

“She Should Have Brought A Book to Read”:  
Contemporary Approaches to Ekphrasis

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2015

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

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**Abstract**

“She Should Have Brought A Book to Read”:  
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What does ekphrasis look like in contemporary English-language poetry? Can poems that explicitly mention a work of art but do not employ detailed description as a means to achieve *enargeia* still be considered ekphrastic? If description is not the primary focus of an ekphrastic poem, how does the poem make the work of art present on the page? Do these poems introduce new ekphrastic methods, or do they in fact draw on previous traditions? In an attempt to answer these questions, this thesis examines poems from *Self-Portrait with Crayon* by Allison Benet White, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* by Mary Jo Bang, and *Decreation* by Anne Carson.

## “She should have brought a book to read”: Contemporary Approaches to Ekphrasis

Scholars and practitioners alike often characterize ekphrasis as an illusive subject with ambiguous boundaries. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines ekphrasis as a “detailed description of an image, primarily visual; in specialized form, limited to description of a work of visual art.”<sup>1</sup> However, the application of the term becomes more complicated due to its many different manifestations in poetry and wide variety of uses, including as “a rhetorical device, a narrative technique, a poetic principle or a dramatic expedient.”<sup>2</sup>

*Ekphrasis* originated as a rhetorical term in the classical Greek tradition, referring to the way in which orators described an object or work of art “as vividly as possible in order to ‘bring it before the eye’” of the audience. The purpose of this was to “focus and amplify the emotions” in order to effectively persuade the listeners.<sup>3</sup> Orators also employed ekphrasis as a technique for memorization, since “examples or major points of an argument could be ‘placed’ in imagination in a particular part of a mental image,” and “[t]he rhetor then needed to recall only the image to have access to the items stored there.”<sup>4</sup> After the transition from oral to written rhetoric, the primary goal of ekphrasis was to achieve *enargeia*, or “to equal in language the natural quality of the artwork.”<sup>5</sup> The vividness attained in *enargeia* is what “distinguishes the [ekphrastic] description from a mere report”; it allows a reader to become an observer.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See G.G. Starr, “Ekphrasis,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition*, (Ed. Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul Rouzer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 393.

<sup>2</sup> See Els Jongeneel and Valerie Robillard, “Introduction,” *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis* (Ed. Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> Starr, “Ekphrasis,” 393 and Jongeneel, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>4</sup> Starr, “Ekphrasis,” 393.

<sup>5</sup> Jongeneel, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>6</sup> See Claus Clüver, “Quotation, *Enargeia*, and the Functions of Ekphrasis,” *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis* (Ed. Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), 37-38.

Most scholars point to the description of Achilles's shield in Book XIX of *The Iliad* as the first notable instance of ekphrasis in the Western poetic tradition. The dynamic description of the shield, which depicts such a broad range of subjects that it seems to contain an entire world, appears to make a case for the superiority of literary over visual art; no physical shield could actually capture everything that Homer describes.<sup>7</sup> In more recent history, a great number of poets have written ekphrastic poems, including Keats, Rilke, Auden, Williams, Bishop, and Ashberry, to name only a few. While approaches vary widely, what identifies the work of these poets as ekphrastic is the description of the work of art the speaker observes. However, in some contemporary ekphrastic poetry, physical descriptions are often partial, fragmented, appropriated, or in some cases, entirely left out.

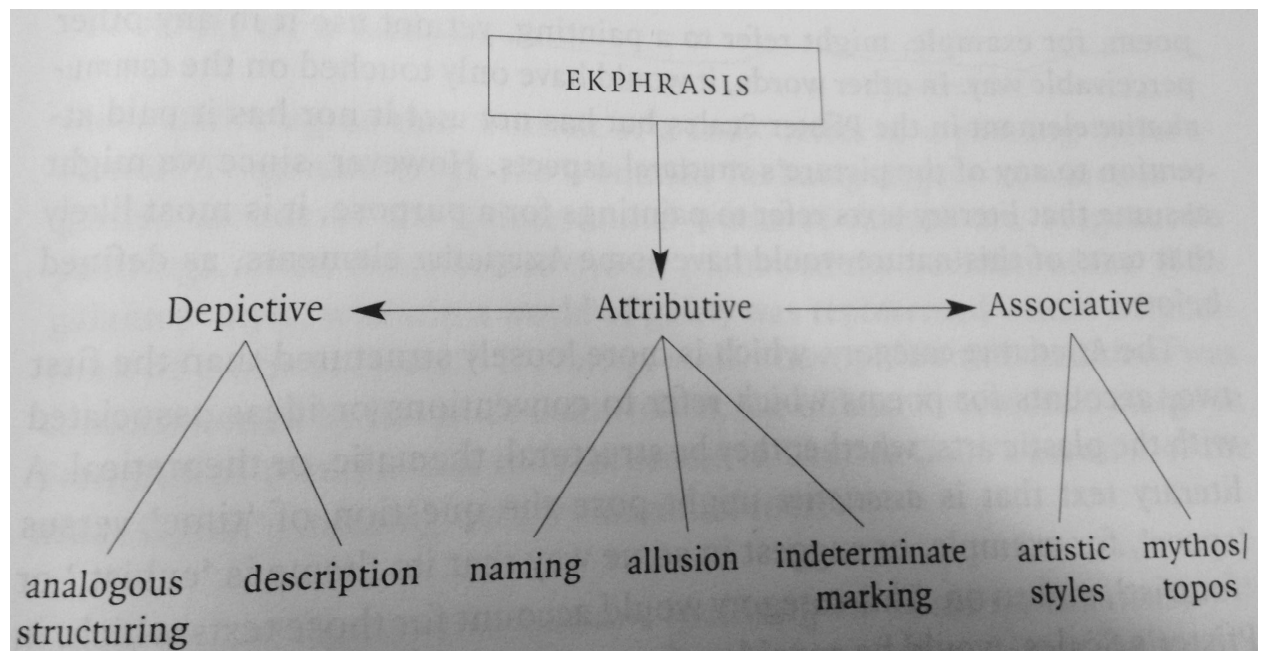
What, then, does ekphrasis look like in contemporary English-language poetry? Can poems that explicitly mention a work of art but do not employ detailed description as a means to achieve *enargeia* still be considered ekphrastic? If description is not the primary focus of an ekphrastic poem, how does the poem make the work of art present on the page? Do these poems introduce new ekphrastic methods, or do they in fact draw on previous traditions? In an attempt to answer these questions, I will examine poems from *Self-Portrait with Crayon* by Allison Benet White, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* by Mary Jo Bang, and *Decreation* by Anne Carson.

Before I launch into my readings of these poems, I would like to introduce a useful typology developed by Valerie Robillard to determine how a poem employs ekphrasis. She draws on Manfred Pfister's "Intertextual Scales" and argues that ekphrasis should be viewed as a form of intertextuality, as if poems are "quoting" a work of art. This, she argues, "allows for not

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, "Ekphrasis," 393 and Homer, *The Iliad* (Tr. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

only direct reference but, more importantly, for the indeterminate references and allusions in poems about paintings that are frequently omitted from discussions on ekphrasis.”<sup>8</sup> According to Robillard, poems that make vague allusions to a work of art or that adopt a structure analogous to a work of art without necessarily describing it in an easily recognizable way should be considered as much a part of the conversation on ekphrasis as poems traditionally recognized as ekphrastic.<sup>9</sup> To illustrate her typology, Robillard includes the following graphic.



The categories in this typology are organized left-to-right by “depreciating strength of ekphrastic relationships, both in the main categories as well as in their sub-categories.”<sup>10</sup> The first category, the *Depictive* ekphrasis, includes texts that closely represent their pictorial sources and achieve enargeia through explicit description of the object and/or through a structure that reflects the art object. All ekphrastic poems fall under the second category, *Attributive*, since

<sup>8</sup> See Valerie Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis: An Intertextual Approach,” *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis* (Ed. Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 60.

they must reference their source in some way. This may be achieved through “direct *naming* in the title or elsewhere in the text, which creates the strongest link to the pictorial source; by *alluding* to a painter, style or genre, which is a less specific form of attributive marking; or through *indeterminate marking*, which is the weakest form of reference: here, the reader... would have to belong to a particular interpretive community to be able to identify the visual source.”<sup>11</sup>

The third category, *Associative*, includes poems “which refer to conventions or ideas associated with the plastic arts whether they be structural, thematic, or theoretical.” Associative ekphrastic poems might raise questions about the connection between literary and visual art or “suggest in some way that its theme is ‘cubist,’ or ‘futurist,’ and so on.”<sup>12</sup> Robillard locates Williams’ “Haymaking,” for example, as closer to the associative end of the spectrum because it is less concerned with representing the particular Bruegel painting named in the title than it is with the artist’s body of work in general and “the living quality/of the man’s mind.”<sup>13</sup>

Allison Benet White’s *Self-Portrait with Crayon* is entirely composed of ekphrastic prose poems inspired by Edgar Degas. Each poem has the same title as a work by Degas, thus falling into Robillard’s *naming* category of attributive ekphrasis. Many poems, such as “La Savoisiennne,” work (at least initially) in a more traditional ekphrastic mode, beginning with images like “Hair parted down the middle...” that clearly indicate a physical description of the art.<sup>14</sup> However, other poems have a more complicated relationship with its respective work of art. To illustrate this, I’ve included White’s poem “The Dance Examination” alongside the Degas painting.

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<sup>11</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 61.

<sup>12</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 62.

<sup>13</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 55.

<sup>14</sup> See Allison Benet White, “La Savoisiennne,” *Self Portrait with Crayon*, (Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2009), 14.



### THE DANCE EXAMINATION

My mother wore a small black hat to her father's funeral, but this is private. She was a child. He was never mentioned again. Therefore the story is brief and somewhat fictional. Often children are not allowed at a hospital or funeral. My grandmother burned his clothes, his shoes in the incinerator. Now we can dress him however we choose and forever. When there is nothing left, everything is possible. Like a drawing of heaven or the yellow room where the dancers will be judged.

Every day has led up to this moment and her body could not remember how to invite the shape of the turn. We will live as long as we have someone to tell. After the burial, my mother warned her younger brother he would turn black if he did not go to bed. Smearing his cheeks with shoe polish, she turned him toward the mirror. It is already happening. All stories persist to explain the end. I will try and fail again. The way a child fails to suppress a smile when she lies, crossing out her mouth with both hands.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the poem seems to have very little direct relation to the painting itself. The speaker latches onto a small detail in the poem—the blond woman's black hat—and dives into a stream of associated memories. In the beginning of the poem, it is tempting to read the speaker as one of the dancers in the poem because the woman in the black hat could easily be a dancer's mother. However, it becomes clear after "She was a child" that the poem is referring to a black hat that does not exist in the painting. In addition, the reference to a dancer in the third person in the beginning of the second stanza indicates that the "I" is probably an observer of the painting.

The only two direct references to the painting occur at the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second stanza: "Like a drawing of heaven or the yellow room where the dancers will be judged" and "Every day has led up to this moment and her body could not remember how to invite the shape of the turn." These images stitch the two stanzas together at the center point of

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<sup>15</sup> White, "The Dance Examination," 26.

the poem, functioning as a fulcrum for the images that compose the rest of the poem. However, the first sentence of the second stanza, while it clearly talks about a dancer, describes an imagined scene. We are given a dancer actually performing her examination rather than the dancers in the painting, who are waiting and warming up. Even the most explicit description of the painting—“the yellow room where the dancers will be judged”—serves as a vehicle for how “[w]hen there is nothing left, everything is possible.” The description of the artwork, therefore, illuminates the associated thoughts and images that make up the poem, rather than the other way around. Describing the painting is not a priority, which allows the poem to make a more dramatic departure from the artwork in the second stanza with the disturbing account of speaker’s mother and the shoe polish. Here, we see the ways in which the two children cope with the trauma of losing their father. The speaker unblinkingly demonstrates how, in a household that has lost its central authority figure, the young girl relies on racial prejudice and carefully crafted lies to assert her authority over her younger brother. The examination in the painting’s title becomes a test in how to “explain the end,” a test that the speaker fails. When she confesses that she will “try and fail again,” it becomes evident that the “brief and somewhat fictional” story the speaker tells herself complicates her subject matter rather than explains it.

Another of White’s poems, “La Bouderie” (in English, “Sulking” or “The Sulk”), makes an even more startling departure from the painting it names in the title.



## LA BOUDERIE

Never *my wife*, only *your mother*, and even this only once. Rarely the phrase *only child*, shameful in most cultures, when he described me, but often *my youngest* or *daughter*. He carried me at a party once when I was tired and soon I said *we need to leave*. A boy whose father leaves is called *the man of the house*. Yet what happens to a girl is not the *woman* but *we*. She and her father, someone could say, live in a gray house on a quiet street. *Without her* is the oldest meaning of *us*: my father holds my hand when we walk to the store. When observed from an adult window, anchorless, *she and he* becomes an almost lovely phrase in its lack of history. Seven years, to summarize, *my father and me*. Seven years before the phone rang. He answered at his desk. Standing in the hallway I asked *who*, without turning to me, drained of color, not *your mother*, but rather the name *Wendy*.<sup>16</sup>

The poem contains no description of the painting. Instead, the speaker gives a personal narrative, and it is not until the end of the poem that we see how the painting may have triggered these memories (“He answered at his desk” and “without turning to me, drained of color”). The man’s posture and expression reminds the speaker of her father at the moment her mother called; the poem presents an entire personal history that builds up to this overlapping image. However, a reader of the poem would have no way of seeing this parallel without looking up the Degas painting. Why, then, does this poem posture as ekphrastic? What are its goals if not to recreate the painting through language?

In these two poems, *enargeia* becomes a private achievement; the goal is no longer to bring the painting before the eye of the reader, but to recreate the art object for the speaker. As the speaker attempts to represent the object for herself in language, she must necessarily include the individual perceptions, associations, and memories that make up her unique encounter with the painting. The reader overhears this process and finds, rather than a complete representation of the art, a fragmented ekphrasis that simultaneously gives a more complete picture of the speaker’s individual experience of the painting.

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<sup>16</sup> White, “La Bouderie,” 37.

In *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*, which includes poems inspired by paintings and films as well as performance and abstract art, Mary Jo Bang takes a variety of unique approaches to ekphrasis. I've reproduced one such approach here, in a poem about Sigmar Polke's work with the same title.



Mrs. Autumn and Her Two Daughters

We live in an ocean  
of white waiting to fall.  
One of us is not like our mother and it's me. It's I.  
My eyes are mostly closed.

My mother knows  
how to make snow. We never see  
our feet. Our skirts end in the oncoming frost.  
My sister wears ermine. I have a narrow waist.

I no longer curl my hair. Why bother?  
I love my sister but hate my mother  
yet we're all of a piece.  
Endless snipsnip. Ragged fragment.

We still live where you last left us—  
between the palace where you keep your winter  
and the summer garden of the ersatz emperor.

Did I hear you say China? If I did you are right.

We live atop the continent  
that contains such poverty. Such pollution.  
Such eerie beauty. Always a mountain.  
Always a screen. White washes

over me. I do not act  
like my mother. I lean farther.  
What I make annihilates the mirror of China  
but not the mountain.

Not the man walking away.  
My mother says throw more snow but I can't  
help thinking.  
There is more to being than erasure.

You are wrong she says. You don't wear your cape.<sup>17</sup>

In this poem, the speaker is clearly the young girl with the black bodice in Polke's piece. Bang uses the perspective of the young girl, rather than that of a speaker observing the painting, to provide description such as "Our skirts end in the oncoming frost./My sister wears ermine. I have a narrow waist." Bang makes the art speak. This approach to ekphrasis actually draws on the ancient Greek tradition of the epigram, "a verbal inscription on sculpture or tombstone" that "sought verbally to represent—and, on occasion, to speak for" the object it accompanies. Epigrams often gave a voice to the art piece, serving to "complicate the more straightforward material representation that it was to complement" and "sometimes subjecting it to the awareness of passing time." Epigrams frequently emphasized the sculpture's paradoxical function as an "immobile and unchanging" object that commemorated a transient human life.<sup>18</sup> Appropriately, the speaker of the poem alludes to her permanent state throwing snow, saying, "We still live where you left us—" Also similar to an epigram, the speaker is self-conscious about the artistic

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<sup>17</sup> See Mary Jo Bang, "Mrs. Autumn and Her Two Daughters," *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>18</sup> See Murray Krieger, "The Problem of Ekphrasis: Image and Words, Space and Time—and the Literary Work," *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis* (Ed. Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), 9.

medium in which she exists. She explains that she, her sister, and mother are “all of a piece,” apparently alluding to printmaking plate on which the three of them were etched and then pressed onto the polyester fabric.

However, the poem expands the traditional use of the epigram by including details outside of the work of art, such as “the palace where you keep your winter/and the summer garden of the ersatz emperor.” In addition, the speaker reveals that they live in China, which is not apparent within the artwork. As demonstrated in the previous quote, the poem further complicates its relation to the art by addressing an unidentified “you” who apparently belongs to the same world as Mrs. Autumn and her daughters. In this poem, ekphrasis is a means to both represent and expand the world of the art through creating a unique narrative and projecting particular relationships onto the subjects (“I love my sister but hate my mother”). Bang’s approach here can be identified as *descriptive* because of its vivid detail, *attributive* because it names the artwork in the title, and *associative* because of the topos (mother/daughter conflict) that it imports to give the ekphrasis a narrative shape.

Ekphrasis looks somewhat different in “The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)”, which is based off one of two (or perhaps both) photograph constructions by Victor Burgin, both created in 1984 and titled *The Bridge*.



The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)

She should have brought a book to read—  
a trim volume, a novella,  
a stack of stunned swallows pressed  
into paragraphs on nifty rice-paper pages.

Instead she was left watching a man  
feed a silver coin to an open-mouthed meter.  
She had ordered pasta with pesto and waited.  
There had been pee smell in the subway apse,

ankle straps on a pair of patent pumps.  
On that particular Tuesday,  
she couldn't take her eyes off the wonderful  
wool in the window opposite,

a bleached blue so light it might as well not be  
blue but for picking up a whisp  
of a slant sky hue and holding it.  
Someone had been unkind last night.

Someone had said, Get thee, and Get thee.  
Clearly she had mistaken fire  
for some galling ember.  
Will he ever come again? No, never.

Rue for you, rue for me. The small street ended  
in a cul-de-sac beneath the bridge.  
Above, the noise of some ecstatic blastment,  
a battalion of Comemycoach

and Goodnightladies.  
This mixed with the softish, silken swish  
of an overhead fan.  
In a rotting wooden box, Parma violets grew

heavy in scent. He nonny no.  
A group of fresh-faced acolytes  
from the Convent  
of the Sacred Heart passed in front of the glass.

A faint breeze, a rippling shadow.  
Her eye caught the corner  
of the Queen's orchid cape  
as it swept by.

A fountain threw its dilly drops  
of water down.  
Would he never come again? Yes, never.  
Against the backscape of sound and

*the hue of illusion of the vegetable glass of nature  
and of lush grass, the hair of graves,  
and of some hinted and heaven-waft scent,  
dressed in black taffeta, the daffodil waited.*<sup>19</sup>

This poem presents several layers of intertextual relationships. First of all, Burgin's photographs clearly allude to *Ophelia*, the 1852 Pre-Raphaelite painting by Sir John Everett Millais, which portrays the death of the tragic character from *Hamlet*.<sup>20</sup> Bang's poem, then, quotes a photograph that quotes a painting that quotes a play. Bang's title ("The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)") attempts to collapse these layers of re-appropriation by incorporating Ophelia's name and foregrounding the twice- (Millais) and three-times- (Shakespeare) removed source material. In most of the other poems in *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*, the title adheres strictly to the title of the single artwork it is based off of, suggesting that "The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)" is in conversation with multiple works at the same time.

Despite the great volume of source material to draw from, however, the allusions are abbreviated and sometimes deliberately vague. For example, the reference to Ophelia's final encounter with Hamlet does not even mention the prince by name or fully incorporate his words, referring to him as "someone" and stripping his statements down to "Get thee, and Get thee." The only character directly mentioned is the Queen, whose "orchid cape...swept by." The Parma violets in "a rotting wooden box" at the end of the seventh stanza could also allude to Ophelia's lament that the violets "withered all when my father died."<sup>21</sup> The rest of the allusions to Shakespeare are appropriated pieces of Ophelia's dialogue and songs from the scene in which

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<sup>19</sup> Bang, "The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)," 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> See Ian Chilvers, "Millais, Sir John Everett," *The Oxford Dictionary of Art* (Oxford: University Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), IV.v.184-185.

she is mad.<sup>22</sup> However, these are also shortened (“Hey nonny no” and “Rue for you, rue for me”), put into contemporary diction (“Will he ever come again? No, never”), or somehow made alien (“a battalion of Comemycoach/and Goodnightladies”).

This poem seems most invested in the Shakespearean material, for there are only a couple allusions to Burgin’s work, and even these are indirect and avoid adhering entirely to the images in the photographs. The speaker describes how “[t]he small street ended in a cul-de-sac beneath the bridge,” which presumably references the bridge in the photograph. However, the cul-de-sac with the restaurant where Ophelia waited for her pasta with pesto only exists in the world of the poem, making it unclear whether this bridge is also Burgin’s bridge. The other reference to the Burgin photographs is the descriptive phrase “dressed in black taffeta” in the last line of the poem. However, while one would initially assume this description applies to Ophelia, since the woman in Burgin’s photographs wears black, grammatically this phrase describes the daffodil. Here, again, Bang appropriates a detail from the art to create an image that only exists in the poem.

Finally, the poem directly quotes a work outside of the attributed sources. The italics in the final stanza are taken from James Joyce’s *Giacomo Joyce*, a posthumously published short story about an English tutor in Trieste who falls in love with his Italian tutee. At an earlier point in the work, the tutor lectures his pupil on Hamlet, who he claims “is most courteous to gentle and simple” and “is rude only to Polonius.”<sup>23</sup> Bang may be challenging this obvious dismissal of Hamlet’s cruelty to Ophelia through incorporating *Giacomo Joyce* in a poem that is much more sympathetic to Ophelia. However, the actual passage quoted is a description of the beloved from

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<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV.v.71-73; 166; 181-182; 190-192.

<sup>23</sup> See James Joyce, *Giacomo Joyce* (New York: Viking Press, 1998), 236.

the tutor's perspective when he sees her at an opera house.<sup>24</sup> In addition to contributing a haunting description, then, this quote makes male desire and cruelty simultaneously present in the poem, suggesting that these are two sides of the same coin in Ophelia's mind.

Given the poem's context in a book of ekphrastic pieces, why is its content so far removed from the images in the photographs? Does this distance push it beyond the boundaries of what might be considered ekphrasis? Bang and Burgin do seem to have a somewhat overlapping method of dealing with the subject matter. Like Burgin, Bang takes Ophelia out of her original Elizabethan context and puts her into a modern landscape. However, Bang takes this move even further and "fills in the blanks" of what happened before Ophelia drowned. The poem is more interested in creating its own narrative than in representing its sources, which don't even enter the poem until the end of the fourth stanza. This poem has what Robillard would classify as a *dialogic* intertextual relationship with all three of the works it draws from because of the "semantic tension" it creates by "casting [the artwork] in a new, opposing framework."<sup>25</sup> While her sources emphasize Ophelia's tragic fate, Bang explores her internal thoughts and daily observations, appetites, and desires. The poem argues that there is more to Ophelia than a woman who lost her mind and drowned herself because of the men in her life. In this way, "The Bridge (Or, Ophelia)" also has an *autoreflexive* relationship with Burgin's work because it questions what each artistic medium is capable of.<sup>26</sup> Like Homer's description of Achilles' shield, which argues for the superiority of literary art because it is capable of producing a shield too detailed to exist in the real world, Bang's poem presents a psychological and emotional depth that a painting or photograph of a drowning Ophelia simply can't express.

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<sup>24</sup> "All night I have watched her, all night I shall see her: braided and pinnacled hair and olive oval face and soft calm eyes. A green fillet upon her hair and about her body a green-embroidered gown: the hue of illusion of the vegetable glass of nature and of lush grass, the hair of graves." (238)

<sup>25</sup> Robillard, "In Pursuit of Ekphrasis," 59.

<sup>26</sup> Robillard, "In Pursuit of Ekphrasis," 59.

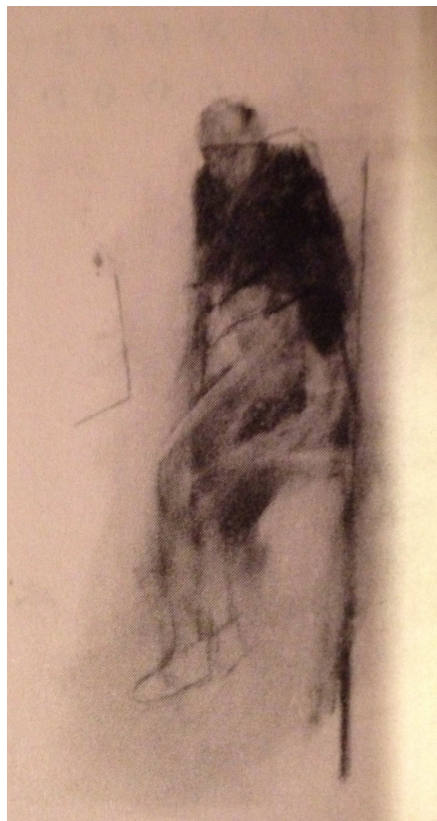
Perhaps the most radical contemporary approach to ekphrasis can be seen in Anne Carson's "Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin." This poem appears in *Decreation*, a book that incorporates a variety of different genres in addition to poetry, including essays, a screenplay, a documentary, and an opera. Based on its context, then, Carson's poem must be especially interested in the relation between poetry and other artistic mediums. The poem is too long to reproduce here, but I have included it at the end of this essay. Unlike any of the other contemporary poems examined so far, "Seated Figure with Red Angle" includes a copy of the corresponding work of art opposite the first page of the poem. Ekphrasis scholar Tamar Yacobi claims that this kind of side-by-side representation is a growing trend in a genre she calls the *museum book*. A museum book of poetry allows the reader to experience the art both visually and verbally, much like a visitor's experience in a museum where they can both view the art and read the accompanying gallery notes and commentary.<sup>27</sup> As a result of the artwork's physical presence on the page, the tension between the poem and work of art may be more readily apparent.

Before examining the relationship between the artwork and Carson's poem, however, I would like to first consider Goodwin's piece on its own; I have included it at the end of this paragraph. *Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)* is an oil pastel, oil, and graphite drawing. It is part of a Goodwin's *Seated Figure* series, which came out of her research on disappearances, torture, and other horrific state crimes under Stalin and various Latin American dictatorships. Goodwin's seated figures depict the alienating and dehumanizing impact of interrogation by torture. The figures are usually completely isolated in a white space meant to represent the interrogation room. Their bodies are hunched, their faces blurred, and their limbs contorted.

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<sup>27</sup> See Tamar Yacobi, "Ekphrastic Double Exposure and the Museum Book of Poetry," *Poetics Today* 34.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2013): 1. Accessed through Duke University Press Online.

Goodwin's series, however, also questions the very notion of being able to extract an objective truth and the rational thinking processes that support this idea. She accomplishes this critique by playing with perspective, which is art's way of creating "distance between the viewing subject and the object." In Goodwin's *Seated Figure* series, the figures often belong to more than one geometric plane, making their bodies seem impossibly constructed; the viewer cannot comprehend how these figures exist in space.<sup>28</sup>



*Seated Figure with Red Angle* (1988) embodies these major characteristics of Goodwin's series. However, there are a few details that Monique Tschofen points out as especially pertinent to Anne Carson's poem. First of all, the legs "do not belong to the same geometric plane as the torso" and "seem to be made of different matter," which makes them appear as if they were

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<sup>28</sup> See Monique Tschofen, "Drawing out a new image of thought: Anne Carson's radical ekphrasis," *Word & Image* 29.2: 233.

“floating away.” There is a stark vertical line to the right of the figure, and there are two horizontal lines that both intersect this line and cover the place on the figure’s face where eyes would be. These lines not only give the disturbing appearance of a space closing in on the figure, but they also evoke the perspectival grids that artists use as “a way of ‘mathematicizing’ space so as to render objects ‘realistically.’” However, “while the grid functions as an invisible mechanism to represent the world objectively, it also objectifies the world.” The seated figure is both objectified by the grid and defies that objectification through its disproportionate legs. Lastly, the red angle suspended in space to the left of the figure adds an element of mystery to the drawing; it resists interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

Anne Carson’s “*Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)* by Betty Goodwin,” is a series of conditional statements starting with “If,” most of which are apparently unrelated to Goodwin’s drawing.<sup>30</sup> Each of these statements ends in a period, though none of them is actually a complete sentence. She sets up each condition using an “if” clause, and she then refuses to finish the thought with what could happen if that condition were met. Thus, she uses the frame of a familiar structure but subverts the grammatical expectation and the rational thought process this grammatical structure represents. If grammatical structures can be understood like perspectival grids on a drawing in that they help prioritize the parts of a sentence in relation to one another, then Carson, like Goodwin, undermines the rational structure of her medium.<sup>31</sup> Anne Carson said in an interview that she wanted to use the “most hesitant of syntaxes.”<sup>32</sup> This choice is fitting given the fact that Goodwin’s piece is a drawing, meaning that, compared to a painting, it is a piece that can “retain traces of every gesture” and “is often also a *study* and offers a means of

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<sup>29</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 234.

<sup>30</sup> See Anne Carson, “*Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)* by Betty Goodwin,” *Decreation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 97-101.

<sup>31</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235.

<sup>32</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 234-235.

entry into a problem.”<sup>33</sup> While the poem does not attempt to bring the artwork to the page in images, Robillard might still classify Carson’s ekphrastic approach as depictive because it adopts a structure analogous to the drawing; Robillard actually identifies analogous structuring as the strongest type of ekphrastic relationship. In this same sense, the poem could also be classified as an associative ekphrasis because it is influenced by the artistic style of the entire *Seated Figure* series. Viewed through this lens, Carson is following in the footsteps of poets like William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, whose “unique structural experimentation” was highly influenced visual artists (in their case, European post-impressionists, abstractionists, and cubists).<sup>34</sup>

How does Carson engage Goodwin’s drawing on a thematic level? Certainly the poem is not interested in representing the artwork in a literal sense. However, the poem does begin with an interest in the human body as a “site from which truth can be produced”; its opening line reads, “If body is always deep but deepest at its surface.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the line “If police in that city burnt off people’s hands with a blowtorch” brings atrocious state violence into the poem very early on.<sup>36</sup> The poem most directly references the artwork in the line, “If the seated figure started out with an idea of interrogation.” However, as Tschofen points out, a subtle pronoun change indicates that the poem’s focus shifts from “an idea of interrogation” to “the idea of interrogation” two lines later.<sup>37</sup> Tschofen argues that “[t]his slippage...delineates the way the poem moves from a consideration of Goodwin’s art and her depiction of torture to a broad set of philosophical concerns, for at the heart of Carson’s response to Goodwin’s art rests the double

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<sup>33</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 233.

<sup>34</sup> Robillard, “In Pursuit of Ekphrasis,” 54.

<sup>35</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235 and Carson, “Seated Figure,” 97.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, “Seated Figure,” 97.

<sup>37</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235 and Carson, “Seated Figure,” 97 (emphasis added).

meaning of ‘interrogation.’”<sup>38</sup> Carson explores both interrogation as torture and interrogation as a kind of academic inquiry “that forms an essential part of rationalist epistemology’s quest for certainty and structure behind the flux of experience.”<sup>39</sup> These two ideas are actually historically connected through the ancient Greek judicial practice of *basanos*, in which a suspect’s slave would be tortured in order to get information pertaining to the accused man’s guilt. The term *basanos* later became synonymous not only with “the process of distilling truth from falsehood,” but with truth itself.<sup>40</sup> It also created the idea of truth as something that needs to be aggressively coerced and dragged to the light.

However, the poem resists any kind of rational sense-making through its associative leaps in subject matter and tonality. Though the poem poses as a process of rational deduction, it would be impossible to extract any stable truth from what it says. The changing pronouns contribute to this disorientation. The “you” is especially hard to track, for it could refer to “the reader of the poem, another viewer of Goodwin’s drawing, Goodwin herself, or the seated figure in the picture.” To complicate matters further, some of these “you” statements, such as “If you’re pushing, pushing and then it begins to pull you” are actually taken from interviews in which Goodwin describes her creative process; the “you” is Goodwin referring to herself.<sup>41</sup> The poem certainly resists a rational interpretation, like the floating red angle in Goodwin’s drawing. However, references to the creative process like the one previously mentioned, in addition to frequent allusions to artists (Artaud, Nabokov) and statements like “If artists tell you art is *before*

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<sup>38</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235.

<sup>39</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235.

<sup>40</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 235.

<sup>41</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 238.

*thought*,” suggest that the poem is presenting art as an alternative to the rational epistemology that both the poem and drawing critique. Art can create new, flexible ways of thinking.<sup>42</sup>

While there are a few passing references to images from the drawing, why doesn't the poem actually depict the artwork?<sup>43</sup> Tschofen claims that,

Carson's refusal to picture the picture represents a refusal to render the silent image knowable and so extract its meanings — literally to “make it talk.” If one of the questions of the poem is how to put thoughts about a complex work of visual art such as Betty Goodwin's into words, Carson wants to ensure that her aesthetic response to the image of a human subject made into an object through the infliction of torture does not subordinate or contain this visual image.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, in “Seated Figure with Red Angle,” *enargeia* is not even a private achievement, as it is in White's poems; *enargeia* is simply not a goal of Carson's ekphrastic approach. In this poem, Carson takes ekphrasis back to its function as a rhetorical tool, before it was inextricably tied up with the notion of *enargeia*. The artwork is a springboard that allows the poem to “focus and amplify the emotions” of the listener.<sup>45</sup>

Looking more generally at the work discussed in this essay, why is detailed physical description not prioritized in these contemporary ekphrastic poems? In most cases, there is an unstated acknowledgement that words will ultimately fail to recreate a visual experience in a satisfactory way, and so the poets give partial or indirect descriptions (or, in the case of Anne Carson, avoid description entirely because it conflicts with the poem's intentions). *Enargeia*, in its traditional definition, is less of a focus, as the poets are less interested in bringing the object

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<sup>42</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 239.

<sup>43</sup> The passages I have noted that come from images in the poem include, “If there are no faces, if faces are not what you interrogate./ If red makes you think of chance or what change operates with./If the feet cross in a way that sucks itself under, sucks analogies (Christ) under,” and “If red is the color of cliché./If red is the best color./If red is the color of art pain.” (98-99)

<sup>44</sup> Tschofen, “Radical ekphrasis,” 236.

<sup>45</sup> Starr, “Ekphrasis,” 393.

before the reader in a literal sense. Instead, these poets embrace the subjectivity of perception and use ekphrasis as a starting point for other concerns.

*SEATED FIGURE WITH RED ANGLE (1988)* BY BETTY GOODWIN  
by Anne Carson

If body is always deep but deepest at its surface.

If conditionals are of two kinds factual and contrafactual.

If you're pushing, pushing and then it begins to pull you.

If police in that city burnt off people's hands with a blowtorch.

If quite darkly colored or reddish (bodies) swim there.

If afterwards she would sit the way a very old person sits, with no pants on, confused.

If you reach in, if you burrow, if you risk wiping in.

If a point that has been fed over years becomes a little bit alive.

If the seated figure started out with an idea of interrogation.

If there was a quality of very strong electrical light.

If you had the idea of interrogation.

If interrogation is a desire to get information which is not given or not given freely.

If buried all but traceless in the dark in its energy sitting, drifting within your own is another body.

If at first it sounded like rain.

If your defense is perfect after all it was the trees that walked away.

If objects are not solid.

If objects are much too solid.

If there are no faces, if faces are not what you interrogate.

If red makes you think of chance or what change operates with.

If the feet cross in a way that sucks itself under, sucks analogies (Christ) under.

If as Artaud says anyone who does not smell cooked bomb and condensed vertigo is not worthy of being alive.

If you choose what to undo, if you know how you make that choice.

If you lead her to water.

If you bring her a gift say one of Pascal's thoughts.

If you bring "infinite fractions of solitude" (Nabokov).

If you bring a bit of Artaud like "all writing is shit all writers are pigs."

If conditionals are of two kinds possible and impossible.

If she slides off, if you do.

If red is the color of cliché.

If red is the best color.

If red is the color of art pain.

If Artaud is a cliché.

If artists tell you art is *before thought*.

If you want to know things like where that leg is exactly.

If the horses were exhausted.

If she begged, if she came to the table, is the sequence doesn't matter.

If it begins, a trickle, this thin slow falling of the mind.

If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.

If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks.

If you stop the leaks with conditionals.

If conditionals are of two kinds real and unreal.

If nothing sticks.

If she waits alongside her.

If Miroslav warned us that experimental animals should not be too intelligent.

If an enigma came into the room.

If all the other enigmata fought to get out.

If outside of here the light has gone from the tops of the trees that rise over a brick wall opposite.

If conditionals are of two kinds now it is night and all cats are black.

If how many were killed by David exceeds how many were killed by Saul by tens of thousands.

If they don't feel pain the way we do.

If you drove here with toys in the backseat.

If you wrote a word on the floor of the cell in waterdrops and videotaped it drying.

If Vitruvius says no temple can be coherently constructed unless it is put together exactly as a human body is.

If red is the color of italics.

If italics are a lure of thought.

If Freud says the relation between a gaze and what one wishes to see involves allure.

If you cannot remember what word you wrote.

If art is the servant of allure.

If Vitruvius does not talk about taking temples apart but we may assume the same canon applies.

If there is no master of allure.

If conditionals are of two kinds allure and awake.

If no matter how you balance on the one you cannot see the other, cannot tap the sleep spine, cannot read what the word was.

If "contrafactual" applied to conditionals means the protasis is false.

If (for example) "had you not destroyed the barometer it would have forewarned us" implies that we are now standing in a storm of rain.

If as a matter of fact it is a clear night I would say almost relentlessly clear.

If conditional comes between condiment and condolence.

If you do not want to remember what word it was.

If your life bewilders you (*sly life*).

If the rain lashes your face like manes of all the horses of this century.

If conditionals are of two kinds graven and *where is a place I can write this*.