As Friedman puts it, "narrative and lyric cannot be accurately said to exist in a fixed binary where lyric is (always) the revolutionary force that transgresses (inherent) narrative tyranny. Rather, they coexist in a collaborative interchange of different and interdependent discourses" (235). In *Bellocq's Ophelia*, the collaborative interchange between narrative and lyric is further complicated by the collaboration between word and image as the sequence also engages with Tretheway's own research into the history of Storyville, all the while encouraging the reader to initiate a paratactic juxtaposition of Bellocq's images—a further step in collaboration between poet and reader that engages the historical in order to explore the imaginary, a project that revisions the past as a political statement in the present. While some critics have objected to the beauty and formality with which Tretheway constructs these poems (given the ugliness of prostitution), her choices to approximate fixed forms such as the sonnet, villanelle, and renga, as well as the deliberate beauty of her language, are best read as political choices that reveal the possibilities for cohabitation within the space of the uncanny as an alternative to antagonistic negation or conflict. The story that emerges in no way attempts to replace the historical record of the images but rather to exist alongside, to imagine a potential context in which the lyric moment, like most

memories captured in photographs, is both a snapshot of each poem's telling and of the untold spaces in between telling.

Unlike some “repetitive cultural narratives structured around the white/other binary: victims and victimizers, colonized and colonizers, slaves and masters, dominated and dominators, ‘us and them’” (Freidman 38), Ophelia's story also demonstrates that race cannot be fixed through the dichotomous, visually inscribed binary of black or white. Tretheway states in an interview with Charles Rowell that she was initially drawn to these images because the women were not what they appeared to be:

When I first saw the women in the photographs, they appeared to be white. I think that they appear that way to most people who look at the photographs within our contemporary gaze. When I did a little more research, I discovered that Bellocq took lots of photographs in various brothels of New Orleans, including Mahogany Hall, which was run by a woman named Lulu White—an octoroon or quadroon herself—who housed mixed-race women. (Rowell 1028)

Class, too, is not so easily delineated since the photos reveal a lushly decorated mansion and well-dressed, stylish women. As Janet Malcolm points out, it is only the distinctive and (in)famous wallpaper of Mahogany Hall glimpsed in the background of certain photos (see, for example, fig. 14) that not only pinpoints the women's geographical location but also locates their racial and class identities (14).²⁵ That is, without the visual detail of the background wallpaper, we would have no contextual clues to help us place the location of the photographs.

²⁵ This wallpaper was such a distinctive feature of Mahogany Hall that when Storyville was shut down in 1917, many stole strips of wallpaper as keepsakes to remember the legacy of Storyville. See the documentary *Storyville: The Naked Dance* (1997).



Figure 14: E.J. Bellocq, *Portrait of a Prostitute* (c. 1912),
from *Storyville Portraits*

Once the wallpaper identifies the location as the interior of Mahogany Hall, we know the women in the images to be mixed-raced prostitutes. Indeed, in one of Ophelia's letter poems, she must check herself when she responds to teasing from the others in the house who see her as "putting on a bit" when she insists on keeping up the appearance of propriety within the brothel:

You are what you look like,
I said, thinking it might cause some change
in their manner, that they might see to carry themselves
as ladies do. I bit down hard on my tongue at the sight
of their faces—fair as magnolias, pale as wax—
though all of us bawds in this fancy *colored* house. ("February 1911," ll. 16-24)

Questioning the truth of what she sees and the reality of what can be seen by the camera and by others becomes an empowering method through which Tretheway allows Ophelia to challenge the framed boundaries of her life.

In a letter to Constance dated/titled “March 1911” that follows immediately after a poem in which it is clear that Constance’s most recent reply has asked “how can you do this?”, Ophelia reflects on how her past has shaped her, saying:

It troubles me to think that I am suited
for this work—spectacle and fetish—
a pale odalisque. But then I recall
my earliest training—childhood—how
my mother taught me to curtsy and be still
so that I might please a white man, my father.
For him I learned to shape my gestures,
practiced expressions on my pliant face. (ll. 1-8)

Later in the volume, but around the same chronological date, it becomes clear just how much Ophelia’s father haunts her memories. The diary poem “Father,” dated February 1911, recalls reciting lessons for an unknown white father, a man who Ophelia fears “though he would bring gifts” (l. 2). Her desire to impress him still sticks in her mind, a parallel that complicates her discomfort in posing in the present for her male clients, including Bellocq:

How
I wanted him to like me, think me smart,
a delicate colored girl—not the wild
pickaninny roaming the fields, barefoot. (ll. 8-11)

Ophelia’s childhood hope to be thought of as smart and delicate instead of wild and barefoot reveals a need to move beyond the racial and social constructs that bind her and limit her freedom, constructs that are so often controlled by a more powerful other. However, as this example demonstrates, while Ophelia’s life has taught her to anticipate

how she might please the male viewer—first her father and then her clients and Bellocq—she is clearly unfulfilled by the task, as she is in the diary poem “Bellocq,” which ends:

I try to pose as I think he would like—shy
at first, then bolder. I’m not so foolish
that I don’t know this photo we make
will bear the stamp of his name, not mine. (ll. 11-14)

Most of the diary poems end with a similarly strong closing as they take the form of free verse sonnets. Tretheway’s use of the volta as a turning point in the diary poems becomes a way through which we begin to know Ophelia’s most intimate thoughts and fears.

Indeed, we see the poem “Father” end with a haunting threat:

I search now for his face among the men
I pass in the streets, fear the day a man
enters my room both customer and father. (ll. 12-14)

In contrast, there is one moment of modeling that seems to empower Ophelia. In a letter poem to Constance she reflects on how much she enjoyed her education under

Constance’s instruction:

how I was a doll in your hands
as you brushed and plaited my hair, marveling
that the comb—your fingers—could slip through
as if sifting fine white flour. I could lose myself
then, too, my face—each gesture—shifting
to mirror yours as when I’d sit before you, scrubbed
and bright with schooling, my eyebrows raised,

punctuating each new thing you taught. (“March 1911,” ll. 19-27)

This calls into question another limitation of the Medusa model in that it always constructs desire as heteronormative. In Ophelia’s story the closest relationship she has is with Constance, and while this exchange is never overtly sexual, Constance’s gaze is the only one in which Ophelia is happy to be posed, molded, and constructed like a doll.

That's not to say that this is explicitly lesbian desire, but it does still disrupt the male/female binary of looking in order to privilege female-female looking, as Ophelia does when she aims her camera at the horizon and remembers her mother fading into the distance.

As the images quoted above suggest, these issues begin to converge in the performance of the pose, certainly not an unfamiliar act, though, as Barthes argues, somewhat distinct due to the nature of the photograph. In relation to his own experience in front of the camera, Barthes points out, "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice...." (10-11). Posing, perceiving oneself being perceived goes against our normal process of perception, thus splintering our relationship to the world into subject and object. Similarly, Ophelia relates her memories as snapshots she's not quite comfortable with, posed for the different viewers in her life: her absent white father, who checks her teeth and corrects her speech; her teacher under whose gaze she begins to imagine a new life; the residents of New Orleans with whom she tries to pass as white by covering her dark hands in gloves; the men of Countess P's brothel, for whom she must enact a nightly tableau vivant; and finally, Ophelia poses for herself, in a constant project of re-imagining her life and identity. Barthes captures some of the (dis)connect between the posed image and the concept of the self:

"myself" never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and "myself" which is light, divided, dispersed....For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. (12)

This “‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed” is better captured by beauty of Ophelia’s voice, itself an extension of the pose, an act of artifice imagined by Tretheway as a way to highlight a dissonance that “ugly” mimetic language would mask. The assumption of the imitative fallacy that fails in the case of any poetic re-historicizing of trauma is the assumption that the language could ever be as devastating as the experience itself. This seems truly impossible, and Tretheway’s commitment to beauty becomes the very tool for deconstructing the performance of Ophelia’s posing, indeed her very subjectivity.

As a persona who “doesn’t have any sense of herself that’s not rooted in the gaze of someone else” (Tretheway qtd. in Haney 23), Ophelia longs for freedom from the constructed self, an impossible longing based on the context the narrative provides because of the insistence on self-awareness and self-fashioning that dominate the poems throughout the volume. For example, in the poem “Countess P---’s Advice for New Girls” which opens the “Letters from Storyville” section of the narrative, the imagined brothel owner instructs her “girls” on how to represent themselves for their male clients. She begins, “Look, this is a high-class house—polished/ mahogany, potted ferns, rugs two inches thick” (ll.1-2) She warns, “The mirrored parlor multiplies everything—//One glass of champagne is twenty. You’ll see/ yourself a hundred times. For our customers/ you must learn to be watched” (ll. 3-6). It seems that Countess P. teaches her girls to embody a Duboisian double consciousness,²⁶ an awareness of the self doubled with the constant burden of the awareness of how others view the self. And yet, these lines also

²⁶ DuBois’s initial description of double consciousness appears in *The Souls of Black Folk* as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (215).

move radically beyond DuBois as his is a narrative construction of the self based on a centralized duality, while here the multiplicity of selves seems infinite and at the same time trapped within the underlying frame of the male gaze as the Countess urges new girls to “Empty/ your thoughts—think, if you do, only/ of your swelling purse” (ll. 6-8). The (dis)connect between being and being seen intensifies as the Countess connects the performance in posing with the history of female representation that feminist re-framed ekphrasis seeks to trouble:

Hold still as if
you sit for a painting. Catch light

in the hollow of your throat; let shadow dwell
in your navel and beneath the curve
of your breasts. See yourself through his eyes—

your neck stretched long and slender, your back
arched—the awkward poses he might capture
in stone. Let his gaze animate you, then move

as it flatters you most. (ll. 8-16)

The girls must watch the light, must pose themselves as artist’s models in the most desirable angles and positions, positions dictated by a visual history of that has exposed the female body to the male gaze which is always able to fix them in stone. Tretheway complicates this exposure—unlike Boland, she refuses to demonize the voyeur. By writing the instructions for the pose in the voice of Countess P., Tretheway demonstrates women’s own involvement in the systems of the Medusa model, a model which demands that Ophelia “Wait to be/ asked to speak” (ll. 16-17). Moreover, Tretheway inverts the hierarchy of looking—instead of re-writing the artist as voyeur (as Boland does with Degas), Tretheway rewrites the voyeur as artist. Even so, Ophelia’s only option after she has pawned her good suit, worn the soles of her shoes down, and started to feel the pang

of hunger as she walks the streets of New Orleans with her hope for a new life dwindling is to:

Become what you must. Let him see whatever
He needs. Train yourself not to look back. (ll. 20-21)

While Ophelia's success as a prostitute depends on her willingness to embrace the body's ability to perform the spectacle, other moments in the narrative highlight her discomfort at scrutiny in the eyes of others. In the poem "August 1911," for example, Ophelia relates to Constance the crude exoticism that brings clients to the brothel: "customers fill our parlors/ to see the spectacle: black women/ with white skin, exotic curiosities" (ll. 5-7). The men play a game then, arguing over who can tell "our *secret*," while "the vilest among them say,/ I can always smell a nigger" (ll. 12-13). Finally, Ophelia relates a moment of confusion where she literally sees herself in her viewer's lens:

a man resolved to find the hint
that would betray me, make me worth
the fee. He wore a monocle, moved in
close, his breath hot on my face.
I looked away from my reflection—
small and distorted—in his lens. (ll. 18-23)

Ophelia looks away from her distorted reflection, an uncanny image of the self that minimizes and clashes with her own perception. Later, when Ophelia risks venturing outside the boundary of Storyville to visit a former prostitute dying of "the invisible specter of our work," she is arrested for being "a woman/ *notoriously abandoned to lewdness*" ("October 1911," ll. 29-30) and forced to have her mug shot taken. This image is the only photograph referenced that is not one of Bellocq's images, though Tretheway

likely looked at the many mug shots of prostitutes arrested during that era. As Ophelia puts it to Constance,

You will not see those photographs—
paint smeared on my face, my hair

loosed and wild—a doppelgänger
whose face I loathe but must confront. (ll. 33-36)

Ophelia's revulsion when looking at the self in reflections and distortions echoes Freud's own initial description of the uncanny as he sees himself reflected in the window of a passing train and, for a moment, fails to recognize his own face. Even as Ophelia claims "I've learned the camera well" ("December 1911," l. 9), she immediately undercuts her own knowledge with an assertion of the difficulty of representing the self. In "(Self) Portrait," Ophelia tries a second time to capture an image of a moving train, remembering how a previous attempt at the image forced her into a confrontation with her own gaze:

Now I wait for a departure, the whistle's
shrill calling. The first time I tried this shot
I thought of my mother shrinking against
the horizon—so distracted, I looked into
a capped lens, saw only my own clear eye. (ll. 9-14)

Even the mechanical black and white binary of the photographic images is undercut through an ekphrasis of the negative, as in the diary poem "Photography":

In the negative
the whole world reverses, my black dress turned
white, my skin blackened to pitch. Inside out,
I said, thinking of what I've tried to hide. (ll. 6-9)

Hiding her mixed-race identity by passing for white fails for Ophelia just as the camera fails to capture everything. The reality is a life Tretheway has taught us to imagine—a life in which being means being seen, in which Ophelia must only obliquely reference the

trauma of her past as “the thing from which /I’ve run” (“December 1910,” ll. 44-45), in which Ophelia longs only for “freedom from memory” to be “somebody else, born again,/ free in the white space of forgetting” (“April 1911,” ll. 40-42). Looking white while being both white and black means for Ophelia that she will always have to endure the scrutiny of the observer, always have to watch out for “the eyes/ of some stranger upon me, and I must lower mine,/ a *negress* again” (“Letter Home,” ll. 19-21). Learning to take pictures from Bellocq gives Ophelia a method for beginning to undercut the assumption that “seeing is believing.” The end of the poem “Photography,” another quasi-sonnet that saves its insight for the volta, reveals that Ophelia is learning to see what’s behind the image:

I follow him now, watch him take pictures,
 I look at what he can see through his lens
 and what he cannot—silverfish behind
 the walls, the yellow tint of a faded bruise—
 other things here, what the camera misses. (ll. 10-14)

With its mechanized eye, the camera can miss what’s truly there just as it can heighten the appearance of an instant of time, framing something we might not see with the naked eye. The camera’s power is seductive to Ophelia; it has, always, “the glittering hope of alchemy” (“September 1911,” l. 20). While Ophelia is empowered by looking through the lens and deciding what the camera will capture, she soon learns that what she has “tried to hide” is, like the other boundaries and categorizations that have limited her experience throughout her life, exactly what the camera will help her to embrace. She’s “learned the camera well—the danger/ of it, the half-truths it can tell, but also/ the way it fastens us to our pasts, makes grand/ the unadorned moment” (“December 1911,” ll. 9-12).

In the end, Ophelia no longer longs for “freedom in the white space of forgetting” because a “white” space partitions her identity. Instead, we learn through the final letter poem, a postcard sent as she travels westward, that literal movement outside of the frames of so many images she has helped to create and outside the physical boundaries of Storyville’s red-light district, translates to an image of freedom the very boundary of her own material body. She writes: “I feel what trees must—/ budding, green sheaths splitting—skin/ that no longer fits” (“March 1912,” ll. 13-15). The final framing poem, a return to the voice of the poet, demonstrates how Tretheway’s insistence on recovery and remembering allows the reader to:

Imagine her a moment later—after
the flash, blinded—stepping out
of the frame, wide-eyed, into her life. (48)

This space outside of the frame is the possibility of a new life for Ophelia. It is the blank space of the unwritten and yet-to-be-written story that is, quite literally, beyond Storyville. This final poem reveals a radical departure into a place beyond retelling or reclaiming and into a space of invention. In the uncharted geography of the West, Ophelia has the potential to invent the self without boundaries, to move beyond the simple organization of desire and identity that have confined and shaped her life. The intersection of narrative and lyric ekphrasis here proves not only that binary constructions of subjectivity and identity fail to capture the nuances of race, gender, class, and location, but also that the dominant narratives of ekphrasis as evidenced in the Medusa or sister arts models are too limited to fully explore both the political commitment and aesthetic goals of contemporary feminist poets. At the same time, while Friedman’s locational feminism helps to re-frame the Medusa model, Tretheway insists on moving outside of

the frame into a space of suspension where narrative has no beginning or ending and where identity is not only multiple but undiscovered, yet-to-be determined, an uncharted place that resists mapping. This is a gesture away from the discursive narrative of politics and towards the living of politics as embodied by Ophelia. The uncanny otherness of relation between verbal and visual is no longer antagonistic but rather produces a third space outside the binary itself—an uncharted or unmapped space in which beauty is both artifice and political tool to enable confrontation and resolution of the uncanny itself. As Kristeva has put it: “artifice neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable” (187).

The cycle of poems ends by encouraging the reader to think about ways in which a new gaze is staged by Ophelia’s coming into photography; her place behind the camera now allows her to work against visions of herself that seem strange, awkward, distorted. The new power over the means of representation, a power bestowed by Tretheway in her narrative, allows both Ophelia within the story and Tretheway beyond the frame to have some control over the means of representation. Tretheway’s control is different from Boland’s in that she accounts for enough slippage and disconnect that the reader may find a different way in. Tretheway doesn’t actually acknowledge the true power of her project. Both poets covered in this chapter have openly discussed how to interpret the political impetus for their choice of content and form, which many critics have misunderstood as simplistically accessible and overly beautiful, respectively. As I have argued, I read the ease with which we are able to read these beautiful poems as the desire to be accessible to the very types of women that both poets write about. A formally radical and fundamentally difficult poem is less likely to allow these readers to identify and connect

with the poems, and identifying is part of the work these poems enact on the reader. In fact, neither poet addresses the more radical political act that I am proposing is at work here. Tretheway hints at this when discussing how the work of the punctum draws her outside of the frame of the image, inducing a shift into the imagination through the moment of disconnect. Because of the work of Heffernan and Mitchell in tracing ekphrasis as a relationship of confrontation and contrast, of difference and desire, we are now in a position to better understand the Medusa model of ekphrasis as not merely a “strand in the fabric of ekphrasis” but perhaps *the* strand that enables us to parse out relationships of desire within our viewing context. The interaction between desire for and resistance of the other reveals the greater lack within ourselves, just as the gaze inherent in the anamorphic image reaches out as an uncanny element that disturbs and disrupts the narratives we create about viewing.

Chapter 2

The Ecstatic Embrace of Verbal and Visual: 21st Century Lyric Beyond the Ekphrastic Paragone

The pervasive interactions between verbal and visual in our contemporary experience demand a re-conceptualization of the ways in which we understand and analyze poetic ekphrasis. When W.J.T. Mitchell defined the 20th century's movement away from words and toward the image as a "pictorial turn" in his 1994 *Picture Theory*, he predicted that the image would be the "problem" of the 21st century, and his exposure of ekphrasis as a relationship of generic and social confrontations of power between others would go on to inextricably influence the critical discourse surrounding ekphrasis (*Picture Theory* 2). Today, in 2012, current theorists of ekphrasis still hold tight to Mitchell's claims of otherness²⁷ and almost unanimously accept James A.W. Heffernan's standard definition of ekphrasis as "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (3). In doing so, critics often accept ekphrasis as a fundamentally oppositional confrontation between verbal and visual grounded in both Mitchell and Heffernan's appropriation of Gotthold Lessing's own strict understanding of each. Conceptual poet Cole Swensen's 2001 essay "To Writewithize" provides a radical intervention into the understanding of ekphrasis in the twenty-first century. Swensen claims that our current ways of thinking about ekphrasis "[accentuate] the separation between the writer and the object of art. The writer not only remains figuratively outside the visual piece, but often physically in

²⁷ Even though Mitchell updates his understanding of 'the problem of the image' in his more recent book *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), scholars of ekphrasis have not yet characterized how 21st century visual culture affects our understanding of ekphrasis. Mitchell's project in *What Do Pictures Want?* seeks to understand the agency of the image, including its ability to desire as suggested by the title, but does not focus specifically on ekphrasis.

opposition to it, i.e. standing opposite it, in a kind of face-off, in a gallery or museum” (“To Writewithize” 123). Swensen’s rejection of the paragonal or oppositional model of ekphrasis reveals a disconnect between what critics tend to analyze within the ekphrastic exchange and what contemporary poets set out to do when writing about (with, in response to, and facing) visual art. Critics who approach the ekphrastic poem as a verbal coding of the image that battles to name the other assume that the poem’s language makes something new of the visual art object and thus re-inscribe a fairly rigid subject/object boundary. The ability of the art object itself to influence the poem’s action—in language, sound, form, and voice—is largely erased from this perspective, creating a lack which does not do justice to the work of contemporary poets. “To Writewithize,” along with the parenthetical subtitle “(as in ‘to hybridize,’ ‘to ritualize,’ ‘to ionize,’ etc.)” (122) is to find words that emphasize the ways contemporary ekphrasis can be thought of as an active poetic strategy or process—the poet attempting to “ize” her subject, to use the action of writing ekphrasis “with eyes” in order to enact some kind of transformative change in the form, language, and sound of the poem and, perhaps, in the world in which the poem exists. When a poet “write[s]withize,” the distance between poet/poem and art object is brought into a relationship of mutual agency, such that the visual may act on the verbal in contradistinction from the traditional positioning of ekphrasis in which verbal takes on agency over the visual. “Writing with eyes” bridges this all-too-common disconnect between ekphrastic criticism and its practice because it originates with the poet as a 21st century viewer—a viewer with eyes wide open to the pictorial turn, a viewer who is likely self-reflexive about her own viewing, a viewer at home in the postmodern society of the spectacle. The ekphrastic exchange is indeed

scaffolded upon a frequently gendered history of hierarchical representations, but Swensen's first suggestion in the subtitle, "to hybridize," is especially compelling as a way of identifying contemporary ekphrasis as a hybrid of the verbal and visual. The term allows us to understand the space of the ekphrastic poem as an open and fluid space of exchange between the arts, and to thus complicate the historically inscribed generic boundaries and power dynamics inherent not only in the verbal-visual exchange but in the social relationships of inequality that have become mapped onto the ekphrastic encounter.

When Gotthold Lessing argued for a strict separation of the verbal as a movement through time and the visual as a static spatial representation, he set into motion a host of binary oppositions that now adhere to the verbal/visual binary. These have been elaborated upon by W.J.T. Mitchell to include not only verbal/visual and time/space, but also masculine/feminine, active/passive, speaking/silent, and gazing/glancing. In place of Lessing's distinction between the visual as spatial and the verbal as temporal, we must understand the space of the ekphrastic poem as both spatial and temporal. In doing so, we will see that the contemporary poet writing ekphrasis is not only affected by Mitchell's pictorial turn, but also by other major poetic movements of the 20th century, those of open field poetics and procedural or language poetics. While this assertion may appear to be obvious, the spatial nature of open field poetics and the emphasis on the materiality of language itself in procedural poetics provide unique insights into understanding contemporary ekphrasis and the contemporary poet who choose ekphrasis as a political strategy. In other words, the energetic space of verbal-visual interaction in the ekphrastic poem is also the open field of the blank page, itself a materially visual form; the temporal

dynamic of the writing process is also the time it takes to look and the temporal procedure of putting that vision into language, along with the time it takes to read. Moreover, I argue that we must also consider the ekphrastic poem as poem; if we want to understand poetic ekphrasis, we must also seek to understand its utterance as a lyric form. Here, I position myself in direct contrast to Mitchell who insists that, semantically, the language of ekphrasis is no different than that of the everyday language of speech: “Ekphrastic poems speak to, for, or about works of visual art in the way that texts in general speak about anything else. There is nothing to distinguish grammatically a description of a painting from a description of a kumquat or a baseball game” (*Picture Theory* 159). What Mitchell neglects in this claim is not only the special case of the fine arts, but also the fact that the lyrical language of poetry, indeed its grammar, musicality, and structure, is quite different from our everyday descriptions of kumquats, baseball games, and even our everyday descriptions of visual art. Robert von Hallberg has argued that “What is called lyric is more effort than thing, a variety of language use differentiating itself from other discourses” (11). What I call “lyric ekphrasis” in this project is more than just a brief poem, but a particular way of using language. A lyrical “effort” in the ekphrastic exchange can be best understood through a focus on process and form that is directly and intimately influenced by the visual component of the ekphrastic exchange. The ekphrastic lyric speaks as a lyrical discourse by giving agency to the external object of contemplation creating a space that is neither internal nor external. The form of the ekphrastic lyric is hybrid in terms of both space and time, an abstraction of many of the binary categories associated with the verbal-visual encounter that functions within the open visual field of the material page. This project is particularly

devoted to the lyric because it is driven by a conviction that the commitment to voice of the lyric needs to be regarded as a determinative element in the history of ekphrasis. In challenging both Mitchell and Heffernan's widely accepted constructions, I mean to suggest that we can reconsider the boundaries of each of these ekphrastic binaries—moving ekphrastic criticism away from a logic of “either/or” and towards an embrace of “both-and.” In doing so, I want to focus on the particular intricacies of voice come to the surface of the poem's language act, so that the verbal/visual dichotomy is expanded to consider lyric musicality as verbal-visual-aural. It is this voice and the perspective that arises from it in the humanist lyrics discussed in this chapter that reveals ekphrasis as a lyric mode in which the power to render sensation, emotion, and the visual imaginary is heightened not only to reveal a subjective, perspectival location of the speaker of the poem, but also to act on the reader of the poem by enabling multiple possibilities of viewing abstraction.

Swensen's challenge to traditional ekphrasis—including her own volume of ekphrastic poems, *Try* (1999)—serves as a useful starting point for understanding the project of another volume of 21st century ekphrastic poems and the primary focus of this chapter, Sharon Dolin's *Serious Pink* (2003). Swensen is an entry point into Dolin's project because Swensen's position on ekphrasis, based on her own composition of ekphrastic poems, offers both a useful comparison and a significant contradiction to Dolin's ekphrastic strategies. Both Swensen and Dolin use ekphrasis in a manner that breaks down the barriers between verbal and visual and allows for the writer to move playfully between and within the two, borrowing methods and formal qualities from each art. As Swensen puts it, “the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a

work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience, both of which the writer occupies” (“To Writewithize” 124). Thus, rather than the traditional paragone or contest between poet and painter that criticism of ekphrasis often highlights, many 21st century poems move beyond this antagonism and “don’t *look at* art so much as *live with* it.... There’s a side-by-side, a walking-along-with, as their basis” (123, emphasis in the original). As the poet occupies a subject position that has access to both verbal and visual modes of experience, she or he can act as a border crosser, able to use the body’s sensory capabilities to find language for both vision and the visual imagination, navigating the generic divide between word and image through sound and rhythm.

In a 2008 presentation entitled “Ekphrasis that Ignores the Subject,” Swensen aligns her ekphrastic strategies with an understanding of the visual field of the page originally set forth by Charles Olson’s influential essay “Projective Verse.”²⁸ She argues that the surface dynamics of rhythm, parallelism, and juxtaposition in visual arts can affect the ekphrastic poem as “visual rhythm.”

the similarities between these principles in painting and in poetry are not metaphorical, but that visual rhythm requires some of the same mental processes that aural rhythm does and that the pattern recognition in both can play the same role of attuning our senses to crucial patterns in the outside world, creating a relevance that participates in meaning. (“Ekphrasis that Ignores” n.p.)

Swensen’s invocation of Olson’s open field poetics makes perfect sense for a contemporary poet as viewer. Indeed, we might argue that the effect on poetry of W.J.T. Mitchell’s “pictorial turn” is the wide-spread acceptance of a poetics influenced by the look of the page, an attention to the interaction between white space and the architecture

²⁸ Lynn Keller notes that the form of Swensen’s subtitles of ‘To Writewithize’ mimic Olson’s ‘(projectile (percussive (prospective’). For a full reading of *Try*’s ekphrastic project in relation to Swensen’s own criteria set forth in ‘To Writewithize’ see Keller’s article ‘Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen’s Ekphrastic *Try*’. *Contemporary Literature* XLVI. 2 (2005): 176-212.

of typography that now seems to come naturally to both poets and readers. Dolin, too, moves away from a metaphorical relationship between the arts by engaging in her own “visual rhythm”—a material use of the white space of the page that explores formal possibilities inspired by the painting. As Dolin translates the pattern of the eye’s movement over the visual field into a visual pacing for the poem and seeks out concrete shapes for language, she breaks down the perceived distinction between what is verbal and what is visual by performing both.

Where Swensen and Dolin differ, however, is in the position of both the subject and the subject matter within this ekphrastic “walking-along-with.” Instead of a poem that describes a painting or the poet’s experience of viewing a painting, Swensen argues that contemporary poets using ekphrasis should “ignore the subject” and focus on “motion, how the world’s appearances are constructed by the dynamic relationships of their elements” (“Ekphrasis that Ignores” n.p.). Indeed, as she argues for ekphrasis that formally values “visual rhythm” over and above the subject matter of the art work, she also exposes a broader desire of conceptual poetry to “get beyond the paradigm of ‘emotions recollected in tranquility’” (n.p). Swensen’s rejection of Wordsworth’s famous definition of the lyric in his “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” is not only a call to ignore subject matter, but to “get beyond” the speaking subject of the lyric poem. Here we see the key distinction between the two projects of Swensen and Dolin. Swensen redefines the act of ekphrasis in order to align it with the aesthetic goals of conceptual poetry, mainly the disavowal of the “illusion of the sovereign self” and the cultivation of multiple subjectivities through play with the Kristevian semiotic²⁹ and the open field of

²⁹ In her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Kristeva makes a distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic is the dominant code that allows language to refer; it is systematic, rule-bound, tied

the page. That is, “writ[ing]withize” means for Swensen that multiple, disembodied “I’s” speak in the poem, a strategy that feminist poetics has embraced to avoid the erasure of difference many associate with “essentialism.”³⁰ For Swensen, the subject is always already fragmented and multi-vocal; she embraces fragmentation of the self as liberatory. Dolin, in contrast, makes no overt dismissals of the self, retaining a poetic construction of the singular lyric voice which often “recollects in tranquility” even as it challenges and disrupts those recollections. As such, Dolin subverts the traditional constructs of ekphrasis from within its own parameters by developing a lyric voice that suggests a material, embodied I/eye who sees and experiences both the visual and the verbal through various states of abstraction, fragmentation, and hybridity. In Dolin’s poems, the situation of ekphrasis—the speaker of the lyric looking at the art object—is located in the foreground of the poem. Dolin extends the implicit possibilities in the very language of Swensen’s argument—the calls to “writewithize” and to “walk-along-with” both suggest that the ekphrastic situation requires an engagement with a viewing subject and his or her relation to a material body—Dolin’s ekphrasis fully and literally “write[s]withize,” thus grounding Swensen’s criticism in the location of the viewing body which speaks the poem. While Barbara K. Fischer has discussed Swensen’s work in order to support her argument that contemporary ekphrasis involves what she terms “site-specific” practices, or a “strenuous engage[ment] with the place of encounter” (143), Swensen’s ekphrasis still insists on a disruption between voice(s) and the material viewing body, which is

to social order, and separates subject and object. The semiotic, in contrast, is only known in breaking through the symbolic, like a prelinguistic babbling that bears the trace of the body, like the music of poetry, the semiotic scrambles the symbolic.

³⁰ Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989) gives a compelling argument that deconstructs the binary relationship between essentialism and constructionism to argue for a set of ‘essentialisms’ that might be useful for feminism despite the negative connotations that have been associated with essentialist strategies and theories of the subject.

always elusively overshadowed by the foregrounding of the museum space. While the site-specific is a physical, material viewing location, according to Fischer this attention to place allows for the ekphrastic poem to “highlight, interrogate, rupture, and reassemble the interventions of the speaking and seeing ‘I’ in relation to its particular place and time” (146) but not, I would add, in relation to its particular viewing body. Swensen’s theory of “writ[ing]withize” is a useful theoretical standpoint on contemporary ekphrasis from a poet currently writing ekphrasis, but my goal here is to draw out Dolin’s own implicit theory of ekphrasis from within the poems themselves. Dolin’s concept of “ecstatic embrace” between verbal and visual captures a closeness and intimacy between word and image (also suggested by Swensen’s “walking-along-with”), and therefore makes an argument for embrace as an opposing model to the ekphrastic paragone of Mitchell, Heffernan, and others. By moving beyond antagonism and placing verbal and visual into a close wordimage embrace, Dolin further suggests the ecstasy of a vivid mingling between the two--the space of the ekphrastic poem becomes an energetic space that heightens, intensifies, and amplifies the resonances between word and image. The poems in *Serious Pink* seek out abstraction as an open source of potential for this moment of connection between word and image; as the image is freed from representation it frees up and enhances the kind of ecstatic lyric energy that is unique to ekphrasis.

Abstraction and Process in *Serious Pink*

Ekphrasis is a sustaining strategy for Dolin’s book-length volume, *Serious Pink*. The book consists of four sections, three of them sequences of short lyrics focusing on individual works of visual art by one painter (Richard Diebenkorn, Joan Mitchell, and

Howard Hodgkin are each the focus of a sequence), and one lyric long poem, “Ode to Color,” which according to Dolin, “borrows liberally with slight alterations from the thoughts of poets, painters, and philosophers on color” (75). Perhaps what is most special about this volume is the set of notes on the relationship between the poems and the individual paintings. Following up on the epigraph for the volume, a quote from Howard Hodgkin that reads “I long to make pictures that will speak for themselves,” Dolin begins her extensive notes with a quick definition of ekphrasis:

Though all the poems in Sections I, II, and IV were written to be pictures that can speak for themselves, the three sequences are all ekphrastic: that is, the work of three different artists...informs them. For those interested in reading the poems beside their pictorial muses, the following notes are offered. (75)

Here, Dolin casts the verbal/visual relationship as one where visual “informs” verbal, a definition (along with the underlying gendering of the image as “muse”) that fits within the traditional framing of ekphrasis in which the action happens on the verbal side of the divide. Still, she also reveals her hope of the merging of the two: a relationship in which the poems not only *are* pictures, but pictures with the ability to speak for themselves, a hybridization in which the boundaries between verbal and visual are made porous by the voice of the poem itself.

The individual notes on the poems’ correspondences provide a scaffolding for the ekphrastic projects of each series. Each of the three sections on particular painters works from a collection of color reproductions of the paintings in a book. Knowing that a book of reproductions and the book of ekphrastic poems can be read as two material volumes side by side not only fleshes out the experience of the poems for the reader, but sheds light on Dolin’s own ekphrastic process. These notes allow us to envision the poet as she looks over the art books at her research, a process that is also suggested by the lyric long

poem “Ode to Color.” We cannot ignore, either, the material context of these images. For example, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux has challenged criticism of ekphrasis to develop a textual consciousness of the aspects of an ekphrastic poem’s “bibliographic code,” the typography, contextual placement, and material relationship to reproductions of the image (Loizeaux 76). Similarly, Fischer emphasized a kind of “peripheral vision” that takes in the poet’s viewing context, the space of the museum in Fischer’s argument (Fischer 3), that here can be thought of as the material book of images. Evidence from the poems—lyric echoes of ideas brought up in the biographical and art historical essays accompanying the images, descriptive slippage between the one painting cited as the poem’s correspondence in Dolin’s notes and another painting reproduced on the facing page, and poetic references to the art book’s own reference section—reveals that Dolin’s looking also includes a side-long glancing that takes in the viewing context, takes in not only the art reproductions, but their accompanying visual, verbal, and editorial context. Taken as a whole the notes in relation to the ekphrastic sequences and the lyric long poem that make up *Serious Pink* suggest a lyric process of compilation not unlike the effect of Eliot’s notes to *The Wasteland*. From a position of reader response, the experience of tracking down the referenced texts (and here, images) reveals the dizzying relationship between constructedness and abstraction, between allusive fragmentation and cohesion. As with *The Wasteland*, we are never sure how academic we “should” be in tracing the correspondences and references in Dolin’s notes—if, as Dolin hopes, the poems can “speak for themselves” or if, as the material presence of the notes traditionally insists, we must fall back on re-creating the procedure of the poet’s looking.

It is by taking account of the poet's looking that we may be able to situate contemporary ekphrasis in a more productive relationship to the mode's historical past, a past that reconnects ekphrasis with its roots in Greek rhetoric. In the literary arts, a tradition of pictorialism developed which understood the verbal-visual encounter as a close relationship between "sister arts," an interconnection of complimentary media, verbal and visual, captured by Horace's phrase "ut pictura poesis" ("as in painting, so in poetry"). This tradition, identified by Jean Hagstrum in his 1958 study *Sister Arts*, is largely considered out of fashion in most current criticism which favors the antagonistic model forcefully established by Lessing. While it is true that Heffernan's "verbal representation of a visual representation" corresponds to only one aspect of Hagstrum's argument, what Hagstrum calls "iconic poetry," the marginalizing of Hagstrum's other, more broad criteria of pictorialism has had a negative effect on our current understanding of ekphrasis. Even theorists who have begun to gesture towards broadening Heffernan's definition, as Fischer does in pointing out that ekphrastic poets may "address non-representational visual works, or may not 'represent' their subjects at all" (2), still maintain a distance between the two arts that re-inscribes separation and difference over collaboration and similarity. Today, so many poets of different styles and schools are drawn to ekphrasis as an intuitive source for the lyric, which points to ekphrasis as a necessary and inevitable response to the contemporary poet's experience in a visual world. This makes Swensen, who writes from a position of critical awareness of the theoretical reception of ekphrasis, somewhat of an exception and a useful foil for bridging the gap between the art of poetry and its criticism.

In further hoping to understand ekphrasis as a lyric mode, we are not only forced to question the “visual representation” in Heffernan’s definition in the face of abstract art that defines itself as non-representational, but we must also question our assumption about the lyric poem’s commitment to mimetic representation. While Loizeaux claimed in 2008 that “There are few ekphrases on abstract art” because, she suggested, “the kind of engagement ekphrasis requires is elicited best by representational art” (195, note 36). Attention to the lyric form’s tendency towards abstraction within the context of ekphrasis based on abstract art offers a unique opportunity to view the kind of engagement ekphrasis demands from a contemporary poet and reader. Indeed, ekphrasis of abstract art does exist; *Serious Pink* insists on abstraction as an invitation to the audience to actively participate as both viewer and reader in the ekphrastic exchange. As Hagstrum defines it, pictorialism embodies “a way of seeing and a way of speaking that, in its long history, has created conventions and habits of its own that are sometimes quite unrelated to particular works of visual art” (xvi). I’d like to propose that we can rehabilitate many of the criteria Hagstrum outlines for pictorialism—ordering visual details in a picturable way, revealing the poet’s intimate connection with the art, limiting paraphrasable meaning in place of the abstract—in order to understand ekphrasis in contemporary poetry as revealing a lyric “way of seeing,” a perspective on the artwork embodied in the poem’s telling, but not limited to that telling. As Merleau-Ponty says, my body “is my point of view on the world” (*Phenomenology* 70). In light of this, we might conceive of ekphrasis as an interaction between two points of view grounded in two bodies: the visual details of the art object reflecting the artist’s point of view have agency within the space of the ekphrastic poem and the point of view of the poet, whose way of seeing in

response to the art may include seeing from a location that looks outside and beyond the frame of the painting. Both of these forms of aesthetic agency are indivisible from the embodied sensory and aesthetic experiences of their creators, though as Swensen points out, in the ekphrastic moment it is only the writer who materially occupies the location of verbal and visual modes. Regardless of conceptual poetics' political choice to represent perception as a multiplicity of disembodied "I"s, the situation of ekphrasis is undeniably located in the experience of the material body—the poet sees, with her own eyes, the marks on the canvas made by the painter's hand. Dolin's ekphrastic sequences, then, can each be read as a negotiation between these aesthetic agencies. The difficulties and inevitable inaccuracies of this task are the focus of the first sequence in *Serious Pink*, based on the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn and entitled "Mistakes."

"Mistakes are the only thing you can trust"

A series of sixteen short, lyric poems, "Mistakes" begins with an epigraph alluding to Diebenkorn's own process of covering over what he considers as mistakes in his paintings: "Everyone makes mistakes. I'm a little ashamed of them in my pictures, so I obliterate them. You can't see what I consider mistake in my work..." (qtd. in Dolin 1). Clearly an imaginatively provocative concept for Dolin, this obliteration of the visual evidence—the record of the mistake—becomes a central trope for the poems in this series. We see the poet determined to find what the painter has purposefully hidden and to struggle to understand the relationship between revealing and concealing, between representation and abstraction. Indeed, the second poem of the sequence "Ocean Park No. 64" (Dolin 4) begins with the command to "Look closely at the under-drawing" (l. 1)

and, after an abstract blur of image and reference to a Buson haiku, the poet resolves the abstraction into a metaphor of memory:

Memory is a fever-trapeze of lines resolving into images
Underpainted by association.

What if he simply tore down the building and left the scaffolding — (ll. 7-9)

Envisioning a web of cross-hatched lines, like a trapeze netting for memory, the poem ends with the poet's questioning "What if?"—expressing her own desire to see the foundation, the "underpainted association" as a scaffolding of the mistakes she aligns here with memory. The slippage between the acts of building up and tearing down in this image captures the complexity of Diebenkorn's own artistic intention in deliberate abstraction. To obliterate and tear down the building and to leave the scaffolding, the artist must build up with layering of the paint on the canvas. Like our own inability to fully cover over or repress memory, the canvas's material memory always reveals a residue, a ghostly shadow of the pre-existing image that Dolin seeks to name as she does in "Ochre" (13): "Whatever was first there/ may continue to exist/ you can still make out" (ll.1-3).

The grouping of paintings Dolin chooses to respond to through ekphrasis covers a wide span of Diebenkorn's oeuvre and thus captures a stylistic divide in his aesthetic choices. The later paintings from his Ocean Park series are completely abstract, with heavily-layered paint that participates in the kind of obliteration mentioned above. However, Dolin also chooses earlier figurative paintings, works in which human figures and objects are stylized but recognizable. Other paintings fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum, such as "Sea Wall" (see fig. 15) a brightly colored semi-abstract which serves as an example of Diebenkorn's own verbal titling of the image as an influence on

getting somewhere now we've slipped. (ll. 8-20)

Here, it is "on closer inspection" that the poet must revise her interpretation, as she does in "Street" when

those roofs of powder blue and
terracotta pink could be childhood sky

could be trees fusing
into a grand piano
of kelly green

could be sheets of apricot rain (11, ll. 6-10)

The repetition of "could be" emphasizes the multiple opportunities for translation of the visual details into the verbal images of the poem; these images pile up on top of each other in a manner that mimics Diebenkorn's own "erasure" of mistakes by layering more and more paint over the surface. The claim in the final lines of "Sea-Wall" regarding the slippage into the unknown ("now we're/ getting somewhere now we've slipped") supports my characterization of ekphrasis as a fluid, hybrid zone between verbal and visual. In these poems, lyric space is a space for trying out potential reactions to the visual which extend and subvert the way of seeing inherent in the painter's own choices between representation and abstraction. Dolin's perspective is multiple, simultaneously acknowledging the meaning that her senses try to make of the indeterminate image and undercutting that meaning with doubt or revision of mistakes.

Interestingly, the poem "Mistake" (7), fifth in the sequence, is the only poem without a direct correspondence to a Diebenkorn image. The poem claims that mistakes "are the picture painted out of / the picture which is nonsense/ because already I can picture them" (ll. 3-5). The word "picture" as subject, noun, and verb in this sentence suggests a circularity of the process in which erasure of the image ("the picture painted

out”) becomes the “nonsense” (the nonverbal abstraction) which the poet makes verbal sense of by “picturing” and naming through the language of visual imagery. This play with repetition, along with another rejection of the instinct to narrate, leads this poem into a space of self-reflection in which the poet creates a direct link between Diebenkorn’s abstractions and her own lyric abstraction:

The point of interest in any story
is where it goes off the tracks.

That’s how we keep track of time
or time keeps track of us.

If it all came out right the first time
I’d be an automatic writer
and I’m not.

But this is coming out all right, isn’t it? (ll. 13-20)

Here the reference to automatic writing calls up the connections to conceptual and procedural language poetry that I began this chapter by considering. Lyn Hejinian’s argument in her essay “The Rejection of Closure” which outlines her own procedural strategies for writing the autobiographical long poem *My Life*, is a fitting comparison. As Hejinian puts it:

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so. (56)

Dolin’s last line “this is coming out all right, isn’t it?” is a direct manifestation of the doubt Hejinian describes, a doubt that is perhaps inherent in all forms of lyric expression. Similarly, in “Ocean Park No. 45,” Dolin cites Diebenkorn as saying “*When I arrive at the idea/ the picture is done*” (19, ll. 1-2) but follows this way of seeing with her own:

but what if color is so saturated
with arrivals it undoes doing—

ideas—completions—ice-blue
panels cooling our forehead. No coincidence

is replicable when the idea is a closed
line I cross the border

into (you have no idea, that's the idea) (ll. 3-9)

These lines evoke Hejinian's distinction between closed and open texts. Closed texts, like realistic works of art, limit the possible interpretations to one reading in Hejinian's description (though, as my reading of Shelley's *Medusa* has shown, even these traditional frames of interpretation are subject to border-crossing). Open texts, like abstract art and lyric poems, are open to multiple interpretations and undercut the authority of the artist/author. Though Hejinian doesn't reference the visual arts, I would argue that "our sensuous involvement" and our effort to "join words to the world" includes an effort to respond to and facilitate our visual sensations, which in the space of the ekphrastic poem may, as Dolin's poems suggest, point back at the poet through a gesture of *ars poetica*.

Conversely, in the poem "Objects" based on Diebenkorn's 1961 *Still Life with Letter*, a clearly representational still life image, Dolin contrasts her own lyric abstraction with an image in which Diebenkorn is not embracing abstraction:

there are enough

frangible moments to
make this an ars

poetica of form
lanced of content:

poppies may be as orange
as the line

down the table's center
which does not go

with the shadow
is blue. (10, ll. 6-16)

Here, the “ars/ poetica of form/ lanced of content” can only be read as the verbal abstraction of the poem, since we can clearly see the objects in the painting referring to what they represent. However, the poppies that find their way into the visual field of the poem do not exist in Diebenkorn's *Still Life with Letter*, but in his 1963 *Poppies* (see fig. 16), which is reproduced on the facing page in the book of reproductions referenced by Dolin, Gerald Norland's *Richard Diebenkorn* (94-95).



Figure 16: Richard Diebenkorn, *Poppies* (1963)

Here, the poet's eye skipping outside of the frame of the painting is also connected with what Hejinian refers to as skipping the "gap" ("overleap[ing] the end stop") between language and experience. The poem ends with an admission of this difficulty:

If I could tell you
without anxious precision

mistrals of feeling
I would not have to

skip around so. (ll. 21-25)

The poet's eye skipping across the surface of the book between the two paintings mimics a skip in content between the representational painting *Still Life with Letter* and the abstract lyric "Objects." Dolin also mimics the eye's movement over the visual image in "Ocean Park No. 79" when she transposes the eye's tracking of color on to the white page of the poem:

so busy the eye jumps/settles
on canary yellow—not entirely—smudged out.

Possible to make an art of imperfect accident? (18, ll. 6-8)

In these lines, the "jumps/settles" of eye movement is only a momentary fix for the poem's argument, immediately undercut by the questioning of accidental imperfection. Dolin appears to question and then reaffirm Diebenkorn's method of hiding imperfection, the layering of painting in the Ocean Park series. Yet, we can also read this question as a judgment of the earlier paintings that do not embrace such abstraction, especially the figural paintings of women, whose poses are hardly accidental.

The poet's eye skips across the page again in "Seated Woman" (5) as the image of Diebenkorn's *Woman at a Table in Strong Light* (1959) merges with his *Woman with*

Newspaper (1960).³¹ The poet wonders, in response to these women, about the scene of the painting. She questions the time it must have taken to sit in the pose:

Fingers over her eye—how long?
Her slouch is not saucy, tell her
to read the front page then
read the front page. (ll. 8-11)

As the poem begins to interrogate “the difference between posing and life” (l. 7) and “the difference between line and color” (l. 12), the only resolution is a non-resolution, a confluence of figures that merges the two women as one body, with the arm of one woman along a table shifting to the knuckles over the knees of the next woman who sits reading the newspaper:

With an arm along the table
gather the bright wheaten light
into the cradle of an arm:

knuckles induce
crabby amusement
over smudgy knees

vertical stripes
cascading down a
sleeveless blouse. (ll. 19-27)

It is as if the poet’s vision blurs in response to the artificiality of the body positioning and, I would argue, in response to an often beautiful yet sometimes demeaning tradition of women as the models for male artists. This tradition suggests that women must always be aware of how they appear—a double consciousness in which the burden of self-awareness required by the act of posing seeps outside of the painting’s frame (see Chapter 1), as it does here in the poem.

³¹ See Norland, 126-127.

This discomfort is also suggested in the poem “Looking Again” (8) in which the poet negotiates layered positions of looking: her own looking on top of the painter’s looking within the scene of the image, this time a nude—Diebenkorn’s *Seated Nude—Black Background* (1961). The lyric voice of the poem must look and look again as a way to work through this dissonance. First, the awkward positioning of the body reveals both poet and painter’s uncertainty in the artificially “random” pose:

Say she’s posed in a random gesture
 of elbows crowning her head
 her upper arm slopes down
 above her breasts (in the next chair
 the almost invisible cat). To see beforehand
 or know before saying was never my forte
 —nor his judging from the back wall entering this studio
 in a rumble of uncertainties. (ll. 1-8)

This pose does not satisfy, and the speaker of the poem, now somewhat exasperated with Diebenkorn, must look again, hoping that the painter will have rearranged the figure:

“After looking again let’s say she’s unclasping/ a necklace or tying a bit of blue around/
 her neck” (ll. 9-11). Still, this looking cannot erase the aspect in the image that sticks in the viewer’s mind, a dark shading of the skin that looks so raw and burnt it is as if the poser’s knee belongs to another body:

her knee’s been cooked so long in his
 attention it’s burnt red as is the spot
 between her breasts so fiercely shadowed
 we look away to look back. (ll. 14-17)

Dolin engages in a subversion of what has been referred to by Heffernan as the Medusa model of ekphrasis taken up more fully in Chapter 1. Instead of a male poet responding to the dangerously seductive female image, Dolin questions the male gaze of the painter and reveals that in this moment, her way of seeing reveals a political location that greatly

contrasts with his. Dolin identifies with the posed woman by imagining the sensations of the material body. What Diebenkorn saw as play of shadow and light on the model's skin, Dolin sees as a fierce and burning, unwelcome attention. Though "we look away to look back" in this moment of disjunction, the image does not change and this last line of the poem hangs in the air unresolved.

While throughout this section Dolin often gestures toward ekphrasis as an *ars poetica* which aligns the painter's and poet's artistic processes in a kind of wordimage embrace, these poems demonstrate that Dolin also pushes against the embrace by questioning Diebenkorn's representations of women. Though we may not always collapse the distance between speaker and poet, Dolin's decision to recognize the poet's own identity as a viewing location within the context of ekphrasis suggests that she employs a politics similar to that described by Adrienne Rich in her famous essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location." Rich outlines a way in which feminists may think of identity as multiply located even as they experience that overlapping multiplicity from the position of one material body:

Recognizing our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the condition we have taken for granted—there is a confusion between our claims to the white and Western eye and the woman-seeing eye, fear of losing the centrality of the one even as we claim the other.... (Rich, "Notes" 71)

Here, a singular "I" struggles with the subject positions of multiple "eyes"—Rich's self-reflexivity about her location, which is in some contexts privileged and in other contexts oppressed, allows her to negotiate her own political commitment in relationship to her aesthetic and poetic commitments. Rich's multiple perspectives contrast with Swensen's

rejection of the lyric voice as an embodied viewer in “To Writewithize.”³² By employing a politics of location, *Serious Pink*’s lyric subjectivity is able to reference the poet and/or speaker’s embodied sensory experience in the same space as it questions the very construction of those experiences negotiated through the excesses and limitations of language. Dolin’s poems do not attempt to offer some kind of resolution of the assumed conflict between verbal and visual; rather, they help to demonstrate to the reader how to embrace a sensation such as Rich’s of multiply located vision. The space of the ekphrastic poem becomes a de-stabilizing location for both poet and reader, a space in which mistakes, blurred vision, and abstraction are valued as disjunctive but productive strategies for connection to the self and others.

“If you look/ if you insist”

Dolin’s sequence on Joan Mitchell’s “Black Paintings” engages images the abstraction of which moves the poet beyond the complication established in responding to Diebenkorn’s images. Dolin’s poems make varied choices in regards to interpreting meaning and crossing the perceived divide between the images and the poems. While sometimes modeling a way of seeing or looking for borders and edges as one might look for shapes in clouds, at other times Dolin reveals a suggestion of Mitchell’s biography, the dark colors and somber mood that have been connected by critics to events in Mitchell’s life at the time she was painting that here manifest in poems frequently invoking loss. At other moments still, the poems explode into lyric thought, with entire

³² A similar project that also troubles the apparent divide between language and the speaking subject is the procedural long poem *My Life* in which Hejinian builds the multiple experiences of autobiography through the serial return to certain language and images, thus revealing the shifting and developing consciousness of the poem’s speaker who is multiply-located in one body that moves through time.

poems functioning as transitional interludes that are unconnected with any one specific image. Dolin refuses to employ any one particular strategy in the face of abstraction. The only consistency throughout the sequence is the sense of parallel artistic entities: the lyric voice that Dolin employs and the imagined viewpoint of the figure of the artist, Mitchell.

The sequence begins with an epigraph from the painter herself: “My black paintings—although there’s no black in any of them” (Dolin 21). Indeed, Dolin’s explanatory note on the sequence reveals that she has adopted ‘no black’ as a requirement for the poem: “[Mitchell] called them her ‘black paintings,’ though she claimed never to have used the color black in them. Similarly, the poems restrict the use of the word ‘black’ to quoting Mitchell in the first poem” (76). Like the process-oriented requirements of a language poem, this restriction on the word “black” reveals an intimate connection between the process of writing the ekphrastic sequence and the serial creation process of the paintings. The titles of the poems follow the sequence of paintings in the order that they appear in a Robert Miller Gallery exhibition catalog from 1994, which contains hardly any textual context aside from page numbers and a list of titles at the end. Unlike the catalogs of reproductions used for the sequences in *Serious Pink* based on Diebenkorn and Hodgkin, which both contain introductions and art historical essays that contextualize the images, this catalog is distinctly empty of contextual verbal clues especially since most of the images collected and reproduced in *Joan Mitchell: “...my black paintings...” 1964* are untitled by the artist. Dolin’s practice assigns poem titles by numbering and naming each painting (“Black Painting #1: ‘No Black’” or “Black Painting #4: Bullfight”). As Linda Nochlin has described, “almost all of Mitchell’s canvases were titled after the fact, not before....one might say that Mitchell was a painter

who worked the motif in after. She discovered the analogies to some thing, place, idea or feeling after she had completed the work, not before” (58). In this sense, Dolin’s process of titling the poems, which is itself a simultaneous titling of the paintings, parallels Mitchell’s own process as these titles evidently seek out an analogy or motif in the image. For example, “Black Painting #4: Bullfight,” which is listed in the catalog as “Untitled,” immediately takes the shape of a bullfight when the image is put into relationship with the verbal naming of the poem. On the left, the image demonstrates a frenzy of dark colors, with a few accents of a vibrant red, suggesting a wounded bull whose powerful shoulders seem to emerge at the center of the painting, leaning and even straining towards another splotch of dark on the right side of the canvas, presumably the bullfighter. The poem establishes this possibility of bullfight, “It could have been a bullfight/who knows which way we were running” (ll.1-2), and builds toward an emotional climax (“wasn’t it what we all desired//passional thrust/ when the bull pierces/ your thigh” (ll. 9-12)), but ends by undercutting its own assertion of what the painting represents by taking into account a black and white blur at the top left, suggesting another more humorous possibility, “but what was a nun doing on horseback?” (l.13).

In direct contrast with the idea that ekphrasis entails antagonism between artistic genres, the playfulness between word and image evidenced in the poem “Black Painting #4: Bullfight” suggests the possibility of a playful, even friendly, interaction between verbal and visual within the ekphrastic poem, and establishes an “ecstatic embrace” between word and image, an embrace that can be energized by humor in place of conflict. Moreover, Dolin’s poems in this sequence cross other framed boundaries between verbal and visual. The poem “Black Painting #5: Twister” allows for slippage between the

elements of the space and time binary initially established by Lessing as it makes a concrete shape mimetic of a tornado's funnel cloud on the page. I'll reproduce the poem in its entirety here in order to preserve its visual component:

Black Painting #5: Twister

Now its finally condensing
 that core of darkness
 at the center of any
 day—especially in rain
 especially when green
 birds tinge
 the edges
 with brooding
 strokes quick
 tails of blue knock
 at the dark scratch-
 marks against white surely
 only such whiteness blue
 fury mixed with reddish
 green forgetting could
 make a dark well
 to plummet all
 irretrievable
 losses

This shaped poem rejects Lessing's categories, allowing the verbal to play with spatial arrangement even as the words themselves engage in swift movement across the lines horizontally and down the page vertically through enjambment. This poem captures the force of the painting in its energetic and musical density, but creates its own independent visual representation that evokes the funnel cloud. The painting does not reveal any figural shape of the twister that the poem takes on.

The lyric voice of this sequence appears to comfortably inhabit a relationship of both closeness and distance in its correspondence with the series of paintings. Part of

Dolin's appeal to playfulness seems to be the awareness that the nature of abstract expressionism is open to interpretation. As Nochlin points out, "In the case of Abstract Expressionist work like Mitchell's...the task of interpretation is both exhilarating and daunting, the canvases functioning as so many giant Rorschach tests with ontological or, at the very least, epistemological pretensions" (Nochlin 50). Indeed, Dolin's poems suggest that one way of seeing in abstraction is to play imaginatively with the image, searching for the outline of something the mind's eye sees as shape, the imagined suggestion of mimetic representation, as one might play a childhood game of finding shapes in the form of passing clouds.³³ "Black Painting #6: Clouds" asserts that this image is "A cloud with legs!" (l. 1). The poem cites the Rorschach-test-like quality of the image, which becomes animated through the poem's description as an "inkblot of loss/ that keeps running forward—/ shadowy scythe// cutting through/ relentless buffoonery/ of white" (ll. 13-18).

Dolin subtitles "Black Painting #8: Predicament" as a "Portrait of Joan Mitchell," and she not only suggests that the image is a self-portrait but also suggests that it can become the occasion for a poetic self-portrait, something approaching an ekphrastic *ars poetica*. What comes to the surface as the subject of the poem is a relationship of

³³ The poems that make up "My Black Paintings" do not all seek out this same element of playfulness, though it is a distinctive strategy in light of the heavy emphasis on dark and emotional times in Mitchell's biography that art critics use to explain this period of her work. As Judith Bernstock warns, "The death of Mitchell's father in 1963, her mother's prolonged illness, and her own unsatisfactory studio situation should be kept in mind in considering the brooding pictures that she created in 1964. She states that she was 'trying to get out of a violent phase and into something else'" (60). The "inward curdling 'black paintings'" (Nochlin 58) mark a stylistic shift in Mitchell's work, as "figure and ground are distinguished more clearly than at any earlier point in Mitchell's career....[and] the beginning of a reemergence of calligraphy is evident in a more fluid, less heavily weighted mass. Instead of complementary color juxtapositions, through which Mitchell generally evokes an impression of light, these pictures depend on tonal contrasts and modulations" (Bernstock 60). Thus, it is evident that Dolin has selected a series of paintings that mark a pivotal transition in Mitchell's perspective, and yet the agency of the visual is no longer under the artist's control.

mutuality rather than antagonism between Joan Mitchell, the viewer, and the voice of the ekphrastic poet:

It's the same predicament:
what to start with, what to fix
on—causes or results,
feelings or the outer effects

this was a way of knowing
this ecstatic embrace (ll. 1-6)

The “same predicament” evidently includes the decision-making process of both visual art and the lyric poem. Viewer, poet and painter decide “what to start with, what to fix/on,” all as a means to develop “a way of knowing.” Abstraction itself undercuts the familiarity of location as it forces the reader/viewer to try to make sense of the image, to find something representative in the abstraction that he or she is able to pin down or fix. To decide on “what to fix” is to choose a location that reveals perspective, a way of seeing, a way of knowing. The “ecstatic embrace” of the ekphrastic poem is what enables this relationship to develop into language. Both daunting and exhilarating, the embrace provides a model for ekphrasis that moves beyond confrontation and highlights the desire inherent in the ekphrastic exchange as a positive form of energetic interaction between word and image or wordimage. In modeling one possible perspective within abstraction, the ekphrastic poet looks upon the image and says “yes to windy clouds” (l. 7), to “what could be a continent forming/ could be chicken scratch” (ll. 10-11). This is not the dominance of a poet over and above the silent image in traditional (or what I called “framed”) ekphrasis, but rather the willingness and desire of the ekphrastic poet to let the image garner control over the lyric self and the space of the poem. Indeed, it seems that

Dolin argues for Mitchell's image pushing past the boundaries of the poem in this unique series of images:

so if she keeps going
 past the white cigarette
 past the favorite part of the day
 when attention has already slid
 into a contemplative pool

 then the application of this red
 now this blue then an olive region

 until the eye refreshes itself (ll. 16-23)

The "eye" here is both the I/eye of the lyric voice and the eye of the painter, as well as the eye of the reader/viewer. In a dramatic muddling of these perspectives, Dolin makes an argument for ekphrasis as a moment of intimate connection within the imaginative space of abstraction and confusion where verbal and visual mingle—"until the eye refreshes itself."

"Black Painting #9: Betrayal" begins to reveal the breakdown of the fixed position of the lyric self at the same time that it overtly references the Medusa. If Dolin researched Mitchell's life, this sense of on-coming fragmentation may bear witness to the traumatic experience of Mitchell's mother's dying ("not knowing.../if you will remain/ until the last stroke" ("Black Painting #12: Doubt" ll. 10, 13-14)). In any case, it reveals a lyric response to loss, and a poetic position of dislocation for the lyric voice. For the lyric self at this point in the sequence, "all mirrors/ are deadly/ because they ask// which one/ which one is/ you" ("Black Painting #11: Duel," ll. 10-15). The poem suggests the relief provided by visual abstraction in the face of overwhelming grief:

amid so much loss and saying

 unsay for a while take back the rampant reds

carve a Medusa in profile

obliterate all full-faced wishes (ll. 5-7)

Relief from mourning is here cast as the ability to “unsay for awhile,” to resist the need to translate experience into language and find comfort in the non-verbal expression of the image. The Medusa, here in profile and not “full-faced,” is actively being “carved” through the work of the poem. This ekphrastic sequence, in the end, opens up a space for a connection between visual artist and poet that soothes the trauma and anxiety of grief. Dolin’s sequence offers comfort in the ekphrastic exchange and seeks (even as it fails) to soothe the anxieties of the lyric voice. In the final poem of the sequence, an interlude not directly connected with a “black painting,” Dolin carves out a space indicative of her ekphrastic project throughout the sequence:

for some means of escape

ignorance being the
obverse of mystery

sometimes with greater
shapeliness

though still play-
fully irregular (“Absence-Memory” ll. 21-27)

These lines capture Dolin’s lyric location as evidenced in her ekphrastic response to Mitchell’s paintings. The poet looks on the images and sees the need and the means for escape, sometimes finding shape and form, while other times engaging in the “playfully irregular,” all the while valuing abstraction as a method of comforting the lyric voice. Abstraction in this sequence locates the “I” in a space of dislocation, a moment between visual and verbal, in which the visual’s stunning ability to captivate the viewer is a moment of escape from the rigidity of language.

Locating the “I” that Sees Color

While “My Black Paintings” ends its lyric sequence in the disruption and fragmentation of a fixed subjectivity--a questioning of the wholeness of its own lyric voice in the face of loss soothed by an embrace of both visual and verbal abstraction--the third section in *Serious Pink*, “Ode to Color,” returns to a unitary sense of the lyric “I” that is distinctly grounded in a material, viewing body. The “I” in this lyric long poem is self aware of her own privileged location in terms of race and class, marking a shift from her earlier identification with the disempowered position of other in poems such as “Seated Woman” and “Looking Again,” which challenged Diebenkorn’s representation of female models and suggested the speaker’s discomfort with witnessing such voyeurism. In “Ode to Color,” Dolin employs the self-reflexive awareness of her own location by investigating not only the philosophical and artistic quotations on color which she cites throughout the poem, but her own experiences with the colors of the body, particularly skin as a visually inscribed marker of racial difference. Again, Rich’s concept of a politics of location is particularly useful. Indeed, Rich voices this same level of self-awareness when she declares, “I do not any longer *believe*—my feelings do not allow me to believe—that the white eye sees from the center” (“Notes” 77, original emphasis). So, too, Dolin’s awareness of her own white privilege complicates her act of viewing in “Ode to Color” throughout which her lyric “I” voice is both solidified and disrupted by the act of looking. Looking at color is seeing difference, seeing the body, seeing trauma. This return to a unified subjectivity that recognizes race and class locations has political value that Swensen’s valuing of fragmentation misses.

For example, those “deadly” mirrors that forced the speaker to confront a lost sense of self in the previous section, have the potential in the opening of “Ode to Color” to help construct and solidify subjectivity in a particular body. The poem begins with the speaker (presumably a white woman) traveling on the subway train, itself a hybrid, in-between location, and encountering a black man whose skin not only reveals racial difference but also overtly displays his body’s survival of trauma. The speaker describes the bright red of his sweatshirt that first catches her eye but quickly emphasizes a complex of sensory details—the darkness of his skin, the “smell of his poverty,” and the scarring of his body which the sweatshirt cannot completely cover. The speaker implicates herself, knowing herself as a “white eye” and troubled by her own tendency to “see from the center,” saying that she stays in the location “out of weakness and pity” and struggles with the desire to stare at the stranger:

....the smell of his poverty much too strong

but I stay out of weakness and pity:

his dark skin has gone through fire

and his hands and arms and who knows how much more of him

wear the ropy scars: I watch him not wanting to stare

as he draws out of a pocket dangling from a long rope at his waist

a red-plastic compact that he opens:

the mercury pool he dips and dips his face towards

as though to stanch the fire (who knows what he sees)

he shuts it opens it shuts it then like a black Narcissus he has to re-open

and stares. Maybe it solidifies him, all I know is steeped

in my own pool I keep seeing this portrait in red. (Dolin 45)

The emphasis in these lines on the serial act of returning to the mirror as a way to solidify the self seems to the speaker like a way out of the pain of trauma. The mirror is “the mercury pool he dips and dips his face towards/ as though to stanch the fire” and yet, we

know from Lacan that the mirror only serves to reflect lack,³⁴ forcing the self to return and return again, to continue to stare as the man does when he “shuts it opens it shuts it then like a black Narcissus he has to re-open/ and [stare].” The speaker’s tone, a sort of wistful hope that thinks, “maybe it solidifies him,” reveals that it does not solidify her—the dark pools of mercury that open for him are for her another image of the body’s trauma, red, like a pool of blood: “all I know is steeped/ in my own pool I keep seeing this portrait in red.”

Even as “Ode to Color” goes on to build a series of memories and reflections about color, this initial thread of meaning connecting the body’s colors through skin and blood recurs as a particularly meaningful resonance for this lyric voice. Unlike the other three sections of *Serious Pink* which all contain short lyric poems responding to a particular painting, “Ode to Color” does not establish a one-to-one correspondence with a work of visual art. Instead, the poem is located in the specific experience of the speaker even as it plays with multivocality as a sustaining feature, with quotations about color ranging from Rothko and Goethe to two signing chimpanzees quoted in *The New York Times*. The chimps, incidentally, pick up on the two colors so metaphorically important in the opening sections discussed above:

What color do you like best, Tatu?
Black, black!
And you, Washoe. What color?
Red, red!
Why?
Beautiful, beautiful! (48)

³⁴ See Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the *I* function,” *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002). For Lacan’s own ekphrastic discussion of the anamorphic image, see “Anamorphosis,” *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

These quoted voices are distinct from the lyric “I” and contained typographically within italics to preserve their separateness. As such, the lyric “I” functions as a reading, speaking, and seeing “eye” that brings together vibrant color memories that cross verbal/visual boundaries, as in the command to “Push the button on Cornell’s Lighted Dancer she glows cobalt blue” (46) or the speaker’s favorite color, “like Lorca’s, will always be green green” (54). The length of the poem, which spans ten pages in the volume, is also sustained by a mode of questioning—a repeated interrogation of the meaning of color which attempts to verbally account for the visceral experience of the visual. This is again connected to the material body through the senses and the body’s own colors as in another image of trauma, color seeping, this time from the speaker’s own body, as red as “...miscarried week-old life/ draining out a full week/ between my legs” (47).

“What you see is what you remember”

“Day Dreams” is a quickly mimetic verbal rendering of Howard Hodgkin’s bright colors, splotchy shapes, dots—a kind of Hopkins-esque energy that jumps from the canvas to the page in the first few lines of the poem:

Let spectacled be speckled
and strips becomes tipples of stripes.

A wavery view loves a vapory hue,
an undulant curve, a redolent verve.

A donging clock polka-dots time,
does a stippled back chime? (ll. 1-6)

This sound play through heavy consonance and both internal and end rhyme marks a triumphant return to the short lyrics that make up much of the volume and shifts into a

playfulness with visuality and language, again through tracking the eye's movement and creating concrete shapes on the page—the kind of visual rhythm Dolin employed in the first ekphrastic sequence “Mistakes.” Positioned last, however, after the two closely ekphrastic sequences on Diebenkorn and Mitchell and the long lyric poem “Ode to Color,” this sequence, “Serious Pink,” is both the title sequence for the volume and a culmination of the volume's commitment to a sense of playfulness between verbal and visual throughout the ekphrastic exchange. The epigraph, quoted from Hodgkin, reads “Can you imagine a serious pink next to a trivial blue or even a ridiculous black?” (55), and suggests that Hodgkin himself liked to play with the relationship between the verbal and visual, here captured as a witty slippage between what the color can signify and what the application of a somewhat discordant adjective might do to our ability to see meaning in abstraction. The question “can you imagine?” invites the reader to do just that, establishing this ekphrastic sequence with a purpose of leading the reader to imagine, to visualize within the mind's eye—a process intimately linked with early Greek rhetorical definitions of ekphrasis which employed *enargeia* to bring the image vividly to life (see Chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of *enargeia*). This *enargeia* is brought back to life in the ecstatic embrace employed by Dolin, a tapping into the capability of ekphrasis to act as what Ruth Webb has called “an active stimulus to imaginative involvement” (“Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern” 17), the poem as a process-oriented space for both poet and reader. The density of sound captured in these first lines quoted above is more exuberant than Dolin's usual style, yet makes a perfectly fitting verbal pairing for Hodgkin's “way of seeing.”

As Susan Sontag puts it, “A first observation about Hodgkin’s work: the extent to which everything by Hodgkin looks so unmistakably by him” (“About Hodgkin” 107).

Sontag argues that the ability of viewers to readily distinguish an artist’s distinctive style seems unique to the 20th century:

Each artist is responsible for creating his or her unique “vision”—a signature style, of which each work is an example. A style is equivalent to a pictorial language of maximum distinctiveness: what it declares itself as that artist’s language, and nobody else’s. To reuse again and again the same gestures and forms is not deemed a failure of imagination in a painter...as it might be in a writer. Repetitiveness seems like intensity. Like purity. Like strength. (106)

Sontag’s use of language as a metaphor for the unique “vision” of the artist is particularly compelling in the case of ekphrasis. Sontag’s interpretation of Hodgkin is interesting in relationship to Dolin’s sequence precisely because this essay by Sontag is included in the catalog of images referenced by Dolin in her notes on the poems’ composition. In fact, we can see that Sontag’s observations about the strengths of Hodgkin’s work become (like Diebenkorn’s statements on mistakes) a central trope for the thematic concerns of the sequence. Sontag points out the importance of the visual imagination and its connection to memory for Hodgkin’s own process, claiming that he moves beyond the goal of Impressionism which aimed to “to preserve the visual freshness of the first fleeting moment that something is seen” (108). Instead, “Hodgkin aims to reinvent the sight of something after it has been seen, when it has acquired the heavy trappings of inner necessity” (108). Similarly, in the second poem “After Dinner” Dolin writes, “what you see is what you remember/ and what you remember is what’s/ framed” (ll. 9-11). The poems in this sequence engage in sensory recollections that fit within the abstract moment of the lyric poem. These visual and sensory images are not linked to one material body (as in “Ode to Color”) but rather, inspired by a viewing of Hodgkin’s paintings and

a parallel to his own practice which was, according to Sontag, a method of memory-making.

Jonathan Culler would argue that the lyric's performativity, captured in this sequence as sound play and formal inventiveness, is itself a method of memory-making. Just as Dolin may have been inspired by the very strangeness of Hodgkin's unique style, Culler defines the lyric as a space that cultivates strangeness through language: "The happening of lyrics is linked to a strangeness or alterity which, if it works, may lodge itself in memory. If the lyric happens, it does so as a form of radical singularity whose value is linked to certain memorable otherness" (46). Thus, the strangeness of otherness that most critics of ekphrasis isolate as a quality of the verbal seeking to understand or overcome its generic other, the visual, is here connected with the use of lyric itself. That is, the otherness of ekphrasis is not so easily mapped as a function of verbal/visual exchange, which Dolin proves can be playful instead of antagonistic. Rather, the otherness of ekphrasis seems to be a kind of revelry in the lyric strangeness of the visual, the verbal and the aural, that unique use of language that allows the poem to stick in our minds. Wordimage, then, is the ecstatic embrace of both what the poem brings to mind through the *enargeia* of vivid evocation of the visual and what it makes memorable through the performativity of language.

In this last sequence, lyric performativity manifests as a subversion of the lyric "I" such that the moon speaks in "The Moon," a performance based on Hodgkin's painting by the same title in which rich, saturated green and red center around an unpainted wooden circle. This moon, who begins "Let me finally tell you what I'm made of..." (l. 1), speaks a bold independent soliloquy, a strange inversion of the traditional lyric aubade

in which the moon is the silent listener to the lyric utterance. This moon says “I’m so cold I burn/ so lonely I spurn and flee to my mountains/ while green flames from your atmosphere/ lick my edges. I would be done with all of you” (ll. 12-15). Then, another shift in lyric subjectivity in the poem “In the Honeymoon Suite,” in which the fixity of pronouns is questioned: “*they* scorned,/ *he* and *she* banished/ so that you and I/ could reverse/ up with down/ then vanish” (ll. 3-8, emphasis in original). Finally, in the second to last poem, which is formally a ghazal or Arabic lyric form in which each couplet represents an abstraction, the poet is required to name herself according to the rules of the ghazal form. While we might expect the poet of “Ode to Color” to allow this lyric voice to map directly on to the identity of the poet, here, when formally required to name the poet, Dolin displaces her own identity onto the visual. The final couplet of the ghazal reads: “Past desert’s edge—plum trees;/ Off the plain of Sharon—the sea rung blue” (ll. 15-16). When the poet must name herself, must say: “Sharon,” she maps that naming onto the visual landscape, a further subversion of the positioning of the poet within the space of lyric abstraction. Even as the poet’s body is located in the position of viewer of the painting, here, the lyric’s form is so strange that even the poet’s self becomes an abstracted other. This other is not nothing, it is a place “past the desert’s edge,” a location that pushes past the border between verbal and visual. When Adrienne Rich says, “I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which was a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (“Notes” 64), she emphasizes the body as the most authentic location. While Dolin’s poems often value the body as the poet’s most authentic sensory location, at other times, they establish the

abstraction of ekphrastic lyric space, here a hybrid of the white space of the page and the visual field of the painting, as a another location for authenticating subjective experience.

Thus, the hybrid space between verbal and visual in the ekphrastic poem is also the difficultly defined space of the lyric. Plotting and mapping location are useful tools for trying to define ekphrastic space, but, in the end, we can only work to trace borders and point out overlaps, moments of definition in a sometimes clouded vision. Indeed, the lyric is “memorable otherness” as is the space of the ekphrastic poem—as critics, we have to allow room for the semiotic and pleasurable aspects of the poem. To do this we must also think of playfulness and sound pleasures, musicality, the Orphic, and in the case of ekphrasis we must also admit that there are some ecstatic aspects of the moment of interaction between the visual and verbal that we cannot name, abstractions which breathe and move outside of authorship or ownership, outside of the control of poet, painter, and critic. As I hope this discussion has demonstrated, reading this negotiation of otherness as a confrontation or conflict is not always accurate. While contemporary poets, like Dolin, may exhibit a locational awareness of their own perspective or “way of seeing” that brings to the surface power struggles inherent in social representations of others according to race, class, and gender; for the most part, contemporary ekphrasis is a productive embrace between word and image that moves beyond both antagonism in order to not only “writewithize” but to write, read, see, and hear with and from the body. The verbal and visual interaction in the space of a lyric ekphrastic poem brings to the reader’s mind images and ideas that move within and beyond the stilled intellect into the potentiality of abstraction. These lyrics charm the senses, so that what you see is what you remember.

Chapter 3

Near Distances: Ekphrastic Aura from *Wunderkammer* to Still Life

Joseph Cornell

Into a sweeping meticulously-
detailed disaster the violet
light pours. It's not a sky,
it's a room. And in the open
field a glass of absinthe is
fluttering its song of India.
Prairie winds circle mosques.

You are always a little too
young to understand. He is
bored with his sense of the
past, the artist. Out of the
prescient rock in his heart
he has spread a land without
flowers of near distances.

Beauty belongs to the small.

Rebecca Dunham
"Box Series," 2006

Frank O'Hara, 1955

To think through all things, that is the still life painter's work—and the poet's. Both sorts of artists require a tangible vocabulary, a worldly lexicon. A language of ideas is, in itself, a phantom language, lacking in the substance of worldly things, those containers of feeling and experience, memory and time. We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences. Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations....

Mark Doty
Still Life with Oysters and Lemon, 2001

In his 1955 *Art News* review of an exhibition of box constructions and miniatures on display at New York's Stable Gallery, poet Frank O'Hara was the first art critic to refer to Joseph Cornell as a "genius," exclaiming that it was a rarity to find "so pure and so uncompromising a spirit in our midst" (qtd. in Soloman 238). Inspired by Cornell's

work, O'Hara penned the poem reproduced above, specifying on his manuscript that the two stanzas of the poem were to be "print[ed] like boxes" (238). In addition to its visual nod towards the form of Cornell's own work, this ekphrastic free verse sonnet captures the wonder O'Hara felt as spectator of the Cornell boxes, those "meticulously detailed disaster[s]" (ll. 1-2) contained by, yet overflowing, each boxed "room." The Cornell box makes a child of its viewer, O'Hara seems to argue; when you look upon it, you feel "You are always a little too/ young to understand" (ll. 8-9). And then, in the final image, O'Hara finds a comparison for Cornell's work of assemblage by conflating the sculptor and the landscape painter:

Out of the
prescient rock in his heart
he has spread a land without
flowers of near distances

This image with its embrace of lyric juxtaposition is deliberately multiple; its syntax must be read in layered and cumulative ways thanks to the enjambments that the boxed stanzas create: "out of the prescient rock" or the "prescient rock in his heart" or "in his heart he has spread", "he has spread a land without," or "a land without flowers" or, "flowers of near distances." Thus, the act of assemblage, collage, layering and juxtaposition, like lyric meaning in this small poem, "spreads" out, "sweeps" and "pours," even as it is meticulously contained and restricted by its own form and presentation. O'Hara's suggestion that we can sense the artist's boredom is striking: "He is/ bored with his sense of the/ past, the artist." Even though we may be too young to understand, we are able to deduce, or at least O'Hara is able to deduce, the artist's intervention into time, into the past as a "near distance." Thus, rather than the act of ekphrasis as a stilling of intellect as the Medusa model of ekphrasis would require, here the call to ekphrasis has an

energizing effect, allowing multiplicity and playfulness to emerge and overflow the stanza.

More than half a century later, contemporary poets are still drawn to Cornell's boxes and collages as inspiration for a variety of ekphrastic poems. "Box Series," a set of poems from Rebecca Dunham's 2006 ekphrastic collection *The Miniature Room*, is based on Cornell boxes and Dürer etchings that emphasize minute detail and thus engage the viewer in a private and focused viewing. "Beauty belongs to the small," Dunham posits, and the poems themselves build their argument for lyric condensation as a parallel to the focused viewing that allows the viewer to "make what we can of this world" (4, 5).

Charles Simic's book-length ekphrastic project *Dime-Store Alchemy* (1992) engages with Cornell's work and again with an imaginative idea of Cornell the person—an enigmatic figure, an urban flaneur, an imaginary collaborator in Simic's own prose poems, and an alchemist transforming ordinary castoff trinkets, those image cutouts and clippings of his favorite ballet and movie stars, into art. Similarly, Lynda Hull's poem "Utopia Parkway" (1990), uses the contrast between the playful wonder of Cornell's boxes and the ordinary and mundane setting of Cornell's life, particularly his home at 37-08 Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens. In the poem, this striking contrast so often mentioned in biographies and memoirs of the artist (in spite of the poetic quality relevant in the street's name, Utopia Parkway), is an imaginative jumping off point for mapping New York City as a penny arcade landscape:

the whole bedazzled city's
a magnificent arcade one might arrange in a cabinet,
those amusement-park contraptions worked by coins

or tinted wooden balls traveling runways
to set into motion compartment

after compartment, a symphony of sight and sound
into fantasy, into the streets of New York...

In this chapter, I want to think through the work of arrangement and assemblage inspired first by Cornell's process, and later by the ekphrastic poems themselves which work to redistribute the relationship between verbal and visual into what I will be calling "wordimage assemblage." As Hull puts it, Cornell draws items together; in this instance the whole of New York City is contained as "one might arrange in a cabinet." That is, by cutting, pasting, and reconstructing images, words, and objects from his vast collections of mass-produced ephemera and placing them together in a relationship of closeness and miniaturized connection within the cabinet or box, Cornell invites the viewer to cross the frame's boundary and imaginatively construct individual, non-commodified visions of the object. In opposition to Walter Benjamin's famous claim that mechanical reproduction induced a loss of aura, I want to think about how Cornell's work and the ekphrastic responses to his art might reactivate aura by recontextualizing reproductions within the frame of the box. In the work of play and miniaturization, as O'Hara suggests, the artist tantalizes the child within us, he coaxes out our wonder, all the while silencing the analytical voice and instead appealing to the lyric imagination that creates an aura of what the poet calls "near distance." Even as the spectacle insists on difference and impersonal relations according to Guy Debord, the Cornell box, because of its small size and peculiar details, insists on intimacy and familiarity and thus promotes a new affective relationship between viewer and object. That is to say, Cornell's work jostles passive consumption of the image by de-framing a public/private binary within the museum

space.³⁵ In this chapter I want to sketch out a theory of ekphrastic aura, one that addresses itself to the relationship between perceiver and art object that engages the sense of wonder and that provokes our desire to collect or “possess” that which is manifested in writing the ekphrastic poem. The poem’s ability to recontextualize the art object challenges the public/private and spectacle/aura oppositions set up by Benjamin and Debord. In the case of ekphrasis based on Cornell, miniatures, toys, and the act of play converge to energize this process. While this theory emerges, somewhat ironically, from works which are explicitly framed, bounded, and even miniaturized--and therefore appears to work against my larger claims in the dissertation for deframing, crossing boundaries, expansion, and rupture--it is precisely these strident borders that make the border-crossing playful, and, even, political.

Benjamin famously claims, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221), an “authenticity [that] is interfered with...” (221). He explains:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has already experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (221)

An object’s aura is linked here to its authenticity as well as to its existence within time, figured as tradition and, later, as an involvement in ritual. Benjamin claims that “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” (222), one that grounded in the use of the work of art within ritual performance “first the magical, then the religious kind” (222). He goes on to argue, “the technique of

³⁵ Cornell was infamously reluctant to sell his boxes, while at the same time, he was known to frequently give them away to children to play with as toys (much to the dismay of art collectors and dealers).

reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it **reactivates** the object reproduced” (221). Benjamin argues that the work of art enters the domain of politics when it is removed from the domain of ritual (224) and, for the work of ekphrasis, this removal can indeed claim a political value both in reproducing the object and by insisting on the politics of the aesthetic form of ekphrasis.

Thus, Benjamin maps the following set of oppositions:

Distance—Proximity (nearness)

Private—Public

Ritual—Politics (play)

Time—Space

Aura—Spectacle

Guy Debord’s 1960 *Society of the Spectacle* fleshes out the relationship of this last binary between aura and spectacle by claiming that in a world dominated by mechanical reproduction society becomes based only on the spectacle of images and appearances. That is, in the society of the spectacle, everything becomes commodified. As Debord puts it, “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (1), and rather than people creating meaningful relationships with others, the spectacle itself serves as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (4). Indeed, the spectacle enforces a hegemonic society and dominant modes of subjectivity; “the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production....the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life” (6). Finally, “The origin of the spectacle lies in the

world's loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been" (29).

The ekphrastic exchange is often characterized as a relationship of oppositions closely related to those Debord identifies, including:

Verbal—Visual

Time—Space

Speaking—Silent

Desire—Resistance

Self—Other

It is my larger argument in this dissertation that criticism of ekphrasis has for too long situated itself firmly on the verbal side of the divide, ignoring how images or the art objects themselves have agency and influence within the ekphrastic exchange. The instance of ekphrastic responses to Joseph Cornell is an important challenge to the limited approach to ekphrasis. Cornell's invitation to the viewer elicits a poem in which the poet, in following with Cornell's process, also begins to move within and between such clean categorical oppositions in order to occupy a "near distance," a playful space of indistinction in which aura is reactivated through wonder and desire. Like the argument in *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, where Lorriane Datsun and Katharine Park chart an important historical shift in the natural sciences from an emphasis on wonder to natural regularities and curiosity, poems about Cornell's artwork demonstrate that representing perception as an act of wondering allows the poet to better capture the draw of the object on the viewer. We can add another binary, "Curiosity—Wonder" to our list: As Datsun and Park demonstrate, in the 16th and 17th centuries, wonder was considered a major

scientific passion. Poised on the line between the known and the unknown, wonders indicated an experience of the unexpected, the rare, and the astounding, and were recorded largely through personal experience and oral reports.

As scientific methods shifted, however, wonder became increasingly disreputable as a popular, amateurish, and childish passion—this opposed to the rational, credible, and educated characteristics of modern, enlightened curiosity. Soon passion and wonderment were replaced by disinterested, Cartesian doubt and curiosity. Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and others feared those marvels that challenged the metaphysical opposition between art and nature, man and beast, species and genres (binary categories not unlike those mapped onto the ekphrastic divide between verbal and visual). Any irregularities that did not fit within these categories challenged classification schema and the rational ordering principles of the new natural philosophy. Suspect here were collections of marvels in costly *wunderkammern* or wonder cabinets that personified nature as a type of artisan and in turn deconstructed the very boundaries between the wonders of art and the wonders of nature that the natural philosophers emphasize. If we think of the Cornell box as a 20th century wunderkammer, we can better access the sensational responses that these art objects elicit within the space of the ekphrastic poem. Doing so, we will see that poets writing within the spectacle of the 21st century are able to re-engage with the image via a different kind of reproduction, not mechanical reproduction, but rather ekphrastic reproduction.

In response to Benjamin's argument that mechanical reproduction negatively "**reactivates** the object reproduced" (221), we might read this notion of "reactivation" in a more positive light. That is, if aura is a "phenomenon of distance" (222), as Benjamin

argues, and “the desire of contemporary masses [is] to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (223), then we may categorize Cornell’s playfulness as an appeal to that desire—when he builds a trap door in the side of a box, inviting us to open, or hides a dancer behind blue glass that we can only see if we push a button, or sets up a game in which rolling balls or moving rings suggest a game from our childhood—we are acting in an individual relationship with the artwork, even if we act in ways dictated or foreshadowed by mass appeal. Moreover, if this reactivation occurs when the reproduction off the artwork “meet[s] the beholder or listener in his own particular situation” then reactivation by ekphrastic reproduction could be engaged through the work of collection, bringing subject and object into a relation of near distance, a process that links the poets and artists discussed in this chapter.

Therefore, instead of the mechanical reproduction as identified by Benjamin, I propose the process of ekphrastic reproduction, a way of engaging with images in the age of the spectacle that allows a re-turn to aura. Ekphrastic reproduction creates a new aura that exists between ritual and politics, between time and space, and between curiosity and wonder. I will model ekphrastic reproduction on the space of the *wunderkammer*. Thus, within the wonder cabinet time is neither the time of work nor of religious ritual but of rather of play, and the model of possession for the *wunderkammer* is neither public nor private but of the shared common.

Cornell was himself a collector of the objects that filled his famous boxes, and this aesthetic of collection seeps into the poem “Nine Boxes” by Siri Husvedt that I will discuss in the first section below. This process of the collection of images brought together within the poem is not unlike the contemporary response to image

commodification discussed by John Berger, who describes our contemporary desire to own and collect reproductions and “frame” them within our own spaces such as the bulletin board or, even more currently (I would add), by storing them within our small, square devices such as iPods, phones, and other virtual “boxes:”

Adults and children sometimes have boards in their bedrooms or living-rooms on which they pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards. On each board all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room’s inhabitant. Logically, these boards should replace museums. (Berger 30)

In the second section of this chapter, I move to consider Marianne Moore’s rejection of the public/private binary through her dismissal of the museum through a call for “imaginary possession.” Moore shares the instinct to question the nature of artifice and representation with many 21st century poets’ whose ekphrastic responses struggle with the frame of the museum. In the final section of the chapter, I will discuss Mark Doty, whose memoir *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* establishes a further link between the very human nature of desire for the visual and our efforts to fulfill this desire through the language of ekphrasis. Though the ekphrastic poet-as-spectator may participate in the spectacle, I will argue that even as these poems acknowledge contextual frames and borders, they de-frame through the political commitment to subvert commodification. For example, Mark Doty’s *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001) redefines commodification such that the relationship between image and viewer is a relationship of desire and love—the still life paintings as objects contain human history and memory and are therefore treasured. Far from the reaction of a passive observer, Doty’s ekphrasis is an example of the power of language to create aura in an image that, according to Benjamin,

may have been stripped of that special quality in its commodification. Thus, the border of ownership is re-defined in the still life painting such that the poet can access the image through a kind of intimate connection with the work of art. Similarly, Marianne Moore is able to use her poems to construct her own “imaginary museums,” visual memory-spaces in which the work of the poem allows the poet to contain the treasured image or object within the imagination. What Doty refers to as a “poetry of relation” (*Still Life* 35) within the frame of the still life painting, can be seen as a way understanding the associative connections between word and image brought together within the space of the ekphrastic lyric where language allows the image to be collectively imagined.

“Boxing” Aura: Wonder and the Ekphrastic Wunderkammer

More than half a century after the publication of O’Hara’s ekphrastic response to Cornell with which I opened this chapter, Siri Hustvedt’s nine-part lyric sequence entitled “Nine Boxes,” opens up the possibility of wonder through the act of the poet’s gathering and collection of images, an act not unlike Cornell’s own rigorous collection of images, toys, trinkets, and other ephemera in his extensive dossier files on particular actresses, artists, or themes. Thus, lyric, ekphrastic responses to Cornell’s work often parallel Cornell’s own process of both collection and presentation based on allusive, lyrical connections between images and things within boxes, as within the space of the poem. Cornell’s boxed assemblages of his found objects—the reappropriation of dimestore baubles, photos, drawings, maps, feathers, balls, rings, bubble pipes, and the like—appear to be imaginatively provocative processes that have drawn more contemporary ekphrastic response than the work of any other singular artist.

Contemporary poetry's wonderment with the work of Cornell is all the more enticing because he was one of the first American artists to appropriate the objects of consumer culture in his work, anticipating Pop Art by more than two decades. As such, ekphrastic poetry based on the work of Cornell opens up a unique avenue into the question of the ekphrastic relationship with aura in an age of museums, digital viewing, and an increasingly commodified visual culture. Even so, what Cornell himself recontextualizes is not fine art—though we now consider the boxes to be so, their individual components are at the opposite extreme—they are cheaply reproduced images of publicity snapshots, or pages or illustrations taken from old books, or small bottles, little clay pipes, marbles, and other junk culled from the dime-stores of New York City. Often, the images themselves are not even the original magazine or book cutout, which Cornell preferred to keep in his extensive filing system. For his boxes, he preferred to use copies of the already mass-produced images. In this way, Cornell upends Benjamin's distinction that "the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value" (224). Cornell's artistic process is an act of mechanical reproduction by Benjamin's definition, a process that "emancipates the work of art from its...dependence on ritual" (224). Instead of the high ritualistic value a work of art might have had as its original use value, the originally low value for the objects and images Cornell makes use of is transformed through the acts of miniaturization, collection, and play. This playfulness chimes with Giorgio Agamben's comments about the toy: "everything which is old, independent of its sacred origins, is liable to become a toy" (79). One such method is miniaturization, in which everyday-use objects (such as a car or gun) can become toys if miniaturized. The miniature toy, like the mass reproduced image,

is taken out of its original context, and while Benjamin sees this as something lost to be mourned, Agamben articulates how this act of play can be transformative: “Play...tends to break the connection between past and present, and to break down and crumble the whole structure into events.” (83). Further, Agamben argues that “play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it” (Profanations 76). Indeed, what Agamben calls “the ‘profanation’ of play” (76) is the way in which playfulness severs the original uses of objects and language. Play as a profane activity becomes, in turn, political, as it frees up sacred associations and “deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized” (77). Furthermore, “Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use” (77). Cornell disrupts the sacred boundaries of the ritual by allowing for play, which becomes a way of profaning the spectacle. We can see that Cornell’s work exists in-between the very oppositions set up by Benjamin and Debord. He is private yet public and, through that “near distance” that O’Hara mentions, Cornell brings the viewer closer, establishing aura not through ritual but through playfulness.

The resonance between the process of ekphrastic writing and of collection in Cornell’s boxes is clear: like the *wunderkammer* in which disparate objects come into relation with one another within the display box based solely on the owner’s aesthetic of collection and display, the poem works through metonymic association, revealing an inherent connection between and within language (through which signifiers bleed into one another) and the play of wonderment within the space of the cabinet. Hustvedt’s ekphrasis based on Cornell’s boxes, like Dolin’s long lyric “Ode to Color” discussed in chapter 2, disrupts the traditional one-to-one relationship of ekphrasis (i.e. singular lyric

poem to singular art object) not only by extending the ekphrastic response to a nine-part sequence, but by resisting the title's ("Nine Boxes") own suggestion that each section of the poem correspond to a particular box of Cornell's. As I discuss below, Hustvedt fractures and disseminates images and items from boxes ranging from the bird, hotel, and ballerina boxes to the Medici princess within and between sections, thus rupturing Cornell's original (boxed) frame and the original relationship between the items and images contained within. The result is that the only framed and contained boxes a reader can make out are the rectangular stanzas of the poem itself, each ten lines long (just short of a sonnet) and of varying line lengths.

Hustvedt, a contemporary novelist and poet whose frequent contributions to art theory have been collected in the book *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting*, argues for "the pleasures of bewilderment." She explains:

I do know that I have never loved a painting I can master completely. My love requires a sense that something has escaped me. This quality of cryptic excess may be responsible for the language people use to talk about seeing art, as if an inanimate thing were endowed with an elusive, almost sacred power. (9)

Datson and Park's revision of the history of wonder connects with Hustvedt's sense of bewilderment specifically in the face of the odd or uncanny *wunderkammer* that has drawn so many poets to the work of Joseph Cornell. It is this wonderment that releases "the language people use to talk about seeing art," presumably a different language than the everyday, a language with "elusive, almost sacred power." Indeed, as I argue in Chapter 2, the language of ekphrasis is itself a special type of lyrical language, not the ordinary language of everyday, empirical description, a language that moves beyond the hierarchical model of observation and description offered by the Medusa model. This ekphrastic process releases an "*almost* sacred power" of wonder precisely because of its

profanation, entanglement, metonymic border-crossing, and hybridization of the verbal and visual. To broaden this observation, the ekphrastic poem, then, can be understood as “wordimage assemblage”—a wunderkammer able to produce affective disruptions of linear, logical thinking and exposition and favoring, instead, the cultivation of wonder and an intimate engagement with the viewer and poet, resulting in the ekphrastic poem’s own logic of new wordimage relations.

Hustvedt’s take on the contemporary relationship between wonder and seeing also reveals a kind of exhaustion or boredom (as O’Hara pointed out) with the contemporary “flood of images”:

In a culture flooded by facile images that race past us on a screen, peek out at us from magazines, or loom over us in a city street—pictures so heavily coded, so easily read that they ask nothing of us but our money—looking long and hard at a painting may allow us entry into the enigma of seeing itself, because we must struggle to make sense of the image in front of us. (*Mysteries* 9)

While Hustvedt makes these comments in reference to the two-dimensional art of painting, her lyric series on Cornell boxes reveals her desire as a poet to take a long hard look at these three-dimensional assemblages which, through their recontextualization and appropriation of the commodified images and objects of the everyday, are themselves a way “into the enigma of seeing itself.” And it is this enigma that ekphrasis can access by suspending the borders between verbal and visual. The enigma of seeing is given a precise form in her ekphrastic poems: wordimage assemblage, which collapses the distance between containment and contamination, sense and sensation, observation and participation.

Wordimage Assemblage: Hustvedt’s “Nine Boxes”

The first poem in “Nine Boxes” ends with a clear reference to Cornell’s famous Medici boxes. In this series, Cornell used images of a young male and young female members of the Medici family, often repeated/dissected with mirrors, framed sections within the box, or by painting black grid lines across the face of the glass, thus partitioning the face in the image (see, for example, fig. 17). While it is unclear exactly which Medici box Hustvedt has in mind when she ends this first section with the image of “the Medici princess bath[ing] in bubbles” (l. 7, see fig. 18), she does make it clear that other images and objects from other boxes have simultaneously seeped into the frame of the stanza.



Figure 17: Joseph Cornell, Medici Slot Machine (1942)

For example, the very first line of this first section in which the poet states that “the adult appeared parenthetical” (l.1), could be read as a connection with the final Medici image in that this series of boxes focused exclusively on children. However, while some Medici boxes did include the objects mentioned in this section—“a pharmaceutical vial” (l. 4), “a violet feather and three blue beads” (l.5), often hidden in drawers or compartments within the box—the background that these objects “secure” (“the map of constellations:/ A peephole to our cosmology” [ll. 6-7]) is a frequent background to other box constructions, but never appears as the backdrop in any of the boxes of the Medici series, which are almost always lined with “diagrams of European cities fashioned from pieced-together Baedeker maps” (Waldman 70). Thus, the “box” represented in this first section of ekphrastic response to Cornell resists, as mentioned above, the traditional one-to-one relationship between poem and art object.

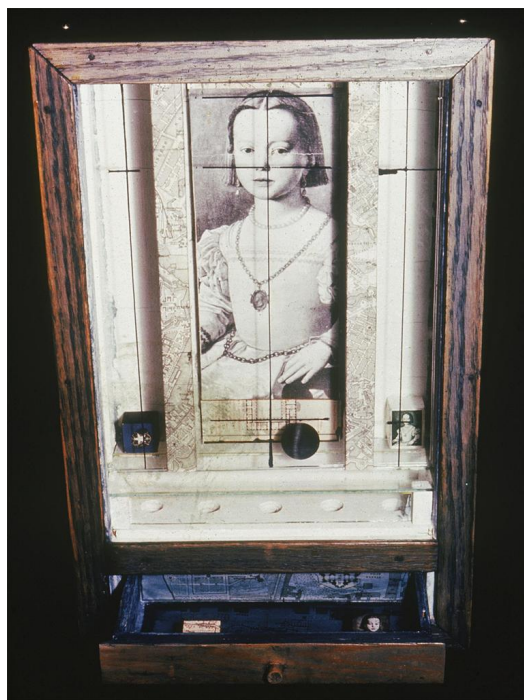


Figure 18: Joseph Cornell, Medici Princess (n.d.)

And while the slight slippages in detailing the contents of the box(es) referred to in this first section of “Nine Boxes” may not be readily apparent to a reader who is not simultaneously referencing Cornell’s catalog, as the poem progresses, these gaps and juxtapositions both widen and intensify such that images simultaneously pile up and disperse within and between the boxed stanzas of the poem, generating a delightful excess via ekphrastic reproduction.

For example, the section begins with an image that readers will directly connect with Cornell’s series on ballerinas but quickly morphs into another well-known series of hotel boxes:

She is always on point—
To pirouette without turning, to suggest the movement only
At the entrance of the Hotel
Where the driver covers her with the stiff furs of legend (ll. 1-4)

Indeed, the poem continues to allow the images to multiply so quickly the entire ten lines of this section make up only one sentence. This quick movement of the eye vertically down the page through the poem’s enjambment is contrasted by the stagnation of the images in time. That is, “suggest[ing] the movement only,” could be explained by Cornell biographers as his tendency to want to still and preserve striking visual moments—seeing a girl on the street, a dancer on the stage, and so on—for his extensive collection of memories and visions. The attentiveness to the remnants of the everyday often overlooked as inconsequential details proves to be the key to unlocking the wonder of his *wunderkammern*. Here, the second section moves from the image of a ballerina on pointe to, finally, “an inert mechanical bird,/ In a cell,/ Lit by Perseus” (ll. 8-10)—an image both caged and mythical such that the unrealized potential to move becomes the source of wonder for the viewer. Through sequential compiling, prosaic and banal objects

suddenly shift registers and become wonders that reside paradoxically within yet outside the terrain of the familiar.

The poem's sections continue in this way, juxtaposing literal points of constellation (in the images of Andromeda and Perseus, among other constellations used by Cornell) that provide the pasted paper background to so many box constructions with the everyday objects—mirrors, cut-out faces, and especially dolls—that seem to resonate most for this poet. Indeed, doll images cohere in section 4, the one section of the poem that can be explicitly mapped to the specific box construction known as “Bébé Marie” (see fig. 19). This box construction contains a Victorian doll that belonged to Cornell's cousin (Waldman 79) entombed, almost, within a forest of painted twigs and the black inside of the box.



Figure 19: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled [Bébé Marie]* (1940s), The Museum of Modern Art

As the poet Husvedt sees it:

The doll stands in a forest
 In a dress
 The color of tea stains,
 With red in her checks, and lashes
 On eyes that don't close—
 Speckled with white
 In an enamel snow storm that doesn't move her hair
 But takes place undercover, in our stories,
 Lying on the night table under a ruffled lamp shade
 In a windowless place. (Section 4, ll. 1-10)

The sequence goes on to sketch out liminal spaces held fixed in time, as if inside “bubbles that move nowhere but stay afloat forever like marble.” As with Cornell’s juxtapositions, contrast is a driving force in the poem, and the reader moves between segments and boxes as through images that double over and echo one another even as they stake a claim for originality. The boxes appear as dreams, maybe nightmares, frozen “in the chilled air of the museum, like a disembodied symptom” or, like the small familiar spaces of a childhood home: “with a floor and ceiling to things” or boxed, like “ten tiny lights on an oak lid, shining like glass where the world sleeps in a cat’s eye.” While the boxes originally act as frames to contain various scenes frozen in time, the collection of poems contaminates and overflows its framed boundary through sequential movement and uncanny doubling of images, spaces, and affects.

It is in this pivotal moment, in which Husvedt focuses the poem onto one specific box construction, that the pronoun “we” begins to enter the poem.

We have closed ourselves in here,
 With a floor and a ceiling to things,
 But we have names for all the remnants of these boxed dreams,
 Unlike the fetus who sleeps and wakes in the unlit reticule
 Of two hearts. (Section 7, ll. 5-10)

Thus, Husvedt collapses the distinction between the “we” that observes, takes notes, and writes, and the “we” that is participatory, embedded and embodied in and through the space of the wordimage assemblage. Distinctions between reception as merely passive perception of the image and creation as the power of language to tame or silence the image are suspended in an ekphrastic reproduction of aura that crystallizes in the wordimage assemblage. In fact, the “we” is no longer positioned as watching from the outside but rather is retroactively posited inside the poem as an uncanny other that the poet both identifies with yet is separate from.

The subject and object distinction no longer holds within the uncanny doubling in the poem, and as a result our conventional notions of space and time become increasingly distressed. What distills within these ever-shifting moments of containment/contamination is a thread of images connected with embryonic division and replication within the space of the womb. The “pair in the charm of identical children,/ split in the spell of minutiae” (section 5, ll. 2-3) of the fifth section references (most likely) Cornell’s repetition of images, multiple cut-outs and division through mirrored spaces as in the Medici boxes as a method of rupturing singular identity by suggesting the image of twins:

The photographed faces behind blue glass
Multiplied, so the sisters were mirrors
Of genetic coupling (ll. 4-6).

Later, in section six, we find “the amniotic night sprinkled/ With the objects of later years,/ Out of chronology” (ll. 2-4). In these lines, the amniotic night is figured outside of chronological, reified, linear time (which is predicated on the causal structure of before and after). In contrast, the time of the womb is a time of perpetual becoming, emerging,

and multiplying, a time within closure, without boundaries, and thus perpetually indeterminate. This allusive connection between the unique space-time of the wordimage assemblage and the female space-time of the womb speaks to a poetic practice that is neither inside nor outside, male nor female, flesh nor word. The result is a poem that incubates wonderment through a collection of strange facts or “remnants” of “boxed dreams” woven together in the beating of the hearts of twins (beings who are both singular yet multiple, originary yet duplicate). Like the “we” that finds itself posited within the poem as its own uncanny stranger, the twin is a coupling of difference and repetition within the space of sequential contamination and the time of becoming.

The “struggle to make sense” of such a profane and playful practice is why we turn to Cornell and enjoy taking a long look. As the poet claims in section 8 of the nine-part sequence:

We have gotten our things together
Before the trip,
A small hoard of connected points
To answer the nebula
That cannot be made out tonight
Or any other night. (ll.1-6)

It is the “nebula” of the wordimage assemblage—the “hoard of connected points” that lacks dialectical opposition or hierarchical ordering/compartmentalization—that produces wonderment in the face of strangeness or play when invited by the artwork. The work of the *wunderkammer*’s invitation to wonder is no premodern retreat into mysticism, superstition, or ritual but rather a practice of affective intensification and extension through attentiveness to those anomalies and peculiarities that lie within the everyday yet are concealed by the curious. The struggle to make sense is here returned to primordial enigmas of the womb, the dream, the constellation, and the nebula found in the “almost

sacred power” of the wordimage assemblage. A new perception of wonder emerges that cannot accept disinterested viewing, categorization, or hierarchical ordering as its basic methodological principles. Rather the subject/object dichotomy upon which the curious scientist measures the facts of external reality (or by which the critical theorist enacts his or her dialectic of negation) is overturned for the embodied and embedded “we” of ekphrasis.

Marianne Moore and the Museum of Wonders

Marianne Moore’s first letter in an ongoing correspondence with Cornell that lasted through the 1940s and 1950s was signed “Yours sincerely and with ever grateful *wonder*” (qtd. in Caws 100, my italics). In fact, Cornell and Moore’s exchange of letters features much identification, expressed here as wonder, with each other’s personal obsessions. Moore publicly praised Cornell’s *The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)*, a wordimage hybrid of concrete poem and collage published in the January 1943 issue of *View* (see fig. 20). In return, Cornell’s thank you missive to Moore (expressing sentiments from both Cornell and the imaginary Berenice) was itself a wordimage collage, the letter framed by cutouts of an armadillo, a pangolin (in reference to Moore’s famous poem), and juggling figures known by Cornell to be among Moore’s own obsessions. One letter, in April of 1944, includes an image of a bird habitat clipped by Cornell from “an article describing a child’s tour among *cabinets de curiosités*” (Tashjian 70-71), suggesting that wonder cabinets were a source of inspiration and delight for both Cornell and Moore. Indeed, an exchange of small gifts in the form of colored papers and stationary, images, articles, and books seems to mark the relationship of Cornell and

Moore as one of “kindred spirit[s]” (Tashjian 71), albeit spirits who interact at a near distance through the words, images, and objects of their own desires.



Figure 20: Joseph Cornell, *The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)* (1943)

In 1945, when Moore agrees to recommend Cornell for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (which Cornell did not win), she writes to the committee that his work has “a poetic associative force hard to rival” (qtd. in Tashjian 71-72). In the first section of this chapter, this poetic association served as the shaping force with which

poets like Husvedt identified in their ekphrastic responses to Cornell. In this section, I want to consider this same method of associative gathering via poetic or lyric connection, that is so important to Husvedt and other contemporary poets, as the force behind Moore's own aesthetics of collection, an aesthetics that ultimately allows her to build her own imaginary museum.

Moore was extremely involved in the world of visual art. She studied drawing and painting as a child and her journals, letters, and scrapbooks reveal that she continued to sketch throughout her life. Her involvement in the contemporary art scene was not only a product of her editorship of the *Dial*, for which she reviewed several exhibitions, art books, and galleries, but also of her personal interest and attraction to the unique ways of looking exemplified by painting, photography, sculpture, and other art media. She saved numerous articles about current artistic trends, such as cubism and its related movements, which she was introduced to through her involvement with Alfred Stieglitz's gallery 291. Moore's poems about art reveal a deeply felt, even spiritual, love of a truth that art can make apparent to the human observer. While this "truth" can stem from art's imitation of nature in many of Moore's poems, much of her ekphrastic writing focuses on the imaginative response to the crafting of the art object, perhaps reflecting the changing values of modern art. In Moore's ekphrastic poems, the poet herself emerges as a kind of museum docent, an expert who mediates between the visual and the verbal in order to educate about beauty, craft, and symbolic meaning. We know Moore as a collector of artifacts, words, tales, and pictures. Through her ekphrastic work, we begin to see her as a curator of an unnamed and invisible museum,³⁶ an "imaginary possessor" who collects

³⁶ For further readings of Moore as a collector and within the museum, see Loizeaux (80-93) and Catherine Paul, especially Chapter 4 (141-193).

the art through writing about it and whose poems reveal a third position, as viewer of the object who delights in art for art's sake and desires that representation work with accuracy and precision. Thus, we see Moore as curator, docent, and audience/viewer, collecting, explaining, and justifying her collections based on her own taste, thereby erasing the hierarchical distances between who can buy art, who can teach and arrange a collection, and who can observe the art on display. As such, her ekphrastic reproductions engage the political possibilities of a museum of wonders, an imaginary museum in which everyone can collect auratic art based on their own standards, preferences, and interests.

As early as 1964, critics such as A. K. Weatherhead were noticing Moore's particular use of perception and visual description within her poems. Weatherhead notes two distinct types of vision, that of "the close-up," a (near) focused look by which the poet observes minute details and describes the accurate particulars of an object or scene, and that of the (distant) "bird's-eye-view," which takes in a "general panorama" of a scene without a demand for accuracy (482). In her more recent study of Moore and visual art, Linda Leavell updates Weatherhead's two types of vision to three modes of vision: an observational mode, which Leavell claims is most natural for Moore, with "the playful, ironic delight in surfaces and oddities that characterizes 'The Steeple-Jack'"; an intellectual, didactic mode which seeks to analyze the image; and a spiritual mode, in which poetry can "educate visualization, refine the language, and, by threatening the tyranny of imprecision, liberate the individual" (216-217). In the "The Steeple Jack," Moore insists on mediating the visual of the landscape from a distance, as the artist would have. This kind of distanced vision is described in relation to art by Norman Bryson in

Vision and Painting, as “the gaze”: a “prolonged, contemplative [look, that regards]...the field of vision with a certain aloofness and disengagement” (94). Moore’s knowledge of visual art allows her to view the scene as she imagines the engraver Albrecht Dürer would likely view it. The disengaged looking is not aloof in a negative manner, but rather distanced because of the need to focus on recreating the image, even if the accuracy of the image may be distorted by the imaginative art of representation. What Moore connects with in the poem is his artistic distance, paralleled with the “bird’s-eye-view” of the steeple-jack and the remove of Ambrose, that allows him to change the colors of his watercolor from the actual “pine green” to “peacock blue and guinea gray” (l. 15) just as Moore shifts from the initial scene of a seaside town to the exotic climate of the “banyan, frangipani, or/ jack-fruit trees” (ll. 37-38). All of this creation takes place in the artist’s imagination. As Bonnie Costello points out, Dürer’s sketches did not always come from direct observation; he was “a realist of the imagination and not of nature:”

Moore admires Dürer as an artist at once of originality and precision (criteria she also set for herself), but points out that in the best pictures he has obtained his sense of fact second hand, filtered through prior representations, a tendency of course akin to her own drawing of the particular from books, pictures, films. (194)

In a July 1928 *Dial* review of an exhibition of Dürer works Moore asserts that “liking is increased perhaps when the concept is primarily an imagined one” (*Collected Prose* 203). This is again a relationship of near distance, here between reality and imagination. In the poem, Moore parallels the imaginative work of the poet with that of the artist by aligning her vision with Dürer’s.³⁷ In making a respectable art form of the engraving, Dürer also helped to introduce a major shift in the relationship between words and images, the very

³⁷ As Leavell notes, Moore and Dürer were very alike: “Like her he was an innovator, heralding a new period in art history; also, like her, he was fascinated by detail and influenced by technology. Printing was still a new invention, and Dürer made the woodcut and copper engraving respectable art forms” (215).

change that Benjamin address in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” That is, because of their relatively easy reproducibility, woodcuts and engravings were used in texts as either functional, accurate representations (as the photograph would initially be considered) or as illustrations. Both functions established these prints with a hierarchically lower status than their verbal counterparts, lacking in aura as Benjamin would suppose. However, Dürer’s influence made reproducible prints equal and independent art objects by freeing them from the responsibility of translating words into images (as in an illustration) or representing with accuracy (as a news photo would).

Because the medium of a wood block or copper plate records the artist’s bodily movement (as opposed to the oil canvas which can be “erased” by paint, though I’ve complicated this in the example of Diebenkorn in Chapter 2), prints such as Dürer’s deictically point to the moment of their creation. In this way, though they are reproducible, they are indivisible from their moment of origin and as such are able to retain aura. That is, they point to what Bryson has called the “founding perception” or the formation of the image in the artist’s mind, and also to the body of the artist, which is present in each line of the carving into copper, as a stroke of ink in Chinese painting reveals the movement of the hand (Bryson 89). With each line, the spectator can imagine Dürer moving the plow in the copper plate or wood block, a medium that records every touch permanently within its surface. Moore’s imaginative intervention into the visual is to set the poem at this moment of the founding perception, a tactic that further energizes ekphrastic reproduction by re-creating through imagination the perceptual experience of the artist. Moore becomes an imaginary possessor as she takes on the mask of another

artist, seeking to see through his eyes and imagine the visual possibilities brought to mind by an engagement with the scene at hand. In writing the poem, Moore has in mind “a small Turner-like water-color of the Tyrol,” possibly Dürer’s 1495 painting *View of the Arco Valley in the Tyrol* (see fig. 21). However, the seaside scene described in this poem is one that comes out of Moore’s own imagination, not the poet’s meditation on or reaction to a specific picture. By maintaining a (near) distanced view, Moore has expanded the frame of the picture to include the scene of its making, a “notional” or imaginary ekphrasis that engages her wonder about the image’s creation.



Figure 21: Albrecht Dürer, *View of the Arco Valley in the Tyrol* (1495), Louvre

In “Nine Nectarines,” a poem that serves the instructional function of Leavell’s spiritual mode, Moore describes the painting of nine nectarines and a unicorn-like creature, the kylin, on the surface of a porcelain plate. Interestingly, Moore’s description barely references the art object of the painted porcelain, except to emphasize its status as a “much-mended plate” that has presumably been used as a functional object but is now an art object and the subject of the poem. Instead, Moore focuses on the nectarine itself and offers a detailed consideration of its creation and the natural history of its existence, questioning whether it is artificially cultivated or a natural adaptation of the peach. As Robin Schulze has carefully traced in her article claiming Moore as a nature poet, in “Nine Nectarines” Moore defends the nectarine, siding with Darwin against Prudent de Candolle and refuting de Candolle’s claim of the nectarine as “derivative.” This defense of the nectarine includes a defense of its symbolic meaning in Chinese myth and culture. As Schulze points out, “The nectarine and the peach, ancient fruits thought to originate in China, serve as emblematic motifs in Chinese art and symbolize immortality and the promise of eternal spring” (7). Moreover, the defense of the kylin’s mythological importance as a sort of hybrid animal unvalued by scientific reasoning parallels that of the nectarine, both instances privilege wonder over and above the scientific.

By emphasizing the value of the mythic over the scientific, Moore reveals her determination to render the act of perceiving wonder within the ekphrastic poem. In earlier versions of the poem, which compare the Chinese plate to British china adorned with scenes of hunting and cultivated landscapes (as if the two were treasured items brought together in the poet’s wonder cabinet), “Moore...fashions a strenuous argument against deforming control of the natural world that juxtaposes two very different views of

nature: the progressive, scientific perspective of the West that works to dominate and use nature, and the conservative, philosophical perspective of the East that, in Moore's view, humbly accepts the integrity of nature and its processes" (11). In the final version of the poem these comparisons between different sets of china plates are revised away, and the Eastern attitude towards nature is reflected more subtly through Moore's description of the style of painting. The nectarine, while it is a naturally occurring mutation of the peach, is more wild, wondrous, and less precise than the peach. In the poem the nectarines are arranged by two's, symmetrically down the branch except for the odd, ninth nectarine that hangs as "a single one/ on twigs that/ grew the year before" (ll. 3-4). While, as with "The Steeple-Jack" we do not have a specific work of art to reference for this poem, we can assume a particular style of Chinese brush painting. We can imagine the "uninquiring brush" made of bamboo and held upright in the hand of the painter. We can see the minimal, quick, elegant strokes that, while themselves precise, render a delicate "half-moon leaf-mosaic" out of the orderly nectarines (ll. 16, 12). These few strokes can render the globe of the fruit with recognizable color and depth, but they are a stylized rendition of the fruit, hardly the detailed biological sketches of the flora and fauna in Moore's own notebooks. This Chinese style of painting with its flat surfaces and rich colors, leads Moore away from the depth of precision, visual detail, and textured surfaces of an artist like Dürer. Instead of adding linguistic texture through detailed scientific and biological language as she has often done in other plant or animal poems, here Moore allows language to reflect the simple brushstroke. She layers words as the painter would layer color:

[the four] pair's half-moon leaf mosaic turns
out to the sun the sprinkled blush

of puce-American-Beauty pink
 applied to bees-wax gray... (ll. 12-15)

To write simply “pink” or “gray” would be imprecise, even inaccurate, and Moore’s layering of language parallels her layering of the myth, meaning, and symbolism of the nectarine and the kylin. The Chinese painter himself embodies all the meaningful emblems of the poem: the precise imprecision of the painting style, the value of nature, and the mythic symbolism. Like the figure of the artist of Cornell who is so enticing to contemporary poets, in this poem, the Chinese master is a master of perception, one whose embodied creation is emulated by the poet. Just as the pointed star at the end of “The Steeple-Jack” must “on a steeple/ [stand] for hope”, the almost mythic cultural identity of “a Chinese” at the end of “Nine Nectarines” must stand for all of Moore’s wonder at the lure of Chinese art. The unknown artist must bear the weight of the symbolic for Moore, a more difficult task than Dürer’s since the knowledge of the artist himself is imprecise, is really replaced with the imaginary. Thus, while the vision in gazing at the plate may be “close up” in “Nine Nectarines”, its symbolic scope is wide-ranging; it engages a near distance. For Moore, this Chinese artist embodies the purity and truth that makes good art. The quick, simple brushstrokes of the carefully measured representation reveal much more than the actual fruit. This kind of art, with its mythical resonance and straightforward presentation is able to, as Leavell suggests of Moore’s spiritual mode, “educate the individual” about a particular attitude toward nature and myth, here revealed as a lesson in wonder. Moore takes on this instructional role of mediating symbols to the reader, encouraging wonder over an above scientific curiosity not only so that we understand the value of the art object, but so that we can appreciate its

artistry, its symbolic meaning, and its history—all elements of aura that would be lost without this ekphrastic reproduction.

Both “The Steeple-Jack” and “Nine Nectarines” have emphasized that dismantling, abstracting, confronting, and rearranging is the work of the aesthetic of collection, as we have also seen in the Cornell box and in the wordimage assemblage. In Moore’s poems, she does this work through accumulating eclectic sources and weaving together associations and symbolic meanings. In her ekphrastic poems in particular, Moore has chosen to align her poetic craft with the craft of the visual artist—Dürer and the Chinese artist are themselves dismantled and rearranged in order to construct larger symbolic meanings, in order to get the “truth” not by scientific investigation, but by igniting the sense of wonder.

The poem “When I Buy Pictures” serves as Moore’s own poetic statement revealing the process and even the goal of ekphrastic reproduction. Looking and possessing are aligned as we read from the title -- “When I Buy Pictures” -- directly into the poem: “or what is closer to the truth/ when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor” (ll.1-2). The enjambment here emphasizes the double meaning of truth, a proximity between buying and looking, and between reality and the narrative of reality. Looking becomes the real truth of the poem; Moore cannot buy all the fine art “pictures” she might want. The title of the poem, which if taken literally could only be in the voice of a very wealthy art collector or museum curator, is shown to be a sort of exercise in imaginary possession. Even the diction of the first few lines, the overwrought stuffiness of “that of which I may regard myself” gives the impression of an official capacity. John Hollander, too, notes Moore’s curatorial voice in her description

of the tapestry in “Charity Overcoming Envy” as having “an echo of the kind of workaday ekphrastic prose one finds in an exhibition catalog, occasionally almost literally quoting from curatorial comment” (299).

“When I Buy Pictures” continues to imagine a museum and gives a possible strategy of curating works of art. This strategy is surprisingly simple; it is based on pleasure: “I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments” (l. 3). The list of works of art that follows is wide-ranging, drawing from functional art (“the medieval decorated hat box,” “a square of parquetry”), impressionism (“an artichoke in six varieties of blue”), symbolic art (“the snipe-legged hieroglyphic”), and religious illustration (“Michael taking Adam by the wrist”). In the end, all these works must be enjoyable, not forcing “too stern an intellectual emphasis on this quality or that” (l. 13). In other words, the works must not force detailed attention and looking; they must not force meaning-making but instead inspire it by being wondrous. That is, “lit with piercing glances into the life of things” and “acknowledging the spiritual forces which have made [them]” (ll. 17-18). This is the very spiritual force that Leavell claims as a mode of vision in Moore’s poetry. However, this mode of vision need not be precise, but must come from the imagination, acknowledging the universal forces of creation, whether religious or mythical, but also acknowledging the artistic force of creation, the mind of the artist. Leavell suggests that, for Moore, “to look at a picture or at a poem, or at a nude or an object or an animal, and really see it is to ‘buy’ it, to display it in the house that is the imagination. Each of Moore’s poems is a room that contains the things she *sees*...” (132). I would push Leavell’s claim one step further to suggest that these rooms are the open spaces of the imaginary museum of wonders. Ultimately, Moore

demonstrates how all art objects phenomenologically reveal their makers. This revelation can include the founding moment of perception, the object's historical past, its symbolic or mythic resonance, its relation to the art of nature, and its effect on the spectator.

Moore's poems do more than serve as rooms to display because they display in the particular and ordered manner that a museum (or wunderkammer) might: the pictures are hung as collections with precise lighting, and each art object is paired with the contextual commentary and interpretation of the museum docent, explained with the knowledge of the curator who describes the artistry, the history, and whose appreciation of the art reveals her intimate knowledge of the imaginative force that has created them.

The Aesthetics of Collection: Love within the Spectacle

Moore is certainly not the only poet to engage the problem of distance in the age of the museum, which she overcomes through imaginary possession. For instance, in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the speaker laments the fact that you can't bring the painting home with you and can't spend the night with it in the museum. Just as the speaker appears to be coming to an understanding about the painting he must leave the museum:

I think it is trying to say it is today
And we must get out of it even as the public
Is pushing through the museum now so as to
Be out by closing time. You can't live there.

We cannot live in the museum. In saying so, Ashbery heightens the tension inherent in what seems to be a relatively intimate connection between viewer and art object by revealing that the viewer is always already aware of his or her distance from the object within the museum space. Whether by the framing, glass or Plexiglas facades, velvet

ropes, laser motion detectors, opening and closing times, admission fees, or other subtle and not-so-subtle indicators of boundary, the spectator within the contemporary museum is unable to engage in a physical closeness with the most famous and valued works of art. And while Ashbery's speaker seems to feel a desire to experience the painting more closely, other poets and their lyric speakers, like the modernist Moore and contemporary poet Mark Doty, have found ways to engage the artwork intimately, ways to connect with the art in spite of or even perhaps along with the boundaries of the society of the spectacle, creating a near distance between subject and object. As a conclusion to this chapter, I will turn now to Mark Doty's ekphrastic memoir *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, in which Doty's own language in describing the subject's connection with an art object exemplifies the new type of affective relationship that viewers within the spectacle can achieve through ekphrastic reproduction.

While it is written in prose and not poetry, the memoir takes its form from ekphrastic consideration of still life and moves by lyrical association more than one might assume an autobiographical prose piece to move. Thus, it works within my consideration of the contemporary lyric use of ekphrasis, all the more so because Doty's identity as a poet is ever-present within the memoir and within its intense desire to understand how to fit language to the lived experience. Still life becomes the focus of this desire, and out of a contemplation of the objects in still life painting come themes of collection and owning of objects, the beauty in used things, the ability of the object itself to contain history and memory in connection with the self and others.

Doty opens the book by claiming that he has fallen in love, and this emotion colors his experience of the world:

I have a backache, I'm travel weary, and it couldn't matter less, for this whole scene—the crowd and hustle on the museum steps, which seem alive all day with commerce and hurry, with gatherings and departures—is suffused for me with warmth, because I have fallen in love with a painting. Though that phrase doesn't seem to suffice, not really—rather it's that I have been drawn into the orbit of a painting, have allowed myself to be pulled into its sphere by casual attraction deepening to something more compelling. I have felt the energy and life of the painting's will; I have been held there, instructed. (3-4)

Here, the lyric speaker who is undeniably Doty himself, as he is in his poems as well as his memoirs, seeks to find the language for his experience, and settles on the notion of “falling in love.” And yet, that is not quite right, it is then being “drawn into the orbit, “pulled into the sphere”; it is a connection, a moment of access into the “energy and life of the painting's will.” The language here increases by degrees in intensity and specificity, as if by marking out concentric circles in which the subject and object draw closer and closer together, and yet, as I have suggested in each reading thus far, the painting has the stronger will, not the viewer. The viewer is merely “casually attracted” at first, but as that attraction “deepens” the viewer risks “falling” in love. The radical intervention here in Doty's subtly elegant description catches in that last moment: “I have been held there, instructed.” This is hardly the staunch Medusan model of ekphrasis in which the poet must dominate and still the viewer, and yet, the viewer submits to the stillness, submits to receive instruction, to be taught by the painting, to learn because the painting has that something—aura—the enigma of the image that ignites the poet's wonder. And then, just as ekphrastic reproduction allows, the poet steps outside into the world and what he has learned moves outside the boundaries of the museum with him:

There, stepping outside into the day, where nothing is framed or bounded as things in the museum are, suddenly the sense of intimacy and connection I've been feeling flares out, as if my painting had been a hearth, a heated and glowing place deep in the museum interior, and I'd carried the warmth of it with me out

into the morning. Is it morning still? The sky's a huge crystal, cracked and alive with fractures, contrails, cloudy patches, *huge distances*. (4, emphasis added)

The “huge distances” that Doty steps into out of the Metropolitan Museum, the city and its crystal sky, the noise and the people and the energy, all of this seems very far from the small painting he now loves, a painting finally revealed to be Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. A small, simple painting that, as Doty puts it, “asserts.” As Doty lists the painting's assertions he comes upon the question of description, claiming “That description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world, we come closer to saying what we are” (6). And at this, one cannot help but wonder whether the painting asserts this, or whether the painting instructs Doty the poet to assert this. Would the painting instruct another viewer in the same way? Finally, Doty calls upon the word “intimacy,” resisting and questioning our relationship to it but finally settling upon the idea that “what we want is to be brought into relation, to be inside, within” to feel “held” in “the dark space within an embrace” (6). And what a contrast this dark, intimate, close relationship of embrace is from the energetic, frenetic and ecstatic embrace of Dolin's poems as discussed in Chapter 2. While the verbal and visual abstractions lead to a frenetic exchange between verbal and visual in Sharon Dolin's ekphrasis, here, in Doty's the sense of intimacy is one of calmness and rightness, of objects settling into place in relation with one another. If Dolin's word and image are young, rioting lovers, Doty's are deeply magnetic soul mates. Again, the notion of embrace serves as a figure for wordimages. The space of embrace is when the distance between subject and object, or you and I, is at its nearest.

As such, Doty's emphasis on still life painting, especially the very tiny *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, seems to engage a different facet of lyrical ekphrasis. For

instance, like Hustvedt's ekphrastic re-production of the Cornell assemblage or *wunderkammer*, Doty's ekphrasis is here dependent upon the nature of still life itself. That the painting, like memory, like poetry, brings objects into relation allows it to "[represent] a poetic field of objects arrayed against the dark" (15). Indeed, both the still life and the wonder cabinet arrange objects by poetic association: "Therein lies a large portion of the painting's poetry; these things form not a single whole but a concert, a community of separate presences; we are intended to compare their degrees of roundness, solidity, transparency, and opacity" (17). Further, the still life as a genre of painting has a specific relationship with the material presence of the human that engages the very notion of "near distances" which the other poets in this chapter have also pointed to, as well as the sense of mystery that ignites wonder:

Sometimes I think these paintings seem full of secrets, full of unvoiced presences. And surely one of their secrets—somewhere close to their essence—lies in a sense of space that is unique to them. These things exist up close, against a background of burnished darkness. No wide vistas open behind them, no far-flung landscapes, no airy vastness of heaven. This is the space of the body, the space of our arm's reach. There is nothing before us here we could not touch, were these things not made of paint. The essential quality of them is their *nearness*. (55, emphasis added)

Thus, like the *wunderkammer* or the Cornell box with a secret compartment, the poet-viewer's desire to engage with the still life has to do with a relationship of near distance, that "unique phenomena of distance" (Benjamin 222) that defines the aura of the work, a relationship of space close enough to be held in an embrace. In *Still Life*, Doty's love affair with one still life painting expands into a theory and history of all Dutch still life, which expands even further into a theory of ownership and relations to and with other treasured objects. All of these things come together into what Doty calls the "poetry of relation" (35), shaped by the mind of the painter, collector, and poet.

The connection between the mode of ekphrasis and the lyric speaker and/or voice of the poet's subjectivity that has scaffolded much of my discussion in the dissertation thus far is voiced by Doty in this moment. While Doty claims that the still life itself refuses to narrate ("The paintings seem to refer to this life of ownership, and to suggest something of the feeling attached to things, while withholding any narrative" [29]), he simultaneously feels the desire to bring the work of language into interaction with the image. For example, in the following moment in which Doty is invited to dinner at the house of friends who own a still life, the poet feels a strong desire to engage with the painting:

At dinner at my friends', I was seated with my back to the painting, but I felt its magnetism; I was trying to converse, I was conversing, but I felt still its pull, the strange silence of these separate things refusing to form a singular composition, as if it were my work to complete them, as if they needed and demanded me. (17)

Here, the poet feels as if the painting "needs," "demands," even desires the viewer's engagement to make it whole, to complete the relationship. Otherwise, the falling in love would not be complete, would stop short of obsession as a mere longing, but here the connection to the image seems to help define the self. Doty goes on to claim:

The eye suffuses what it sees with I. Not "I" in the sense of my story, the particulars of my life....But "I" as the quickest, subtlest thing we are: a moment of attention, an intimate engagement.

Certainly this is true of poetry, the poems of the dead....Where there was a life, now there is a form.

And the form, spoken, breathes something of that life out into the world again. It restores a human presence; hidden in the lines, if they are good lines, is the writer's breath, are the turns of thought and of phrase, the habits of saying, which makes those words unmistakable. And so the result is permanent intimacy... (50)

This idea of "restor[ing] a human presence," of "permanent intimacy" is what Benjamin appears to claim is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction. Debord, too, sees the

viewer as a passive observer in the society of the spectacle and denies that the viewer could be able to engage in a meaningful relationship with the image. Doty goes on to point out that “What is documented, at last, is not the thing itself but the way of seeing—the object infused with the subject. The eye moving over the world like a lover. And so the boundary between self and the world is elided, a bit, softened” (56). Thus, maintaining the “I” doesn’t have to mean maintaining that the “I” is singular and intellectually in control of the situation or the senses. Seeing from the body does not have to mean reinscribing the subject/object boundary. Doty gives voice to a concept of a multiple and complex subjectivity without splitting that subjectivity from a sense of its own corporeal form and its own material viewing/sensing organs. Thus, Doty’s ekphrastic re-production moves beyond the subject/object binary and into a space of wonder.

I have argued, in this chapter, that wonder is a near distance, a feeling of intimacy but also of awe, a mysterious closeness—not simply spatial but cognitive, the thing that happens to us in the state of wonder. While curiosity merely puts us in touch with the thing in a factual groundedness, wonder leaves us in a state of wanting to get close but without quite knowing how. Ekphrasis is the concretization of this affect, the materialization in the wordimage of the sense of wonder. We swirl around the object that invokes our wonder, looking closely, reaching out to embrace, but it always slips from our grasp, and can’t be formulated exactly. Since curiosity is scientific it can form a hypothesis that can be tested. Wonder, however, can only be evoked through a kind of lyric incantation, a mysterious sense of presence but one that can never be made full. It is

no surprise, then, that even today the Art Institute of Chicago, which holds on of the largest collections of Cornell assemblages, keeps several boxes on display in the basement exhibition area for children, along with a hands-on exhibit in which children can make their own Cornell box by placing provided objects into a large box display mounted on the floor. And you can do this yourself, if interested; for just \$24.95 on Amazon.com, you can order your own Cornell box activity kit, which comes with some paper cutouts and plastic discs, and a book which systematically catalogues the boxes thematically, giving suggestions for how you might complete your own. What is at stake here, ultimately, is the fragility of Cornell boxes and other art objects and images that are at risk for commodification in a museum shop or on Amazon—a relationship not of near distance, but just nearness. In the face of this risk, poets must fight for wonder.

Chapter 4

Visionary Ekphrasis and the Mind's Eye: Image-Making through *Enargeia* and Synesthesia

Mere words are credited with the ability to make absent things seem present....
--Ruth Webb (*Ekphrasis* 8)

Wanting a master image obscures ground, like objects in space.
--Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Permanent Home" (*I Love Artists* 99)

In her extensive study of the Greek origin of ekphrasis, Ruth Webb traces ekphrasis back to its rhetorical meaning. As she puts it, "the definition of ekphrasis taught to students in the Greek school of the Roman Empire as they began their studies of rhetoric" was a "speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes" (*Ekphrasis* 1). Indeed, while all modern definitions of ekphrasis "place a central importance on a certain type of referent: the visual arts....this was not its ancient sense" (1). Rather, "in the ancient definition the referent is only of secondary importance; what matters...is the impact on the listener" (7). In this chapter, I want to examine how the work of 20th and 21st century ekphrasis draws on these roots in ancient rhetoric and the processes of *enargeia* and *phantasia*, both of which indicate a complex relationship between the imagination of the poet and the visual imaginary or mind's eye of the poem's audience. In doing so, I see a connection to the tradition of visionary poetics, in which, as Hyatt Waggoner has argued, there are no clear boundaries between the visualization and the verbalization of perception:

[T]he visionary poem does not assume a dichotomy between the perceiver and the perceived, the poet and the image...or a clear unambiguous disjunction between

perception and interpretation. It implies rather that responsible imaginative vision may be noetic, may disclose or uncover previously hidden aspects of being. (12)

The two poets discussed here, the modernist H.D. and contemporary poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, both enable us to move a conception of ekphrasis far beyond the act of mere description by making visible “previously hidden aspects of being.”

By considering H.D.’s visionary practice as a way of connecting with the ancient rhetorical meanings of ekphrasis, we can see in what ways her poetic prophecy has power within the world. Within her semi-autobiographical novel *Bid Me to Live*, her main character, Julia, struggles against some of the same gendered power dynamics discussed in the feminist ekphrasis of Chapter 1. Reframing is marked by an inversion of power dynamics in terms of who can speak and attitudes towards the artist, also by a kind of self-awareness of the overt act of reframing that manifests in inflammatory attacks and often in appeals to enlightenment modes of “scientific” thinking like measuring visual detail by geometric means, appeals to science, and other forms of logical thinking. To negotiate and eventually overcome these dynamics, H.D. embeds processes of both reframing and de-framing in the treatment of artists, museums, and visual space—allowing the character, also a poet, to move toward a conception of wordimage in which her imaginary processes of image-making coalesce with her visionary experience. Van Gogh as a figure of the artist as well as the image of *gloire* become icons for a new type of wordimage *enargeia*, or vividness, that points back at the origins of these images as well as forward to a new way of seeing after war. As Webb explains, “if *enargeia* arises from mental images, it must be possible to work back up the chain and reconstruct the creative process, or rather the original mental image which gave rise to the words that prompt the reader’s own mental image” (96). Thus, H.D.’s focus on iconic touchstones in

Van Gogh and *gloire* become a way of moving forward into an image-making process within the mind's eye of the reader. While H.D. was writing *Bid Me to Live*, she was also experiencing actual visions, which are later revealed in the prophetic project of *Trilogy* as well as in her memoir, *Tribute to Freud*. These visionary moments become most evocatively manifest in visions of the prophet-poet of *Trilogy* through ekphrastic *enargeia* and *phantasia*, processes which anticipate the avant-garde work of Berssenbrugge's own wordimage practice.

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, on the other hand, "makes absent things present" (Webb, *Ekphrasis* 8) through her description not of perception but of the *act* of perceiving (Simpson 134). While her poems do not always reference particular works of visual art, they are in fact ekphrastic in the sense of the original meaning of the term. Indeed, generic boundaries dictating what qualifies as ekphrasis in ancient definitions are much looser:

[A]n ekphrasis can be of any length, of any subject matter, composed in verse or prose, using any verbal techniques, as long as it "brings its subject before the eyes" or, as one of the ancient authors says, "makes listeners into spectators." Mere words are credited with the ability to make absent things seem present to the spellbound listeners, to control the most intimate of faculties, the imagination. So, while the visual arts may be literally absent from this definition of ekphrasis, and from most of the discussions by ancient rhetoricians, the *idea* of the visual underpins this mode of speech which rivals the effect of painting or sculpture, creating virtual images in the listener's mind. (Webb, *Ekphrasis* 8-9, original emphasis)

This puts Berssenbrugge both in the position of authority, as defined by the tradition of visionary poetry,³⁸ but also on an equal plane of image-making with the reader—who,

³⁸ See Helen Sword's introduction to *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence, and H.D.* in which she claims that "prophetic discourse...denotes not only statements made as a result of direct visionary experience but also any mode of speech or writing that lays claim to prophetic authority by echoing traditionally prophetic cadences or appropriating prophetic language and imagery" (4). Sword notes that this authority is always in tension with the requisite submissiveness that allows the poet to receive inspiration.

like Doty, is drawn into the orbit of vision, drawn into participating in the process of perception to make the image cohere in the mind's eye. As Webb notes, this can be aligned with a distinction that the ancient rhetoricians made between types of language:

The distinction between words which stay on the surface of the body, by which Quintilian presumably means plain statements of fact and arguments, and those which penetrate inside to appeal to the "eyes of the mind," reveals a conception of the human body as permeable and of words as a quasi-physical force....The difference is more than a technical distinction between "showing" and "telling." Instead, it lies in the way each mode of discourse is received by the listener: *enargeia* derives from the innermost recesses of the speaker's mind and works its way inside the listener to produce its intense effect. (98-99)

Berssenbrugge may take this one step further: As if able to figuratively evoke images not so much within the body, but rather in a metaphorical space outside and in front of the perceiving form—a three-dimensional coming face-to-face with the poem's metaphoric possibilities—Berssenbrugge is able to make vivid a kind of virtual landscape for the reader to inhabit and explore.

Centering Man-Woman/Woman-Man on Van Gogh and *Gloire*: H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live*

We must rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence. —Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*

H.D.'s novel *Bid Me to Live*, set during World War I and subtitled "(A Madrigal)," is a semi-autobiographical dance of relationships between married couples, Julia and Rafe (closely representative of H.D. and her real-life husband, Richard Aldington) and Rico and Elsa (representing D.H. Lawrence and his wife) and two single characters, Bella and Vane. Because of the easy mapping of these characters on to their real-life counterparts in

H.D.'s biography, much criticism has focused on parsing out the famous relationships and affairs that *Bid Me to Live* offers particular insight into. Notable exceptions to this vein of criticism include work by Teresa Fulker, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Joseph Milicia, all of whom, in various ways, seek to understand Julia's struggle with the tension between her feminine role within the heterosexual love relationship and her role as poet. Despite their feminist readings of the novel, these critics miss the opportunity to view H.D.'s aesthetic as a fundamental rupture within the field of perception that underlies gender distinctions in the first place. In this section, I want to reveal the parts that ekphrasis, visualization, and visual art, including the space of the museum, play in enabling Julia to reconcile her position as both artist and female, suggesting ultimately that Julia (and indeed H.D. herself) must appropriate visual models through the act of ekphrasis in order to claim her own lyric authority, a poetic voice, both gendered and not-gendered, that serves the poet's personal desires and cultural needs in a time of war.

I argued in my prologue that we can conceptualize three modes of ekphrasis—what I call framing, reframing, and de-framing—in order to understand those verbal responses to the visual that engage identity and reveal the poet's wonder, anxiety, and even political or cultural commitment. With the use of the term “framing,” I refer to a canonical theoretical framing of ekphrasis as a hierarchal relationship between word and image. My concept of ekphrastic reframing as discussed in Chapter 1 refers to examples of ekphrasis in which the binaries of traditional ekphrasis are inverted or subverted, especially for political purposes. Finally, close attention to ekphrastic poems and prose by 20th and 21st century authors throughout the dissertation has revealed a third ekphrastic mode, that of de-framing, a gesture which explodes the binary constructions of

verbal/visual, male/female, hetero/homo, speaking/silent, and self/other. In *Bid Me to Live*, we can trace Julia's emotional and aesthetic journey through the novel by way of her ekphrasis and visualization. That is, we can see in Julia's vision a progression that begins in framed existence, moves through an act of reframing, and finally, with the discovery of the image of the *gloire*, explodes into a model of de-framing, a process whereby perception is understood more wholly—not as the parsed elements of the visual field taken in one-by-one by the intellect, but rather as the full body's engagement with the world as a whole, both beautiful and chaotic.

The novel's two distinct settings, London and Cornwall, mark a shift in Julia's perception and pivot around this key image of *gloire*—a term gleaned from a poem of Lawrence's and used by H.D. to signify the vitality of art and expression that is difficult to access, especially during a time of war. As Fulker describes the split-structure of the novel, she claims that,

The novel, which begins as a war narrative, ultimately rejects that genre entirely; in a shift mediated by the image of the *gloire* which permeates the last chapter of the novel and which rewrites the figure of the “shifting plane of gold” at the center of the cyclone, the narrative turns away from the themes of death and sterility linked to war to describe a quest for the peace necessary to artistic inspiration.... (54)

Fulker sees that Julia must turn to find inspiration for her art from herself, rather than depend on the relationship between herself and a male figure of the artist, which she has cycled through in terms of coupling: Julia and Rafe, Julia and Rico, Julia and Vane. Each of these relationships limits her creativity in some way and forces her to maintain a binary between man and woman that she finds restrictive. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has defined Julia's subscription to romantic scripts of male and female behavior as “romantic

thralldom.” “an all-encompassing, totally defining love between apparent unequals. The lover has the power of conferring self-worth and purpose upon the loved one” (66). This thralldom can be compared to the traditional framing of ekphrasis in that it “insists upon the difference between the sexes” just as framed ekphrasis insists on the difference and inequality between verbal and visual (66). As DuPlessis argues, romantic thralldom is dangerous, since “the sense of completion or transformation that often accompanies such thralldom has the high price of obliteration and paralysis” (67). This dangerous paralysis, like the fixing or stilling of the image enacted in a framed mode of ekphrasis, tends to repress whatever falls outside of the defined binary category. Julia’s initial subscription to the frame of heterosexual romantic thralldom suppresses her identity as an artist and her sexuality. First, this limitation forces Julia to retaliate by reframing her experience both in the World War and the war between the sexes.

Early in *Bid Me to Live*, it is evident that Julia has cast her relationship with Rafe not only as a romantic ideal, but as an intellectual meeting of the minds. Initially, Julia sees the disruption of the war as the reason that this idealistic framing of the relationship does not work, and she begins to reminisce about their relationship pre-war. Interestingly enough, visual art is one way in which Julia encapsulates those memories. For example, she reassures herself that she and Rafe still have a loving relationship, even as she translates sexual touch into artistic touch:

“Oh, Michelangelo,” he said; and she knew they were at their old game, he had not forgotten, he did not want to forget.

“Yes, I was thinking of Michelangelo, not that the fury was—” but he knew that perfectly. “I was thinking that our hands run over that marble torso as they said Michelangelo’s did after he had gone blind.”

Yes—that was it, the very touch of the fingers of Michelangelo had been transferred to theirs. Their feet, their hands were instilled with living beauty, with things that were not dead. Other cities had been buried. Other people had been shot to death and something had gone on. There was something left between them. (70-71)

The couple barely needs to speak in their understanding of each other. Julia resists the reality of a war-torn existence both within the relationship and outside of it by escaping to the beauty in art, insisting on a love that completes even blindness, that erases war's destruction of their city and their lives. Earlier, she thinks back to a time when they visited museums together as another moment of perfectly enthralled completion:

They found that the Louvre was closed. It's always closed on Monday. They had forgotten that. They trailed across the bridge and walked to the Cluny Museum, where there were Gothic fragments, stuck up against the wall. She didn't want to sketch Gothic fragments, but it was cool there. They compared their sketch-books, his drawings were niggling and tight, hers better conceived but vague in outline. His were squat and too tight. They completed each other, even in their crude sketches; "Between us we might make an artist," he said. (33-34)

The claim that the lovers could complete each other and make one artist between them is looked back on fondly, though it is disturbing in its erasure of each artist's individual identity. Further, neither of their two styles of visual representation, the sketches they compare and find lacking, is able to adequately capture the visual and sensual experience of the moment. The Louvre itself, though closed, takes on particular significance as a place of beauty and refuge for the imagination, one in which, presumably, they would feel more inspired and would thus create better art. This moment marks a distinct contrast to the present setting of the novel, in which Julia must be careful to limit the light in rooms as she hears the buildings destroyed around her and feels her own body in physical danger. She can hardly bear to think of the Louvre in wartime: "Paris, the Louvre. All those things were stacked in cellars, the galleries would be empty. Everybody was

waiting for everything to be smashed. Why pretend that life could possibly be the same, ever?” (50). Clearly, war has shaken the world to the extent that Julia must search for a solution to the chaos. Philip Fisher has claimed that “the museum displays and stabilizes the idea of a national culture, an identifiable *Geist*, or spirit, that can be illustrated by objects and set in contrast to other national cultures” (8). Thus, the inability for the museum to function as a safe haven for art and artists during a time of war is particularly damaging to a culture. Indeed, the process of changing an object from functional or decorative (as it was when displayed in the individual home) to a work of art that is controlled by the public (as it is with the onset of public access to museums) is inevitably linked to a process of transforming the artist from an individualistic aesthetic role to a role as visual symbol-maker for the nation. The story of *Bid Me to Live* can thus be read simultaneously as the story of Julia’s individual struggle to see herself as an autonomous figure of the artist and the story of finding art in a time of war. Any model of whole perception would force Julia to account for both art and war simultaneously, as they exist in the world simultaneously.

One way in which Julia “seeks to find order within chaos, or to turn chaos to order” is through her use of visualization, often describing the scene as a painter would frame it (Milicia 279). As Joseph Milicia points out,

[Julia] attempts to capture how things look in moments of time—a realist tendency, objective in portrayal, but subjective in the choice of the moments to be pictured, and hence creating its own tension between stillness and motion....I would call H.D.’s technique not Impressionism so much as Imagism, a non-Symbolist and non-subjectivist mode of fixing concrete reality. (282)

Milicia goes on to argue that “Julia’s efforts to “fix” objects permanently is one of a very large group of efforts on her part to overcome her anxieties, to find order in her chaotic world, and to create or discover an identity for herself” (283). Indeed, in moments of confusion or distress, Julia often allows her thoughts to travel back to a visual image, which she describes in measured and detailed accuracy:

She blocked round it, it gave her a sense of proportion, placed her in the centre of the circle, which she measured, mock-professionally, with a pencil held before her. When she squinted at the pencil, she was not so much seeing the thing she was about to block in roughly, as making a circle, with a compass, for herself to stay in. (*Bid Me* 34)

Here, Julia blocks herself in a circle, carefully proportioned and fixed, safely understood.

The circle image that she adopts here is important and repeats itself as a precursor to the *gloire*:

Oh, it was all a muddle. But no, it was not. There was the candle and its exact circle of light, an exact geometrical definition, as exact as the clock-dial on the clock, as the little circle on the watch he had strapped round her wrist, the time before the time before the last (was it?), late winter or early spring anyhow, and this was autumn and the war would sometime be over.

The war would never be over. (62-63)

The response to the muddle is again to mark out the space visually using geometrical principles of artistic representation.

Julia’s response is evocative of the Cartesian response to hyperbolic doubt. Just as Descartes employed the plotting of the visual scene on a Cartesian grid in order to test the validity of his senses, so Julia plots herself in a visual scene to assure herself of her own positioning, to enforce agency and solidify a notion of the self in relation to her surroundings. This is Julia’s act of reframing. Her geometrical interpretation of the visual

scene privileges accuracy and proportion, suggesting an engagement with the principle of the golden mean, “a canon of proportion used in painting, sculpture, and architecture thought to have special meaning because of its correspondence to the principles of the universe” (Seehan 18).³⁹ H.D.’s contrast between the geometric appeal to visual certainty and the rupturing potential of the image of the *gloire* is not unlike the contrast between enlightenment models of “scientific” logic and the artistic relationship to wonder described in Chapter 3. It is no coincidence that the *gloire* image directly contrasts the golden mean in its resistance to accuracy and perfection and its privileging of feeling and expression, as it comes out of Julia’s own concentration on the golden colors of light and individual paintings, especially those by Vincent Van Gogh.

We see that in moving away from the relationship with Rafe through these geometrical principles of measuring space, Julia reframes her experience—moving from the frame of enthralled female to a reframed position of technically skilled artist. This technical skill, a poem’s measured form and linguistic precision asserted through the visual parallel of the golden mean and geometric influence on the visual fails to encompass all that makes a powerful and meaningful poem. This reframing still insists on a relationship of unequal parts, still insists on rigidly drawn boundaries, and still represses a certainly quality of both life and art that Julia and H.D. desire. It is only through the image of the *gloire*, as Fulker suggests, that H.D. is able to access “the golden glory that for [her] almost always symbolizes transcendental unity and a rejection of the division implicit in pairs” (78). Thus, as the novel’s setting shifts from London to

³⁹ Used by artists to render accuracy and beauty in perspective, the principle of the golden mean “was founded on Euclidean geometry... [and is] based on the ratio between two unequal parts of a whole in which the proportion of the smaller to the larger is the same as that of the larger to the whole” (18-19).

Cornwall, the *gloire* is introduced, and Julia is able to shift her perception so that she rejects the symmetry and rigidity of geometrical visual understanding, along with the binary of man-woman or woman-man. She asserts this before she even believes it: “There was one loophole, one might be an artist. Then the danger met the danger, the woman was man-woman, the man was woman-man” (137).⁴⁰ It takes her experience in Cornwall, with her own space to work and a relationship with a man whom she does not love, for her to come into her own as an artist. Fulker asserts that at this point the novel “continues into a territory that offers an alternative to war, and that serves as the basis of artistic inspiration” (73). At this point, Julia is no longer a captive woman reacting to her role in a male-authored narrative. Instead, Julia begins to open her aesthetic experience up to sensual perception, trusting in the body’s instinctual responses in a way that, As Merleau-Ponty suggests, allows perception to be experienced “in a total way with [one’s] whole being” (50). Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain, “I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once” (50).

Coming into this synesthetic way of being is literally a journey for Julia as she walks through the countryside, a seemingly haunted and ancient space far from the controlled space of the museum that allows her to shift her perception. First, she realizes that this is a scene she must learn to “read” and interpret for herself: “The very landscape was illustration in a book. The path she had just left, that twisted with apparent meaningless curves, was hieroglyph. It spelt something. Laid flat, unrolled, it would be a huge screen

⁴⁰ While, to the contemporary reader, this “man-woman/woman-man” may seem like an unsatisfying way of conceptualizing gendered subjectivity, it is not unlike Virginia Woolf’s own claims toward androgyny for the female writer. It seems that without the critical language of post-structuralism, androgyny was a suggestive concept for these female authors. However, in “Notes on Thought and Vision,” H.D. goes on to link her creative abilities directly to the physicality of the womb, anticipating those theoretical notions of subjectivity that are intimately linked to the body such as Cixous’s and Kristeva’s.

in a temple in Egypt” (146). In a time of fragmented identity because of war and because of displacement in her relationship with her husband, this journey through nature takes on the scope of a mythic journey into identity. Julia becomes the “seer, see-er” (146), literally the prophet, who will translate the visual scene for herself and for her country in a time of war:

The various irregularities of the earth-road, the stone path, the wall, the field...were vast in their implications, symbolic like a temple wall-painting....this walled-in space, was a world; the world, the whole world was given her in consciousness, she was see-er, “priestess,” as Rico called her, wise-woman with her witch-ball, the world. (147)

The experience is visionary in that it “denotes a visual apprehension, a picture, an apparition” (Sword 5). Further, it is not an experience that the poet has full control over. As H.D. continues, she claims that Julia’s “perception was sharpened, yet she was not thinking” (*Bid Me* 152). Thus, as Helen Sword claims, the “Visionary experience is unmediated and absolute” in that the poet experiences it as pure inspiration (Sword 6). Indeed, *gloire* is the moment of perception which, as Merleau-Ponty argues, exposes a more primordial wholeness between subject and object than that constituted by the Cartesian ego with its strict boundaries. The difficulty in writing a visionary poetry, however, is that the vision must find a way into words: “Prophecy... whether it describes a divine vision or relays a divine message, is always doubly mediated, first by the prophet...and then by language itself” (6). Sword claims that “‘Visionary poetry,’ then, cannot really exist except as a form of prophecy, a visual revelation transposed into words. The visionary poet, the prophet, and the mystic all share the age-old dilemma of ineffability: How can one give utterance to an experience that is by its very nature unutterable?” (6).

In her desire to voice the “unutterable,” Julia’s touches upon the image of the *gloire*, which becomes embodied in the work of Van Gogh as Julia shifts into the final section of the book, a monologue in the form of a letter to Rico. Returning from the walk during which she experiences the vision, Julia is unable to concentrate on a translation project and attempts to write a letter she knows she will never send. In it, she begins to resolve her need to be the female counterpart of a male-female binary. The address to Rico is fitting, then, since he is the character who first verbalized a criticism of her attempt to write from a male perspective and also since he, even with the consent of his wife and the opportunity, rejected Julia as a lover. Van Gogh enters this letter as a parallel to Rico in terms of the figure of the male artist and in terms of the border between madness and artistic creation; however, his presence in the letter is crafted by Julia herself into something much more symbolic: the letter, while addressed to Rico, speaks more convincingly of Julia herself.

In the space of this letter, Julia is able to see the distinction between the two kinds of perception that dominate *Bid Me To Live*. The first, discussed above, is the geometrically influenced measuring of the visual field and its desire to reframe and reconcile chaos into manageable and formulaic perfection. This is a level of abstraction that separates and divides into a hierarchically ordered space, what Merleau-Ponty would refer to as “analytical perception” (49). The second, an act of de-framing, is here embodied in Van Gogh as Julia says, “I did see...how a path could make a pattern, letters, a sort of hieroglyph or picture-writing. But when I said I saw magic lantern pictures, the pictures were all on one plane or parallel. They were not dynamically exploding inside, like van Gogh pictures” (178-179). Here, the example of reframed vision is marked as “picture-

writing,” a two dimensional evocation of the relationship between word and image. The de-framed example of “dynamic explosion” captures a wordimage rupturing of those images “all on one plane or parallel.” Below the level of analytical perception lies a more dynamic mode through which the whole--binding word to image and image to body--is apprehended—a perception that organizes itself without conscious mediation. This is the kind of vitality that Julia asks of Rico’s writing: “I would goad you on to writing, writing as Vincent painted” (182). But, really, it is Julia, and thus H.D. herself, who needs to discover this kind of writing, even if she risks chaos and madness in doing so:

Vincent was locked up, in some place near Arles. He went on painting, half-crazy, when he got out. One of his later pictures was that very wheat field...showing the early green as the wind blew it. There are stiff sprays in the foreground. There is the distant roof of a farm-house like a ship on the waves. No, I am forcing this. I am trying to explain it. When I try to explain, I write the story. The story must write me, the story must create *me*. (181, italics in original)

The forced distance between creating and explaining is what Van Gogh is able to eliminate. His art is organic and vibrant, he “would draw that magnetism up out of the earth, he did draw it. His wheat stalks are quivering with more than the wind that bends them” (183). Indeed, Van Gogh is so liberated in his art that referencing him as inspiration allows Julia to break herself out of the man-woman binary and privilege the essence of the art, the *gloire*:

I don’t really know if this man-is-man, woman-is-woman means all that you think it does. I don’t know that. I couldn’t have found it out, not then. I might find it out later. But when it comes to loving a cypress or a peach tree as Vincent van Gogh loved them, one is going back, is going forward. I mean, one is, as I said of myself with the candle at my elbow, not yet born. Vincent is in the cypress, he is in the blossoming fruit-tree, he is in the *gloire*. (183).

Van Gogh's art and the *gloire* both represent a possibility of rebirth, a visual de-framing that breaks the limitations of the verbal/visual binary (as poetry and art move throughout the novel as interwoven modes of expression) while exploding the binary of male/female and, finally, serves as a solution both to Julia's own loss of identity and the fragmented identity of a world at war.

Through her ekphrastic appropriation of Van Gogh as the figure of the artist, H.D. also explodes another binary—that of life and death, just as Shelley's Medusa does (see Prologue). The *gloire* itself represents life in a time of death; it is "the ability of the artist to touch anything and to make it live, such as Van Gogh's ability to paint a scene that is not one-dimensional but swirling and multi-dimensional" (79). This kind of vitality is paramount to any kind of artistic pursuit of beauty and meaning. Julia's decision to value the *gloire* in art is a rejection of the Euclidian/Cartesian model of visual interpretation privileging imposed order and symmetry over being in the world. Here, H.D. speaks more universally to the role of the visionary, casting off the gender distinction that so plagues her throughout the novel, and finding in that freedom a mode of expression that will serve her own artistry. The scripted roles of romantic thralldom and the bordered tracing of the visual field are discarded in favor of de-framed perception of the world coming into being from chaos. Indeed, Julia's new access to the vision of the *gloire* gives her the authority to speak as a visionary poet by trusting the senses of the "body schema." The body schema, as proposed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* is a kind of somatic intelligence in its own right that both grips the world and is gripped by it. As Waggoner puts it:

[P]oets when they write visionary poems are neither dreaming up fictive music nor projecting neurotic tensions but are perceiving in depth what is ‘out there,’ beyond the conscious mind and the self, but also in the body and brain, using the senses and imaginative intelligence as a means of discovery” (23).

If we recall the beginning of the novel as Julia attempts to locate herself visually while she is sketching, we see her struggle as she tries to block her body within the center of a circle that repeats and repeats again throughout the novel. We see her lost in the circle emanating from candlelight, trapped in the circle marked on her wrist by Rafe’s military watch, passed from partner to partner in the circle of the madrigal dance between lovers, swirling through memory, time, and the brushstrokes of Van Gogh. Finally, by the end of the novel she is fixed in the center, and, though the world still swills about her, she can finally look to the future and admit for the first time that the war will end. It is the only moment in the novel in which she does not immediately counter that hope with the statement “the war will never end.” She says, “I cannot see the future, but the war will be over sometime” (184). She accepts the chaos of the world, its fighting and its death, and she accepts and even welcomes her role as artist within that world. In other words, she takes a stand on her being by recognizing the bond between subject and world. She has fixed herself as the center of the circle and found, ultimately, that “There is peace in the centre of the cyclone” (183).

“The Painters Did Very Well By Her:” H.D.’s *Trilogy*

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D.’s memoir of her experiences as the analysand of the famous psychoanalyst, the poet retells a life-changing visionary experience that she refers to as “the writing-on-the-wall.” This reference alone is telling of H.D.’s intimate spiritual

investment in the relationship of word and image, for what she sees is actually pictorial representation, images projected on the wall as if in a slide show. The fact that she labels these images as “writing” emphasizes her role in their symbolic interpretation, a prophetic role of translation and mediation between verbal and visual. *Tribute to Freud* is full of the symbolic foundations and explanations of visionary experience that we see revealed in the three-part revisionist project of H.D.’s book-length poem, *Trilogy*. While I will primarily focus on the use of specific works of visual art as well as “painterly” representation in the poems of *Trilogy* in this section, I will also discuss H.D.’s retelling of the act of translating vision in *Tribute to Freud*. These moments further identify how H.D. views her own project as the imaginative interpretation and re-working of symbol to open the possibility of new spiritual meanings, especially for female mythic personas and, finally, for the female poet herself.

H.D. and Freud differed in their interpretation of dreams in that H.D. saw the imaginative dream vision as an actual vision, real to the extent of being like a tangible representation as a painting or sculpture is tangible. She says, “here and there a memory or a fragment of a dream-picture is actual, is real, is like a work of art or is a work of art” (*Tribute* 35). Her comparison of the dream image to actual, physical artwork continues as she describes the visions:

Those memories, visions, dreams, reveries—or what you will—are different. Their texture is different, the effect they have on mind and body is different. They are healing. They are real. They are as real in their dimension of length, breadth, thickness, as any of the bronze or marble or pottery or clay objects that fill the cases around the walls.... (35)

H.D.’s insistence on the “realness” of the dream vision again conflates artistic representation of actual vision, such as an artist viewing a model and representing that

model in a painting, with spiritual visionary experience, in which “seeing is believing” and the unique ability to “see” requires that the seer bear witness and mediate what is seen to others as an act of “healing.” Alicia Ostriker has placed H.D. within the category of visionary poet alongside Blake and others, precisely because of her ability to see vision and her desire to make that vision apparent through writing:

H. D. is a visionary poet. By this I mean that she is one of a tiny group of poets for whom, behind the flux of secular existence, there exist permanent sacred realities that are both supremely beautiful and supremely forceful. The poet apprehends these realities, personally and intimately, during states of altered consciousness: “vision,” “trance,” “dream.” (8)

These altered states of consciousness were, for Freud, dangerous symptoms of delusion and therefore he discouraged H.D.’s interpretation of the visions as real or actual and would only allow that they could be interpreted as revealing subconscious desire, as any other dream would within the context of psychoanalysis.

This desire was, according to Freud, H.D.’s longing to serve as the “founder of a new religion” (*Tribute* 37). He comes upon this translation of the vision after H.D. describes a dream in which a princess descends a staircase and comes upon a basket with a baby nestled inside. While there is much to be said about H.D.’s investment in the position of a kind of prophet, most applicable to this study is her description of the image of the baby:

There, in the water beside me, is a shallow basket or ark or box or boat.
There is, of course, a baby nested in it. The princess must find the baby....

We have all seen this picture. I pored over this picture as a child, before I could read, I our illustrated Doré Bible. But the black and white Doré illustration has nothing in common with this, except the subject. The name of this picture is *Moses in the Bulrushes* and the Professor [Freud] of course knows that. (37)

While Freud goes on to suppose that H.D. is the baby in the basket and therefore wants to be the founder of a new religion, the description here is unique in that H.D. taps into a

collective stock of images, biblical in this case, which “we have all seen” and “the Professor of course knows.” Not only does she reference the image we carry in our minds based on the bible story of the baby in a basket who will be found among the reeds and saved by the princess, she directly references the actual illustration from the particular bible which is the source of the image in her mind. The image is in black and white. The image signifies to her even before she can read the story. H.D. begins to reveal that part of the process of working with image is engaging in visualization not only because we know the mythic or spiritual meanings associated with the name of a bible character or plot of a particular story, but because we have seen the image represented previously.

In this way, H.D.’s visionary process is also intimately linked with the ancient rhetorical concept of *enargeia*, with which I began this chapter. As Webb puts it, *enargeia*, or that vividness in description that brings the image to the mind’s eye of the reader or audience, is also linked to a common set of images: “what lies behind vivid speech is the gallery of mental images impressed by sensation in the speaker’s mind. The souls of both speaker and listener are stocked with internal images of absent things, and these provide the raw material with which each party can ‘paint’ the images that ekphrasis puts into words” (113). H.D., complicating this further, names the individual visual art source for her image, not only drawing on previously established myth and symbol, but on other artists’ representations of such symbols. These representations are complicated by gender, as Susan Gubar points out, “H. D. always remained conscious that mythic, scientific, and linguistic symbols are controlled and defined by men, so she repeatedly described her alienation from a puzzling system of inherited signs that do, nevertheless, finally reveal a special meaning to the female initiate” (201). As H.D.

invokes inherited signs in order to re-interpret them, she also invokes other artists' (also often male) visual representations of the signs.

By addressing both the symbolic meaning and its previous visual representation, H.D. aligns the creation process of the painter, who translates vision into representation, with the poetic process of the poet/visionary who recreates myth. Both processes depend on the interplay of the individual imagination and the collective symbolic meaning, akin to the *phantasia* described by Webb. This term, *phantasia*, is used by ancient rhetoricians "to encompass the author's imagination, the words he [sic] utters and the resulting impression in the listener's mind [that] reveals the intimate connections between mental images and the words that both result from and create them....[I]n this way, the speaker's visual image is assumed to be transmitted to the audience through the medium of words and then give rise to a comparable image in their minds" (Webb 96).

For example, at a moment in her description of "the writing-on-the-wall," H.D. has to pause in her act of interpretation: "But here I pause or the hand pauses—it is as if there were a slight question as to the conclusion or direction of the symbols. I mean, it was as if a painter had stepped back from a canvas the better to regard the composition of the picture..." (*Tribute* 46). She goes on to claim that these images are "the hieroglyph actually in operation before our very eyes" (47), a verbal/visual emblem, along with the palimpsest, that allows for layering of image and meaning on one surface, as in a painterly representation which layers what the painter actually sees with what he (or she) wishes to represent. Finally, H.D. makes clear that she rejects Freud's interpretation of "the writing-on-the-wall" as a "suppressed desire to be a Prophetess" and even as "merely an extension of the artist's mind, a picture or an illustrated poem, taken out of

the actual dream or daydream content and projected from within...overthought, you might say... a ‘dangerous symptom’” (51). While H.D. will not pin down a definition of the writing, she emphasizes its ability to speak to everyone because of its universal dependence on the visual image:

But symptom or inspiration, the writing continues to write itself or be written. It is admittedly picture-writing, though its symbols can be translated into terms of today; it is Greek in spirit, rather than Egyptian. The original or basic image, however, is common to the whole race and applicable to almost any time. (51)

Writing becomes the act of translation, while image becomes the timeless and universal method to signify new meaning. Ostriker glosses the meaning of “Greek in Spirit”:

“Greece” meant a set of specific myths that were eternally true because they were eternally beautiful. To recreate these myths was to unite a spiritual obligation with a private need. Art would triumphantly restore what war had appeared to destroy, and at the same time the artist would understand and validate her life by discovering where her experience and mythic patterns—an individual modern psyche and a collective ancient one—coalesced. (18-19)

Therefore, while *Trilogy* does not engage with Greek myth as specifically as other works of H.D., its method is “Greek” in that it fulfills the spiritual obligation and private need that Ostriker outlines. Moreover, it does so through a way of looking and relayering of image and symbol that parallels H.D.’s other revisionist work.

Even though H.D. rejects Freud’s interpretation and apparent dismissal of her visionary experience, her experience as recounted in *Tribute* deeply influences her understanding of the symbolic resonances of the written word. Indeed, as Ostriker claims, “[The later poetry’s] logic is that of psychoanalytic free association, which H.D. has adopted as a governing principle of her poetics” (30). The result in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the first book of *Trilogy*, is “a sometimes despairing struggle, toward a rejection of chronology and linear narrative, a stilling of jeering external voices and internal fears,

before her personal reconstructive visions can crystallize” (Ostriker 32). Within this struggle, there is a particular emphasis on the need to “disentangle” the image from its previous representations so that the poet may revise it for her purposes. As Susan Gubar has claimed, “Inheriting uncomfortable, male-defined images of women and of history, H.D. responds with palimpsestic or encoded revisions of male myths” (202). One such myth is the story of Christ, whom H.D. struggles to represent in poem 18 of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, which reads:

The Christos-image
is most difficult to disentangle

from its art-craft junk-shop
paint-and-plaster medieval jumble

of pain worship and death-symbol,
that is why, I suppose, the Dream

deftly stage-managed the bare, clean
early colonial interior,

without stained glass, picture,
image or colour,

for now it appears obvious
that *Amen* is our Christos. (27)

The visually noisy “art-craft junk-shop” clutter of images, the jumble of previous representations of Christ that do not fit H.D.’s purpose, are difficult to struggle through, both for poet and reader, as H.D. represents with mimetic sound the drastic difference between the clutter or symbols and the “deftly stage-managed” bare and clean white space of the room. The reader is convinced through this interplay of language and image of the need for the clean space, like the blank room of a museum “without stained glass, picture,/ image or colour” in which one can finally hear, “*Amen* is our Christos” as both

sound and image allowed to resonant in the blank space. And yet, in the very next poem, H.D. chooses a particular representation of Christ to serve as the Christos image, that of Diego Velasquez's *Christ on the Cross*:

He might even be the authentic Jew
stepped out from Velasquez... (28)

As she introduces this representation, H.D. rewrites the male-dominated image by unearthing the actual image behind the painting. Her emphasis on "the authentic Jew" is revealing for it acknowledges the actual person who posed as the model for the painting, probably a Jew who became a "new Christian" after 1492 (Barnstone, 180). This acknowledgement makes real the actual representation by assigning it to once-living person aside from the Christ figure, at the same time that it enforces the image as iconic of the Christ figure. As the poem continues, H.D.'s translation of the image allows her to imbue life into an image of death, for the Velasquez painting represents Christ with head slumped and eyes closed beneath blood-soaked hair and the crown of thorns:

those eye-lids in the Velasquez
are lowered over eyes

that open, would daze, bewilder
and stun us with the old sense of guilt

and fear, but the terror of those eyes
veiled in their agony is over;

I assure you that the eyes
of Velasquez' crucified

now look straight at you,
and they are amber and they are fire. (28)

As the poet enacts a resurrection of Christ that is not present in the painting itself, she sets into motion her overall project of revising the myth. She is able to open the eyes of Christ

and create a new image, one with roots in the Velasquez painting, but one that takes on its own meaning within the poem, as amber and fire take on transformative properties and the act of looking fuses the “I” of the speaker with the “eyes” of the Christos figure.

More important to H.D.’s overall project in *Trilogy* is the reworking of the Mary figure, which takes place in *Tribute to the Angels*, and follows a similar pattern of her engagement with the Velasquez painting. Here, in poems 29 and 30, a range of Madonna images are referenced, and these are accumulated into a store of typical representations cataloged as the poet claims, “We have seen her/ the world over”:

Our Lady of the Goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,

Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
Our Lady of the Chair...(93)

These “our lady’s” evoke the same “art-craft junk-shop” representations of Mary that the poet struggled with when trying to locate the Christos image. The objects--goldfinch, candelabra, pomegranate, and chair--represent special objects, material treasures that paradoxically lower the status of the Lady and associate her with the trivial prayers and desires of their owners. Yet in the original paintings, we see a series of lovely Madonnas, with peaceful smiles and demure poses. While there are more significant representations of her, “we have seen her head bowed down/ with the weight of a domed crown,” there is still an overall triviality about her representation as child-like, dainty, and even cute like a little cherub, as is the case with the visual representation of many women in visual art:

or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl
trapped in a golden halo;

we have seen her with arrow, with doves
and a heart like a valentine...(93-94)

An overtly-sexualized representation of Mary is absent, which is perhaps why “the painters did very well by her” and chose to represent her in overwrought dress, sumptuous pearls and fine damask, still, her demure, virginal quality is expressed with great detail:

it is true, they missed never a line
 of the suave turn of the head
 or the subtle shade of lowered eye-lid
 or eye-lids half-raised; you find
 her everywhere (or did find),
 in cathedral, museum, cloister,
 at the turn of the palace stair. (94)

Finally, in poem 30, the past tense of “we have seen” shifts to the present “we see” and the Mary figure poses with “her hand in her lap,” “her hand at her throat,” “her hand unknot[ting] a Syrian veil” (95). All of these positions suggest, as the emphasis on the model in the description of the Velasquez painting did, that H.D. wants to focus on the moment of the creation of the image. It is as if she aligns this present moment of viewing Mary with a moment of the artist viewing the model in her poses. We could hear a painter asking the model to move her hand through these different positions, trying to find the best placement of the body to prepare the image for the final couplets of the poem:

we see her stare past a mirror
 through an open window,
 where boat follows slow boat on the lagoon;
 there are white flowers on the water. (95)

The poem ends removed from the Mary images and the inherent struggle in her representation to what she herself sees. It is not the amber and fire of Christ’s eyes, but the removal of the gaze from the body of the woman to the calm, pure symbolic of the

white flowers on the water. Struggle with the Mary image is resolved in a way that the Christos image is not. This is, perhaps, the moment where the poet allows herself to fuse with the central female image in the poem. As Ostriker suggests, in *Tribute to the Angels*, “The Lady can be interpreted by nobody but the poet, for whom she includes and transcends classical and Christian iconography” (33).

This fusion of the inclusion and transcendence of iconography and myth is made final in the last image of *The Flowering of the Rod*, the third and final book of *Trilogy*. As Gubar describes it, “After two sequences of poems progressing by allusive associations, complex networks of imagery, and repetitive, almost liturgical, invocations, the final book of the *Trilogy* embodies the emergence of the poet’s sustained voice in a story—if not of her own making—of her own perspective” (211). While the previous two books have included examples of dependence on previous artists’ representations and the collective image stock, this book contains no specific references to painterly representation, though it does play with the collective image of Mary holding a baby. The final image of the entire poem resists interpretation by invoking this image of the baby as a bundle in the arms, but never quite determining the image:

he did not know whether she knew
 the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh
 she held in her arms. (172)

“Not knowing” is important to the seemingly unreadable nature of the image here. The poet may be the only one who knows for sure what she implies with the bundle in the arms, though all readers at this point will have the association of the baby and notice its seeming absence from the representation. The effect is of drawing the collective stock of images of the Madonna and child to the reader’s mind, while simultaneously subverting

those images for both the characters in the poem and the reader by replacing the visual with another sense—the bundle of myrrh is not visual so much as fragrant. Here, in this final image, H.D. makes actual her vision by drawing on our collective knowledge of what the image “should” be and then resisting its representation as such in a synesthetic fusion of the senses. Mary is made actual as a *new* Mary through a process akin to the alchemy so important to language in *Trilogy*, but here is alchemy of sensory image and association, one that leads through a history of artistic representation as well as the allusive mythical meanings associated with symbol. In the final image that is both readable and unable to be read, “the writing continues to write itself or be written” (*Tribute* 51).

I Love Artists: Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and the Visionary Authority of the Senses

When I first heard contemporary poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge read her poetry, I was struck by how quiet and musical her voice was, and how the poems—unfamiliar to me at the time—built a kind of architecture of imagery within the space of the room we were in. The room was crowded; students and professors were standing against the walls and sitting on the floor, spilling into the aisles and out the door. Without having seen them on the page, I could sense that her lines were long, that they lingered just past the capacity to envision them in the mind’s eye—so long, they slowed perception so that the next lines hung in the air, waiting to be processed by the audience. As Jonathon Skinner has aptly described it, Berssenbrugge’s poetry requires work of the reader: “It is...a poetry, not of metaphor but of metamorphosis, a challenging poetry because one is constantly being asked to release focus, and to reengage—constantly getting away and

back to things” (n.p.). In this final section, I want to consider how Berssenbrugge’s poetry calls on the same relationship between poet and audience that *phantasia* and *enargeia* required of the ancient listener. I begin with my own experience of encountering Berssenbrugge’s work first in an auditory setting because it replicates the rhetorical setting of those original uses of ekphrasis described by Webb. Indeed, ekphrasis as a rhetorical tool is meant to persuade, to still the intellectual thought process and replace it with vivid imagery, a process not very far flung from the Medusa model’s desire to control. However, in the case of H.D. and Berssenbrugge, this rhetorical control is given up in order to allow access to the visionary. Like H.D.’s final authority in the last image of *Trilogy*, Berssenbrugge, too, gains her authority through a dependence and trust on the sensory experience. By combining visual images and other sensory imagery with the complex philosophical and emotional concerns of her poetry, Berssenbrugge creates a synesthetic visionary in which images and thoughts cohere as wordimage.

Megan Simpson has argued that “Berssenbrugge describes neither the world nor its contents, but the act of perceiving itself” (134). Indeed, “Images and ideas are not only both comprised in and of language, but they often conflate in her work—that is, what is perceived or apprehended is often both image and idea, simultaneously visible and thinkable” (136). For example, the epigraph with which I began this chapter, “Wanting a master image obscures ground, like objects in space” (*I Love Artists* 99), is a line from the poem “Permanent Home” which first appeared in the collection *Nest* in 2003. This line reveals the speaker’s desire for a “master image,” perhaps a standard image that all can call up and agree upon for what “home” ought to look and feel like. However, not unlike the master images of Christ and Mary that H.D. undercuts, to want such an image

(for H.D. as well as Berssenbrugge) “obscures ground,” blocks out possibility and potentiality, takes up room in the mind “like objects in space” by being fixed as one image, one thing or object that cannot change according to the imagination.

The search for the conception of home continues in the poem such that “House and space are composite, like my dream, a bubble, lightning, starting point and any second place” (99). I read house and space as the blank areas (and I cannot say “blank canvases” because of the three dimensional nature of the imagery) in which the poet’s mind (and thus the reader’s mind) works to build the figural concept of home. As Berssenbrugge explains, “I understand the situation by perceiving parts, one after another, then reversing in a glance that removes/ time” (99). Here is the forward and back motion of seeing and seeing again, shifting and reverting focus as the eyes or a camera lens can do by instinct or choice, a confusion of both gaze and glance that spans across the field of the imaginary. In the final section of “Permanent Home,” a poem structured like most of Berssenbrugge’s poems with numbered sections composed of lines that take the unit of the sentence, there is a consideration of material objects in space, the materiality of space, and so on:

Materials and freedom combine, so materials aren’t subjective.

The material of space is like having a skeleton to gain a vantage point on seamless distance, as in a/ comparison.

It’s a style of accumulating materials that does not become a solid thing, anymore.

Accommodating a view by being able to be seen through is perceptual, not abstract, like space painted/ white.

Give a house the form of an event. (100-101)

In these lines, we can begin to parse Berssenbrugge's subtle process of combining what Simpson called the "simultaneously visible and thinkable" in the wordimage. Since "Materials and freedom combine" and the logic of the sentence structure (also the logic of the poetic line for Berssenbrugge) continues with "so," the reader is instructed to connect the difficult image of materials and freedom with the dispositional statement of the speaker that "materials aren't subjective." In other words, the word choice of "materials"-- which could be specific objects, could be building materials, could be many things—is the more specific and concrete of the images when combined with the concept of "freedom." And, when given this combination, many readers and/or listeners might interpret the image of combined materials and freedom as one subjective to the lyric voice, the shaping intelligence of the poem, which we assume has more authority than we do. However, that authoritative voice undercuts our assumption by declaring not only that "materials aren't subjective," but also by pursuing, in the next lines, further iterations of the nature of the material and materiality. If "The material of space is like having a skeleton to gain a vantage point on seamless distance, as in a/ comparison," then we begin to see that the unit of the metaphor, the "combination" above and the "comparison" here, is a method of perceptual access to imaginary space. The skeleton is a representative trace of the material body at the same time as it is a structural object marking out space in the visual field. Further, the skeleton is able to "gain a vantage point," to perceive from a set position even as it is "able to be seen through," and yet what it perceives is "seamless distance." This is also "seamless distance, as is a/ comparison," a suggestion that metaphors broaden and rupture representational meaning rather than narrowing it down. The visual and perceptual wordimage metaphors are, for

Berssenbrugge “a style of accumulating materials that does not become a solid thing, anymore”—a way of bringing images, thoughts, and perceptions together to produce, not a solid thing, but a visual image that is both material and experiential, a wordimage that is “perceptual, not abstract, like space painted/ white.” Finally, this process succeeds in considering the concept of home, not simply as a material house or as an emotional concept of home, but as an event, a happening, as in the line in which the speaker commands: “Give a house the form of an event.”

The visionary for Berssenbrugge, then, is not so much about the image, but rather the event of perception. This again connects to Webb’s definition of ekphrastic *enargeia*:

Enargeia is therefore far more than a figure of speech, or a purely linguistic phenomenon. It is a quality of language that derives from something beyond words: the capacity to visualize a scene. And its effect also goes beyond words in that it sparks a corresponding image, with corresponding emotional associations in the mind of the listener” (Webb 105).

For Berssenbrugge, however, what corresponds in the mind of the reader or audience is not merely image and emotion, but wordimage—the word as material and visual, the image as language and emotion. While *enargeia* thus “insist[s] on the mind and its images as the point of mediation between material reality and language” (129), Berssenbrugge argues that language is a material reality. She is quoted as saying “being visual in writing is not about anything. You are making something right there” (qtd. Simpson 136).

For example, the fourth section of the poem “Dressing Up Our Pets” reads:

Real is a span of visibility, inasmuch as your flesh is not chaotic, *of* a contingency.

The real thing substitutes for another who’s not representable, as he gathers up parachute and delivery.

If I stay here and you mean something, the part in common is disjunct from what you mean, like my/ hands touching.

That you're telepathic means nothing; you've facts you can't know, which still work in connections of my/ experience.

A rock in rain distributing water along texture is my response to experience.

Inasmuch as your flesh is an interplay of disjunctions needed for identity, flesh is texture.

(I Love Artists 104-105)

In these lines, Berssenbrugge “makes” both real and imaginary without a distinction between the two. “I” and “you” in this excerpt are intimate in moments such as the tactile imagery of “my/ hands touching” while at the same time flesh and the material body are ways of mediating identity and subjectivity: “Inasmuch as your flesh is an interplay of disjunctions needed for identity, flesh is texture.” Further reading in *I Love Artists* reveals that subjectivity and the position from which the lyric voice speaks is constantly under construction through the work of sensory experience, as in “Kisses from the Moon” when the speaker says:

Let the sensation, “I listen to her,” dissolve in my head; there's no self.

What's called *hearer* is *hearing*. (110)

If “what's called *hearer* is *hearing*,” then the process of sensory experience is a process of formulating subjectivity. This is not unlike Julia Kristeva's concept of the subject-in-process, but instead of that process privileging language, Berssenbrugge complicates this by introducing other senses into the subject formation and further undercutting the formed subject by rejecting the concept of self, revealing a phenomenological

understanding of the self through the body. However, in the poem “Hearing,” the self is momentarily reclaimed:

A non-transparent self is needed, an aesthetics of documentation in which images have power because/ the drama is real.

They withdraw from matter to representation, for more agency, point of presence, bird falling along a/ stitched in-and-out of my hearing it call and its ceasing to exist. (119)

Here images regain power but withdraw and morph into the uncanny presence of the bird, which falls, dying, but is heard by the “I” of the poem. The bird’s ceasing to exist allows the speaker to come into existence.

Finally, I want to end with mention of the poem “Parallel Lines,” in which the poet seems to reference some of the details of traditional visionary poetry. She calls on a spirit guide, but quickly moves into a kind of waking dream vision in which the technical elements of mechanical reproduction of the image (photographic, lithographic, etc.) provide a backdrop for ways of viewing:

While I questioned my dream, whether or not he was a spirit guide, I closed off imagination not contained/ in the world.

The dream is a touchstone, face to your face.

.....

I wake, like a bird among thousands of traces of small birds’ passing through the space.

Can you perceive traces, virga, pigment in a substrate of dawn light, as one speaks yes, pigment, *no*,/ substrate, *seeing*, pigment.

Not waking is a substrate, as no love is to love.

So, you go out and meet someone.

Encountering a dream trace by day is face-to-face transmission: *lightning strikes the lamp between us in a/ summer storm.....* (137)

The voices layering call and response (yes, no) atop of pigment and substrate become both a relationship between the speaker and the lover (or no lover), as well as the need for face-to-face material meeting between image and the surface/paper (substrate) upon which it must be printed in order to be viewed. The “dream trace” is also the trace of the image, the lithographic plate, etched and inked but not yet printed, that has a three-dimensional existence in space before making the two-dimensional image. Or, it is the image captured by the camera, dependent on the time of light exposure, not yet developed and printed—the potential image, as in the later sections of “Parallel Lines:”

My eye encounters ocean floor, light on sand, horizontal bands of color with no distinction between/ dream object and heightening sensation—looms of sunrays, rain.

.....

Yet presence and today are like snapshots from a pin-hole camera, no substrate.

.....

Not walking is last year to this year, words arriving, mind ancillary to words, as I recall your manner of thinking,/ of feeling happiness, of walking, looking, of immediately telling your dream.

Pick up a weft line then and thread it here, edge of memory like film exposed beyond an image, sky not/ hindering white clouds from flying?

.....

A moment over-exposed on film regains vibrations of a web in rain. (138-139)

As the poem’s own title indicates, these “lines” have a parallel form to them—verbal and visual. The essence of time in these lines is controlled by the visual description of light, either snapshots or overexposure, time distorts the visual, like memory, which is heard as a material thread, able to be woven in and out of the edge of the film itself. Finally, the

moment that “regains vibrations of a web in rain” is simultaneously verbal, visual, aural, tactile, and sonic—a conflation of the sensory that takes up space. The web vibrates in time and space and sound, but also in the visual imaginary as it shimmers with its drops of rain, which, no doubt, themselves reflect pools of other vision. And as Berssenbrugge repeats, twice, in the poem “Red Quiet,” “Words spoken with force gather particles” (141). In her poetic process dependent on the authority of the sense, wordimage becomes “the location of accidents,” a complex of sensory data that converges in “a morphic field,” a time and space in which “Words spoken with force create particles” (143).

Epilogue

Wordimage *Concordance* and the Poet-Artist Collaboration

The poem with which I ended Chapter 4, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's "Red Quiet" in which "words spoken with force create particles," also appears in Berssenbrugge's collaborative book, *Concordance*, with visual artwork by Kiki Smith. "Red Quiet" is one of only two poems in this slim volume, the other is the title poem "Concordance" (also published in *I Love Artists*). Together, these two poems paired with Smith's artwork were produced in a limited edition run of two thousand copies from Kelsey Street Press in 2006 (see fig. 22).⁴¹ While "Concordance" appears as the bulk of the volume, intermingling as it does on the page with Kiki Smith's bold indigo prints of the creatures and foliage that inhabit "Concordance," "Red Quiet" ends the collection without an imagistic pairing, though the selection of paper on which it is printed—a bright red, textured through transparent rice paper—serves as the material evocation of *red* as the subject of the poem. Indeed, words gather force in this representation of the poem as they build up across the transparent pages, so vibrantly colored yet at the same time allowing the trace of previous words and lines to show through such that the reader encounters not only the lines she or he reads, but also the lines before and after, the words backwards and forwards, and the saturated color, simultaneously. The language of the poem "Concordance," as the title suggests, exists in correspondence with the visual images, another effect of the exchange and intermingling of verbal and visual, a wordimage in

⁴¹ In addition, a limited edition accordion book was designed by master papermaker Anne McKeown and published by the Brodsky Center for Innovative Print and Paper at Rutgers University.

which language does not seek to explain the image and neither does the image seek to illustrate the word.



Figure 22: Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Kiki Smith, *Concordance* (2006), Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions

At times word and image overlap to disrupt each other, such that the reader/viewer may have to choose which to focus on, which to interpret—an act not unlike the willingness to shift focus between and within wordimage that the re-vision and de-framing of ekphrasis discussed throughout this dissertation has privileged.

In fact, the idea of concordance serves as a culminating point for my dissertation's discussion of the nature of ekphrastic wordimage. At the level of the volume, *Concordance* acts not only as collaboration between the creators, but as a material and

three-dimensional wordimage that embodies both the theoretical and artistic dispositions of de-framing. While the title evokes our commonplace understandings of the word “concordant” in its “agreeing in sentiment,” “correspondent,” and even “harmonious” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “concordant”: see A.1-3) relationship between word and image, it also suggests collaboration itself in the meaning of a “concordance” as a “treaty, agreement, or compact.” Further, the material volume exists as an instance of word and image as “a citation of parallel passages in a book” (*OED*, s.v. “concordance”: see 2 and 6.a). Indeed, the first section of the poem begins:

Writing encounters one who
does not write and I don't try
for him, but face-to-face draw
you onto a line or flight like a
break that may be extended,
the way milkweed filling space
above the field is 'like' reading.

Here, writing is an encounter, a face-to-face meeting between an I/eye and you in which the literal milkweed printed on the page comes to fill space so that viewing the page of the wordimage is 'like' reading, is “reading” both image and text as interpretable “text.” Further, this way of “reading” image and word in concordance forecloses on misreading:

Then it's possible to undo
misunderstanding from inside
by tracing the flight or thread of
empty space running through
things, even a relation that's
concordant.

Seeds disperse in summer air.

Sunrays cease to represent parallel
passages in a book, i.e. not coming
from what I see and feel.

Relation is in the middle, relay,

flower description *to* flower
 becoming of the eye between light
 and heart. (*Concordance* n.p.)

Finally, in these lines, “parallel passages” no longer function as the concordant metaphor; rather, “relation is in the middle.” We are reminded of the border-zone between word and image discussed in the Prologue. The wordimage is a “relay,” a method of moving between “flower description *to* flower,” of occupying the italicized “to” in this phrase, the in-between.

These first moments of “Concordance” are emblematic of the ekphrastic exchange. Concordance, like harmony, is always in tension with discordance—there is always the possibility of the dissonant note throwing off the chord, always the possibility of the clash between things that are both familiar and strange. While this dissertation explored various metaphors for harmony and strangeness there was always at the heart of the wordimage the simultaneous act of seeing within the other the difference of the self. For this reason, ekphrasis will likely always be connected to a discussion of subjectivity both in the lyric voice and the personas (imagined or real) of visual artists and poets engaged in the embrace. The harmony of two voices comes either from the same note sung differently or two (or more) notes sung in concordance, but these differences also must cohere from a point of sameness in order to engage the listener. Still, there are always those instances in which the discordant is what draws us in, sounding wrong and yet intriguing us to participate, as Berssenbrugge does when she sees “sunrise frequencies/ emanate from your body, like music” (*Concordance* n.p.).

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1993.
- . *Profanations*. Tans. Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- Altieri, Charles. "Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's Empathy." *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Ed. Hinton and Hogue. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Ashbery, John. "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems*. New York: Penguin, 1976.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Manet's Olympia." *Morning in the Burned House*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 24-25.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1939). *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Eiland and McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Bernstock, Judith E. *Joan Mitchell*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1988.
- Berssenbrugge, Mei-mei. *I Love Artists: New and Selected Poems*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Berssenbrugge, Mei-mei, and Charles Bernstein. "Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Charles Bernstein: A Dialogue." *Conjunctions* 35 (Fall 2000): n.p.
- Berssenbrugge, Mei-mei, and Kiki Smith. *Concordance*. Kelsey Street Press, 2006.
- Boland, Eavan. *Collected Poems*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1995.
- Bryson, Norman. *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Lyric Time*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Caws, Mary Ann, ed. *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1.4 (1976): 875-893.

Costello, Bonnie. "Ut Pictura Poesis: Moore and the Visual Arts." *Marianne Moore Imaginary Possessions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. 186-214.

Culler, Jonathan, "Deconstruction and the Lyric." *Deconstruction is/in America*. Ed. Anselm Haverkamp. New York: New York University Press, 1995. 41-51.

Datson, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998.

Debo, Annette. "Ophelia Speaks: Resurrecting Still Lives in Natasha Tretheway's *Bellocq's Ophelia*." *African American Review* 42.2 (Summer 2008): 201-214.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

Dillon, Brian. "Attempts to Recover the 'Ordinary' in the Poetry of Eavan Boland." *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 25.1-2 (1999): 309-322.

Dolin, Sharon. *Serious Pink*. New York: Marsh Hawk Press, 2003.

Doty, Mark. *The Art of Description: World Into Word*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2010.

---. *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Dunham, Rebecca. *Miniature Room: Poems*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2006.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *H.D and the Career of That Struggle*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

---. "Romantic Thralldom and 'Subtle Genealogies' in H.D." *Writing Beyond the Ending*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 66-83.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.

---, ed. *Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle*. New York: New Directions, 2002.

Fischer, Barbara K. *Museum Mediations*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Fisher, Philip. *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.

Fulker, Teresa. "Not-War and the Inspiration of the *Gloire* in H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live*." *Sagetrieb: A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Imagist/Objectivist Tradition* 12.2 (1993 Fall): 51-82.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Garber, Marjorie and Nancy J. Vickers, eds. "Introduction." *The Medusa Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Gilbert, Sandra M. "Marianne Moore as Female Female Impersonator." *Marianne Moore: The Art of a Modernist*, ed. Joseph Parisi. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990.

Goldhill, Simon. "What is Ekphrasis For?" *Classical Philology* 102(2007): 1-19.

Gubar, Susan. "The Echoing Spell of H.D.'s Trilogy." *Shakespeare's Sisters*. ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Indiana UP, 1979.

Hagstrum, Jean H. *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

von Hallberg, Robert. *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008),

Haney, David. "A Conversation with Natasha Trethewey." *Cold Mountain Review* 33.1 (Fall 2004): 19-34.

H.D. [Hilda Doolittle]. *Bid Me to Live*. New York: Dial Press, 1960.

---. *Collected Poems 1912-1944*. ed. Louis L. Martz. New York: New Directions, 1983

---. "Notes on Thought and Vision." *The Gender of Modernism*. ed. Bonnie Scott. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 93-109.

---. *Tribute to Freud*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1956.

---. *Trilogy*. New York: New Directions, 1973.

Heffernan, James A. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 56.

Hinton, Laura. "Three Conversations with Mei-mei Berssenbrugge." *Jacket* 27: n.p.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995.

Howard Hodgkin Paintings. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 1995.

Hull, Lynda. "Utopia Parkway." *Collected Poems*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2003. 106-7.

Husvedt, Siri. *Mysteries of the Rectangle*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.

---. "Nine Boxes." *A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by the Work of Joseph Cornell*. Ed. Jonathan Safran Foer. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2001.

Joan Mitchell: "...my black paintings..." 1964. New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 1994.

Kibble, Matthew. "Sublimation and the Over-Mind in H.D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision*." *ELT* 41:1 (1998), 42-57.

Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992).

Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Leavell, Linda. *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995.

Lessing, Gotthold. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Minneola: Dover Publications, 2005. (1766)

Logan, William. "God's Chatter." *The New Criterion* (Dec 2006): 59-66.

Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Malcolm, Janet. "The Real Thing." *New York Review of Books* 44.1 (9 Jan. 1997): 12-16.

Marx, Karl. *Capital*. (1867) 1977

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2002 [1962].

----- . *Sense and Non-Sense*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

----- *What Do Pictures Want?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Milicia, Joseph. "Bid Me to Live: Within the Storm." *H.D. Woman and Poet*. ed. Michael King. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986. 279-298.

Moore, Marianne. *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Viking Press, 1981 [1967].

----- *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*. ed. Patricia C. Willis. New York: Viking Press, 1986.

----- *The Poems of Marianne Moore*. ed. Grace Schulman. New York: Viking Press, 2003.

Nochlin, Linda. "Joan Mitchell: A Rage to Paint." *The Paintings of Joan Mitchell*. Jane Livingston. New York and Los Angeles: The Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, 2002. 49-59.

Nordland, Gerald. *Richard Diebenkorn*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1987.

O'Hara, Frank. "Joseph Cornell."

Ostriker, Alicia. "Marianne Moore, the Maternal Hero, and American Women's Poetry." *Marianne Moore: The Art of a Modernist*, ed. Joseph Parisi. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990.

---. "The Poet as Heroine: Learning to Read H.D." *Writing Like a Woman*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1983. 7-41

Petty, Jill. "An Interview with Natasha Tretheway." *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 364-375.

Rado, Lisa. "'The Perfection of the Fiery Moment': H.D. and the Androgynous Poetics of Overmind." *The Modern Androgyne Imagination*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. 60-98.

Ranciere, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. New York: Verso, 2009.

---. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. New York: Continuum, 2006.

---. "What Aesthetics Can Mean." *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art, and the Senses*. Ed. Peter Osborn. London: Serpent's Tail, 2000. 13-33.

Rieke, Alison. "'Plunder' or 'Accessibility to Experience': Consumer Culture and Marianne Moore's Modernist Self-Fashioning." *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.1/2 (Fall 2003): 149-170.

Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 71.

-----, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision" (1971). *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.

Rindge, Debora, and Anna Leahy. "'Become What You Must': Tretheway's Poems and Bellocq's Photographs." *English Language Notes* 44.2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 291-306.

Rose, Rex. "The Last Days of Ernest J. Bellocq." *Exquisite Corpse* 10 (n.d.).
< http://www.corpse.org/archives/issue_10/gallery/bellocq/index.htm>

Rossetti, Christina. "In an Artist's Studio."

Rowell, Charles Henry. "Inscriptive Restorations: An Interview with Natasha Tretheway." *Callaloo* 27.4 (Fall 2004): 1022-1034.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Schulze, Robin G. "Marianne Moore's Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish and the Poetry of the Natural World." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.1 (Spring 1998): 1-33.

Scott, Grant F. "Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis." *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*. Ed. Frederick Burwick and Jurgen Klein. Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996. 315-332.

Sheehan, Steven. "The Golden Section." *American Artist* 58.619 (1994): 18-20.

Simpson, Megan. *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-oriented Writing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Skinner, Jonathan. "Boundary Work in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's 'Pollen.'" *HOW2* 3(2): n.p.

Soloman, Deborah. *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.

Sontag, Susan. "About Hodgkin." *Howard Hodgkin Paintings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 1995. 105-112.

---. "Introduction." *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, The Red-Light District of New Orleans*.

Storyville Portraits. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970.

Storyville: The Naked Dance. DVD. Anne O. Craig and Maia Harris. Tete Rouge Productions, 1997.

Swensen, Cole. "To Writewithize." *American Letters & Commentary* 13 (2001): 122-127.

-----. "Ekphrasis that Ignores the Subject." Conceptual Poetry Symposium, University of Arizona Poetry Center, May 2008.
<http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp_media/papers/cp_papers_swensen.shtml>

Sword, Helen. *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence, and H.D.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Tashjian, Dickran. *Joseph Cornell: Gifts of Desire*. Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1992.

Tretheway, Natasha. *Bellocq's Ophelia*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002.

-----. *Domestic Work*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000.

Tucker, Marcia. *Joan Mitchell*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974.

Waldman, Diane. *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.

Waggoner, Hyatt H. *American Visionary Poetry*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.

Weatherhead, A. K. "Two Kinds of Vision in Marianne Moore." *ELH* 31.4 (Dec. 1964): 482-496.

Webb, Ruth. "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: the Invention of a Genre." *Word and Image* 15(1999).

---. *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Burlington, VT: 2009.

Wordsworth, William. "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*"

(1802). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
648-668.