

**Excerpted from: Crossing the Liminal:
Why Write Poetry About Art?**

Lauren Camp

I account for large swaths of my life by the art I've seen. On a trip to Dallas once, I experienced a giant Rauschenberg "combine"—pattern, color, and image, all fearlessly cozying up together. I have no reason to remember the exact location, or why I was there. It was the art that mattered, and I stood beneath it, and let it talk to me for a long time.

At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a 10-part Cy Twombly series scribbled out my more organized perspective. Somewhere else, Basquiat's crossed-out, downtown drawings. In Taos, Agnes Martin's plain and particular lines. In Marfa, Donald Judd's boxes. The Rodin sculptures in Paris. I could go on.

What affects us in art is deeply personal: a photograph, an illustration, a style, a color. Unfolding our predilections is like choosing the best donuts (crüllers or jelly-filled?) or the best place to vacation (Club Med or the ancient Mayan city of Tikal?). There is no *best*. Likewise for the makers; they choose the media and techniques that offer the right amount of tension between the strain of succeeding and the skills they possess. The painter Georgia O'Keeffe avowed, "Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words." She invoked cow bones and flowers with her brushes, spilling out their gleaming and elusive details so we, her audience, would look more closely at each notable moment and shadow, and find new resonances in what we already know. Though her statement was true for her, many poets have taken her paintings further—using her creations as their initial canvas and crafting magnificent written pieces.

Aldous Huxley wrote in *Texts and Pretexts* (1932), "Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him. It is a gift for dealing with the accidents of existence, not the accidents themselves. By a happy dispensation of nature, the poet generally possesses the gift of experience in conjunction with that of expression." At whatever point a writer decides to explore a work of art with words, he or she is striving for the same thing writers always seek: an alchemy of knowledge and surprise. The completeness of the experience begins with the attention the piece commands for the writer, a connection that might not make sense for even the person standing beside the writer in the museum.

Then, there are the preparations of words, the layering and shaping of lines on a page. The inevitability of where the writer is likely to go in these words, where the writer *always* goes in his or her poetry, is derailed and flung in an entirely new direction (or dimension). The poetry takes on unexpected structure, influenced by the artwork.

The ekphrastic tradition of writing about, or describing, art comes from the early Greeks. The word *ekphrasis* (or *ecphrasis*) can be broken down to *ek*, “out,” and *phrasis*, “speaking.” Speaking out. Over and over, writers have used art to speak their words... to empower their words. British poet W.H. Auden and American writer William Carlos Williams both reframed a tragic Greek myth, referencing Breughel’s painting “The Fall of Icarus.” It is a worthy exercise to compare the two poems (Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”) to see how they address and respect the originating artwork.

Poetry about art is unlike a critical art analysis. It is not an account of the exact fixture of this piece in the artist’s oeuvre, or an evaluation of how the artist fit into the art movement of the time. Any particle of the work can be considered. The writer could exalt the whole, or notice the perimeter of the painting.

Writers can’t mimic what’s on the canvas or the pedestal or in the frame, in part because they are not using like to draw like. Instead, they take their medium of words, and their habitual tone and style, and from this, suggest another way to see. Artwork becomes a surface from which to create. The writer could exercise a personal response to the work, or zigzag into an entirely imagined story. “One of the reasons that writers — rather than art critics have written so well about artists and painting is that they retain these delusions... about picture-making,” writes Geoff Dyer, in *Out of Sheer Rage*, his memoir/analysis of D.H. Lawrence. He continues, “When writers write about painting, they are in a sense on vicarious holiday.” They are leaving the facts of their normal material, and moving into a realm that allows the background, middle ground or foreground to radically change them. They are making space in the room of the mind for the visual to blow through and sing to them.

Both mediums—visual art and poetry—offer the potential for expressing shared human experience. Spanish poet Ramón Gaya, in his poem, “From Painter to Painter,” writes “...to paint is to probe—as the light fades—/ the brink of an abyss with your hand...”. It is the same for poetry.

Writers notoriously fear the “blank page.” In ekphrastic writing, the poet avoids this by beginning with what he or she sees. There is already color and image to transfer to the paper. There is the conspicuously obvious, and then the meaningful conversation the writer has with the piece that may be beneath the surface.

Santa Fe, New Mexico

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