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'Light & things'

A poem and essay on Bill Culbert's
Daylight flotsam Venice and *Drop* by
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**The dark, secret relations of opposites
the mutual distrust, the absolute
dependency.
For example,
I can only walk backwards
if I understand which way is forwards.**

**In this room filled with light
I don't trust myself.
I stay low – adhere to the detritus, the wrong
effects of us in the world.**

**I move
slowly
like I'm climbing a horizontal ladder.
For comfort, I read
words on plastic bottles
foreign words
that exoticise the ordinary
*eau de javel, mon chéri.***

**When you left, you took all manner of
things,
light was the least of my worries.**

Why did I bring you with me today?

**I watch you through Venetian blinds
clandestine, suspect
and then its opposite,
brazen, like I'm in an 80s music video.**

**I keep finding fragments
of us,
always something there to remind me
da da da dah dah
so I've catalogued them all around the
edges of the sunroom
memento mori – things to step over
because light travels whether your eyes are
opened or closed
because today I feel transfixed –
it happens sometimes – out of nowhere
I don't expect
you to understand. When you left you took
all the sharp implements, so this vague talk
of impalement
will be surprising to you.**

**When I save these words I'm reminded
this product is licensed to you.**

**I count. I count suspended chairs and
tables.
In their quiet chaos, a hard angle.
I came to believe
in a God**

**that threw them in a rage –
some celestial tantie to teach us humans a
lesson
perhaps that my comfort should not be
assumed.**

**The attendant circles
as though writing steals something,
and she's right to be suspicious.
Perhaps I'm stealing this stillness,
perhaps I'm trying to make
an invisible support
for the Atlas we forget is there.**

**That you still
rise to the surface, bob
and rock, almost comical in your
unannounced entrances
shakes me,
and anchors me to whatever spot
I'm in.**

Respect and envy: Poetry's response to visual art

**'You do what I can only name.'
Frank O'Hara, 'To Larry Rivers'**

I wrote the poem 'Light and things' in response to Bill Culbert's works *Drop* and *Daylight flotsam Venice*, on display at Te Papa until March 2015. Culbert was New Zealand's representative at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and these two works formed part of his larger installation *Front Door Out Back*.

Daylight flotsam Venice lights up the gallery space in a friendly fluorescent party. There's a certain cordiality in the way the work never strays across its invisible edges, a contained sprawl. The illuminated fluorescent tubes are sparks of light that bounce off the sea on a brilliant summer's day. The carefully arranged plastic bottles and containers are too colourful and sanitised to be rubbish, yet nonetheless they become detritus in a shimmering ocean. And then it changes. When I stand at the north end of the gallery and scan the length of the work, I see a bed of hot embers. I imagine the fluorescent lights as burning coals and myself as some young initiate bravely padding barefoot through the centre until I reach the other side, unscathed.

When I look up at *Drop* I'm transfixed by the stillness of the objects. Each chair and table suspended from the ceiling as though petrified in space. I think of a

state where objects temporarily defy gravity. I think of earthquakes.

Why write poems about visual art?

Poets have always felt compelled to respond to visual art. So much so, that poetry about art has its own name: *ekphrasis*. The word *ekphrasis* comes from the Greek, meaning ‘to tell in full’. It has a long and fascinating history dating all the way to Homer and his description of Achilles’ shield in *The Iliad*.

The mutual respect between poets and visual artists is evidenced by the number of art museums the world over that produce occasional anthologies of ekphrastic poetry based on works in their collections. This year, in Wellington alone, writer and curator Greg O’Brien ran a workshop at Te Papa inviting poets to write in response to McCahon’s *Walk (Series C)* and in August, the Adam Art Gallery hosted a full-day symposium on the relationship between the verbal and visual in contemporary art, as well as running two ekphrastic writing workshops. As we can see, ekphrasis is a hot topic!

Just why it is that this genre of poetry continues to be so popular is a knotty question to answer. In many ways, ekphrasis these days seems a little redundant, particularly when written in response to conceptual art. Why should we care about a poem about an art work when we can either view the work ourselves, or find out everything we need to know by reading the wall text or accompanying catalogue? Like many other areas of discourse in contemporary art and letters, there is no simple answer. It remains, however, that the same impulse that inspired Keats to write his masterpiece ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ still operates among various poets today, whether the art work in question is a fictive Greek vase, or a 20 or so metre-long spread of fluorescent lights and plastic containers.

How the visual speaks

In my last job at Victoria University, I was lucky enough to enjoy Culbert’s 1985 work *Long white cloud* on a daily basis. The work hung in the Art History Department’s communal staff area and, like a beacon, quietly exuded a radiance that seemed to fill the entire length of that large space.

I always think of this work as generous. It seems to give so much with such modest materials: a row of plastic containers, denuded of their labels and skewered by a horizontal fluorescent light.

Despite this seemingly violent act of impalement, the work for me contains no malice. The materials work together to soften one another. The plastic containers are given a new life and essence via the light that shines through them; they lose their status as refuse and become receptacles of light.

Long white cloud was my only physical encounter with Culbert’s work before visiting those currently on display at Te Papa. I was enthralled from the moment *Daylight flotsam Venice* stretched out in front of me. I visually picked through it, tracing patterns and angles, minutely and then expansively. When Te Papa asked to write something of an ekphrastic nature, I was in no doubt about the work I wanted to choose. There’s a reason that we still hear people utter that rather pat phrase ‘it spoke to me’ in regards to an art work. Despite the impossibility of the idea, I like to think that an ekphrastic poem can go some way toward making the art work speak.

How does one write an ekphrastic poem?

Contemporary ekphrasis often (but certainly not always) leans more toward interpretation than description. When contemplating an art work, a poet may choose to adhere only loosely to the work itself, as though in a ‘side-by-side’ rather than ‘face-to-face’ exchange. All sorts of things seemingly unrelated to the art work may find their way into the poem. How much of a problem this is depends on which side of the visual/verbal fence you’re standing on. If you like your ekphrasis to describe, then a poem that makes no obvious reference to the art work probably won’t be your cup of tea. If you like it to interpret, then the options for reading ekphrasis broaden out considerably.

While there is no set prescription for how to write an ekphrastic poem, when I write poems about art I tend to do it in one of two ways:

The first is to view the work and let my mind interpret it through language, primarily using my imagination as a guide. This way tends to be part instinct, part reportage. I take notes as I go and do my best not to censor any thoughts that come into my mind – banal thoughts mainly, like ghosts of a consciousness I’m not entirely aware is even operating. Did I remember to feed the cat this morning? How much time I have I got left on the parking meter? I listen to these ‘other’ thoughts because sometimes, when the prosaic partners up with the contemplative, interesting things can happen in the resulting poem.

The second way I like to write ekphrasis is to read the wall text and artist's statement first and then view the work. Both ways have merit. In this latter case, I feel armed. I feel equipped to 'read' the work. But the obvious issue with this way is influence. If I know that Culbert was responding to variegations of light on Venetian water, what do I myself make of the art work? What about the fact that the two works on display are part of a larger installation, made with the architecture of the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà in mind? If I'm prompted to understand this work in its original context, can I still maintain my own sense of curiosity and imaginative reach as I look at them in situ? These are of course very difficult questions to answer, but are interesting to consider when setting out to write poetry about art.

In the case of the poem here, I chose the first option. I read the wall text only after I'd viewed the work and taken plenty of notes.

In the end

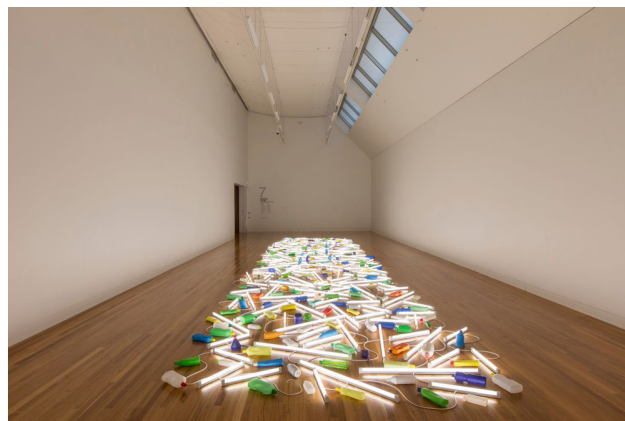
If you stood blindfolded in front of *Drop* and *Daylight flotsam Venice* and someone read my poem to you, what would the image you create in your mind look like? When the blindfold was removed and you looked upon the work, would you say, 'Ah yes, that's just how I imagined it.' No, most likely not. Ekphrasis is the verbal interpretation of a visual interpretation. Its aim is not necessarily truth or even accuracy, but to offer the reader a poetic take on a specific art work or exhibition by a particular artist or artists. We have catalogues and wall texts carefully written by curators, and often the artist themselves, if it's information we seek. An ekphrastic poem ushers the reader into a different realm entirely, one where the vacillations of the poet's thoughts and words reflect, challenge, and meditate upon the visual. For the poet, I like to think that the art work acts, paradoxically, as a springboard for lyrical flights of fancy, and as an anchor that keeps the poet's focus and attention throughout.

There is every chance that when I visit the exhibition again, on a different day, in a different frame of mind, the poem I write may not resemble the one here one iota. To me, this is part of the magic and mystery of ekphrasis; an ekphrastic poem can never be the final word on an art work because of its deeply subjective nature, but it can represent a moment in time. It can act as witness, a small testament from one who was there.

Note

The title of the poem, 'Light and things', is taken from a statement by the 2013 New Zealand Commissioner for the

Venice Biennale, Jenny Harper. www.creativenz.govt.nz/en/news/new-zealand-exhibition-lights-up-2013-venice-biennale



Bill Culbert, *Daylight flotsam Venice*, 2013, plastic and fluorescent lights. Te Papa (2013-0030-1/AA to VM)



Bill Culbert, *Drop*, 2013, furniture and fluorescent lights. Te Papa (2013-0030-2/A to S)

IMAGES NO LONGER AVAILABLE DUE TO LICENSING

Bill Culbert, *Where are the other two?*. Photograph by Jennifer French, 2013

Bill Culbert, *Bebop*. Photograph by Jennifer French, 2013