
‘With Courteous and Careful Eyes’: Eva Bourke’s Ekphrases

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Abstract. This article considers the function of ekphrasis – which can be defined as the verbal representation of a visual representation – in the work of Irish poet Eva Bourke. The visual arts have featured prominently across much of Bourke’s work, and her ekphrastic poems, which eschew the traditionally gendered interpretations of ekphrasis that privilege “masculine” narrative over “feminine” image, suggest that the ekphrastic act develops differently when performed by a woman writer. Her poems celebrate the presence of the minute and detailed: a practice of looking that is born of disciplined, precise observation, and they often reflect upon painterly representations of domestic interiors and household items, valuing them for their usefulness and simplicity as well as their beauty. Moreover, the way in which Bourke approaches visual art embraces disorder and the “disjointed,” and takes into account the location of the artwork, suggesting that the ekphrastic encounter is not limited to a single gaze between poet and art object. Bourke’s art poems offer readers a multidimensional version of the ekphrastic experience, and demonstrate that ekphrasis continues to be a way for women poets in particular to examine anxieties that arise from questions of nationality and gender.

Key Words. Ekphrasis, visual art, gaze, disorder, gender.

Resumen. El artículo considera la función de la écfrasis – que puede resumirse como la representación verbal de una representación visual – en la obra de la poeta irlandesa Eva Bourke. Las artes visuales ocupan un lugar preponderante en gran parte de la obra de Bourke, y sus poemas ecfásticos, que rehuyen las interpretaciones tradicionales de la écfrasis basadas en el género que priman la narrativa ‘masculina’ por encima de la imagen ‘femenina’, sugieren que el acto ecfástico se desarrolla de forma diferente cuando lo lleva a cabo una mujer escritora. Sus poemas celebran la presencia del pequeño detalle: una manera de mirar que surge de la observación precisa y disciplinada, y a menudo medita en torno a representaciones pictóricas de interiores domésticos y de objetos del hogar, valorándolos por su utilidad y simplicidad así como por su belleza. Por otra parte, la forma en que Bourke se acerca al arte visual abarca el desorden y lo ‘inconexo’, y presta atención a la ubicación de la obra de arte, sugiriendo que el encuentro ecfástico no se limita a una simple mirada entre el poeta y el objeto de arte. Los poemas de Bourke ofrecen a los lectores una versión multidimensional de la experiencia ecfástica, y demuestran que la écfrasis sigue siendo una manera en que las mujeres poetas en particular examinan las ansiedades que surgen en torno a cuestiones de nacionalidad y género.

Palabras clave. Écfrasis, arte visual, mirada, desorden, género.

Engagement with visual art figures strongly in the work of the poet Eva Bourke, who emigrated to Ireland from Germany as a young woman, having studied German literature and

art history at the University of Munich (Arts Council of Ireland: 2012). The author of six collections of poetry, her first collection – Salmon Publishing’s inaugural title, released in

1985 – was a work of collaboration between Bourke and her sister-in-law, artist Jay Murphy.¹ Bourke’s subsequent collections have continued her preoccupation with visual art, often in the form of poems that are “about” works of art, a technique known as ekphrasis. Much critical work is yet to be done on Bourke’s work, and, despite the prominent place of visual art in her poetry, she has not been thought of before as an ekphrastic poet.

This article will consider the ways in which Eva Bourke’s ekphrases engage with the question posed by art historian Griselda Pollock (1988, 1992) and literary critic and art historian Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (2011), among others: is the ekphrastic act different when practiced by women? Bourke’s poems about visual art suggest an answer in the affirmative. Eschewing traditionally gendered interpretations of ekphrasis, which privilege “male” narrative over “female” image, as well as a desire to possess or conquer a silent, still artwork, Bourke’s poems respond to visual art without antagonism. They celebrate the presence of the minute and detailed: a practice of looking that is born of disciplined, precise observation, as Loizeaux points out (Loizeaux 2011: 84). While Bourke does not write ekphrases of household objects themselves as poets such as Joanna Baillie, Gertrude Stein, and Eavan Boland have done,² Bourke does turn

her gaze on painterly representations of domestic interiors and household items, valuing them for their usefulness and simplicity as well as their beauty. Additionally, the way in which Bourke approaches visual art embraces disorder and the disjointed, and takes into account the location of the artwork within a cityscape, suggesting that the ekphrastic encounter is not limited to a single gaze between poet and art object, but that the encounter is intimately connected to the poet’s, and the artwork’s, surroundings. Bourke’s poems recognise multiple ways of seeing and multiple gazes – to borrow Loizeaux’s phrase, she “does not stand and stare at one thing too long” – offering readers a multidimensionalised version of the ekphrastic experience (Loizeaux 2011: 88).

In Elaine Scarry’s words, “Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down” (Scarry 2006: 18). Bourke focuses on the particular, on the minute and detailed within a work of art, in poems such as “Museum of Conquest” (*Litany for the Pig*, 1989), “Backyards, Interiors” (*Spring in Henry Street*, 1996), and “Artist in his Studio” (*The Latitude of Naples*, 2005). In the first section of “The Museum of Conquest,” Bourke, in the tradition of W.H. Auden, Frank O’Hara, Ted Hughes, and Paul Durcan, among others, steps into the territory of the public art museum. Elizabeth Loizeaux (2011) and James Heffernan (1993), among others, have demonstrated that ekphrastic poetry by twentieth-century writers owes much to the founding of public art museums, which began in the late eighteenth century and continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the twentieth century, the staging of the ekphrastic encounter within the space of the art museum and gallery was commonplace. Bourke’s poetic speaker is a visitor to a museum of ancient history, and she finds herself dissatisfied with, and unsettled by, her surroundings: here, in the tradition of Shelley’s Ozymandias, artefacts of war act as *memento mori* for male conquerors. Yet they are devoid of true meaning for the poetic speaker, who finds little beauty in them: they are the trappings of a civilization, but, removed from the actual communities they were to signify, they lose their significance. “Towers, battlements,/ Sphinx-guarded gates/,” the speaker muses, “but no cities” (Bourke 1988: 29). Dwarfed by the sheer size of the giant

1. Bourke is also the author of *Litany for the Pig* (Salmon, 1988), as well as *Spring in Henry Street* (1996), *Travels with Gandolpho* (2000), *The Latitude of Naples* (2005), and *Piano* (2011), all published by The Dedalus Press. Born in 1952, Jay Murphy studied at the Dun Laoghaire School of Art and the Central School in London. She is a founder member of independent artists’ organisations Fíoruisce, Western Artists, and AKIN. Her work has been exhibited in galleries throughout Ireland, including The Kenny Gallery in Galway. The Irish artist Brian Bourke is her husband. (“The Kenny Gallery: Jay Murphy.” The Kenny Gallery. Web. Accessed 24 July 2012).

2. As Loizeaux notes, the tradition of women writing ekphrases on household objects that are also works of art is strong: “Lines on a Teapot” by nineteenth-century British poet Joanna Baillie, “Things” by Gertrude Stein, and poems by Eavan Boland including “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me” and “The Shadow Doll,” both from *Outside History* (1990), are just a few examples (Loizeaux 2011: 88-89).

artefacts that stand around her, acting as empty signifiers only, she moves around the museum's wing, from "frieze after frieze/ of great wars,/ soldiers, chariots" cast in "the hard froth/ of marble" to "rows of giant kings,/ their eyes/ turned in/ towards black stone" (Bourke 1988: 29).

As the artefacts the poetic speaker describes are remnants of male conquests, so traditional interpretations of the ekphrastic encounter are rooted in the idea of male dominance: although twentieth century female poets such as Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, among others, have been drawn to ekphrasis, the traditionally gendered ekphrastic exchange continued to present challenges to women poets who would engage in it. James Heffernan insists, "[t]he contest [ekphrasis] stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (Heffernan 1993: 1). However, the opponents in the ekphrastic contest are not on equal footing, for the female "gaze" – that is, the image itself – cannot be envoiced: it is necessarily silent. Couched in terms of both eroticism and violence, such an interpretation of the word-image relationship disturbingly constructs the feminine as an object that "wants" to be possessed, even if it seems to "resist" such possession. Moreover, it situates the feminine at both ends of a misogynist spectrum in which the "feminine" image is either sexually desirable on the one hand, or vile and threatening on the other.

In Bourke's "Museum Conquest," then, evidence of that male dominance is set, quite literally, in stone. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Medusa," the male narrator fears the "feminine" image that would have its revenge by rising up and silencing him, "turn[ing] the gazer's spirit into stone" (Shelley 1824, 1971: 582). Here, the masculine images have already been rendered silent and ossified before the female narrative gaze encounters them. However, the implication is that, while traditional articulations of the ekphrastic encounter suggest that the masculine narrator strives to "conquer" the feminine image in what Pollock calls the "relentless inscription of masculine desire" (Pollock 1992: 108), here

those dynamics are powerfully reversed: the female narrator and her gaze now apprehend the male image, confident that it has been permanently silenced. "Everything's petrified," the speaker declares,

permanently cast
in the posture of attack
or rigor mortis.
Rooms of conquests.
Rooms of death.
(Bourke 1988: 29-30)

The grandiose has become an empty shell, gesturing only to what is no more. There is "[n]o sign of life/ on such heroic scale," the speaker states, then addresses the reader directly with the command, "Let's leave" (Bourke 1988: 30).³ For her – although the speaker is not explicitly gendered, the female pronoun is appropriate here, as Bourke privileges the female gaze over the male – the lofty and ostentatious can only end in dust. Viewing tombstone-like monuments to the "heroic" does not stimulate poetic inspiration, but brings it to an end. For Bourke's speaker, the old maxim "God is in the details" rings true.

In the second part of the poem, the poetic speaker leads her reader away from the museum's main exhibit of male dominance and battles fought and won, to a space in which she is far more comfortable: "a side room," where

three earth mother figures
each no taller
than an index finger
hold their bellies/
as though – with a laugh –
they could split into twin fruit
like chestnuts.
(Bourke 1988: 30)

3. Here, Bourke engages in *deixis*, an ekphrastic strategy that engages the reader by emphasizing the immediacy of the encounter, or the "here-and-now-ness" of it, by poetically "pointing" to a particular aspect of an artwork. It is often articulated in exclamatory comments or commands to the reader such as "Look," "There!" or "This." See an example of this in Adrienne Rich's "Mathilde in Normandy," as indicated by Loizeaux (2011: 97). Here, unusually, Bourke does not merely "point" to a single artwork; instead, her speaker expects that the reader will join her not only in poetically "noticing" one aspect of the image, but by joining her on a "virtual tour," so to speak, of the entire museum.

Here, at last, are the “sign[s] of life” she sought, in a collection of tiny female figurines that, unlike the monuments in the neighbouring room, refuse to take themselves too seriously. After all, both expectant motherhood and humour bear fruit: the former in a child, and the latter in the infectious act of laughing. These women are pregnant not only with human offspring, but also with joyful self-expression.

Next, the museum-goer turns her attention to a nearby “small clay bath” that stands alongside “a child-size sarcophagus” (Bourke 1988: 30). Bourke steps back from the poignancy of the miniature sarcophagus to focus on the perfectly-preserved bath, a familiar domestic object, created to be useful, and to be used frequently. Therein, for Bourke’s speaker, lies its art, unchanged over time:

2000 years left no mark
on its form.
Its highest function
lying on the scale
of intimacy and touch,
it is compact
and serviceable.
(Bourke 1988: 31)

Form mirrors content in “Museum of Conquest:” its short, cleanly descriptive lines convince with minimal pomp and ornamentation. Perhaps these earth-mother figurines are representative, then, of what Bourke hopes to achieve in her work: a form of verse that, like her foremothers Baillie, Stein, Boland, and others, takes practical objects as the symbols with which to transmit meaning, and that recognises that the deepest meaning is rarely found in the large and overblown. The last lines of this poem are some of the collection’s strongest:

Let’s rest
in this room for awhile
where the objects are small
and enduring.
Time shrinks all conquests
to nothing, but everything here
is large as life:

a Boetian woman
in a finely patterned garment,
a bronze cow that can fit
onto a palm,
a tiny child
holding an even tinier goose.
(Bourke 1988: 31)

These artefacts in miniature are evocative of the wooden Russian “layered” dolls which contain smaller dolls within smaller dolls; they remind the reader that true meaning is created by the small and precise, and that the act of reading and understanding poetry is an internal act, one that forces the reader to turn into herself, not away from herself, and to contemplate the majestic via the meek.

In her third collection, *Spring in Henry Street* (The Dedalus Press, 1996), Bourke returns to ekphrasis in her poem “Backyards, Interiors,” which begins with an intertextual reference: a line from Derek Mahon’s “Courtyards in Delft” (1981), in which he considers the same painting, “The Courtyard of a House in Delft” by Pieter de Hooch, 1659 (below).



“The Courtyard of a House in Delft”
Pieter de Hooch, 1659
© The National Gallery, London

The first line of Mahon’s poem reads, “Oblique light on the trite, on brick and tile...”, and continues on to lament the painting’s primness – “Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste./ We miss the dirty dog, the fiery gin” – as well as its stasis: “That girl with her back to us who waits/ For her man to come home for his tea/ Will wait till the paint disintegrates...” (Mahon 2011: 96). Bourke has commented on her reaction to Mahon’s poem in a 1999 interview with Danielle Sered:

Well, I did get a bit annoyed about his dismissing the whole thing as trite, and the only people I could see in the paintings were women, so being trivial and being a woman ... So here's my woman poet's reaction to that. What does he mean by that? Is it really trite? Are these women just house-proud and dour housewives? You know? So that was my response to that (Sered 1999: n.p.).

It is not difficult to understand Bourke's need to respond to such an interpretation, especially in the context of her praise of the miniature, the functional and the understated in "The Museum of Conquest," and her respect for art objects that are "small and enduring" (Bourke 1988: 31).

If Mahon mourns what he views as the necessary stasis of the feminine image – literally so, since it is a painting of three women in a domestic scene – Bourke grants the image a modicum of revenge by meditating on the way in which the useful can also be beautiful, not necessarily "trite," and by narrating a number of possible futures for the women in the painting. First, Bourke leads us into a seventeenth-century "*symphonie domestique*," meticulously describing each of its details: "the bucket beside the birch broom," "ochre yard tiles", a sky that "recall[s] wet blue sheets pegged up to dry," all illumined by watery, freshly-washed sunlight (Bourke 1996: 30). If Mahon has looked past the bucket "rimmed with glistening drops," Bourke notices the way in which it "takes up the motif of light again," reflecting and augmenting the fragment of sky that is only just visible in the top centre of the canvas (Bourke 1996: 30). It also draws the speaker's eye to "the startling indigo of the woman's skirt/ (the one standing on the outhouse steps/ holding her daughter's hand):" on the woman's clothing, the shared colour of sky, domestic object and dress is no longer simply pleasing, but "startling." Suddenly, the reader is jolted into a deeper engagement with the poem: if Mahon writes silence and stillness into his ekphrasis, Bourke writes the potential for shock, movement, sound, and joy – "a sudden change from minor to major" – into hers (Bourke 1996: 30).

"Backyards, Interiors" is hardly a simple paean to domestic bliss. If, for Mahon, the most enigmatic female image in the painting – a faceless woman who turns her back on the viewer and shares the direction of the viewer's gaze – can only be waiting for her husband, Bourke utilizes the ekphrastic mode to envoice, and suggest alternate possibilities for, the three females in the scene. Perhaps, she suggests, the faceless woman is "preparing for departure,/ taking a last look," and urges her readers to look beyond "the sense of confined space" in the painting to what must lie beyond it, to where

"there are doors flung open, windows/ letting in the sun, vistas of canals/ where eventually ships, tugs, trawlers must pass by" (Bourke 1996: 31). Bourke's ekphrasis refuses to confine the women in "The Courtyard of a House in Delft" within the painting's frame. As Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux acknowledges, the notion "[t]hat the work of art may prove not still is one of the excitements of ekphrasis... When combined, as it often is, with the female gendering of the work of art in ekphrasis, the moving image can exert her power over the typically male viewer, sometimes rising up and speaking" (Loizeaux 2011: 20). It may be that Mahon "freezes" the women in the painting into immobility due to just such a fear: that the image will remain stubbornly kinetic, despite his efforts to conquer it through narration. Bourke, however, embraces the possibility of such motion, and suggests histories for the painting's women – not by insisting upon a single ekphrastic reading of them, but by raising a number of questions:

Where, if they're going, will these women go?

How far? The carved gilt frame?

Or will they – one mild autumn day – break out of the confines of portraiture, crack through layers of paint,

disrupt the composition?

(Bourke 1996: 31)

"To look and to record one's looking is inevitably to set the scene in relation to oneself," asserts Loizeaux: by declining the egocentricity of single authority, and by suggesting a number of perspectives on the action in "The Courtyard of a House in Delft", Bourke is able to "read" the painting without compromising its integrity (Loizeaux 2011: 88). Having done so, she is able to propose a future for one of the women in it, writing her out of de Hooch's painting and into another; there, she will have her turn to "speak":

One woman rises from having searched for lice

in her daughter's hair,

tucks up her pinafore and starts

to pack a wicker basket.

She places a pistol beneath her linen shirts

...

her story will be told on a different panel,

already the colours have been rubbed and mixed

with linseed oil, the canvas is prepared.

(Bourke 1996: 31)

In some of Bourke's earlier poems, such as "Two Times Two in Domestic Interior" in *Gonella*, or "Pygmalion" and "Diptych of a Wedding" in *Litany for the Pig*, she paints her poetic speakers *into* the paintings to which she responds, whether they are traditionally ekphrastic or not: they close themselves into rooms, hide themselves in paintings, and weave and unweave histories not their own. Here, however, the women are painted *out* of the poems and set loose. Having broken free from the gilded prison of the painting's frame, armed and dangerous, the woman with the pistol will soon demand her own ekphrasis, for "her story will be told on a different panel": she "rises" up to claim her own narrative future, an audacious move that leaves the reader with a sense of tense possibility.⁴

Precisely because of its domestic detail, and not in spite of it, "Backyards, Interiors," like the artefacts with which Bourke engages in "The Museum of Conquest," infers a world much larger than itself and a wide context for its inhabitants. Moreover, the poem is explicitly feminist in its engagement with de Hooch's "The Courtyard of a House in Delft", and also in response to Mahon's overwhelmingly masculinist interpretation of the image. "Backyards, Interiors" is an articulation of feminist ekphrasis which, according to Loizeaux, "works specifically in self-conscious conversation with the idea of a mastering male gazer and a feminized art object" (Loizeaux 2011:81). In her poem, Bourke unsettles traditional ideas of the image as still and silent; she writes it out of its own frame, and does not attempt to possess it by giving a single reading, but rather, through her use of questions, suggests myriad meanings for it – and for the images of women in the painting. In this way, Bourke allows the image to take its revenge.

Elaine Scarry argues that beauty is associated "with error, for it brings one face-to-face with one's own errors: momentarily stunned by

beauty, the mind before long begins to create or to recall and, in doing so, soon discovers the limits of its own starting place, ... or may instead... uncover the limitlessness of the beautiful thing it beholds" (Scarry 2006: 48). Bourke's poem, "Letter to Sujata: On the occasion of a visit to Paula Modersohn-Becker's exhibition in Bremen 1996," published in her fourth collection, *Travels with Gandolpho* (2000), embraces a sort of artistic wandering that is experiential, intellectual, organic, and conducive to chance and wonder. Parallels for such an encounter exist in Barbara K. Fischer's investigation of "site-specific" practices in the work of three contemporary female American poets (Cole Swensen, Kathleen Fraser and Anne Carson). These poets, Fischer argues, "compose ekphrastic poems through strenuous engagement with the place of the encounter" (Fischer 2006: 143). For all three of these poets, she writes, "site specificity is also gender specificity" (Fischer 2006: 143.) Instead of viewing the ekphrastic exchange as if within a vacuum, in which text and artwork exist independently of their surroundings or other outside influences; for these poets, the interaction must inevitably take place *someplace*, in a specific location. In acknowledging that poems are not site-specific in the same way that certain works of art are, Fischer expands the term to apply it to poems that feature "participation in a physical location" (Fischer 2006: 144), while also stressing the materiality of painting, poem and setting; after all, she points out, painting, poem and setting all exist as *objects*. For Fischer, site-specificity *is* materiality, and – crucially – is enabled by deixis, or the "here-and-now" element of a text, that locates it within a particular time and place. It is the presence of this particularity which is crucial to the alteration the traditionally gendered "he-she" gaze, for several reasons; first, that the particular resists generalization; second, that the particular defies "masculine" rationality or logic and welcomes error and chance; and third, that it possesses the power to disrupt, to interject 'interruptive, extraneous, and often disorienting reminders of the "here and now," and to reveal an infinite number of gazes within the ekphrastic exchange (Fischer 2006: 147).

Bourke, too, engages site-specificity in her work: she retains a focus on the particular as a

4. Bourke spoke to Danielle Sered of the way in which poetry is necessarily bounded by silence. Silence, for Bourke, is "where language goes beyond the sayable, to a certain extent. That this is where it should begin, and end, here, in the silence. This is what I think poetry is: it's on the margins of silence, isn't it, even though we make a lot of words and create a lot of noise" (Sered 1999: n.p.).

way to “correct the reductive terms of gender difference and gendered dominance in ekphrastic studies” (Fischer 2006: 147), but also includes an element of the classical concept of the ekphrastic act as an enthralling or enslaving “spectacle” as well as a variation of the idea of ekphrasis as a public, not private, exchange. Classicist Simon Goldhill argues that ekphrasis was a rhetorical device employed within Hellenistic culture, “a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes” (Goldhill 2007: 3). Similar to a theatrical performance, its goal was to make the listener become “almost” a viewer: through the skilled use of vivid language, the orator could “get around the censor of the intellect” by securing entrance to the listener’s emotions via astonishment or excitement, and can thus gain access to her or his “innermost mind” (Goldhill 2007: 3, 7). However, much more is at stake for the listener-viewer than simply a pleasant distraction, for ekphrasis “sets out to make a slave of,” or trick, the listener by slipping past the guard-dog of rational thought and holding the listener in thrall (Goldhill 2007: 4). Ekphrasis, then, achieves far more than mere spectacle or astonishment; it intends to alter the listener/viewer’s very act of looking.

This concept might be termed “experiential ekphrasis:” that is, an encounter with an artwork in which the poet does not respond to a single artwork via a singular gaze, but instead considers multiple factors, including, but not limited to: artwork, site of encounter (gallery, museum, private home, studio, public outdoor space); geographical surroundings of the site of encounter (city, village, meadow); companions or secondary viewers; personal histories; and deictic “markers,” or indicators of the here-and-now that lend the ekphrastic exchange particularity and specificity. Experiential ekphrasis allows for an “holistic” poetic response to a work of art as well as the circumstances that allow it to exist, one that is not necessarily based on a narration of the artwork or a description of what it is “about,” which tends towards the reductive masculine-feminine polarity. Also, because it is irreproducible, and grounded in a particular experience of which the artwork is a part, we must rely on the text to, in Goldhill’s words, “enthrall” us into seeing the artwork/experience in our mind’s eye, which is not dissimilar to the

idea of the ekphrastic poem as “spectacle.”

A number of these factors are illustrated by “Letter to Sujata.” In it, the ekphrastic response takes the form of a reminiscence of a circuitous journey in which Bourke meshes artwork with exhibition space with viewer with the city that surrounds them all. Here, already, the poem’s subtitle performs, in a way, the deixis that Fischer identifies; it locates the reader firmly within a specific journey (“the occasion of a visit”), location (Bremen, Germany), and date (1996), even though the action in the poem occurs in retrospect, and not on “that November day/ ’96 in Bremen” itself (Bourke 2000: 34). Though it is so firmly and quickly grounded in the “here and now,” this poem, paradoxically, also concerns the opposite condition; the instability and rootlessness of being an exile – even if that condition of exile is self-imposed. This rootlessness is reflected in the poem’s conversational, rambling tone – not unlike Browning’s “My Last Duchess” – which nearly masks the poem’s formal structure. “Letter to Sujata” consists of twelve stanzas of four couplets each and a final stanza of two couplets plus a fifth line, but the structure is scarcely noticeable on first reading, which is appropriate, given the wandering nature of the poem’s tone, its loose end rhyme, and the poem’s substantial length of over one hundred lines.

Although “Letter to Sujata” is focused around the titular exhibition of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s paintings, nearly half the poem elapses before the speaker addresses the artwork itself. First, she considers her surroundings, which consist of

...sullen drizzle that soft-pedals
the pavement turning to ice as it falls,
and same as here the sea’s just down the road,
like a relation bitter with life in the spare
room...

(Bourke 2000: 34)

and then turns her gaze toward her companion on this outing, who, like Bourke, is an exile, who does not

fit in, in uneasy exile, self-chosen but real
nevertheless, both at times painfully made feel
other, outlandish. You, born in India,
graceful poet, who dreamt up in freezing Iowa

tropical gardens for picnics, now live in this
boreal town; (the poet’s the one who always

must leave, “saris flapping in the wind”, who carries home “inside her darkness” wherever she goes)... (Bourke 2000: 34)

The artwork with which they will engage cannot be viewed in any other way than as themselves, as humans, as exiles; in fact, later in the poem, they will rejoice in the celebration of human idiosyncrasy and human error that Modersohn-Becker’s artwork embraces, as does their own meandering journey through Bremen towards that exhibition. It is the ‘humanness’ of this disorder that lifts both the speaker and her companion – even if only temporarily – above the condition of exile: “here’s a language that transcends the otherness,” the poetic speaker exclaims towards the end of the poem (Bourke 2000: 37).

But for now, the journey is only beginning for these two exiles; Sujata, “homesick for bougainvilleaeas/ the size of elephants” in her native India, and Bourke – if it is the poet herself who speaks in this poem – homesick for something intangible, unidentifiable, but very real (Bourke 2000: 35). En route to the gallery that houses Becker’s exhibition, they move from the regularity of the “tall patrician flat-chested houses in their grandeur” into a fairy-tale-esque cityscape that delights the two women as well as Sujata’s young daughter; it is not built of streets laid out in regular grids, nor is it lined with sedate, identical rowhouses, but is made of

an unexpected alley
with madcap buildings gone cracked as Gaudi,
every-which-way the bricks, tiles and glass
stained bluer than the flames of city gas,

fat toads spout water, pixies hold flambeaux,
as daughter Jenny’s running rings around us.
(Bourke 2000: 35)

Several forms of art are speedily invoked in the language here; the ‘madcap’ architecture of Gaudi; the mosaics and the stained-glasswork; griffin-like toads are miniature fountains, while sculptures of pixies act as torchbearers. This is a litany of the contents of a veritable street-museum, but one that seems to be as alive as the women that observe it, and we are just as astonished and enchanted as they are. Here is Goldhill’s ekphrastic “spectacle” at work; a city street turned work of art turned fairyland. We, the readers, are also “enthralled,” and nearly feel that

...we, too, have found our feet
at last here in that topsy-turvy street
full of irreverent architectural pranks
in the universal language of high jinks –
imaginary gardens with live toads –
or high art, the real thing not some ersatz.
(Bourke 2000: 36)

When she and her companion arrive at the gallery, the speaker is dazzled again; this time not by a fairy-land, but by the portraits on exhibition. There is nothing of the grandiose or august here, just plain, unrefined, vivid humanity, “bog-farmers’ faces/ or their mothers’,” who bear “poverty’s stamp, thick noses, pale, thin hair” (Bourke 2000: 36). Their subjects may be plain, but these portraits are in no way dull, and here their evocation is all the more vivid for the spectacle of cityscape that preceded them. Now, the limelight of spectacle has shifted to the paintings; they are rich with colour: “rusts, duns and blues, the young mother, her breasts luminous/ in a flame-red bodice as she feeds her baby, the most sensual Madonna you’ll ever see...lit up from within the layered paint, as though the canvas had been soaked in it” (Bourke 2000: 36).

Finally, towards the poem’s conclusion, our narrator turns toward her inner landscape for a moment to meditate on ekphrasis herself:

...the painter’s true gift is her love, her genius,

how she with courteous and careful eyes
has put her drab and heavy subjects at their ease
and in the centre of their world, that’s what
it’s all about, speaks to us straight.
We know that poets often make up lies
so they can catch the tail-end of a truth,
but no matter how well and skilfully they do it,
it’s as nothing if that ingredient’s not in it.
(Bourke 2000: 37).

If this appears to be a simple alignment – “painting speaks truth while poetry lies” – it is only so upon first glance. Here, the artist’s impulse, a painting’s existence, the viewer’s response, and the poet’s role are considered simultaneously in a single element:” the call to “speak to us straight.” This is neither an exhortation to represent things “as they are” nor a call for a singular, or reductive, way of gazing; it is a recognition of an artist’s holistic

approach to her subject, one that is built of a “courteous and careful” painterly gaze, one that is based on a fundamental openness to the infinite number of responses that might be evoked by any subject. A poet’s trade is “mak[ing] up lies,” and the poetic speaker, with her tongue rather in her cheek, indicts herself here, for, paradoxically she too must “makes up lies” in order to convey the “speak-to-us-straight” nature of Modersohn-Becker’s paintings.

Here, then, is a poem in which ekphrasis is not an attempt to control a work of visual art, but strives to convey the experience of viewing in its entirety, by focusing on the particular or the deictic via specific locators of time, place and circumstance; by embracing the necessarily fragmented or disorderly nature of the human gaze; and by practicing the element of spectacle that brings the artwork and the experience so vividly before our eyes. It is also significant that the three “viewers” in the poem – the speaker, Sujata, and daughter Jenny – are female. The act of looking has traditionally been gendered male, as has the act of looking in *public*: as Griselda Pollock comments, “Women...were never positioned as the normal occupants of the public realm. They did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch...They are positioned as the *object* of the flâneur’s gaze” (Pollock 1992: 71). In “Letter to Sujata,” however, the three female viewers (or participants) saunter from street to gallery, completely and unselfconsciously engaged in the act of gazing.

Bourke also interrogates the implications of the gaze in “The Art Judges” in *Travels with Gandolpho* (2000). Here, Bourke returns to an explicitly feminist ekphrasis, as defined by Loizeaux, as she considers the painting by Austrian artist Gabriel Cornelius von Max (1840-1915) entitled “*Affen als Kunstkritiker*” or “Monkeys as Judges of Art” (1889). The painting depicts thirteen leering monkeys perched in various positions atop a wooden crate that was most likely used for shipping artwork, judging from the word “*Vorsicht*,” or “Fragile,” scrawled across it. Several of them gaze at a painting in a thick, luscious gilt frame; only the frame is visible to the viewer. Others gaze into the distance, while yet others peer behind a gap in the drapes that is just visible at the far left of the

canvas. The monkeys are snobbish and insouciant; only one makes direct eye contact with the viewer, and he is sticking out his tongue.



“Monkeys as Judges of Art” (1889)
Max, Gabriel von, 1840-1915
München, Neue Pinakothek
© Bayer & Mitko – ARTOTHEK

While von Max’s painting clearly lampoons high-brow art critics, suggesting that their jobs could be performed equally as well by monkeys, Bourke’s ekphrastic poem performs a different kind of critique in two ways. First, she rewrites a depiction of the gendered gaze: the thirteen monkey-judges are certainly male, and the painting they scrutinize is invisible to the viewer, a move that effectively “silences” it. Her poem helps to paint the invisible image back into the artwork, so to speak, in order that it might challenge the voracious, supercilious gaze of its male critics. Second, Bourke refuses the reader the complacency of a single point of view: the poem can be read either as a narrative spoken by the painting’s creator, or as an envoicing of the painting itself. “Multiplying points of view” in this way removes the focus from the uni-directional perspective of the judgemental monkeys, and destabilizes their authority, declining the egocentricity of the single viewpoint and poking fun at the “arrogance of the civilized eye” by challenging the reader’s assumptions about point of view (Loizeaux 2011: 88, 87).

Bourke does not doubt that the ape-viewers the painting depicts are gendered male. “They breeze in from tops of trees,” she writes, emphasizing their easy arrogance, “headed by a patriarch with sagging belly/ and grizzled side-whiskers” (Bourke 2000: 50). The aged “patriarch” leads a pack of his self-obsessed, often inattentive comrades:

Some pick nits
 from each other's pelts,
 two regard me with raised eyebrows,
 their ancient ironic faces frown,

five have given up on me
 and turned towards the gap in the drags
 where the next competitor is unwrapping
 a burlesque carving covered in gold leaf.
 (Bourke 2000: 50)

Immediately, their gazes "consume" the image: two frown in disapproval, while five have already made their judgement on the artwork and dismissed it as unworthy. They "have given up on me," the speaker laments, the pronoun suggesting that the speaker is the painting itself (Bourke 2000: 50). Outside the confines of the judging tent – the arena that frames and confines this act of looking – the scene is more cheerful: the painting longs to break away from the static gaze imposed upon her, and to interact with the wider world. "Two mothers are nursing their babies./ I am waiting for the verdict/ while outside the revellers are milling/ past the tent in the sunshine" (Bourke 2000: 50). The speaker looks on longingly: for now, she must remain inside and await the judges' decision.

At this point in the poem, the tone changes in a way that unsettles the reader's assumptions regarding the identity of the poetic speaker. In the frustrated voice of a beleaguered artist whose work has been rejected in the past, the speaker predicts the judges' criticism: she insists, "I know my failings," and significantly, those failings are bound intimately with the written word:

... I let myself be seduced
 by words, "blue" for instance or "tree"
 instead of making a case,
 and there's an overabundance of rivers and seas.

Where are the marital problems,
 the primatial condition,
 not to mention metaphysics
 or the proud origins of the species?
 (Bourke 2000: 50)

If the painter is the poetic speaker, she is stymied by her critics' insistence upon logic, or "making a case," preferring to luxuriate in the beauty of the signifier, not the "logic" that connects it to what it signifies. Rich with the shades of blue that depict "an overabundance of

rivers and seas," her work refuses to argue, comment, criticize, or propound: although it is no way as "silent" or "still" as Keats's Grecian urn (especially since the reader suspects, nervously, that the painting may indeed be in the act of speaking for itself), it is self-contained in its integrity and its mystery. If Bourke fears that the monkey-judges' hungry gazes are picking – have picked – the artwork apart in the same way that they have "pick[ed] nits/ from each other's pelts," in suggesting its appearance to her reader, she goes some way towards restoring the invisible image's integrity to it while permitting it to remain a mystery. Even if the judges will not be pleased, they will be thrown off-guard:

I'll never come up to scratch
 in the face of my judges' critical rigour.
 At every step they'll stumble
 over an owl or a sphinx.
 (Bourke 2000: 51)

The judges, the speaker is certain, will be nonplussed by both owl and sphinx – or, perhaps more precisely, with the wisdom and mystery that they represent; after all, they are only monkeys who judge by rote and mimicry, without creativity, insight or intuition. The poem ends in tense near-silence; the reader will never know what the judges' verdict is to be. "...I sit expecting their pronouncement/ any minute now," whispers the speaker. "I hear nothing/ except an occasional cough/ and the sound of cracking lice" (Bourke 2000: 51). Bourke insists on leaving the reader with silence, dodging the masculinist notion that to be silent in front of a painting is to admit defeat. As Loizeaux writes of the ekphrases of Marianne Moore, "Silence... could be a telling option in response to the image. The gendered dynamics of ekphrasis that depend on a conventionally male word responding to a female image, language filling silence with speech, need not be played out to the end" (Loizeaux 2011: 92).⁵

5. Bourke spoke to Danielle Sered of the way in which poetry is necessarily bounded by silence. Silence, for Bourke, is "where language goes beyond the sayable, to a certain extent. That this is where it should begin, and end, here, in the silence. This is what I think poetry is: it's on the margins of silence, isn't it, even though we make a lot of words and create a lot of noise" (Sered 1999: n.p.).

Given the fact that such a number of Bourke's poems feature female artists and writers and explore the constraints surrounding female creativity, it is not unlikely that the poem's narrator is the author of the work and not the work itself. "I know my failings," the poetic speaker of "The Art Judges" sighs, in the voice of an artist who has been reminded of them time and again. (That the speaker is also gendered female is suggested by the opposition created between the "I" of the poem and the predatory ape-judges whose all-consuming critique she fears.) Yet the reader cannot be certain whether the speaker is indeed the artist, peering through the "gap in the drapes" to watch the expressions on the faces of the critics as they survey her work, or if it is the painting itself, envoiced prosopopoeically, finally able to re-assert herself by "speaking back" to her critics.⁶ Or it is possible that the speaker is yet another artist whose work is still to be assessed by the critics, who is hidden behind that tantalizing "gap in the drapes," keeping one eye fixed on the events that transpire in front of the gilded frame. Such a reading of "The Art Judges" would illustrate the liminal element of ekphrasis, for this "gap in the drapes" gestures toward that grey space that exists between "representation and mis-representation," between artwork and the poem that alters or criticizes it, between creation and reception (Heffernan 1993: 307). After all, it is that tension between "representation and mis-representation" that renders the ekphrastic exchange so fruitful.

Finally, it is possible that all three voices – and indeed, many more – all act simultaneously as poetic speaker in "The Art Judges." This conflation of artist and image is not accidental:

6. "Prosopopoeia is the envoicing of the silent image, the most radical means ekphrasis has at its disposal to animate the still, silent image into speech" (Loizeaux 2011: 23).

in so doing, Bourke allows myriad versions of painter and painting to "speak out" together, playing havoc with the reader's complacent assumptions regarding who – or what – is looking at whom. Thus, she explicitly reworks the idea of the traditional single male gaze, fragmenting that gaze into an endless number of identities, and opening it to more than a single notion of gender.

Conclusion

Eva Bourke's ekphrastic poems actively rewrite traditionally gendered ideas of the relationship between image and text. In "Museum of Conquest," her speaker values the minute and detailed over the grand, lofty and ostentatious monuments to masculine heroism. Her careful attention to the miniature and the marginal helps to facilitate dialogue between image and text, for it refuses to insist that one must "silence" or dominate the other. Bourke's speakers also celebrate disorder and privilege the experience of looking over an ordered, direct speaker-image relationship. Moreover, the multiple gazes inherent in poems such as "The Art Judges" destabilize the certainty of a single, dominant gaze, and "respect" the image's integrity by presenting the reader with multiple points of view regarding it.

Ekphrasis can act as a fruitful site for working through the anxieties surrounding conditions of "otherness." While she writes in English and has spent most of her adult life in Ireland, it is notable that Bourke's ekphrastic poems address artworks by non-Irish artists, and are set within continental European or other non-Irish locations. In this instance, as a German woman living in Ireland and writing in English, Bourke herself – the creator of the text – may be considered to be, like the image she interrogates, in the position of an "other." Her poems demonstrate that ekphrasis continues to be a way for women poets in particular to examine anxieties that arise from questions of nationality and gender.

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