

PAINTING WITH WORDS

"Overall, I think visual artists and poets share the same instrument of their artistic trade: the image."



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AN ANCIENT TRADITION CARRIED through to present time, ekphrasis is a poetic description of, or commentary on, a visual work of art. While painters and sculptors have been inspired by literary works, writers have continued to translate their interpretation of visual artwork into written form. In this interview, scholar and poet Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett discusses ekphrastic poetry and her writing process, including the connections between visual and written art – as well as her take on bringing the ancient tradition of ekphrasis into the 21st century.

Born in Ohio and raised in New Orleans, just like her namesake, Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett is a teacher, writer and activist. With a wide range of interests and, yes, passions, it's no surprise how her social and literary interests intersect in her work. In college, Somers-Willett became interested in production while working at a newspaper and began work at a small book company as a production manager, doing layouts. When she completed her undergraduate work at Duke University with a degree in cultural anthropology and women's studies, she quickly realized how her studies greatly influenced her interest in poetry and literature. Her growing passion for poetry also extended to performing, and she became active in the slam scene, competing in several national poetry slam teams as a competitor and coach.

This foray into slam helped Somers-Willett envision the poem in the realm of sound and performance, giving her a new set of tools — vocalization, gesture, singing, improvisation, music, dialect — that have opened up other ways to look at her writing and create new works. She eventually entered a graduate program in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at Austin and received both her Masters in Creative Writing, and her Ph.D. in Literature. In 2003, she published her first book of poetry, *Roam* (Southern Illinois University Press), a vibrant collection that chronicles a varied range of topics, notably the trial of Joan of Arc. The book was selected for the Crab Orchard Award Series in 2006, and was a finalist for the Helen C. Smith Memorial Award for poetry.

In intervening years, Somers-Willett built a reputation as a poet exploring and re-thinking ekphrastic poetry's motives and purposes, delving into multimedia collaborations. For example, in 2008, she participated in The Blanton Poetry Project at the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, creating poetry based on Dario Robleto's artwork, "Daughters of Wounds and Relics;" and has also held ekphrasis

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An Exploration of Ekphrastic Poetry with Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

G A B R I E L L E D A V I D

PAINTING WITH WORDS

SUSAN B.A. SOMERS-WILLETT

Gabrielle David

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workshops at The Bowery Poetry Club in New York City. By 2009, Somers-Willett became involved with IN VERSE, a groundbreaking collaboration between poets, photographers and radio producers to create a new model of storytelling in journalism. The project was conceived in the spirit of the upcoming 75th anniversary of the Federal Writer's Project, by Ted Genoways, the editor of *Virginia Quarterly Review* (VQR), and radio producer Lu Olkowski.

Somers-Willett worked closely with photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally and Olkowski to create "Women of Troy," which documents the effects of the economic crisis on the lives of working mothers in Troy, New York. This multimedia project combined poetry, photography and audio footage to create "documentary poems" for radio, web, print and iPhones. It garnered a number of awards, including a Gracie Award from the Alliance for Women in Media in 2010.

Somers-Willett published her second poetry collection, *Quiver*, in 2009 with University of Georgia Press as part of the VQR Series in Poetry. She also published her book of criticism, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, by University of Michigan Press, which is considered one of the first scholarly investigations of the art. Somers-Willett has said that she likes to "think of poetry as something that's off the page as well as on. Not just speaking a poem aloud, but embodying its voice in a theatrical way."

She has received fellowships from the Millay Colony for the Arts and the Dow Center for Creativity, and her honors include the Ann Stanford Poetry Prize, the Robert Frost Foundation Poetry Award, VQR's Emily Clark Balch Poetry Prize, and a Pushcart nomination. Somers-Willett's writing has been featured in *The Iowa Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The New Yorker*.

Both a writer and a scholar of verse, Somers-Willett currently teaches college courses in creative writing, contemporary poetry and poetics, African American literature and culture, and gender and performance studies. Her articles and essays about poetry, poetics, and performance have appeared in a number of peer-reviewed journals including the *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*; *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*; *The American Voice*; *Teachers College Record*; and *Text, Practice, Per-*

formance Journal of Cultural Studies. She has taught at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she was an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities. She currently teaches as an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

What follows is Somers-Willett's take on ekphrasis and why and how she "paints words with poetry."

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How did you become interested in ekphrastic poetry? Where did the interest stem from?

I've always been drawn to visual art, dabbling in drawing and painting, and before I was a poet, I was a graphic designer and book production manager. One of my teachers, David Wevill, called my writing "cinematic," and I guess I would agree. My interest in ekphrasis stems from a motivation on my part to blend media and have a conversation across the arts.

To what extent is your ekphrastic writing grounded in theory, and to what extent are you self-taught? What resources do you read before poetically responding to artwork?

I read and view sort of all over the map when I approach an ekphrastic poem— but probably the most important is researching the artist's materials and process in making the work.

I'd like for you to talk about the idea of calling attention to one kind of art in the form of another, but taking as your task, if it's possible, getting beyond that initial image of inspiration. Mark Strand said once famously that essentially, the poem should erase what inspires it.

I definitely agree with Strand's statement, that the ekphrastic poem should erase what inspires it. I recently participated in a poetry project at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, where they invited poets all over Texas to write about items in their permanent collection. Many poets wrote purely descriptive, figurative poems — some of which were excellent, by the way. But my favorites were ones that looked at non-figurative art, using the artwork as a launching point from which their poem emerged.

The way I've approached ekphrasis recently is to look at the artwork from a standpoint of process. I seek out artwork that has innovative methods of creation behind them, and then try to apply a similar process to writing.

Working this way ensures that there is a concrete connection between the art and writing, even if the resulting poem may not describe the artwork at hand. So for example, for one of the pieces I wrote for the Blanton, I wrote about a multimedia piece by Dario Robleto which samples and fuses a number of modern materials (stretched audiotape with Civil War survivors' voices on them, melted bullets, transfer art, soldiers' letters sent home pressed into handmade paper ribbons, vintage lace) into a formally stylized Antebellum memento mori. In writing about it, I wanted to do something similar in terms of process with my language, so I chose a strict, traditional form (the villanelle) that sampled in its refrains language from an interview with Robleto. The resulting poem, "The Last Confederate Civil War Widow Writes from the Dead Letter Office of Heaven" (see p. 43), has this effect of turning the gaze back on the reader/viewer, because it's as if the artwork (and the artist via his sampled language) is speaking back, commenting upon being fused together and displayed. (Both are available at the Blanton Poetry Project website. (<http://blantonmuseum.org/elearning/blantonpoetry/index.html>))

Tell me, what is your favorite ekphrastic poem?

One of my favorites is Rilke's sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo." I learned from Mark Doty that when Rilke wrote this poem, he was working for the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Rilke felt his writing was too airy and lightweight, so he asked Rodin, whose fleshy and substantial sculptures he admired, for assignments. Rodin would send him to the Louvre, or to the zoo — What do you see there? To write about it?

The poem begins with Rilke first describing the headless statue of Apollo in a traditional ekphrastic way, but it very quickly evolves so that the torso is looking at him. This divine body, though headless, and rough with age, is still so powerful that its gaze is like a lamp illuminating his entire torso. He ends the poem "for there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life." That last line comes out of nowhere, and it blows my mind. That hairpin turn at the end captures precisely how art hails its viewer, how it fixes its gaze upon us in ways that fundamentally change how we understand the world. It's absolutely brilliant. Pure light.

Where do you feel the connection is between visual and written art in this piece and on other levels?

Overall, I think visual artists and poets share the same instrument of their artistic trade: the image. An artist works to represent an idea or subject with her materials in the same way a poet uses language to represent a subject, and so I

Archaic Torso of Apollo

by Rainer Maria Rilke

translated by Edward Snow

We never knew his head and all the light
that ripened in his fabled eyes. But
his torso still glows like a gas lamp dimmed
in which his gaze, lit long ago,

holds fast and shines. Otherwise the surge
of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile
run through the slight twist of the loins
toward that center where procreation thrived.

Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt
under the shoulders' transparent plunge
and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur

and not burst forth from all its contours
like a star: for there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

"Archaic Torso of Apollo" from THE POETRY OF RILKE translated and edited by Edward Snow. Translation copyright © 2009 by Edward Snow. Reprinted by permission of North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

think poetry and art have always had a kind of natural affinity for one another. We're using the tool for our trades.

Do you feel it is important that readers know which works of art you are writing about? That to know both the poem and the artwork makes the piece richer? Or do you think an ekphrastic work, once written, should stand on its own?

I think that an ekphrastic poem should stand on its own as a poem, but having the artwork as a point of reference certainly makes our understanding of both richer.

In your writing process, do you rely on your own dictation to find the shape of a poem or do you find there's an organic quality of shape inherent in the subject? Do you follow a formal ekphrastic format, or do you just write the way you feel?

When writing about artwork, I always try to find a form that complements the artist's process and honors the form of the artwork — which has lead me to explore some voices and forms pretty far afield from what I might write without a visual referent.

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

I’m actually more attracted to modern and contemporary artwork: photography, video installations, abstract painting, and multimedia work. That may be just because of personal taste, but usually I find more of a challenge in this kind of artwork — I have to think beyond what may or may not be represented and engage more in process, making, and materials.

Both Homer’s *Illiad* and the Brueghel poems of William Carlos Williams balance deftly on the seam between the perceived and the perceiver — in other words, we are made aware of the subjectivity at work when our gaze as readers is directed toward the speaker, whose observations become the subject of the poem as a piece of art, even while they are engaged in a process of fixing another artist’s subject in their own gaze. How can ekphrasis be of use to both the poet and the reader of poetry as an exercise in gaze, perspective, and subjectivity?

I’m so glad you asked this question, because it’s something I’m wrestling with now with my new manuscript. I’m trying to write about photography documenting violence/war, the Abu Ghraib photographs, photo postcards of lynchings, in ways that convey their reflexive nature. That is, I think it is through these images that we come to define and re-define ourselves as citizens, many times in ugly ways. I’m not quite sure if I have the answer quite yet, but I’m finding that framing some of these images as “self-portraits” through my writing — as images through which the gaze is refracted back onto ourselves as viewers — is proving a promising avenue.

Another project I collaborated on last summer also takes a different approach to ekphrasis. Together with Public Radio International journalist Lu Olkowski and photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally, I documented the lives of working mothers in Troy, NY in verse as part of a larger series about how the economic crisis is affecting impoverished communities in the U.S. The resulting suite of poems was broadcast on the WNYC show Studio 360 with Kurt Anderson and appeared in print in the Fall 2009 issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Lu also oversaw putting together a multimedia slideshow and iPhone app featuring the title poem and Brenda’s photography (available online at <http://vimeo.com/6363677>). “Women of Troy” ended up being both ekphrastic and journalistic. Brenda has been documenting these



The Last Known Confederate Civil War Widow Writes from the Dead Letter Office of Heaven

After Daughters of Wounds and Relics by Dario Robleto

SUSAN B. A. SOMERS - WILLETT

Sampling these letters is not passive consumption.
It is the artist's job to make it new from the old,
to press from death a voice retrieved from the destruction.

Don't get me wrong. What I recorded were not instructions
for mourning. I spoke and the tape simply rolled.
But grief's sampling is not passive consumption,

and so here I am, Lazarus made from death's seduction.
What has blossomed is akin to turning shit into gold:
the sour breath a voice retrieved from the destruction.

Do I unseal the letters to remember or forget? Resurrection
lies in display, the open casket where love blooms manifold.
Here my love is framed. Sampling is not passive consumption:

what we bury comes back. Such is the function
of the dead—the letter, the scrap of hair, the black costume folds
into living comfort, a voice retrieved from the destruction.

Listen. The body is a squeezebox playing its own corruption
and I sing with it, my sweetheart voice bright as a marigold.
The heart's sampling is not passive consumption.
It reckons my beloved's voice, retrieved from the destruction.

Villanelle written with some phrases sampled from Dario Robleto's essay "All rights reserved. I Love Everything Rock and Roll (Except the Music)." An interactive gallery of the artwork and this poem is available at: <http://blantonmuseum.org/elearning/blantonpoetry/index.html>

women for six years through her project Upstate Girls, and though I had several of her images in mind when I was writing, I rarely wrote about specific images—instead, I was forced to think how our poems would work together, in tandem. I think collaborating with artists in other fields pushed me to think of the poems in new ways, as portraits which captured our subjects and their lives but which also speak to a social condition.

What are your favorite ekphrastic poetry by other poets writing today?

Natasha Trethewey's book, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, is an incredibly powerful book of ekphrastic poems alongside E.J. Bellocq's portraits of Storyville prostitutes in nineteenth-century New Orleans.

In what ways did visual art inform your process in developing your recent book(s)?

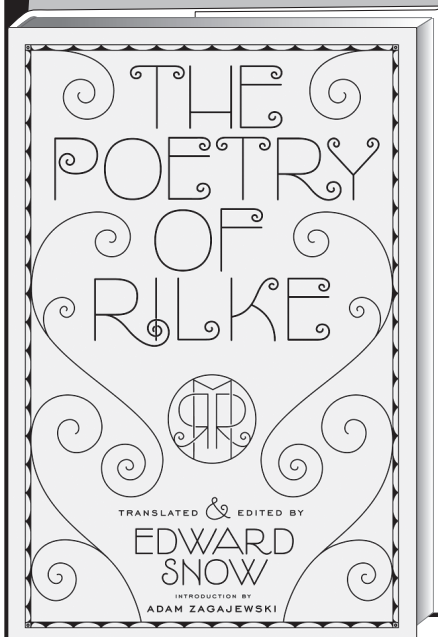
In addition to my new manuscript-in-process engaging photography, I also had very clear ideas about the artwork on my book covers from the very start of both of my books of poetry. For my first book, *Roam*, I even had the image that appears on the cover hanging above my desk where I wrote the poems, and so many details of

that image ended up entering the poems. My second book, *Quiver*, has a painting by Wassily Kandinsky on the cover, "Several Circles," and has an epigraph from Kandinsky at the start of the book. Having these artists and their artwork as touchstones for my poetry helped me organize my thoughts into the book, because I could visualize what the effect was that I wanted it to have. I have no idea if this is a trend that will continue; I only know that, so far, my cover images seem to select me far before I have contemplated the contents of the book itself.

What great books have you read recently? Are there any upcoming releases you're excited about?

There are several books of poetry that have come out just recently that really excite me: Keetje Kuipers' *Beautiful in the Mouth*; Erika Meitner's *Ideal Cities*; Anne Carson's *Nox* (which, being an accordion book reproduced from a scrapbook, has an ekphrastic element to it); Terrance Hayes' *Lighthead*; and Major Jackson's *Holding Company*. All of these books are teaching me new things, new ways to approach my writing. Not a new book here, but one of my old standbys is Brigit Pegeen Kelly's *Song* — when I'm feeling stuck, I read a poem or two in her book, marvel at it, and am able to get the gears turning. ■

The single most comprehensive volume of Rilke's German poetry ever to be published in English



"In Snow's hands, Rilke becomes clear as glass—as if the poems could be windows opening onto the world, rather than mirrors that show us ourselves obstructing the view."
—Craig Morgan Teicher, VQR

"*The Poetry of Rilke* is a major new text. It runs the gamut of Rilke's mature career, from the dramatic religious sequence of the *Book of Hours* through the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, as well as the *Uncollected Poems*, appearing together in a single volume for the first time. With the German *en face* throughout and Snow's own notes at the end, *The Poetry of Rilke* provides **the best introduction yet to this inimitable master.**"

—Daniel E. Pritchard, *The Critical Flame*



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