

# A Conversation about Art: Writing Ekphrastic Poems



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We're in the closing days of National Poetry Month, and this Sunday if you'd like to compose a poem of your own, we're offering a program about writing ekphrastic poetry in partnership with The Writers Guild at Bloomington. It's at 2 p.m. this Sunday in Room 2B. Call 349-3228 to register. The word *ekphrasis* comes from the Greek and simply means description. The original Greek root *phrazein* meant to point out or explain. An added meaning was to name an inanimate thing.

Many of the Romantic poets celebrated art including John Keats in his "Ode to a Grecian Urn." The list of modern poets who have worked in the form include W.H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, Anne Sexton, Muriel Rukeyser, Greg Pape, and former poet laureate, Kay Ryan, among many others.

You can write about any art form in ekphrastic poetry: sculpture, paintings, ceramics, prints, and photographs. Some poets describe the work in vivid detail; others just use the art piece for a jumping off point. This is especially true when an abstract painting is the subject of the poem as in the example I've included below.

In creating an ekphrastic poem, the author has many options. The poet can speak in the voice of the painter, or of characters portrayed in the painting. The poet can speak directly to the artist or have a dialogue with him or her. Or the poet can intensely describe the scene depicted or perhaps the next scene envisioned after the action occurs in the painting. The poet can even speculate why the artist created this work. So many choices.

If you're curious about this kind of art, here is a contemporary poem about an abstract painting.

*Abstract Painting, Blue* by Mary Jo Bang

Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting, Blue*, Oil on canvas, 1952

Why are children jealous  
of their fathers? Steps  
run up against the stones  
which gate tombs,  
flagstone oratories  
where the organ murmured, where the dead posed face.  
Nothing water bottles!

A youth carries out in leaves  
a greyhound. Do they cry?  
They cry I. I am not unaware.  
The curious remain  
a chorus. Time took a step  
and said, who expired?

Some rich person,  
another right hand.

And art?  
I was occupied.  
Exempt at the time.  
One of the monstrous figures  
that sculptors attach  
by the shoulders to gutters  
squeaked and twisted.  
I encouraged a smile.

Art gave me the first  
conditions of art,  
which is *idea*. Isn't this the "here Me I exist"?  
That positive orates the room.  
In drama everywhere is seen,  
as I see you. It is better  
than the mirror.

Posted by Dory L. on April 25, 2013

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