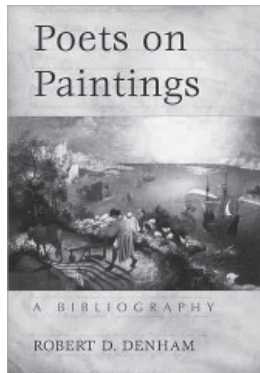


BOOK REVIEWS

EXPLORING LITERATURE

Our mission is to increase interest in reading by providing cool, short book recommendations in poetry, fiction and nonfiction. To submit book reviews, send them to editor@phatititude.org. Happy reading!



Poets on Paintings

by Robert D. Denham

McFarland, 2010 www.mcfarlandpub.com

\$95.00; 341 pp.; ISBN-10: 0786447257

ROBERT DENHAM'S BOOK *Poets on Paintings* offers a comprehensive volume of works on ekphrastic scholarship. Denham invites the reader to experience ekphrasis as a process of speaking visual art. *Poets on Paintings* provides an "inventory" of poems written about paintings and painters as well as works on the theoretical study of ekphrasis. *Poets on Paintings* expands its bibliography to include a dash of poems about graphic art, tapestries and mosaics in addition to the expansive number of poems written about paintings. Approximately 2,500 poems on paintings have been catalogued in this book. *(cont'd pg. 18)*

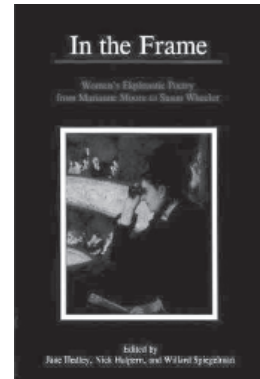
In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler

edited by Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern and Williard Spiegelman
Univ. of Delaware Pr., 2009 www2.lib.udel.edu/udpress/
\$60.00; 316 pp.; ISBN-10: 0874130468

IN THE FRAME: *Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler* introduces

ekphrasis as the act of speaking to, about or for a work of visual art through their powerful essays. The reader is taken on a journey through a process that beckons them to ponder, what poems "see." Readers are further invited to delve into the experience of seeking in works of visual art.

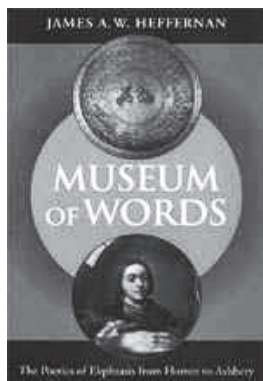
Situated in the consciousness of women poets, *In the Frame* seeks to expose the intentions of ekphrasis in the gendered realm. The writings and essays illuminate the



(cont'd pg. 18)

Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery

by James A. W. Heffernan
Univ. of Chicago Pr., 2004 www.press.uchicago.edu
\$25.00; 257 pp.; ISBN-10: 0226323145

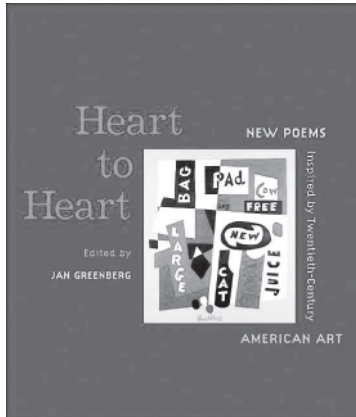


EKPHRASIS IS THE art of describing works of art. Profoundly ambivalent, ekphrastic poetry cel-

ebrates the power of the silent image even as it tries to circumscribe that power with the authority of the word. Over the ages its practitioners have created a "museum of words" about real and imaginary paintings and sculptures. *Museum of Words* is the first book ever to explore this "museum

Published in 1991, Heffernan painstakingly investigates the literary trope of ekphrasis and shows how notions of ekphrasis have changed from the epics of Homer,

(cont'd pg. 18)



Heart to Heart : New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art

by Jan Greenberg

Harry N. Abrams, 2001 www.abramsbooks.com

\$19.95; 80 pp. ISBN-10: 0810943867

JAN GREENBERG'S VISION to create an anthology to celebrate the power of art to inspire poetry comes alive in *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth Century American Art*, a picture book that offers large-type poems with full-page reproductions representing America's most important artistic movements of the 20th century. Greenberg invited 43 poets to choose a piece of modern art and write a poetic response to it. Marketed under Children/Young Adult literature, this compilation, which is also ekphrastic in nature, is actually for anyone interested in poetry inspired by modern American artwork.

(cont'd pg. 19)

Quiver: Poems (VQR Poetry)

by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett

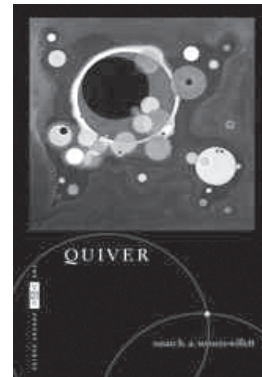
Univ. of Georgia Pr., 2009 www.ugapress.org

\$16.95; 96 pp. ; ISBN-10: 0820333271

THE POET, OCTAVIO PAZ, once said that "Poetry is a form of knowledge, of experimental knowledge." This quote, from his collection of essays, *Alternating Current* (Tr. 1973) discusses in great detail the connections of poetry and science. On the surface, poetry may seem very different from science, but what is common to a large sector of both disciplines is their interest in the natural world. They also encompass an enormous diversity of human activity, which I believe, forges a fairly fundamental link between the two subjects.

In fact, it was the shared habit of Romantic scientists and poets both to put as much stock in the process of

(cont'd pg. 20)



(cont'd pg. 26)

POETS ON PAINTINGS

(cont'd from pg. 15)

Through *Poets on Paintings*, readers are provided with poetic connections to the art of such prominent painters as Georgia O'Keeffe and Vincent Van Gogh. *Poets and Paintings* includes a comprehensive guide for a variety of topics even in such areas as websites and journals. Hence, as such areas continue to expand resources in such areas will undoubtedly expand as well.

Poets on Paintings provides inventories on ekphrasis that assist writers, visual artists, theorists and lay people efficiently access several categories. Such categories include: Anthologizes from Museum Collections, Other Anthologizes, Volumes on Individual Painters, Volumes by a Single Poet on Multiple Paintings, Journals and Websites and a List of Poets with Their Ekphrastic Works. Collections are arranged chronologically and poets are listed in alphabetical order ranging from Bertus Aafjes to Albin Zollinger. The book concludes with 2,000 entries of secondary literature which is expansive enough to include powerful sources domestically and abroad as well as scholars' noteworthy Ph.D. dissertations. ■

Robert D. Denham is the John P. Fishwick of English emeritus at Roanoke College in Virginia. Denham also served as Director of English Programs and Director of the Association of Departments of English for the Modern Language Association. (Reviewed by Jennifer N. Bacon, Ph.D.)

IN THE FRAME

(cont'd from pg. 16)

poetic path of women as they speak about visual art in a field of critical literature and theory in which they have traditionally been silenced and excluded. One of the emerging themes which becomes central in the book is the experience of "seeing and saying" the art (pg 15).

The writers bring us *into* the art not only intellectually but through feelings and emotions. This sense of "feminine logic" allows the unification of seeing, feeling and saying that is often missing in the traditional "masculine logic." Rather than institutionalize or dominate the art in order to assess it, feminine ekphrasis seeks to become one with it. Moreover, it is understood that to enter into this process one must desire to experience the art as well as the writing. Furthermore, one must be focused enough to withstand feeling the art deeply enough to express the feelings in writing while not to becoming distracted by the art.

The three essays of *In the Frame* further theorize ekphrasis within a gendered perspective. Joanne Feit Diehl examines the creation of woman as "Other" in the masculine ekphrastic tradition thereby creating a shift in theory by exploring the role of women as the observer and object observed. In so doing, Diehl unfolds the poems of Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Jorie Graham. The essays of Joanne Feit Diehl and Jane Hedley take the reader on a journey from romanticism to gender liberation and philosophic voices. Moreover, Jane Hedley's essay adds an essential dynamic to women's ekphrastic poetry as she explores the poetry of Rita Dove and her writings on race and gender.

Rita Dove's ekphrastic poetry deepens reflections on "Othering" through a racialized dimension. Dove explores and embraces "Blackness" with a sense of knowing and feeling of "body politics" alongside European art and images. Through the Dove's knowing revealed in the essays of Hedley, we remember such revelations and works of Joanne Braxton (1989) who exposed the ways in which Black women are made to be invisible knowers who are not known. Dove's ekphrastic poetry pursues this path of knowing by shattering the silence and invisibility or race and gender in art.

In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler is a necessary companion for those embarking on the journey of bodily and emotional knowledge and academic scholarship with the awareness that "its creation is awe and a sense of urgency . . ." (pg 93). ■

Jane Hedley is the K. Laurence Stapleton Professor of English. Her teaching specialties are Renaissance literature and poetry of all periods. Nick Halpern, is Associate Professor of English, at North Carolina State University. Willard Spiegelman is the Hughes Professor of English at Southern Methodist University, and editor-in-chief of the *Southwest Review*. (Reviewed by Jennifer N. Bacon, Ph.D.)

MUSEUM OF WORDS

(cont'd from pg. 16)

Virgil and Dante, to contemporary poetry. This very dense book is broken up into four chapters: "Homer, Virgil, Dante: A Genealogy of Ekphrasis," "Weaving Rape: Ekphrastic metamorphoses of the Philomela Myth from Ovid to Shakespeare," "Romantic Ekphrasis: Iconophobia, Iconophilia, and the Ideology of Transcendence," and "Modern and Postmodern Ekphrasis: Entering the Museum of Art."

Literary critics such as Heffernan have chosen to focus specifically on poetry as a rich potential and actual realm for ekphrasis, noting poems such as Yeats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" as prominent examples of verse seeking to embody the gestalt — that is, recapitulate the viewer's comprehension — of pictorial artworks. Heffernan goes into great detail throughout the book, raising many issues central to the entire history of Western poetry.

The centerpiece of the book, however, is how Heffernan distills the definition of ekphrasis to "the verbal representation of visual representation." He then posits a far more provocative claim: ekphrasis, he argues, is "a literary mode that turns on antagonism." For Heffernan, ekphrasis "is anything but submissive. It is . . . the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental." While his argument is surprisingly persuasive, some scholars would argue that Heffernan serves up a fairly narrow definition based on "notional ekphrasis" (writing poetry on works that are imagined by the poet rather than a piece of artwork that actually exists).

Since *Museum of Words*' first printing, the boom in ekphrasis in the past 20 years is not only an aesthetic but a critical phenomenon, introducing new ways that both poets and writers have come to terms with the critical dilemmas of our moment. Today, visual art and literature have an intimate relationship, a relationship exploited constantly throughout our modern society. Many scholars would also argue that ekphrasis is no longer limited to artwork, and a movement that recognizes music, TV and film as ekphrastic in nature, has also been on the rise. Yet despite these developments, Heffernan's treatment of ekphrasis remains intact, making his work still relevant and widely quoted by poets and scholars, even today.

Overall, Heffernan's study of how poets have represented paintings and sculptures remain a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the arts. An old book that becomes "new" with each generation of scholars, poets and writers, *Museum of Words* remains an excellent and readable study of a fascinating topic, ekphrasis. ■

Having taught English at Dartmouth for almost forty years, James Heffernan has left the classroom to concentrate on writing and outside lecturing on various topics. For the Teaching Company has taped 24 lectures on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and another 24 on great authors from Wordsworth to Albert Camus. His books include critical studies of literature and visual art such as *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Baylor University Press, 2006). (Reviewed by G. David)

HEART TO HEART

(cont'd from pg. 17)

From modernism to pop art, the wide range of artists presented in this volume include Jacob Lawrence, Jackson Pollack, Romare Bearden, Andy Warhol, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Georgia O'Keefe, Chuck Close Alfred Stieglitz and Elizabeth Murray. Among the poets featured are Joy Harjo, Hettie Jones, X.J. Kennedy, Lyn Lifshin, David Mura, Naomi Shihab Nye and Janine Pommy Vega. The poets are well matched with the art they have chosen to interpret. While the poems are brief and to the point, they provoke a wide range of emotions, from playful and challenging, to humorous or sad, in a way that celebrates the power of art to affect language.

Greenberg does a great service to readers by providing a variety of mediums and formats of both artists and poets. For example, the artworks range from mixed media, oil on canvas and photographs, to aerographs, prints, silkscreens and collages. Moreover, the poets present a rich depth and breadth of poetic forms and styles that include free verse, sonnets, rhymed verse and experimental verse. This kaleidoscope of multicultural voices and visions (African American, Arab American, Asian American, European, Hispanic/Latino) are as surprising as it is engaging, capturing the true essence of American arts and culture.

Greenberg's love of "looking at art" began at an early age, when she was inspired by visual art and in turn, how art inspired her own writing, which formed the basis of her writing books about American art and architecture. In her introduction, Greenberg painstakingly emphasizes the appeal of art and poetry, as well as the study of cultural arts through ekphrasis. She goes on to explain her belief in "the power of art to inspire language" noting that "What the poet sees in art and puts into words can transform an image . . . extending what is often an immediate response into something more lasting and reflective."

Greenberg has organized this collection into "four distinct but complimentary motifs," whereby the works are grouped loosely into four categories: "Stories," "Voices," "Impressions" and "Expressions." "Stories" include poems that conjure up a memory or tell an anecdote. In "Voices," the poets assume the voice of the object or person as depicted by the artists. "Impressions" are poems that explain the art by illustrating and comparing, sometimes through the use of similes and metaphors. In "Expressions," the poets explore aspects of visual form that concern the nature of art and the artists.

Some examples of poem/art pairings include “Women at the Piano” by poet William Jay Smith with “Woman at the Piano” painted by Elie Nadelman; “The Bison Returns” by poet Tony Johnston with “Standing Buffalo” a sculpture by Charles M. Russell; “From Above” by poet Angela Johnson with “Tar Beach” a mixed media collage by Faith Ringgold; and “Man Ray Stares into the future of Jazz: 1919” by David Clewell, with “Jazz” painted by Man Ray. One of my favorites is “The Brown Bomber” by Carole Boston Weatherford, with “Joe Louis and Unidentified Boxer” painted by William H. Johnson.

“He was a secret weapon in a war
to knock out hate. Joe bore a million
hopes
each time he punched a foe. he was
a star;
his stage, a mat set off by stakes
and ropes.
A left hook, a right jab, muscle and
grace;
Joe danced, and pride glowed on
every brown face.”

The poetry is crisp, interesting and meaningful to contemporary culture without being trite or overly stylized, making it accessible to everyone. While the artwork provides a sense of connection to the poems, the poems themselves can stand on their own. At the end of the book, Greenberg provides biographical notes on the poets and artists as well as an alphabetical index of art selections and poets.

Greenberg has managed to create a wonderful pairing of American artworks juxtaposed with poetry that provides connections between art, poetry and imagination. While this collection may be hard to push on teenagers, it is definitely a collection that belongs in the library of anyone who has an appreciation of both poetry and art. If a picture book is defined as a marriage of word and art, then *Heart to Heart* is not only a wonderful poetry collection, but it is also a picture book of the highest quality. ■

Jan Greenberg is the coauthor of five books on American Art and architecture, and the author of seven works of fiction for young readers. Her books have received many honors: the Michael L. Printz Honor Award, ALA Notable Book, School Library Journal Best Book of the Year, Booklist Editor's Choice, IRA Teachers' Choice, Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book, the Robert F. Siebert Honor, and Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Honor Book. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri. (Reviewed by G. David)

QUIVER

(cont'd from pg. 17)

discovery as in discovery itself. So, it should be no surprise that a strong connection between science and art exists through poetry. Indeed, the figure of the poet-scientist (or scientist cum poet) is not as rare as one might believe, and there are examples abound of the mutual influences these different creative activities can have on each other. One such example can be found in Susan B.A. Somers-Willett's second poetry collection, *Quiver*.

It's no surprise that Somers-Willett would take on science to present the shared boundaries of science and the human experience. She has been stretching and breaking boundaries for years — as a spoken word artist, ekphrastic poet, a documentarian, and a literary critic. What is surprising is her approach in tackling a not-so-easy subject and making it accessible to the reader.

Unlike Kimoko Hahn, who's inspiration from her latest collection, *Toxic Flora*, was influenced by *The New York Times* science section; Somers-Willett's inspiration is drawn from her first career path, that of a cell biologist, before switching over to creative writing. Her love and fascination for science, and her desire to once again test the boundaries of her imagination was the impetus for this collection.

Somers-Willett immediately captures the reader's attention with the naming of her collection. When one thinks of “quiver,” a shaking in rapid motion, vibrate tremulously or tremble usually comes to mind. Here, Somers-Willett also implies the mathematical definition whereas a quiver is a directed graph where loops and multiple arrows between two vertices are allowed. On the other hand, it's quite possible that Somers-Willett has employed a bit of wordplay here and has implied both.

As you flip through this slim volume of poetry and delve into Somers-Willett's poetic foray into science, it is as palpable as it is practical. The collection is divided into five sections: “Dark Matter: A Love Story,” “A Natural Order,” “Survival of the Fittest,” “Radium Music,” and “Praise.” Each section represents an area of curiosity for the poet. Running themes such as dark matter and relativity; and characters such as Darwin, Curie and DaVinci are prevalent throughout the book. Somers-Willett's premise is to explain how these scientific ideas connect us, just as the idea of love does. Throughout the book, she also questions how scientific mysteries — M-theory, dark matter, genetics, the big bang — connects us in ways we cannot even imagine now.

Quiver demonstrates a continued preoccupation with the possibilities and instabilities of our lives and the world

at large, but also explicitly explores the meeting points of poetry and science. This is clearly evident in the poem, "My Natural History," where Somers-Willett juxtapositions her parents' lovemaking and her inception:

"This is how my father will tell it:
he is a young man, not even twenty,
driving down a road in Arizona with my mother
and searching for the place where they will park,
put their backs to cool June grass. . . .
The blade of a river flowing between them
in which their daughter is being carried away."

My favorite poem is "Oppenheimer's Lament." J. Robert Oppenheimer's name has become almost synonymous with the atomic bomb, and also with the dilemma facing scientists when the interests of the nation and their own conscience collide.

"Like a good doctor, I am meant to wean
The thing from the love of its mother —
I will burn it, I will make it clean — "

Careful speed forced between
the patient poles, one circling the other
like a good doctor, I am meant to wean . . ."

Somers-Willett successfully captures Oppenheimer's regret for being known as the "Father of the atomic bomb" and his love affair with science versus his political and religious beliefs, which were always at odds with one another. She manages to write this villanelle with a deceptive effortlessness that blends the proverbial with a gradually revealed complexity. The repetition of the villanelle drives this message home.

It's evident that Somers-Willett thoroughly researched and has given great thought on her chosen topics, so at the end of the book, she provides notes to some of the poems. As a layman relying on high school science to make connections to the scientific terminology and the people mentioned therein, I would have liked to have seen more extensive notes, but perhaps it was Somers-Willett's intent to provide some, not all of the information, in order to motivate the reader to look up the rest.

What *Quiver* ultimately demonstrates is that there is a hidden similarity between science and poetry, and that Somers-Willett explores science in an illuminating way, with a dedication to the sort of underplayed craft, colloquialism and gentle power so evident in her work. ■

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett is the author of a book of poetry, Roam, and a book of criticism, The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America. She is an assistant professor of English at Montclair State University. (Reviewed by G. David)

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