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Neil Murphy

In a reflective afterword to a recent volume of essays on ekphrasis, one of the most prominent theorists of ekphrasis over the past few decades, James Heffernan, observes that “ekphrasis is probably the most Protean of all critical terms we have” (“Afterword” 257). While Heffernan’s earlier claim that “*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation*” continues to provoke debate, as we shall see hereafter, his acknowledgment of the Protean, and contentious, status of how we define ekphrasis is broadly reflective of the current critical status of the field (*Museum* 3). In fact, much of the critical reaction in recent years—including David Kennedy and Richard Meek’s 2019 volume, *Ekphrastic Encounters: New interdisciplinary essays on literature and the visual arts*, in which Heffernan’s recent afterword appears, and an influential 2018 special issue of the journal, *Poetics Today*—speaks to a reassessment of the precise meaning of the term ekphrasis in the context of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century aesthetic and cultural shifts.

One of the dramatic shifts, in literary terms, that has occurred in recent decades is what Renate Brosch characterizes as “an astonishing upsurge of ekphrasis in popular novels” (“Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels” 403), particularly with respect to their featuring of canonical works by famous artists. She suggests that “the more we are surrounded by the digital, the more precious surviving art objects from periods of manual production become” (403). While Brosch’s observations, with respect to popular novels—the subject of attention in her essay—are persuasive, this phenomenon is not restricted to popular novels. A similar fascination with ekphrasis, and often with respect to canonical painters, has occurred in novels and stories that generally would be considered artistically and formally innovative, rather than “popular.” Some specific examples include Gabriel Josipovici’s *Contre-Jour: A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard* (1986), Carole Maso’s *The Art Lover* (1990), A. S. Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories* (1994), Susan Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (2000), Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* (2001), Jennifer Higgie’s *Bedlam* (2006), Ciaran Carson’s *The Pen Friend* (2009), Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), Georges Perec’s *Portrait of a Man* (2012), Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014), Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* (2014), John Banville’s *The Blue Guitar* (2015), Alicia Kopf’s *Brother in Ice* (2016), Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), Rachel Cusk’s *Second Place* (2021), and countless other narrative fictions by these authors, and others.

In addition, Gabriele Rippl views ekphrasis to be both important and topical in contemporary fiction, considering its popularity to be linked to developments in other media:

Today's readers are accustomed to retrieving information distributed on split TV screens, on the Internet, and from printed material such as newspapers and magazines, which themselves increasingly combine words with images. This is one reason why contemporary novels and poetry collections often include pictures, maps, diagrams, and other visual depictions and employ ekphrastic devices (266).

While Rippl's argument is compelling, the fact that literary ekphrasis continues to thrive in a multimedia world is, at first glance at least, surprising. In fact, critics like Jay David Bolter and Marie-Laure Ryan have argued that the emergence of a dominant digital media would diminish the allure of ekphrasis. Bolter argued that "[p]opular prose and multimedia are striving for the natural sign in the realm of the visual rather than through heightened verbal expression" (265), and hence, the verbal intervention that ekphrasis represents would be less significant.

However, as Brosch correctly observes, "the frequency of ekphrasis has increased rather than decreased in the last two and a half decades. Despite what is often considered a visual overabundance on the World Wide Web, ekphrastic occurrences are surprisingly prevalent in recent novels, poems, short stories, and in drama, with no signs of remission" ("Ekphrasis in the Digital Age" 228–229). Brosch argues that the reason for these increased occurrences may in fact be the "very prevalence of images, given that ekphrasis responds to and participates in the culture of images. Something in ekphrasis must still speak to its recipients in a way that reproductions do not" (229). Similarly, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux suggests that the "widespread presence of ekphrasis in twentieth-century poetry" (3) is best understood in the context of a culture of images that now dominates—which in turn resonates with W. J. T. Mitchell's observations about a "pictorial turn" in the twentieth century (*Picture Theory* 3). So, a widespread saturation of images in the digital age has enhanced a fascination with paintings and the value of a critical or aesthetic intervention (via ekphrasis) increases rather than decreases.

Much of the contentious nature of the discourse surrounding ekphrasis has hinged on two key factors: the principle that a text must be a representation of an existing representation; and the view that conflict or paragone defines the hierarchal relationship between word and image. Critics like Heffernan and Bergmann Loizeaux have argued for an understanding of ekphrasis that insists on the specificity of the object of ekphrasis, on an *actual* painting (or representation) to which we can refer. Bergmann Loizeaux defines ekphrasis, for example, as "the poem that addresses a work of art" (1) and claims that "writing on a work of art differs from writing on a natural object in that the work of art constitutes a statement already made about/in the world" (5). This essentially rejects Murray Krieger's position in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), in which an understanding of the term in line with what he argues was the original meaning assigned to it by the Greeks, "a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art" (7), is preferred. Krieger sought to "broaden the range of possible ekphrastic objects by re-connecting ekphrasis to all 'word-painting.' I want to trace the ekphrastic as it is seen occurring all along the spectrum of spatial and visual emulation in words" (9). Krieger's critical position has been resisted by critics like Heffernan, whose influential definition—"ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation" (*Museum* 3)—remained central to ekphrastic studies for many years. Heffernan's position rests on the view that Krieger's "word-paintings" are distinct from ekphrasis and that there is a fundamental difference between pictorialism, iconicity, and ekphrasis: "What

distinguishes these two things from ekphrasis is that both of them aim chiefly to represent natural objects and artifacts rather than works of representational art” (3), but “ekphrasis differs from both iconicity and pictorialism because it explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*” (4).

Clear fault lines have also been evident with respect to the question of the defining significance of conflict, or *paragone*. For Heffernan, “Ekphrasis is a literary mode that turns on the antagonism” between word and image (*Museum* 7), while Mitchell refers to “rival alien modes of representation” (*Picture Theory* 156). More recently, in his *Writing for Art* (2008), Stephen Cheeke acknowledges that “the notion of the *paragone*, a struggle, a contest, a confrontation, remains central to all thinking about ekphrasis” (21). However, he then proceeds to offer a persuasive discussion that suggests that the relationship between, say, a poem and a painting may be construed differently. Cheeke’s discussion of Derek Mahon’s poem “Courtyards in Delft” (1981), which responds to Pieter de Hooch’s *Courtyards in Delft* (1658), concludes by claiming that “it would not quite be correct to say that the poet (or poem) somehow harbours a wish to control or dominate the image-as-other, or to overcome the differences between poem and painting, even though these differences are also at the root of the exchange” (36). Effectively, this represents a challenge to the notion of a fixed *paragonal* relationship. In fact, the positioning of *paragone* at the center of image-text relations has been frequently contested in recent years, with the notion of “encounter” having frequently replaced the emphasis on contestation that originated in G. E. Lessing’s work and that has remained central to the thinking of influential critics like Heffernan. As Laurence Petit argues, “the ‘paragone’ or rivalry between the Sister Arts seems to be a thing of the past, as we enter an era where verbal literacy and visual literacy no longer compete, but function together in a true ‘alchemy of the word and the image’” (“Alchemy” 320). Furthermore, Kennedy and Meek introduce their compelling volume *Ekphrastic Encounters* (2019) by placing this very issue at the forefront of their concerns and acknowledge the shifting paradigm: “Indeed critics have begun to confront, or perhaps struggle with, this critical paradigm, and to query the traditional view that ekphrasis necessarily represents a struggle for mastery or dominance” (3). Nonetheless, they also concede that there has “always been an opposition or dialectic between these two models—antagonism and cooperation—and indeed this tension is itself the subject of debate within the theory and practice of ekphrasis” (3).

A critical clamor for a more porous interpretation of ekphrasis has emerged in recent years, partly in sympathy with Krieger’s position, but also in the context of a radically transformed multimedia world, as well as a growing appreciation of the fact that not all works of art, to begin with, are themselves representations. The emergence of prose fiction as a major focus of interest in the context of ekphrasis has also contributed to an enlargement of focus, primarily because the novel form has incorporated numerous innovative encounters between word and image including, but not limited to, a diverse range of ekphrastic interventions. In this context, there is little surprise that many of the more innovative reconceptualizations of ekphrasis in recent years have been offered by critics who are engaged with prose fiction. For instance, Tamar Yacobi refers to ekphrasis as an “aesthetic composite” (18), rather than a representation of a representation, more appropriately reflecting the way that visual images, or visually allusive narrative processes, define prose fiction. Furthermore, the way that many contemporary writers creatively deploy narrative discourses about paintings, photographs, sculptures, installations, and exhibitions in their fictions is fundamentally different to a poetics defined by realist representation. Such discourses also often play a substantial compositional role in the novels; as we shall see, images are often absorbed into, and define, the narrative structure of the novels rather than simply offer interpretative descriptions

as a proxy for storytelling or to announce an epiphanic moment. Ultimately, many innovative contemporary novels impel us to reconsider the very definitions of ekphrasis, or as Liliane Louvel has it, to substantially “rethink ekphrastic categories” (255).

Several initial examples reveal both a contemporary diversity of approach and a perhaps inevitable profusion of definition. Claus Clüver, for example, in an essay that considers novels like Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* (1999), Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), Susan Vreeland’s *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), and Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014), among others, eventually rests on a complex definition that emerges as a result of his examination of these diverse examples of ekphrastic prose fiction: “Ekphrasis is an enargetic representation of non-kinetic visual configurations as semiotic objects. It verbalizes a real or fictive viewer’s perceptions of, or reactions to, characteristic features of configurations that exist, or suggests the perceived existence of such configurations in virtual, or fictive, reality. Its materials are purely verbal” (252). Clüver’s definition allows for a broadening of the objects of ekphrasis to include fictional visual configurations. Brosch too offers a less restrictive definition: “ekphrasis is a literary response to a visual image or visual images,” which she views as necessarily accommodating both “performance and response” (“Ekphrasis in the Digital Age” 227).

Perhaps more crucial, especially in the context of a consideration of prose fiction, Brosch’s definition encompasses both “fully fledged extended instances as well as abbreviated ekphrastic references that emerge as mere traces of a visual art work” (“Ekphrasis in the Digital Age” 227). The key for Brosch is to describe “a process rather than a one-on-one relation,” a feature that has a particular resonance for certain kinds of novels that are structurally saturated with a variety of traces of origin paintings (227). Also, in the context of prose fiction, Rippl identifies the sheer variety of word-image configurations in contemporary culture as the primary reason for a new understanding of ekphrasis: “In order to adequately describe the manifold word-image configurations in contemporary literature and the visual arts, as well as the new media, the concept of ekphrasis needs to be adapted, modified, and expanded” (267). The critical horizon has clearly expanded, and now reflects an openness about the specificity of the object of ekphrasis, while also being devoid of any sense of paragone. The model is instead now suffused with a sense of non-hierarchical encounters rather than a competition between word and image.

Ruth Webb has argued that there have been so many attempts to redefine ekphrasis to “fit the critic’s selection of works and to accommodate a particular critical stance, one is tempted to ask whether there is in fact a single phenomenon that can usefully be called ‘ekphrasis’” (7). It is certainly true that many treatments of ekphrasis and literature begin with a clarification of terms or a definition, itself a testament to a dynamic field, nowadays infused by an ever-increasing variety of engagements between word and image that extend beyond ekphrasis (irrespective of the definitions deployed). Nonetheless, with respect to the two primary disjunctions between the early work by Krieger and the subsequent interventions by Mitchell, Heffernan, and Bergmann Loizeaux, most recent responses are generally aligned. Firstly, a more inclusive definition of what constitutes a work of art—or visual configuration—within a literary text has emerged. Secondly, the term encounter, or similar variants, has largely replaced a sense of conflict between mediums; or, as David Kennedy has it, “There is no doubt that art can present us with sudden challenges, but we should be cautious about the idea that this means that ekphrasis is inherently *paragonal*, that is, a struggle between different modes of representation” (*The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry* 13).

As indicated above, a key feature in the increased permeable status of ekphrasis has been the increased critical activity with respect to the relationship between prose fiction and ekphrasis,

which in turn derives from an extraordinary increase in the prevalence of ekphrastic prose fiction and in fiction that engages with the visual arts more generally. While the earlier wave of critics of ekphrasis were primarily focused on poetry (Krieger, Heffernan, Bergmann Loizeaux, and Cheeke), more recent critics like Louvel, Brosch, Rippl, Petit, Nancy Pedri, Sylvia Karastathi, and Asya Sakine Uçar have shifted their focus to a consideration of ekphrasis in the context of prose fiction. That this occurs globally is also worth consideration, with important ekphrastic prose fictions written both throughout the western traditions, as indicated above, and elsewhere (e.g., Xi Xi's "Marvels of a Floating City" [1997], Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* [2012], Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* [1998], Amos Oz's *The Same Sea* [1999], Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof* [2006], Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* [2007], and Haruki Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* [2017]). This both testifies to the transcultural narrative impact of Mitchell's "pictorial turn" and, more specifically, to the widespread proliferation of the use of ekphrasis in world fiction.

While the broader cultural impact of the digital, as observed by critics like Rippl and Brosch, is likely a major contributory factor to the increased use of ekphrasis in fiction, the consequent varied usage of the technique in contemporary prose fiction has, in turn, had the impact of reconstituting what ekphrasis means. The sheer proliferation of its use in fiction has had the effect of expanding our understanding of both its limits and possibilities in critical terms. Where the fiction has gone, the critical response has followed. Fiction, as we shall see, has both been enriched by the folding of ekphrasis into its narrative systems while simultaneously enhancing our understanding of what ekphrasis is, and can be, primarily because it functions differently to poetry. For example, as Brosch suggests, "Narrative ekphrasis involves the performance of seeing. By staging a visual observation, narratives are liable to reflect on particular ways of seeing and on the relation between the subject and the object of a significant act of visual scrutiny" ("Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels" 406). Indeed, many ekphrastic encounters between word and image in contemporary fictions are framed against broader artistic subjects, which frequently reflect on ways of seeing, artistic process, and larger aesthetic observations.

Furthermore, Heffernan reminds us that ekphrasis was historically deployed as epic digression, "a descriptive detour from the high road of epic narrative" in epic poetry, that offered peripheral insights, as in the case of Achilles's shield (*Museum* 5). However, its specific use in poetry from the eighteenth century onwards meant that "the representation of a work of art is no longer surrounded by a larger narrative that subsumes it," and instead the "work of art becomes the poet's chief or only subject" (134). While contemporary prose fictions, especially by authors like John Banville, Ali Smith, A. S. Byatt, and Han Kang, involve a lot more than a detour, it is also clear that individual paintings in many ekphrastic novels extend far beyond being their author's "chief or only subject," and are instead both folded into larger ekphrastic structural frames, and often radically reconstituted within the storyworlds. This occurs in numerous ways. For example, as Brosch suggests, there may be a recontextualization of a painting "into unlikely contemporary settings," to "open surprising new perspectives and to make startling departures from the readers' expectations," even as they often "keep alive the enduring linkage between ekphrasis and epiphany, which has been one of the elements of ekphrastic writing since Romanticism" ("Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels" 406). In addition, several novelists like Banville and Smith splice, merge, and invent paintings or painters. Furthermore, what constitutes a painting, or a work of art, is continually negotiated within the frames of various novels; if, for instance, a scene is presented in the compositional language of the visual arts, can it be considered ekphrasis? How far can the definition be loosened before ekphrasis becomes pictorialism?

Perhaps on its most obvious (and least technically innovative) level, artists, paintings, museums, and galleries feature heavily in popular contemporary fiction as aspects of plot. In such works, historically acclaimed works of art tend to act as the central objects around which the narrative takes shape (e.g., Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* [2000], Michael Frayn's *Headlong* [1999], Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* [1999], Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* [2013], Neil Olson's *The Black Painting* [2018], and Gina Buonagura and Janice Kirk's *The Sidewalk Artist* [2006]). A substantial number of these novels are also crime novels or thrillers, which tend to emphasize intricacy of plot above aesthetic or technical innovation. The mystery of missing or stolen paintings (*The Goldfinch*), the mysterious linkage of paintings and the otherworldly (*The Black Painting*), and the power or value of art that can drive a man to despair (*Headlong*), all become points of departure for such plots. While these novels demonstrate the prevalence of widespread popular interest in the subject matter across several subgenres of the contemporary novel, and have much merit in this context, they tend not to foreground aesthetic discourse and/or the narrative innovations that emerge in the encounter between word and image.

Alternatively, novels like Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) and Rachel Cusk's *Second Place* (2021) offer some initial examples of the diverse ways that ekphrasis functions in contemporary fiction. In *Open City*, the narrator visits a gallery in New York, where he encounters John Brewster, Jr.'s *One Shoe Off* (1807), which has a profound impact on him. After a standard, detailed ekphrastic description of the painting, its effect on the narrator is foregrounded: "I lost all track of time before these images, fell deep into their world, as if all the time between them and me had somehow vanished [...]. When I eventually walked down the stairs and out of the museum, it was with the feeling of someone who had returned to the earth from a great distance" (39–40). The scene recalls George Steiner's suggestion that "certain paintings 'temporize,' generate their own time within time, even beyond the powers of language [...]. Such paintings draw us into a time-grid integral wholly to themselves" (59). While seeking to translate some of this quality to his prose, Cole blends the impact of the painting with the broader narrative in the novel, in which a relatively isolated consciousness negotiates his way through a complex urban landscape and momentarily finds a calming stillness in the gallery. In this respect, the painting (and gallery) is a narrative detour rather than a primary element of the novel's storytelling, even as it registers a significance for the broader context of the novel.

It is also a reminder that while there are differences between the use of ekphrasis in poetry and prose, one of the central principles that has long characterized ekphrasis in poetry frequently remains—the use of the ekphrastic moment to herald a moment of personal revelation or epiphany. As Brosch has it, in the context of modernist writing:

Modernist ekphrastic writing was often concerned to generate an epiphany by probing the depths of a spectator's consciousness. The fictional moment of looking at a work of art was very often a moment of startling recognition, of revelation and even epiphany—an effect that is premised on the connection between sight and insight in the Western philosophical tradition, which has imbued vision with epistemological relevance and made it central to defining the relations of the self to the world. ("Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels" 416)

This is similarly the case in Cusk's *Second Place*, a fictional rewriting of Mabel Dodge Luhan's memoir *Lorenzo in Taos* (1932). In Cusk's novel, a woman, M, offers an ekphrastic response to the work of a fictional painter, L. As with Cole's novel, the response of the perceiver signals the profound mental impact of the painting on the character, and the novel more generally:

Looking at it, the emotion I felt was pity, pity for myself and for all of us: the kind of wordless pity a mother might feel for her mortal child, who nonetheless she brushes and dresses so tenderly. It gave, you might say, the final touch to my strange, exalted state—I felt myself falling out of the frame I had lived in for years, the frame of human implication in a particular set of circumstances. From that moment, I ceased to be immersed in the story of my own life and became distinct from it. (Cusk 12–13)

The impact of the painting on M extends beyond the specificity of the moment and saturates the forward momentum of the entire novel both in terms of the plot (she invites the artist to live on her remote farm as a resident artist) and its persistent fascination with art. Even the landscape itself becomes entangled with artistic perspective: “when I looked at the marsh, for instance, which seemed to obey so many of his rules of light and perception that it often resembled a painted work by him, I was in a sense looking at the works by L that he had not created, and was therefore—I suppose—creating them myself” (60). While such moments are, strictly speaking, more akin to pictorialism rather than ekphrasis, there is a delicate balance here between fictional works of art and objects of landscapes that are framed artistically, as opposed to merely descriptive scenarios. While such novels present ekphrastic moments as interludes, or momentary digressions within larger narratives, their implications extend throughout. Nonetheless, the implications are thematic, even if—in Cusk’s case, especially—some degree of artistic discourse is generated. Furthermore, both Cole’s and Cusk’s novels deploy paintings—both real and imaginary—as the primary focal points of their ekphrases.

In many contemporary fictions, the objects of the ekphrastic gaze include forms other than paintings. For example, Ciaran Carson’s *The Pen Friend* (2009) evocatively focuses on both postcards and fountain pens, which act as signposts that mark various stages in the narrator’s life, with each of the postcards also bearing key coded words. The full-color postcard images also open each chapter as visual markers. Alternatively, Carole Maso’s novel, *The Art Lover* (1990), features what might be termed ekphrastic gestures by generating hybrid remembered moments that read like ekphrases, or what she terms word pictures (8) and tableaux: “She breathes deeply and sighs. She is in love with light. Her eye caresses each blade of grass, each lavender shadow. She stretches her legs out. There are ants, I’m sure, the first ones of the season, now near her ankle. Does she hum a song? Something about her suggests to me she’s not from our time” (7). Novels like *The Pen Friend* and *The Art Lover* offer clear examples of the ways contemporary fictions extend beyond traditional painting-based ekphrases.

Other innovative examples that transgress traditional ekphrastic boundaries include Alessandro Baricco’s *Silk* (1996), in which tableaux and the near stilling of time are used to offer meditative emphasis to key moments, all in a novel that seeks to mirror the lightness of silk by virtue of its scant emphasis on concrete details. While the novel does not feature specific instances of ekphrasis, it may be argued that the entire novel represents a work of the art that itself invites ekphrastic commentary. For example, the novel continually shifts towards a resonant stillness and silence, as when Hervé Joncour speaks to Hara Kei and his unnamed female companion: “The room seemed to have slipped into an irreversible silence” (31). Similarly, the context in which the events unfold is frequently cast as an invention, or image, of some kind. Hara Kei’s dwelling, we are told, “seemed to be drowning in a lake of silence” and there were “no doors, and on paper walls shadows appeared and disappeared without a sound. It did not seem like life: if there was a name for all that, it was: theatre” (45). While such gestures extend beyond traditional understandings of ekphrasis, they are clearly closely related because the world itself is reconstituted as forms of art.

So too with A. S. Byatt's attempts to mirror Matisse's use of painting in verbal form. With reference to Byatt's "Art Work," a story from *The Matisse Stories*, for example, Asya Sakine Uçar sees distinct parallels between Matisse's artistic "style and vision" in the construction of the narrative in the stories (187), while Petit, writing of the same story, argues that Byatt is "trying to render with words the form and the color of Matisse's paintings, especially *Le Silence habité des maisons*, whose ekphrasis—or verbal representation of a visual representation—opens the narrative and generates the story" ("Inscribing" 397). In both cases, an argument for a fusion of word and image is being made, that hinges on, but is not limited to, traditional understandings of ekphrasis. The direct engagement with the painting acts only as a point of initiation.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) also exemplifies an expansion of the potential limits of ekphrasis by staging the ekphrastic encounter in a multilayered fashion. Rather than focusing entirely on the actual painting that her unnamed brother-in-law renders on the body of the primary character, Yeong-hye, the narrative instead details the painting process in significant detail. This process is described in several distinct ekphrastic ways. Firstly, the act of painting her body:

First he swept up the hair that was falling over her shoulders, and then, starting from the nape of her neck, he began to paint. Half-open buds, red and orange, bloomed splendidly on her shoulders and back, and slender stems twined down her side. When he reached the hump of her right buttock he painted an orange flower in full bloom, with a thick, vivid yellow pistil protruding from its center. He left the left buttock, the one with the Mongolian mark, undecorated. (91)

This combination of narrated process and ekphrastic description emphasizes the encounter between narration and image, highlighting the fusion of both. Furthermore, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law also films the process, which enhances the initial ekphrasis and extends its range to include his camera-focused perspective: "He panned the camera down the ridge of her side and over the soft curve of her buttocks, then filmed first the flowers on her back, the flowers of night, and then the flowers of the sun on her front. Once he'd finished this he moved on to her Mongolian mark, faint like some blue relic in the gradually fading light" (96).

Finally, in yet another iteration of the ekphrastic process, the brother-in-law reviews and edits the recording:

The tapes had turned out better than he'd expected. The lighting, her movements, the atmosphere these evoked—all were breathtakingly compelling. He toyed briefly with the idea of adding some background music, before deciding to keep it silent, to make it seem as though everything on-screen were occurring in a kind of vacuum. Her gentle tossing, her naked body littered with gorgeous blooms, the Mongolian mark—against a background of silence, a soundless harmony recalling something primeval, something eternal. (101)

In all variants, both the process event (of painting or filming/editing) and the painting itself are described, always resting finally on the central image of the Mongolian mark, a birthmark that somehow defines her essence to the brother-in-law. The fusion of narrated process with ekphrastic description occurs frequently in contemporary fiction, often with the effect of integrated slippage from visual image to sequential narration. For example, in Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989), the protagonist Freddie Montgomery creates an imagined sub-narrative account of the creation of the painting at the center of the novel, Willem Drost's *Painting of a Woman* (1654)—an episode

that has significant implications for the primary narrative account, where the painting occupies central significance for the plot and artistic intent of the novel.¹

The ekphrastic variations in *The Vegetarian* are closely related to the central motivations of the novel, particularly with respect to issues related to embodiment and image, gender, and the materiality of existence. In addition, even when an image is not explicitly depicted or discussed, a certain slippage between the ekphrastic encounters and other narrated events is evident in the section that features the artist brother-in-law, particularly with respect to the depiction of color and images; an intense transformative visual awareness continually commands his perspective. For instance, as he watches a performance, the dancers in motion become “a blur of movement, with individual figures impossible to make out” (63), while on another occasion, after he has completed the painting on Yeong-hye, he feels as though his body were brimming with “intense hues, all this latent energy inside him” (106–107). His experience of reality has been transformed by the acts of painting, and seeing, that derive from the painting: “The monochrome world, entirely devoid of the colors he was now experiencing, had had a calmness that was beautiful in its way, but it wasn’t somewhere he could go back to” (107).

Among the most aesthetically innovative responses to ekphrasis in contemporary fiction are those works that fully absorb their visual encounters to such a degree that the narrative logic of the novel is completely predicated on the presence of visual images. Banville’s and Smith’s works exemplify such deep structural integration between word and image, and may be considered among the most innovative and fluid uses of ekphrasis. Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014), for instance, extends far beyond a descriptive and interpretive encounter with the work of Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa, in particular *Saint Vincent Ferrer* (1473–1475) in London’s National Gallery and his frescoes for the Hall of Months in the Palazzo Schifanoia (1469–1470), in Ferrara, Italy. Set in two historical periods, the 1460s and 450 years later, the primary ekphrases in the novel act as a mini treatise on what the narrator views to be the performative self-consciousness that lies at the heart of all art. One section is narrated by an adolescent girl, George, and the other by the fictional del Cossa (who is female in the novel and whose historical persona is blended with her role as a character in the painting), who crosses temporal lines to witness George. Smith also published the novel in structural variations: in some versions George’s persona opens the novel, while in others del Cossa’s does so.

Of major aesthetic, and ekphrastic, significance is the manner in which *Saint Vincent Ferrer* acts as a kind of portal that imaginatively permits the narrator and the ghost of del Cossa to fictionally cross temporal and artistic frames. Rather than simply acting as a plot detour or epiphanic occurrence, the painting acts as the dominant compositional device from which all else resonates. Clüver claims that the primary significance of Smith’s approach resides in how “the many forms in which the works of del Cossa” act like “verbal representations of the performance of a song or a symphony, a ballet or a high-wire act, a play or a film,” and “create what we call ‘images’ of visual, aural, kinetic or performatic phenomena in the reader’s, viewer’s, or listener’s mind” (249–250). As such, an imaginative transcendence of the verbal is achieved by virtue of the almost seamless way image becomes text, and text is shaped by image. That the entire novel is also enclosed, contained, between images from del Cossa’s frescoes (on the internal front and back covers) implicitly suggests that the entire novel is fully entwined in the paintings.

As Yvonne Liebermann proposes, the fusion of verbal and visual representation is emphasized “through the integration of two images that frame the book: one at the beginning of the novel and one at the end. The images are two figures taken from Francesco del Cossa’s March fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia: the ‘infidel worker’ and a musician who could either be male or female” (146).

Brosch acknowledges the high degree of integration but frames her reading in ethical terms, usefully pointing to the way technical innovation often merges with other concerns:

While she herself is the subject of the painter's empathetic ghostly attention, the girl George recovers from grieving through remembering her dead mother's empathetic readings of the artist. Without crude didacticism, art is represented as creating intersubjective and empathetic connections across strict ontological divides. Ultimately, ekphrasis moves the characters beyond the binary relationship of viewing subject and perceived object, and by extension from their isolation as marginal characters to engagement with others. ("Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels" 419)

Similarly, Banville's use of ekphrasis as a complex aesthetic device has long been acknowledged as a characteristic feature of his narrative fictions: in all his novels from *The Book of Evidence* onwards, one can discern traces of the ekphrastic—depending on what definition of ekphrasis one accepts. While *The Book of Evidence*, with some justification, has attracted much attention in the context of ekphrasis,² the following novel, *Ghosts* (1993), extends the narrative possibilities of the verbal-visual interaction in a far more integrated manner.³ Its primary narrative frame is predicated on at least two paintings by the eighteenth-century French artist, Jean Antoine Watteau, *Gilles* and *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, while a third, *Le pèlerinage à l'isle de Cythère*, also has a presence in the novel. Freddie explicitly alludes to Watteau's "pèlerinages or a delicate fête galante" (*Ghosts* 30) and to "Cythera" on several occasions (31, 216), attributing them to the fictional painter, Jean Vaublin. *Le monde d'or*, the "Vaublin" painting that dominates the narrative fabric of *Ghosts*, is effectively an amalgam of the three Watteau paintings, which in turn mirrors the surface action of Banville's novel.

The interweaving of Vaublin, Watteau, and Banville finds expression in numerous ways in the novel, as when the character, Flora, notices a color reproduction of *Le monde d'or* in the bedroom which features "a sort of clown dressed in white standing up with his arms hanging, and people behind him walking off down a hill to where a ship was waiting, and at the left a smirking man astride a donkey" (46). This is further emphasized a few pages later when she sees Felix and realizes that behind "his shoulder, like another version of him in miniature in a far-off mirror, the man on the donkey in the picture grinned at her gloatingly" (49). Felix is the harlequin in Watteau's *Gilles* (and thus Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*), while Freddie himself is identified as Gilles, the Pierrot, and the other characters in the painting reflect those waiting to re-board the ship.

The fictional painting, *Le monde d'or*, to which Banville devotes a detailed ekphrastic section late in the novel (225–231), focuses on the figure of the Pierrot in the painting *Gilles*. The painting is a partial reflection of the novel, and vice versa, while Gilles mirrors Freddie, in terms of his fictionality ("has he dropped from the sky or risen from the underworld?" [225]). In this instance, the ekphrastic commentary is extended to offer insight into the context of the novel itself that the characters inhabit and, furthermore, to offer self-reflexive commentary on the textual frame itself:

This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and as clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing

evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (231)

In essence, Banville folds the fluid narrative of the invented, hybridized painting into the sequential narrative of the novel. *Le Monde d'or*, itself a composite visual text, is thus allowed to spatially move beyond the frames of its fixed image, while the narrative fiction benefits from the occasional switch to the present tense to reflect some of the implicit stillness of the visual. The two forms become so closely aligned that any sense of hierarchy between word and image is erased.

Thereafter, Banville's *The Sea* (2005) extends the range of his absorption of the visual arts into his prose; allusions to Pierre Bonnard's paintings proliferate the novel, but it is the way that the narrative continually uses tableaux moments and the stilling of temporal sequence via a frequent use of the present tense that suggests an even more integrated approach. In the novel, the character-narrator Max Morden is writing a book on Bonnard (1867–1947), which nominally explains the multiple references to his paintings and life, including a compelling example of ekphrasis of one of Bonnard's most famous paintings of his wife, *Nude in the Bath, with Dog* (1941–1946),⁴ which I offer detailed analysis of elsewhere.⁵ Furthermore, the links between Max's and Bonnard's wives, Anna and Marthe, are key to the nature of the aesthetic transference that is achieved. Max is explicitly reminded of Anna when he looks at the painting of Marthe: "Her right hand rests on her thigh, stilled in the act of supination, and I think of Anna's hands on the table that first day when we came back from Mr Todd, her helpless hands with palms upturned" (153). Anna's hands also feature in a mirror reflection that Max sees in the window of Mr. Todd's window, "resting on her thigh" (15).

As with Marthe, in life and in Bonnard's paintings, the ill Anna too spends a lot of time in her bath. But the transference of the qualities of the visual are more subtle than such connections imply. While awaiting the cancer diagnosis in Anna's doctor's office, Max gazes out the window and sees Anna "palely reflected in the glass," like one of Bonnard's ghostly presences, portrait-like, "very straight on the metal chair in three-quarters profile," with "one knee crossed on the other and her joined hands resting on her thigh" (15). Anna, framed by the window, simultaneously occupies two ontological layers in the scene, one that contains implied movement, the other restful and silent. Later, having returned home, Anna is again transfigured via an accident of the light: "Light from the window behind me shone on the lenses of her spectacles where they hung at her collar bone, giving the eerie effect of another, miniature she standing close in front of her under her chin with eyes cast down" (21). While strictly speaking, this is not an instance of ekphrasis—Anna is a character, not a painting—but by virtue of the connection established between Anna and Marthe (between word and image, arguably), there is a sense in which Anna herself becomes a visual configuration.

Similarly, in a direct allusion to Johannes Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* (1657–1658), when the character Constance washes Rose's hair, she stands in "pose of Vermeer's maid with the milk jug, her head and her left shoulder inclined, one hand cupped under the heavy fall of Rose's hair and the other pouring a dense silvery sluice of water from a chipped enamel jug" (222). Again, a transference of visual signs occurs and, in a sense, Rose momentarily becomes Vermeer's milkmaid. This also occurs in less determinable ways and the suspicion remains that most of the major scenes in *The Sea* are derived from paintings. Most evident is the way that the language of art is continuously assigned to descriptions of plot events. For example, Max conceives of this episode in artistic terms: "This morning it was the state of my eyes that struck me most forcibly, the whites all craquelured over with those tiny bright-red veins and the moist lower lids inflamed and

hanging a little way loose of the eyeballs” (94). As Sean McGlade points out, “‘Craquelured’ is a word for the network of fine cracks in the surface of a painting; the borders between artwork and life described as artwork are constantly blurring for Morden” (136). While again, such moments would not traditionally have been viewed as ekphrasis, the deep fusing of narrative practice with the language of visual perspective, and the process of painting (and other forms of art), forces one to reconsider the implications of what constitutes a “work of art.” It is also evident that Banville himself is self-consciously playing with a form of deep intertextual fusion. After all, Bonnard too had a painting named *The Sea* (1944), which resonates with Banville’s innovative narrative on multiple levels, as it lends credence to the idea of book as painting, and painting as book, at least on structural and conceptual levels.

The use of ekphrasis in contemporary fiction is diverse. It is a common device in popular fiction, where the arts, museums, and galleries offer an attractive cultural frame for genre fiction. As with its use in narrative poetry, ekphrasis in fiction can herald epiphanic moments and also be used as interlude. However, other writers impel one to reconceive of the limits of ekphrasis especially because its use in fiction is often more expansive, more fully integrated in the extended narrative form. The precise limits of ekphrasis are continually tested, especially in work by writers like Han Kang. Others, like Ali Smith, John Banville, and A. S. Byatt, structurally infuse their works with ekphrasis to such a saturated degree that the rationale of their narratives is dominated by a poetics almost totally indebted to ekphrasis. Such novels, in particular, enlarge the very meaning of ekphrasis by forcing us to conceive of the limits of what constitutes art, whilst simultaneously marking a key stage in the development of the novel in which a pictorial turn has evidently saturated the novel form—perhaps the dominant literary form in the twenty-first century. The porous form of the novel has proven to be an eminently suitable place of cohabitation for the visual arts, and a form in which the continued, and deepening, significance of ekphrasis is increasingly evident, even in a multimedia world.

Notes

- 1 I explore the significance of both the Drost painting and Freddie’s imagined scenario in depth in my monograph, *John Banville*, pp. 63–77.
- 2 Several critics of Banville have considered his deployment of ekphrasis—particularly Joseph McMinin, Françoise Canon-Roger, Anja Müller, Sean McGlade, and Joakim Wrethed—in diverse and interesting ways.
- 3 See Murphy, “The Poetics of ‘Pure Invention’: John Banville’s *Ghosts*.”
- 4 The title Max uses is different to its correct title, *Nude in the Bath with Small Dog* (or *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*). This variation likely represents an inclusive attempt by Banville to allude to other Bonnard paintings, several of which feature a similar dog. See, for example, *Woman with Dog*, *Dressing Table and Mirror*, and *The Bathroom*, all of which include a dachshund.
- 5 See Murphy, *John Banville*, pp. 105–106.

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