

Surreal Look-ins



Ars Picturae – Ars Poetica by Rafal Olbinski & Ian Lukins (BOSZ art, 2018)

In this exquisitely produced collection of colourful paintings and charming poetical responses, two seasoned artists invite us to contemplate history, occasion, nature and myth. Napoleon once said: “A good sketch is better than a long speech.” What he failed to add was: “And the best response to a good sketch is a poem of 14 lines.”

Ekphrasis, also spelt ‘ekphrasis’, is poetry about a visual work of art. The most famous piece of ekphrasis in the English language is W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1939) based on “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”, a painting that until 1996 was attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder but is now regarded as merely a copy.

I myself was fascinated as a kid when I was introduced to Auden’s piece of ekphrasis, but it was only a lecture by Michael Benton in my adult life that inspired me to go down the ekphrasis trail. I acquired a copy of his and his brother Peter’s *Double Vision* (1990). I often get my students to do some ekphrasis, and they rise to the challenge. I have also written several ekphrastic poems myself.

Monica Prendergast is an education researcher who recommends ekphrasis as a dramatic form of writing that can engage students learning English as a second language. On pages 19-20 of her paper, “Ekphrasis And Inquiry: Artful Writing On Arts-Based Topics in Educational Research” (2004), she quotes from Michael Benton’s “Anyone for ekphrasis?” (1997): “[Ekphrasis] is a rhetorical game played by poets and a spectator sport for the reader who is invited to ‘attend twice at once.’” And she concludes: “Ekphrasis asks for this phenomenological double-mindedness of the spectator as well. We are attending to the catalyst for the poem as well as to the poem itself. A double challenge, yet doubly rewarding in engaging multiple intelligences – cognitive, imaginative/creative and affective – including both visual and verbal.”

A Polish-American and Welsh-English-Danish collaboration

Born in Poland in 1945, Rafal Olbinski emigrated to the United States in 1981, where he soon established himself as a prominent painter in the style of the famous Belgian surrealist, René Magritte. In the introduction to this magnificent, coffee-table book Olbinski calls retired *gymnasielærer* Ian Lukins his “poetic *alter ego*”. Lukins, who himself emigrated to Denmark from the UK in 1974, will be 70 next year, and

it was midway between their both turning 70 that Lukins wrote these 70 “poetic responses” to these 70 Olbinskis. The sonnets have been translated into Polish by Halina Cieplinska. It was she who sent Lukins’ first twelve sonnets to BOSZ, Olbinski’s publisher in Poland, thus establishing contact to Olbinski.

Olbinski’s paintings are simultaneously naturalistic and surrealistic. Rich in elemental symbolism, they come across as meditations upon the interconnectedness as well as the disconnect between the human, animal and plant worlds. We see a woman whose hair is the body of a black swan on a lake, birds that have a tree’s roots as their bodies, trees formed in the shape of a man’s and a woman’s head. There are many naturalistic portraits of half-naked or naked women, but always with some surrealistic effects in the settings they appear in. There are also several pieces that serve as wry comments on man-woman relations. With its clever, surrealistic, metamorphic conceits, this is an art form that lends itself well to creative interpretations.

Just as he did in his debut collection, *Tality Tales* (which I reviewed in *Anglo Files* #156, May 2010), Ian David Lukins (14 letters) has again worked around the numbers 7 and 14. Each poem is a sonnet, and the number of syllables in each sonnet is a multiple of seven. And, as a nice touch, the title of each painting is included in the final two lines of the accompanying poem, usually at the very end.

The perspectives that Lukins takes are a) identifying with one of the figures and speaking his/her case, b) addressing the figure as the viewer, c) describing what he sees as a more-or-less neutral observer and filling it out with additional details, and d) composing dialogue between the different figures.

Lukins’ language

Lukins employs a nice mix of linguistic styles. There is a distinct theatrical element to most of the pieces, and they are clearly designed to be performed alongside the paintings. The various voices of the narrators are quickly established as Lukins strives to match the mood and tone of each painting he has chosen. He has a musical gift, and he ranges easily from being slightly naïve, whimsical, playful and informal to being formal, poetical, philosophical, literary and sophisticated; and he often combines different elements to draw an effective parallel to the mix of naturalism and surrealism in the paintings. While there are several paintings that have a dark theme, the majority have a light-hearted feel, and as a result a lot of the sonnets are playful.

For all the diversity in styles, there is still a very strong sense of continuity throughout the collection. This is mainly due to the default setting being *standard written English*. Very wisely, I think, Lukins has refrained from slipping into the dialects that – as the CD accompanying *Tality Tales* shows – he excels in. He must have been very tempted at times. But no. He has allowed himself a personal take, but not too personal.

Not that restraint is the most obvious hallmark of the language here. The surrealism of the paintings has given Lukins license to invent several neologisms – all understandable from the context – and original compound adjectives, e.g. “death-stubbed” and “war-haunted” (from “Dancing Absent Wishes”). Kudos to him for using them sparingly and for their subtle yet powerful effect, e.g. in “Circumstantial Happiness”.

Circumstantial Happiness

Even though there’s magic in the snow –
printed hieroglyphics,
secrets told by bird, by fox, by hare –
even though stars shine clear –
much brighter in the keen crisp cold air –
and ice makes flowers grow,
I’ve chosen to climb up the ladder
of youthful swelling dreams,
to where my first love still rests bedded –
meadowed in wildbright flowers,
running streams, and white scented clover,
where feelings leaf eternal summer –
till the chill whispers
circumstantial happiness.



An idyll in an idyll. The two compound adjectives, “crisp cold” (l.5) and “wildbright” (l.10), are antithetical, a visual way of marking the contrasting scenes. The speaker in the poem is both the viewer and the creator of the painting. The main sentence of this single-sentence poem starts at the beginning of line 7: “I’ve chosen to climb up the ladder...” Seven is the poet’s magical number, and the ladder has ten rungs, thus referencing the number 70, especially relevant for both painter and poet. The waning crescent moon also symbolises old age. The idyllic at-one-ness is conveyed by two verbal neologisms: “meadowed”, at the beginning of line 10, and “leaf” in the very middle of line 12. Marking a break in the syllabic pattern, which up until this point has been 9-6, line 12 is a nice précis of the tree’s circular green foliage and the heart-shaped piece of sky within.

The Complexity of Movement

A glance, a glint, a gleam.
Dancing movement, feathered mating,
bright inviting windows –
how naked desirous you seem.

A smile, a blink, a stare, a wink.
Your face a house of tricks
lost in blue illusory sky –
I’m unsure what to think.

I long for word, sound, sigh.
Enlighten this blinded dullard
what it is your eyes speak –
something to judge, to trust you by.

Then kiss me, so I sense
the complexity of movement.



This is one of the few sonnets that employ rhyme, which matches the reflection motif in the painting. It is also one of only seven sonnets that consist of more than a single stanza. Here the division into four stanzas matches the four eyes in the painting. A subtle effect translates the mirror image: a double reflection in the syllabic pattern. The first quatrain is 6-8-6-8, the second quatrain its mirror image (8-6-8-6), and the third quatrain again a mirror image (6-8-6-8). The 6-8 of the final couplet breaks with this pattern. Nor is there any rhyme here. This matches the concluding appeal for movement. A subtle effect in the painting is the way the swans’ tail feathers are tufted to correspond to how the eyelashes might be curled. The phrase, “naked desirous” (l.4), is an interesting archaism with one adjective qualifying another, a poetical effect.

Prisoner of Perfection

Masked Eye, do, please, make up the truth
telling me there is no lie –
that you remain here with me still,
that our music has not stopped,
that kisses dance yet on our lips,
and all I have given you
and all that you have given me
lingers in embrace, not lost?
There must be no deceit, no raid
on love’s nakedness, no theft,
no wily red-coated hunter.
Remember – be my brave knight,
my prince, my keeper, and I your
prisoner of perfection.



A glance at the painting is enough to notice that the man's head is missing, but it is only a closer look that will reveal the gap between his glove and his shirtsleeve. And, speaking for myself, this was rather a ghastly discovery. This soon gave way to admiration for the artist's sleight of hand. And later I enjoyed the irony of calmly noting an instance of decapitation and then freaking out because of an uninhabited glove. I had quickly analysed the floating mask as a surrealist, symbolic effect and simply assumed that the stuffed fingers of the glove meant the presence of a hand.

Why is a red circle within a red circle painted on the mask's cheek? At first, I thought it might be a target symbol, a reference perhaps to the spot a lady might want to kiss (or slap), but the colour red is irregular, and the bull's eye should be filled in. I was stumped. I didn't even remember that I had seen it before in a humorous quiz, where the solution was "A Mexican seen from above". In the end I resorted to Google. The best answer, however, had been staring me right in the face: "Masked Eye,..." The capital "E" in "Eye" should have been clue enough. The primary meaning of "Masked Eye" in the context is an eye that has been put on a mask rather than a hidden eye. But that meaning is, of course, relevant too. And yes, a circle within a circle is a symbol for the iris of the eye. In the context of the painting it's a symbol of perfection; an all-seeing eye that sees any imperfection. Red is the colour of passionate love, seduction, violence, danger, anger and adventure. It also matches the red coat. There is a significant allusion in "red-coated" (l.11) in that it refers to British soldiers in colonial times. And it is funny how the speaker asks Mr. Perfect not to be red-coated when he so obviously is. In the context the symbolism of the earring might well be that she is a slave or a victim of colonialism.

The overriding conceit in both poem and painting is that the man is Mr Perfect, but he doesn't exist. The poem, however, adds an extra spice: a searing critique of British colonialism. To take this interpretation one step further, the blue background could symbolise the EU, and the red circle within a red circle could symbolise Brexit. The UK within the EU would be a red circle within a blue circle.

I don't know that Lukins was deliberately trying to make a political comment here. But it does point to the liberties that ecphrasis can take. Contemporary, Irish ecphrastic poet Paul Durcan is noted for adding a political slant that is absent in the original. His own background is a painful one. He was the son of a circuit judge who thought him "a sissy" and who had him committed, as a young man, to a mental hospital and subjected to electro-shock therapy to cure him of his unconventional ways. This has left many psychic scars, according to the poet himself, but his work shows great humanity and compassion, and his eccentric views of life are often hilarious.

I trust that a great sense of humour can be acquired without the psychic scars. Both Olbinski and Lukins have the former in spades.

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