



PAINTING POETRY: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

Painting is silent poetry; and poetry is painting with speech. (Plutarch in Abse 1986: 11)

Ekphrastic poetry responds to the visual stimulus offered by the arts. This theoretical reflection discusses existing literary theory, exploring the area of overlap between poetry and painting. I reflect on how particular artworks are transformed from the visual to the verbal medium. I also discuss my own process of writing poetry where the poems give voice to the artworks and also express my personal reaction to them.

Since antiquity, poetry and painting have been regarded as sister arts. The poet Simonides of Ceos characterised painting as mute poetry and poetry as a speaking picture. In *Ars Poetica*, Horace discusses the theory of *ut pictura poesis*: “as is painting so is poetry” or “as in poetry so in painting” (Wagner 1996: 5). This dictum implies “mutual exchange and enrichment as language appropriates the image” (Scott 1994: 29). It is a complex concept which still affects Western tradition and literary theory. “The poet himself, in seeking to find an eloquence to account for the forms his words seek to turn themselves into, has done well to turn to metaphors for the spatial arts” (Krieger in Calderwood 1968: 325). Mitchell too is interested in the paragone that “there is no *essential* difference between poetry and painting...that in...the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind ...they cohabit the same representational space” (in Wagner 1996: 32). Thus, the ekphrastic process verbally represents the visual representation by bringing the image into language, “a creative process that involves making verbal *art* from visual *art*” (Scott 1994: 1). Wagner calls it the “correspondences of the arts” (1996: 5) where both expressive media make creative use of imagery and symbolism. Art and poetry evoke their vision within a chosen format but while painting uses colour, line and form to conjure images, poetry uses words. The fact that it is possible to use terminology such as metaphor, allusion, image, collage, suggestion, colour and tone in both cases emphasises similarities. Ekphrasis is

the genre specially designed to describe works of art, to translate the arrested visual image into the fluid movement of words...when the narrative halts and the poet intervenes...it breathes words into the mute picture, it makes pictures out of the suspended words of its text ...(it) appropriates and liberates the image, captures and enables it.... (Scott 1994: xii)

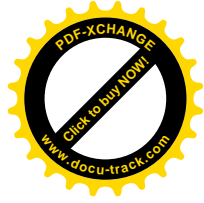


Thus, it is the medium in which the poet recreates the work of art in words, or where the artist creates a work of literature in paint. The inspiration for art comes from art: a piece of art may inspire a poem or a poem may inspire an artwork. In each case, the original image provides the stimulus which is developed into a new work. But where an artwork can only imply a story, words can take the frozen, narrative moment and make it explicit. It is through this exchange that the mute art object is appropriated and given voice recreating the artwork or creating anew, formulating and institutionalising the imitation of a work of art in literature. While the ekphrastic response could be to ballet, movies or theatre, I have limited myself to the verbal description of a visual representation, poems inspired by objects of fine art, that is, paintings, drawings and sculpture. From this it can be seen that in ekphrastic poetry a relationship between painting and literature is forged where potent visual works stimulates the viewer's literary sense, influencing and inspiring a new work in a different medium. "There are two imaginations at work, that of the original artist and that of the respondent" (Bosveld 2001: 1) and well-known examples of poems that use art for inspiration are Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, and Shelley's *Ozymandias*.

The terms influence and inspiration are useful when clarifying what occurs during this process of intermedial transformation or translation. Influence describes the initial impact where "traces of the source may be found in the finished product" (Weisstein 1979: 127). Inspiration refers to an extremely powerful form of influence where the poem create a "verbal equivalent of feelings, emotions or moods or worldview" (Frankel 2000: 11) to the antecedent artwork. Influence and inspiration become apparent through "affinities" (Wellek in Weisstein 1979: 138), where "sets of features closely similar or corresponding, as in purpose, tendency...or essential parts" (Weisstein 1982: 268) occur in the works. These features may be motifs, images or objects linking the poem to the painting because of their similarity. Influence and inspiration may also be signaled by "the writer's own comments, the title of the work, the curatorial notes on the wall, the catalogue notes, exhibition reviews and art history" (Heffernan in Wagner 1996: 279).

When carrying out an intertextual reading, Wagner considers poetic texts as

networks or...fabrics, in which the most interesting points are the knots
called allusions which integrate other texts; ...[they] ... actually open



up an endless universe... may be considered as archeological material,
as textual layers.... (1996: 282)

Thus, the poem recalls other poems and other paintings and it is these allusions that create the “networks” of meaning for a tapestry that knots together verbal and visual discourse, a poetic representation of earlier visual and verbal “pretexts” (1996: 302). To illustrate this Wagner carries out a detailed, archaeological analysis of Oscar Wilde’s poem *Impression du Matin* where even the title of the poem is “intratextual as well as intertextual” (1996: 284). Interpretation requires acts of recognition, reception and reading, and in this way “parallels and conflicts within or without authorial intention may be revealed” (Wagner 1996: 35).

Where specific works serve to objectify the emotions of the poet, ekphrasis is part of T. S. Eliot’s notion of the “objective correlative” (1928: 100). Here, emotion is expressed in the work of art through “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (ibid.). Through the use of “exact equivalence” (ibid.) states of being are communicated through the accumulation of “imagined sensory impressions” (ibid.). “Artistic ‘inevitability’ lies in the complete adequacy of the external to the emotion” (1928: 101) and which, to be successful, should not be in excess of the facts. This may be sustained throughout the poem, or occur in a few lines as part of the whole.

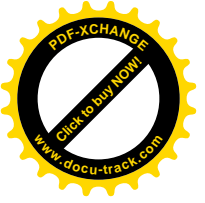
However, correlations and affinities may become difficult to determine in areas where they are multileveled, blurred and abstracted. Allusions, ambiguities and misrepresentations of the original may be deliberate or unwitting, with their meaning depending on personal and social circumstances. Thus, the painting may be both embodied and displaced by the poem and may bear no relationship to the original work of art. From this it becomes apparent that ekphrasis does not simply “reproduce a work of visual art in words, so there is no point in judging [it] by a criterion of fidelity to the work of art it represents. We can much better judge it by asking what it enables us to see about the work of art, or what it enables us to see, period” (Heffernan 1993: 157).



Weisstein therefore suggests caution when using interchangeable terminology in the disciplines. He points out, there can never be a “literal transfer from one medium to another” (1982: 268). While both disciplines do create a juxtaposition of symbolic images, there are inevitable problems that concern issues of representation because much of what is expressed in a work of art simply cannot be expressed in verbal terms. Fundamental differences are affected by material choice when moving from one medium to another and specific changes need to take place because technical and physical factors determine and modify the final work. For example, where the artist uses collage fragments to physically paste images onto his canvas, the poet fragments images through the displacement of words. Nor can the transference of concepts between one medium and another remain illustrative: the text does not replace the image, but becomes an image on the page in its own right.

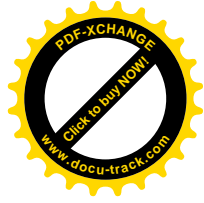
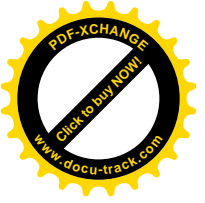
As a consequence, some theories concerning the appropriation of images by texts reject the sister-arts approach altogether. Greenberg, for example, dismisses Horace’s dictum and argues for purity and for the delimitation of the arts. He supports the elimination of the notion of the influence of one medium upon another and emphasises instead “the way in which each medium reaches towards its own essential properties and possibilities” (in Bal 1989: 284). This lays bare not only the correspondence of the arts and how they are made but also the dynamic struggle of their paragonal juxtaposition. This confrontation repudiates the mimetic and provides an opportunity for the breaking away from the “reflexive entrapment as art imitates art imitates art” (Wagner 1996: 22). Therefore art may inspire art, but ekphrasis also concedes divergence between the two during the transformation process. Both the artwork and the poem are modes of representation where “the poem, its images and sounds, its dramatic scenes and injunctions, is first of all an experience (Ashbery 1988: 109). As Mukarovsky points out, “[w]hat links the individual arts to one another is the unity of their goal (1978: 208) and while there is a great divide between art and poetry, the two arts may also transcend borders through “mutual collaboration” (Bal in Scott 1994: 37).

Ekphrastic poems recreate the world of art through the use of text. The visual cues may contain academic connotations but poetry is not art history. Works of art stimulate conscious and subconscious personal connections which encourage



alternative ways of looking, provide concrete containers for experience and open possibilities for deconstruction and renewal. Art provides me with a vehicle to illuminate and unravel the meaning of my own history and experience. Their subject matter provides me with a format for individual response and a springboard for objective distance from emotional issues which might otherwise overwhelm the writing. The images I use are those that remain with me long after I encounter them as reproductions or in the original. My poems use the moment depicted by the artist as the opening for a narrative or description, interpreting this to make my experience verbally explicit for the reader. The response-poems are dependent on the questions I ask myself during this act of looking and as the poem develops, senses other than the visual come into play affecting the choice of words and imagery. I choose my point of view as an artist might. Technical aspects such as perspective, formal composition, shape, lines and colour provide stepping stones for the poem's form. The tone may be succinct, descriptive or lyrical and either in keeping with the artwork or at odds with it. I may use fine art techniques, for example, collage, a formal, compositional device that explores multiplicity and discontinuity, relating the fragmentation of the poem to that of the painting. I ask myself what aspects draw me into the world of the artwork. What is my personal response to subject matter, technique, history? Am I responding to the artist's autobiography? When was the piece made and how does this affect me? What sentiment does it arouse in me? Am I sympathetic or antagonistic to the work? Artists who have influenced my choice of subject matter are Monet, Cezanne, Robert Rauschenberg, Matisse, Velasquez, Bernini, Rodin, Klimt and Brancusi.

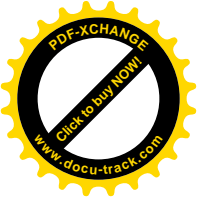
My poems enter into and inhabit the world of the artworks and engage with different aspects. *Snail* deals with movement and light whereas *Marble, Paper Stone* focuses on the shape and form of the figures. Where *Mother and Child* is narrative and biographical, *Red Painting* and *Marisol Man* are descriptive and personal. Writing *Scapegoat*, I imagined being within the world of the work itself. I am the outside observer of Bernini's sculpture *Pluto and Persephone*. Although it is from a different era to mine, the subject matter still resonates today. Some of the images are famous such as Rodin's *The Kiss* which I refer to in *Marble, Paper, Stone*, and some are obscure, for example the Bonnard etching of *Mother and Child*. It is the intertextual borders that provide material for the new work of words but they should be able to



stand alone, surviving the distance from their source material yet benefiting from the synergy.

In addition to having been influenced by works of art, my poems have been influenced by other ekphrastic poems. The artworks that these poems refer to also influence my poems, but do so indirectly. *Standing Female Nude* by Carol Ann Duffy, a dramatic monologue delivered by the female model, focuses on paintings in general. *Not my Best Side* by U. A. Fanthorpe is divided into sections devoted to the individual point of view of the three protagonists in a painting by Uccello. Wendy Cope's *The Sitter*, which is a monologue spoken by the naked woman model is a reaction to Vanessa Bell's painting *Nude*. Duffy's *Woman seated in the Underground 1941* creates a narrative around a Henry Moore drawing. Jorie Graham's ekphrastic poems *For Mark Rothko* does not refer to a specific painting but uses the artist's paintings and biography to encapsulate philosophical ideas. Other poems of interest to me refer to artists whose images are of interest to me: Anne Sexton's *Starry Night* and Phoebe Hesketh's *Letter to Vincent* are about that artist's life. Julie O'Callaghan's *Automat* and *Nighthawk* reflect on Edward Hopper's art.

Many painters have been inspired by the written word, Walter Sickert and W. H. Davies, Robert Motherwell and Frederick Garcia Lorca, Francis Bacon and T. S. Eliot, and David Hockney and Wallace Stevens. However, the influence of paintings on poetry has been historically less frequent until the 1800s and the birth of the public museum. According to Heffernan, "museums not only regulate our experience of works of art and certify their value, but also determine what they mean" (in Wagner 1996: 278). The museum provided art with an "aura of importance where symbolic fragments were rescued from the destructive forces of time" (Scott 1994: 15). These acquired a status beyond their intrinsic or artistic value just because they had survived and became, for the Romantics, "redolent of the past... (with)...a mysterious sense of otherness. The power of the Elgin Marbles and Ozymandias derives from their antiquity as well as their status as *survivors*" (ibid.). The works displayed at the Royal Academy of Arts seemed indestructible and attained a mystique because of this. The pieces they saw inspired Byron, Shelley and others to preserve them in language and their poems too have survived.



The influence of the museum in ekphrasis may be illustrated by referring to a more recent poem, Auden's *Musee de Beaux Arts* (in Abse 1986: 16). The poem's environment is the museum and this is intended to confer authenticity. The theme is declared in the opening lines, "About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position" (Abse 1986: 16). It reconstructs Breugel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* which was painted in response to Ovid's tale. Without the title, however, the viewer would not know that the splashing feet belong to a drowning man, and more specifically Icarus. Thus the words clarify the image indicating how "[w]ithout text, the image lies or gives way to a multitude of interpretations" (Eco in Wagner 1996: 30). This emphasizes in another way how art influences art. On the other hand, "no verbal authority can ever wholly subdue, control or explain: the disturbing, unmasterable power of the painted image" (Heffernan in Wagner 1996: 279). Instead the two media may be seen to operate together to create the meaning in ekphrasis.

With regard to the process of the dissemination of art to a mass audience begun by the museums, Walter Benjamin (1955) focused instead on the availability of reproductions in the age of technology. With the availability of cheap copies, paintings like van Gogh's *Sunflowers* or Monet's Impressionist landscapes are familiar to the viewing public and many poets have turned to art for their subject matter. Originals of artworks have become almost inseparable from "reproductions through which we experience them" (Heffernan 1993: 183). There has also been a proliferation of text so that poetry is readily available, now even more so through the internet. So, the paintings referred to may be viewed without having to travel to a gallery in Europe and I am also easily able to reproduce for the reader the artworks that inspired my poems. These factors cannot be ignored when writing poetry, for the reader is more likely to be familiar with the work of art and have his own interpretation of it and where a particular painting has been written about before, the earlier poems also provide their own impact and influence. My own poems were all inspired by artworks but not always by the originals. The works I have seen in galleries are *Snail*, *Wild Poppies*, Rodin's *The Kiss*, *Monogram*, the van Goghs and the Cezanne pieces. The rest of my poems are based on works which I have only encountered in reproduction yet even so they reveal how the poet "seeks mastery over the painter's image" (Heffernan 1993: 7). My poems are the result of influence and



inspiration where “traces of the source may be found in the finished product” (Weisstein 1979: 12).

From this it is clear that it is difficult to write about van Gogh and his work and be original. Reproductions of his sunflower and chair paintings are ubiquitous. Students emulate his compositions and colours. At the van Gogh Foundation, Arles, various modern artists contributed works to an exhibition that commemorates his suicide. Rauschenberg’s oil painting contains a black sunflower surrounded by barbed wire (*Untitled*; 1988). Hockney’s oil painting, *Vincent, Chair and Pipe* (1988) and Appel’s *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh* (1988) refer to his imagery, colour and energy. In *His Madness* by di Rosa (1988), the artist’s bedroom is painted inside the cross-section of his turbulent brain. All this endorses Heffernan’s statement which describes “the disturbing, unmasterable power of the painted image” (in Wagner 1996: 279). Songs such as Don McLean’s *Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)* have added to this over-familiarity yet poets are still attracted to his paintings.

In Phoebe Hesketh’s poem *Vincent*, (in Benton 1990: 44), the colours cobalt, red, yellow, green, create a word-palette. ‘Colour is naked’ implies van Gogh’s state of mind, emptiness and death. ‘Cypress straining against the gale,’ (l 20), and “crimson seeds congeal to black/ cracking my skull” (ll 30-31) emulate the painting and bring van Gogh’s visual imagery to the reader. Words such as ‘burning,’ ‘inflamed,’ ‘writhing’ and ‘gashed’ give us access to his thoughts as he cries out, ‘O, torment of sun-yellow tormentil – /fiery blood of the sun/sticks to my knife’ (ll 9-10). Another poem by Hesketh, *Letter to Vincent*, begins, ‘You never painted this picture, Vincent’ (in Benton 1990: 45) and what she describes is a painting colourless and cold and his struggle as a ‘painter of a poem without words’ (ll 10-11). Through an imagined conversation with him, we are given insights into his work.

The Starry Night by Anne Sexton (in Benton 1990: 48) is also written as if van Gogh were speaking the words. The mood is set by the opening quote from a letter to his brother that reveals van Gogh’s connection to nature and religion. Sky and trees become one in the boiling night with its bulging moon-eye and the despair embedded in the painting is carried by the poem’s rhythm and word choice. His own words indicate movement, ‘bulges,’ ‘rushing,’ ‘sucked up,’ and ‘split’ are analogous to his



frenetic brushstrokes. Van Gogh's yearning is repeated in the final lines of verse one and two, 'Oh, starry, starry night/ this is how I want to die.' This is particularly resonant because Sexton, like van Gogh, took her own life. The poems corroborate Krieger's statement that the poet does well to "turn to metaphors for the spatial arts" (in Calderwood 1968: 325).

My own poems, *Chair*, *I am no van Gogh* and *light/dark* use aspects of the painter's biography, artistry, imagery and the mythology of personal life, "giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object" (Hagstrum 1958: 18). They do not concentrate on any one specific painting, but use recurrent images from van Gogh's works, for example, his chair. This appears in more than one of his paintings either on its own or in an interior scene. In his bedroom in Arles, there were two beds and two chairs, one for himself and one for his only friend Gauguin, and in some versions a still-smoking pipe is placed on the wicker. The chair is as much about empty space as about solid form, presence and absence. My own poem *Chair* considers how meaning changes from when the piece is painted to its location in a gallery where it is one of many works. *I am no van Gogh* also refers to biographical details about his isolation and solitariness but without the specifics. The poems stand alone, reaching for their own "essential properties and possibilities" (Greenberg in Bal 1989: 284) beyond the paintings that were their source and through a process of defamiliarisation, unusual language and images create surprising connections.

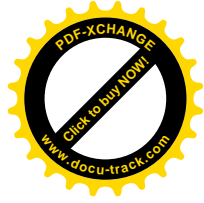
In contrast with the familiar van Gogh works, my Edward Hopper poems refer to six of his lesser-known works. In each the subject is a woman, either on her own or distant from the man who is with her. She is introspective, completing her toilette, gazing out of the window or touching the piano keys. Hopper uses strange casts of light to emphasise the loneliness. As an outside observer, we can only guess at the significance of the situation and physical details are used to build up psychological meaning. For example, in *Morning Sun I*, the protagonist 'cocoons her legs' (l 13) and it is only the wisps of hair that 'escape' (l 11). *Hotel Room* describes her packed suitcases and the 'hopeful double bed' (l 11) beneath which her 'dancing shoes lie/ askew on the floor' (ll 13-14). In *Morning Sun I* and *Evening Wind* her face is obscured from viewer, so we can only infer her feelings 'looking outwards;/ looking



inwards' (11-12). The drawings are all intimate portrayals and my poems reflect the circumstances using understatement and unembellished, everyday language.

My poems have precedents in Julia O'Callaghan's *Nighthawks* (in Benton 1990: 102) and *Automat* (103) where Hopper's characters inhabit public places, "tropical fish/ in a fish tank (*Nighthawks* ll 6-7). People are cornered by stark lines and angles of composition and this is captured in the poem. O'Callaghan uses the voices of Hopper's characters to give the reader imaginative access to their thoughts and also describe the physical content of the paintings, the overflowing ashtrays and endless cups of coffee. In *Automat*, the poem, the woman speaks about her dreams when she came to the big city, of getting rich or marrying her boss. Instead, she is caught in a dark bubble pretending celebrity under café lights instead of cameras. In my poems, the language and imagery is understated and echoes the paintings' emptiness, the lack of communication of the people in the paintings is cumulative in the cycle of poems.

Where Hopper's paintings are modern cityscapes, Bernini's Renaissance sculpture *Pluto and Persephone* captures a moment in a classical Greek myth. Cultural history entwines with aesthetic response. Based on an earlier narrative, there is a "contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving forces of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (Heffernan 1993: 6). Where the sculpture takes the myth as its starting point, my poem looks to the sculpture and apostrophises the King of the Underworld. His relationship with Persephone is that of pursuer and pursued, aggressor and victim, combining violence and desire in "the agony of the frozen moment" (Scott 1994: 7). The tone becomes interrogative as we witness the outrage of struggle and entrapment and almost hear Persephone's panting. An early version ended 'even her mother couldn't save her' but now 'one twist away' emphasises finality. As the marble comes alive with Bernini's touch, the poem tries to capture the sylvan scene about to be sullied. The marble and the words hold the inevitable moment. Similarly, Velasquez's *The Weavers* is based on a myth. It in turn inspired other words. The narrating words and the fixed image are well-known and strongly linked and also compete with each other. However, their final impact is exerted through "mutual collaboration" (Bal in Scott 1994: 37). My own poem reaches for its own possibilities beyond the earlier works. Although weaving the stuff



of life is not original metaphor, in my final lines it adds an ominous note to the poem: 'But I had forgotten to take the curse into account:/that the goddess had already won.'

Ekphrasis turns on the "depicted moment into a story of what the painting represents" (Heffernan 1993: 157). Thus my narrative poem *Mother and Child* is based on a Bonnard etching and tries to do more than merely reproduce a work of art in words. It bears only a slight resemblance to the original and makes no explicit reference to it and the title is my own invention. While knowledge of the biography of an artist or poet enriches the poem, it should not be necessary to its enjoyment. Nor is ekphrasis "art history," (Heffernan 1993: 157) and so "there is no point in judging [the poem] by a criterion of fidelity to the work of art it represents" (ibid.). More than a description of the visual image, its narrative creates a new work of art with its own validity. The poem assumes that the identity of the woman is Bonnard's model-later-wife, Marthe. In the picture, there is no indication of the identity of boy Marthe is holding. The poem invents their history based on the fact that the two lived together in the South of France at 'Le Cannet' and had no children. The focus is on Bonnard's obsession with his art and Marthe's with him. I try to imagine Marthe's feelings if she had wanted a child of her own and her longing counterbalances Bonnard's ambition. The domestic detail is intended to undercut the awe in which famous artists are held. The narrative is conversational and reflective, the pace and language languid and appropriate to the late nineteenth century. Whereas I usually build up a poem line by line and image by image, I wrote this by paring-down one of my short stories.

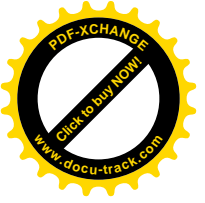
My poem *Marble, Paper, Stone*, however, does describe and "reproduce works of visual art in words" (Heffernan 1993: 157). Originally titled *Rodin vs. Brancusi vs. Klimt*, it is piece of description to be enjoyed in and of itself, as are paintings and sculpture. In looking at the artwork and writing about it, my process highlights Duchamp's point that "[a]rt is not about itself but about the attention we bring to it" (Duchamp in Foster and Prevallet 2002: 2). The work carries implications, emphases and innuendos and the accretion of detail becomes part of the meaning. The poem describes the processes and the visions of the artists.

Each sculpture reflects its period of creation: the Rodin is realistic, the Klimt and the Brancusi modern and angular. The contrasts between them are emphasised by the



different art techniques used, the processes of molding, incising and painting respectively. This becomes my subject matter. The most famous piece of the three sculptures Rodin's *The Kiss* uses a reductive process, cutting away the black marble to create the lovers as equals: their seated bodies are level. The piece makes impermanence permanent, preserving the moment. My choice of words emphasises the positive qualities of love by using negative constructions: 'containing hand does not bear the whip' and 'yielding lips are not rejecting.' Abse's poem *At the Tate*, (1986: 96) focuses on the marvel and difficulty of the act of creating it, 'the sculpture/ the embodiment of an illusion' (ll 8-9). In Klimt's *The Kiss*, the couple is interlaced, I describe them as 'gilded together' but placed 'on a bed of rain.' Ferlengetti's poem *Short Story on a Painting of Gustav Klimt* (in Benton 1990: 25-26) ends 'She/ will not open./He/ is not the one' (ll 60-64), denying their commitment to each other. Thus, other poets' interpretations may impact on the evolution of my own interpretations, verbal images intertwining with other verbal images. Word choice, tone and metaphor "enable us to see" (ibid.) and interpret the variations on the theme. My early drafts included ineffectual and contrived expressions, for example, 'sweet embrace;' 'voracious in their voluptuous colours, decorative and devouring; bejeweled and bedecked;' 'his abs' was too colloquial and 'sinuous and sensuous' was a predictable stock phrase. In order to improve the poem, I concentrated on using specific detail and precise images. Colloquial idiom and surgical language serve as antidotes to the esoteric component.

There are endless possibilities for a poet to remake an artwork depending on her own history, culture, religion, gender and education. *Snail* is another descriptive poem. It was inspired by Matisse's joyous collaged image in the Tate Gallery. Geometrical shapes create a natural spiral on the wall and the grey, tiny creature assumes gigantic proportions. It is recognizable yet other, its roughly cut, coloured shapes speaking of difference between reality and artistic vision. Matisse was doing *papier collé* because he was an invalid but we enjoy the work without knowledge of this biographical detail. My poem deals with issues of captivity and freedom overtly and subliminally "making verbal art from visual art" (Scott 1994: 1). An early ending "Your collaged dreams are mine" did not tie in smoothly. The poem explores personal issues, relating to identity, trying to avoid narrowing the artwork to an aesthetic extension of ego or flattening its multiplicity. After looking at a natural object, Matisse transformed it and



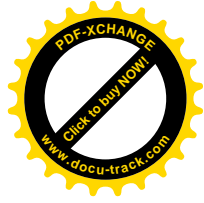
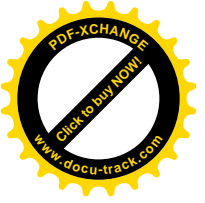
made it new. I appropriated his image and collaged word-fragments on a page to create my poem. Both the artwork and the poem are containers of emotions, thus supporting Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative.' The poem confirms that ekphrasis gives "life and voice to the inanimate art object" (Scott 1994: 1) and "remakes the painting in words" (Heffernan in Wagner 1996: 278). The reader interprets and extends the Matisse work as well as my poem depending on similar factors.

My Imagist poem *In Tow* is based on Monet's landscape *Wild Poppies*. My poem is descriptive, using the painting to evoke a relationship, connecting the poppies to the imagined circumstance of the woman in the forefront. The poem's meaning remains underdetermined and suggestive. Where the use of 'dance' and 'stately home' were too predictable in the first version, unexpected expressions such as 'effective jailer' and 'carmen-crimson' defamiliarise the situation. Precise and unadorned language helps to avoid a polemical conclusion and the ending resonates with the opening of the poem.

I use specific details of a visual piece to create a poem whereas Jorie Graham states that "Those poems that move me are enactments of discovery, not retellings," (Graham in Gardner 1005: 1). Her poems capture the enigmatic being of the painter, avoiding physical description of the painting itself:

I don't use paintings as much as spring off the scene in them which is strangely fixed and free from us and so makes especially evident our desire for transformation, our tiny imperialism of the imagination.
(Graham in Gardner 2005: 62)

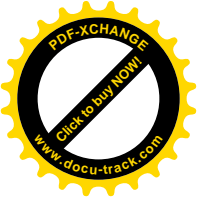
Shifrer describes Graham's process as one which acknowledges the surface significance but at the same time "tinkers" with western art, appropriating and changing it (in Gardner 2005: 62). In keeping with this approach, Graham extends paintings to create a fantasy world, moving from the "literal to the symbolic, and hence to the beautiful and the mysterious, from the profane...to the elusive, undefined, 'sacred' space of art, from the public to the private" (Gardner 2005: 23). Rothko's method of field painting contains no element of representation and the artist's presence is inherent in his brushstroke, composition and colour choice. In *For Mark Rothko* (1980) Graham is concerned with what paint itself can suggest, the



‘field made crooked/as with disillusion or faulty/ vision’ (ll 6-7). It is within this colour field that the poet and then the reader can ‘see’ the ‘Persian-red bird’ (l 3). By the poem’s end, the image of a bird in flight represents the painter himself. Bird and painter are at one and then become one because of the ambiguous use of ‘he.’ The fourth stanza begins, ‘When I look again he is gone’ and we are unsure if it the bird or Rothko. The colours on the canvas change from crimson to magenta and then pale to white and then disappear as the painter merges into his painting and becomes as nothing. The poem is an extended metaphor for flight ‘into a moment of sunlight/that fell from the sun’s edge/ten thousand years ago/mixed in with sunlight/absolutely new’ (ll 30-34). This tone is appropriate and resonates with Rothko’s suicide.

In *Drawing Wildflowers*, (1980: 14), Graham uses a drawing of her own as subject matter ‘as if something truthful [the flowers] could be made more true’ (l 4). The poem describes the struggle and search of both artist and poet for the heart of the matter ‘making of the flower a kind of mind in process’ (ll 12-13). The flower becomes the carrier of the burden, ‘I can make it carry *my* fatigue/or make it dying.’ The artist is as the flower in this poem where, in the Rothko, the painter becomes the bird but the connections remain ambiguous. The poems are ekphrastic because of their stated visual source but without her titles this would not be clear, the poems moving so far away from the original image.

My poem *Red Painting* is similar to *Drawing Wild Flowers* in that it is also about my own art. The title is a prosaic counterpoint to the record of the drama of my quest and my state of being at the time. It is a very personal painting, a milestone in my exploration of the landscape of me and its recovery was an encounter between my current and former self. The poem’s meeting with the painting is about both prolepsis and nostalgia, a Janus-experience wrestling with the notion of how we remember and how it really was, how I was then and how I am now. When I look at the picture now, I see the past and the present simultaneously but the two have their own separate existence, as do picture and poem. The first version of my poem concentrated on this aspect but ended with a heavy exegesis of my realization that I cannot replicate the moment. I removed this because it is implicit in the description. Thus, reengaging with the painting, I was confronted with the complications of memory and how it



serves reality. The picture is not mimetic and the poem is affective rather than descriptive. As the one who painted the work, I have insights which an outsider would not have and another approach might have been to describe how I photographed every building site where earthmovers devoured the debris and then tore up the photographs to use as collage. There are “affinities” (Wellek in Weisstein 1979: 138) between the poem and the painting which inspired it and these are especially obvious as the works come from the same hand.

The fragility of memory was again brought home to me when I found that the sculpture I thought I was describing in the *Willendorf Venus* is actually *Diana of Ephesus*. This error highlights how the written piece can veer away from the source of inspiration to become a new entity with its own identity. I have included both sculptures in my collection of reproductions.

Memory also plays its part in *Self Portrait at the Dam* which is ekphrastic only insofar as it refers to the creative process. Although I was looking at the scene with an artist’s eye, I had no desire to paint it. Thus

[t]here is no essential difference between poetry and painting...in the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind, they co-habit the same representational space.
(Mitchell in Wagner 1996: 32)

The poem developed from a journal entry instead. Looking into the water at Emmentia Dam, I was aware only of the reflections on the surface, but as I stared, other layers revealed themselves. The light across the landscape changed over a period of time. The Impressionists were the first artists to actually work *au plein air* and I thought about how Monet would have painted and repainted the scene. I searched for language without cliché to describe the European painter in Africa. In this act of translation, ‘Rouen in Emmentia’ is a fresh phrase where ‘Monet in the veld,’ my initial phrase is not. The poem moves art from one location to another, colonising and recuperating it, looking for an idiom to translate it without flattening it. Relationship and identity emerge through this process of extrapolation, investigation and mediation and the unlikely analogy between Hazel Frankel and the genius of those light painters arose.



My poems, *Landscape* and *Still Life* use surface appearance to capture the essence of art and enhance content in a completely different way to Graham's. I constructed them by making a creative leap: their subject is Cezanne but their style is similar to Apollinaire's concrete poems and calligrams. These poems become pieces of art in themselves in a physical sense. The placement of the words on the page literally 'makes' the poems artworks in themselves and they become an "experience" (Shifrer in Gardner 2005: 68) that resonates the poem's meaning. I first placed *Landscape* at the top of my page but this looked awkward as if the mountain were dangling in mid air. I moved it down and changed the length of the lines to strengthen the overall shape. The structure of the poem plays with the contradiction between the meaning of last line 'the sky's the limit' and where the line appears at the bottom corner of the page. With *Still Life*, I placed the words as if I were Cezanne placing the jug, Cupid and fruit. After this breakaway from formal, conventional structure, I went back to *Snail* and altered the position of the lines there. The black shape on the white paper adds a refreshing vitality and a sense of playfulness to the writing. While the poems *Landscape*, *Still Life* and *Snail* are separate entities, they impact on each other in an on-going and developmental creative process.

Artworks also provide me with a convenient platform for debate even as my poem becomes an "imitation in literature of a work of plastic art" (Krieger in Scott 1994: 29). *When Christo wrapped the Reichstag* refers to that artist's process of measuring, photographing and drawing the Reichstag building before winding huge swathes of cloth around it. His was a political act of tying up, concealment, hiding, protection and escape. My poem extends these into the area of gender conflict by developing images of bondage and dependence. Early versions were suffocated by overstatement, 'strangling voiding me of breath' and tautology, 'devoid of breath.' The last stanza needed an ambiguous image of entrapment rather than the earlier, clichéd butterfly image, but 'favourite thing' works well as a stock phrase in an unlikely place. The second verse is an example of the use of the 'objective correlative' where specific objects, the soft duvet and the hard obelisk serve as emotional equivalents. I worked towards balance between over-description and minimalism. As Wagner states, "[t]here is no "finite reading" (1996: 282) because pieces may be read as "textural layers" (ibid.) of each other. The male-female conflict is also the theme of the modern sculpture *Bicycle Race* and my poem *The Marisol Couple* is based on it. At first

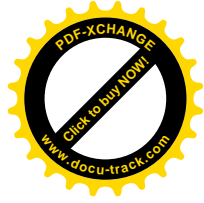


glance, both are amusing, the wood blocks combed with metal wheels and my opening line 'What I have in front of me/ is a photograph of a sculpture,/ mixed media.' But the blocks are stiff and rigid and my poem goes on to describe 'a man and a woman,/ not in tandem,/ not touching.'

Where I have been influenced by other ekphrastic poems, it is the artworks on which they are based that have influenced me. This indirect path of influence, via the vision of other poets, is another aspect of intertextuality. Carol Ann Duffy's poem *Standing Female Nude* (1985: 46) refers to a particular genre of art where male artists paint nude females. The poem is placed next to different artworks in different anthologies, for example Braque's *Bather* or Duchamp's *Descending Female Nude*. It refers to debates about the value of 'great art,' a personal situation in a particular society and the use of volume, space and colour. The model who stands naked under the artist's gaze speaks in the first person, describing how she appears in the painting. Her voice is colloquial as she sets the scene in the artist's studio where the light catches her body. She is well aware that to him she is merely bodily parts as she prostitutes herself for a few francs. The degradation and the artist's scorn are clear from the opening lines:

Six hours like this for a few francs.
Belly nipple arse in the window light,
he drains the colour from me.
(Duffy 1993: 86)

This is a factual but crude and derogatory description of how she sees herself through the artist's eyes. That 'he drains the colour from me' has an ironic double meaning: he invests colour on his canvas but sucks away her life to create his masterpiece. He gives terse directions: 'further to the right Madam,' where the use of 'Madam' is ironic: she is nothing more than 'standing female nude.' A play on the word art: 'little man/ you've not the money for the arts I sell' (ll 19-20) and 'he possesses me on canvas' (l 18) contain a sexual undercurrent. As he dips his brush repeatedly, unable to afford her other arts, he gazes at her as if she is an object. Artist and model each have a hunger and both make their living how and where they can. She mocks both their endeavours when she says, 'they call it Art' (l 7). The words of the model make



up the poem while the painting illustrates the artist's view so we see the model as he saw her.

Duffy's poem *Woman Seated in the Underground*, 1941 (1985: 50) is also a dramatic monologue using the female model's point of view. It is based on Henry Moore's drawings of people hiding in the London Underground during the Blitz. The poem makes specific references to this, for example 'There was a bang and then/I was running through the smoke' (ll 4-5). The poem is also about a personal tragedy. 'I am pregnant but I do not know my name' (l 7) indicates the classic situation of woman as victim as does '...waiting for whom? Did I? ...I have either lost my ring or I am/ a loose woman. No. Someone has loved me. Someone/ is looking for me even now' (ll 9-13). Moore made many drawings using wax resist and black ink where drawn lines go round and round people's bodies. These become a metaphor in the poem as 'my mind has unraveled into thin threads that lead nowhere' (ll 17-18). The artwork records a particular situation and the poem extends this. Again, it is not necessary to know the art or history background to enjoy the poem.

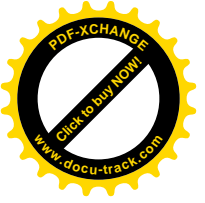
Wendy Cope's sonnet *The Sitter* also uses the female model as its protagonist. Here, the artwork referred to is specific. It is Vanessa Bell's *Nude* (1922-3) where Bell's unforgiving gaze translates into an insulting painting. The model slouches naked with her belly sagging and her mouth turned downwards and says 'Depressed and disagreeable and fat - / That's how she saw me. It was all she saw' (in Collins 1993: 56 ll 1-2). There is no sexual undertone but the model feels so ashamed she would rather pose for 'some old rake' (l 8). She remembers men who made her feel beautiful but they are all gone with her youth. The bitter final couplet, 'Admired, well-bred, artistic Mrs Bell, I hope you're looking hideous in Hell,' is the only way the model can get her own back on how posterity will see her. In all these poems, the model is shown to be at the mercy of the artist and in the last, she is also at the mercy of the poet. Using artworks to debate and illuminate male and female interactions, these poems describe specific situations from the woman's point of view.

My own poems *Picasso's Mistress* and *Declining Female Nude* are similarly informed and are located in the same genre. All recall Manet's *Olympia* where the female model "challenged the established misogynist male glance with her own



mysterious gaze...” (Wagner 1996: 303), focusing attention on the act of looking. Prosopopoeia, the act of ventriloquism, gives the art object a woman’s domestic, conversational voice to describe their situation. The poems enact the root meaning of the word ekphrasis, which is “speaking out” or “telling in full” (O E D) and “turn fixed forms into narrative” (Heffernan 1993: 6) by transforming the body to paint and the paint to words. In *Picasso’s Mistress*, the setting is Montmartre and Picasso’s nature is indicated in the combined title and first line, which simultaneously indicate the personal relationship and the making of the artwork. The model displays a pragmatic approach to her career, prepared to follow the artist on his path to fame for her own gain. Where Duffy’s nude is aggrieved that the final painting does not look like her, Picasso’s mistress is uplifted by her relationship with him; though she is no oil painting. He transforms her on canvas and makes her feel beautiful.

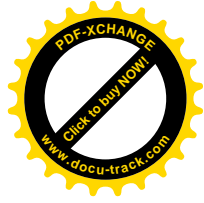
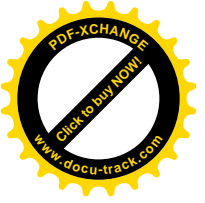
Declining Female Nude refers to traditional works of art such as Delacroix’s *Female Nude Reclining on a Divan*, Rodin’s *Reclining Nude* and Duchamp’s *Descending Female Nude*. As Heffernan suggested (in Wagner 1979: 127), both influence and inspiration are signaled in the choice of title which was initially *Reclining Female Nude*. This links my poem to the antecedents already mentioned and to the ongoing debate about women in art. In this poem, the model’s recognition of her own worth is unexpected: she is a woman fallen on hard times, rather than a fallen woman. Her voice is consistent and cogent. Exaggeration, colloquialism and deflation balance the esoteric in ‘after he saw me at the Lapin Agile in Montmatre./ That sounds glamorous,/ but it really isn’t anything more than the local pub’ (ll 5-7). Complex words such as ‘meninx’ emphasise the conflict between brain and body, intellect and physicality. This breaks down reader expectations – we would expect her to be cheap and dull. Early versions used clipped lines and a sharp tone but I subsequently amalgamated lines creating new juxtapositions to intensify the imagery. The slower pace enhances the sensual undercurrent. Knowledge of Picasso’s Cubist work and how he used geometrical shapes and black outlines is not essential. These poems were also influenced by other ekphrastic poetry. In this case the artworks that influence me do so indirectly, having been filtered through another poet’s imagination creating Wagner’s “networks...or fabrics, in which the most interesting points are knots called allusions which integrate other texts” (1996: 282).



Intertextuality is inescapable. *Scapegoat* is my reaction to a multimedia 'combine' by Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram* where the title is of little help in decoding meaning. The goat achieves iconic status when placed in the gallery. As such it is part of the modernist debate fuelled by Duchamp when he exhibited a urinal in a gallery and claimed that it was Art. My poem's structure and tone are also influenced by a poem, U. A. Fanthorpe's *Not my best side*, (in Benton 1990: 32-33) which subverts the myth of St George and the Dragon. The myth was, in turn, the starting point for Paolo Uccello's painting of the same name. In Fanthorpe's poem, the three characters each give their point of view in the first person, the dragon beginning with 'Not my best side, I'm afraid' (l 1). He is vain and blames the artist for the poor choice of pose. He criticises his opponent who is 'ostentatiously beardless' riding a horse with 'deformed neck and square hoofs' (ll 11-12). In part II, the damsel finds the dragon more attractive than the boy who may be concealing acne under his armour, 'I didn't much fancy him' (l 30). She debates the pros and cons of going off with the dragon instead: 'He made me feel he was ready to eat me. And any girl enjoys that' (l 28). As for the saint, he describes his talents eloquently but then becomes physically aggressive and pushes the lady out of the way.

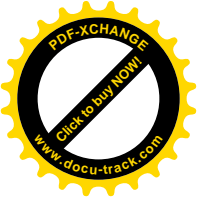
Part I of *Scapegoat* looks at the flotsam of *Monogram*, a reflective process of deconstruction. Part II is written from the view point of the spectator who looks intently at this work of modern art, becomes exasperated and walks off. Part III is spoken by an imagined nanny goat, but I found it difficult to differentiate between her and the billy. A fourth section might be written from the point of view of the artist describing how he acquired and combined the materials. Although I do not consider that my poem has achieved cohesion yet, I have kept it in the collection as it reflects the difficulty that is an unavoidable aspect of modern art and poetry. This therefore becomes part of the meaning itself in a poem inspired by an artwork and influenced by a poem. My writing tries to do verbally what modern art does visually to achieve poems that are "multi-leveled and difficult" (Kitaj in Frankel 2000: iv), focusing on word-image and metaphor, just as individual brush strokes build up to become a still life, landscape or portrait.

In Her Own Image reflects a text, in this case the first words of the Bible. It was the first poem I wrote about making art and originally used the pronoun 'He.' What



would He have wanted in the beginning? How did He know how the elements should look on His giant canvas? As the poem developed, the references expanded. For example, I changed ‘well of iris’ to ‘iris of the sky’ to emphasise the enormity of the act of creation and the subsequent ‘torrent.’ I then changed ‘torrent breaks her banks’ to ‘torrent bursts her banks’ so that I could use the word ‘break’ in the final line to enhance the ‘heart’ image. Each change increased the energy but was also dependent on the one before. The images work separately and also relate to each other interlinearly. The poem seemed complete but I then changed ‘He’ to ‘She’ and this completely altered the emphasis. It now also makes intertextual reference to the issues of *Picasso’s Mistress* and *Declining Female Nude*, except that now the female is the creator rather than the observer. The original title was *Genesis*. This then became *Final Touches*. Then I changed it again. This development encapsulates the process of writing poetry and how it requires dressing, addressing and redressing the words to achieve cohesion. This may or may not be the poem’s final incarnation.

Jenny Joseph describes the poet’s struggle to pin down a work of art in *A Chair in My House, after Gwen John* (in Adams 1986: 76): “To get in words/ What you could do in paint/ Only the simplest sentences will serve” (ll 5-7). At the end of the poem, she extends this: “I cannot get my chair the way you do/ The things you paint/ Even the simplest sentence will not do.” Joseph describes how she wrestles with words to achieve what she believes the painter accomplishes so easily. Each of my poems uses a different approach. Where *Red Painting* addresses the painting itself, *Picasso’s Mistress* uses the model’s voice, *Snail* talks to the subject of Matisse’s painting, *In Tow* describes Monet’s *Wild Poppies* and gives it psychological resonance, *Marble, Paper, Stone* contrasts the materials of the artworks and the relationship of the figures. In the van Gogh poems and *Self Portrait at the Dam*, the poet is part of the artist’s world, whereas in *Pluto and Persephone* the poet comments on the observed situation. A colloquial tone expresses theoretical notions in *Declining Female Nude* and local images capture the artist/poet’s struggle in *Self-Portrait at the Dam*. *Picasso’s Mistress* banters with the reader and the van Gogh cycle is reflective. Language usage and punctuation control emphasis, tempo and gradations of meaning. These are also vested in the melody if the internal rhymes, half rhymes, underlying rhythms and free verse form. After close engagement with an artwork, the poem which follows is affected by my personal approach and experience an act of



translation complicated by the various stimuli at work, the artwork itself, others that relate to it and also other texts and poems.

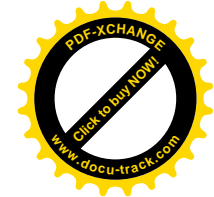
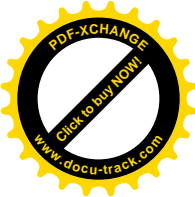
The title of each poem either sets the scene as in *Self Portrait at the Dam* or provides an insight, as in *Scapegoat* or *In Tow*. Sometimes the name of the artwork is itself the poem's title, as in *Pluto and Persephone* or it may be purely descriptive as in *Marble, Paper, Stone* or as in *Snail*. The title can add an extra dimension or allusion to the work as in *Declining Female Nude* or act as a counterweight to the content: *Red Painting* is matter-of-fact in contrast to the painting's whirlwind strokes. In this way, titles are further instances where text works together with image to their mutual enhancement. Each poem has its own "artistic inevitability... [that reveals]...the complete adequacy of the external to the emotion" (Eliot 1928: 101).

Organizational decisions also had to be made. The poems are not placed in the collection in the order they were written but so that they resonate with and reflect each other. I also considered whether to present the poems alongside reproductions of the artworks which inspired them. However, this might have created an illustrated poetry book where the reproductions flattened the effect of poems. Where the influential artwork is well known, perhaps readers would have no need of the image. Where the artworks are unfamiliar, the poems might still have greater impact if presented on their own. Finally, in order not to preempt the poems, I decided to provide the reproductions of the works separately. They therefore appear at the back of the collection and the reader can choose whether to view them or not. In this way they do not displace the poems but may help to make the poems more accessible. The reader is free to debate my connections and come to his own conclusions. It is also for this same reason that this explanatory theoretical reflection appears after the poems.

Writing ekphrastic poetry combines my fascination with art and with words. My poems evolve in the intersections between poem and painting and between poem and poem. The process encouraged me to look closely at form and content in order to bring the chosen works of art to language where "the new piece becomes a work in its own right with a life of its own" (Foster and Prevallet 2002: 2). Using the limitations imposed by ekphrasis, the poems developed spontaneously and experimentally through the marriage of word and image. I realized that the processes of painting and

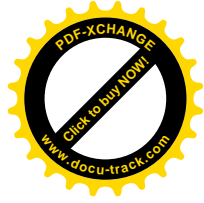


writing have many similarities. In each, there is the looking, then the making, then the looking again. The addition of an extra element no matter how small changes the balance and the meaning, and each removal requires adjustment and reassessment. Thereafter, each art requires deliberate editing and conscious distillation. The meaning of art and poetry can diverge from biography and art history into a space of narrative and description that allows my personal viewpoint to emerge. The poet, Wallace Stevens describes how “the world about us would be desolate except for the world within us. There is the same exchange between these two worlds that there is between one art and another, migratory passings to and fro, quickenings and discoveries.” Ekphrasis links my passion for poetry to my passion for art.



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