

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY: PORTALS, PLACENTAS, AND
THE CORPUS ENTIRE: THREE TAKES ON EKPHRASIS

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World Tree

David Wojahn

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011

144 pages; paperback, \$15.95

Core Samples from the World

Forrest Gander

New Directions, 2011

96 pages; paperback, \$15.95

The First Flag

Sarah Fox

Coffee House Press, 2013

180 pages; paperback, \$15.95

In the internet era, we are constantly looking at screens and “seeing” the world. Open the *New York Times* on your computer, and you can click rapidly through wildly disparate images: from a young Syrian boy grieving the loss of his father to sniper warfare, to an elementary school in Oklahoma destroyed by a recent tornado, to two old women in fuchsia hats at the Chelsea flower show in London. How should we respond? Each of these images pulls on deep, and different, emotions—the news-sample slideshow yanks us from despair to glee in instants flat. The speed of the info-stream is mind-boggling, and we are continuously creating, encountering, and fielding images.

In his essay “The Pictorial Turn,” W. J. T. Mitchell builds on Richard Rorty’s “history of philosophy as a series of turns” to suggest that our current “turn” involves our relationship to images. Mitchell published this essay twenty years ago, and we are even further to-

wards “a culture totally dominated by images” than we were then, but I find that his theories still ring true:

Pictures form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry[...] In what is often characterized as an “age of spectacle” (Guy Debord), “surveillance” (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them.¹

As Mitchell suggests, we are exposed to pictures all the time, and yet they are still somehow mysterious. How do images change us? More particularly for this review, I am curious to know what the pictorial turn makes possible for poetry.

There is, of course, a whole subset of poetics dedicated the interaction between visual and verbal art: ekphrasis. Contemporary definitions of ekphrasis might be summed up as “poems about art,” or, to take James Heffernan’s more nuanced definition (one that acknowledges both the poet’s and the artist’s common interest in representation), ekphrastic poems are “verbal representations of visual representations.”² Critics alternately trace the origins of ekphrasis to two genres that are opposite in scale: the epigram and the epic. In truth, I think this points to the kind of friction and discomfort that Mitchell identifies—just as visual images do not communicate in any single way, so *representations* of visual images have diverse functions: some critics have noted the indexical function of ekphrasis (ekphrastic passages point to, or read, something external), others discuss its iconic or emblematic potential (ekphrastic passages recast and expand the work in which they appear).

Once, I had a long discussion about ekphrasis with a classicist, and his perspective changed the way I see it now, which is to say that when I called it a genre, he corrected me and called it a “device.” It is a device that one might use in any genre (epigram or epic, no matter). Understanding ekphrasis as a device revolutionized my

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn.” *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 13.

² James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

understanding of it: *describing* a work of art is not usually the point, but using that description as part of a larger project means one might invite all of the visual image's nonverbal resonance, its fine, unwieldy friction and uncertainty, into a love poem, for example, or an ode.

I was thinking of the way ekphrasis functions as a device while reading three contemporary collections of poetry: David Wojahn's *World Tree*, Forrest Gander's *Core Samples from the World*, and Sarah Fox's *First Flag*. These collections are intriguing to me, first because each poet writes in a different primary genre (elegy, travel poems, and confessional poems, respectively), and second because of the different ways each poet integrates images (mostly photographs) into his or her book: as a single section of poems paired with photos, several sections of poems interspersed with photos, as stand-alone photo-essays, or as illustrations attached to individual poems.

While skillful observation might be a prerequisite for poetry, these particular poets have a panoramic scope. Each uses reading and research—in the form of epigrams, quotations, and anecdotes—not just as background for poems, but often as a subject, or at least a feature, of poems. In many ways, then, their use of visual material is an extension of the kind of information gathering that they already practice in their work.

All three of these books do include “verbal representations of visual representations,” but they also use visual components in other ways. It is as if, in the age of digital reproduction, the poet need not always verbally represent the visual representation inside a poem. The visual image can represent itself (or at least the reproduction of the visual image can represent the visual image of the thing represented). In fact, as I hope to show, these poets use visual elements in radical ways, both ekphrastic and otherwise—creating meaning by juxtaposition, by adding a kind of visual harmony, by making of the poem what Mitchell might name a “sutured imagetext,” and above all by calling into question ways of creating, ways of reading, and ways of looking.

David Wojahn, *World Tree*

David Wojahn's quartz-like vocabulary, trance-inducing iambs, pitch-perfect gravitas, and, above all, his enviable skill for shifting

between personal and historical registers astound me. Above all, I am struck by the great humility in these poems. This is partly to do with Wojahn's self-deprecating anecdotes, and partly to do with how he turns his curiosity outward to study history, human nature, and relationships.

Nearly every poem in *World Tree* is elegiac: some mourn the loss of a particular person (including musician Willy Deville and poets Aleda Shirley and Czeslaw Milosz), some are self-elegies, and some are elegies in the broader sense of nostalgia for cultural moments or phenomena (as in "Ode to Black 6"—a poem about "[t]he most enduring and successful subspecies of lab mouse" (131)—or the masterful title sequence "World Tree" (46–52), in which Wojahn reads the chronology of music-playing technologies for how each signals particular associations, both personal and cultural, of loss and longing).

While Wojahn's poems are often nostalgic, he tempers the sentimental by contextualizing personal "close-ups" inside their more panoramic historical moments. In one of my favorite poems in the book, "Screensaver: Pharaoh," Wojahn begins with a personal memory, then creates a portrait first of an era, then of human history. It begins with a surprising anecdote: "We had eaten the placenta in a soup that someone based on a family recipe / for menudo, though someone else— / it was Bill, I think—joked that it tasted just like chicken" (6). The first move outward from personal to universal starts with meditations on subjects like "where did the soul inhere?" and the "perfection" of the placenta: "the body's all-in-one: liver, kidney, / blood supply, // its vascular estuaries spidering from delta to sea, tasting not just of flesh, // but of the corpus entire" (6–7). The second move outward comes by way of allusions to musicians (Elvis Costello, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, and Sam Cooke) as well as literary figures (Blake). This is not a "social network" form of connection (the speaker refuses to Google his old friends)—it ultimately resolves as a desire to connect with the "corpus entire," which he achieves in the final movement by way of ekphrasis.

In a sense, this segue to ekphrasis allows the speaker to connect not just with contemporary figures, but also with people from thousands of years ago:

But the screen instead
coalesces to a tomb painting of Pharaoh. Lordly he walks,

preceded by his vassals,
who bear his emblems & trophies, hoisted atop tall staffs.
Among them
is Pharaoh's placenta, preserved & flapping like an ensign.
Raised to the sky,
the crimson portal hovers in the wind. From it the God-King
fell headfirst into this world. (7-8)

The painting is evidence that, like the people in this poem, ancient Egyptians also sought ways to ritualize, celebrate, and commemorate birth. The painting is, in this case, a kind of historical document, and Wajahn's choice to describe it at this moment of the poem affirms his own theme that memory and connectivity are timeless. The painting, in Wajahn's hands, is a Whitmanian time-portal, by which we see each other "face-to-face."

The link between art and elegy is a major feature in this book. First of all, Wajahn writes a great number of the elegies in this book for artists and writers. There is an element of homage and an element of identification, but there is also an element of *ars poetica*—that is to say, Wajahn seems to return throughout this book to central questions such as: How can one make lasting art? How does art communicate across eras? Also, and perhaps most importantly, what is the role of the artist in addressing all that it means to be human, including humanity's inevitable losses?

The third section of the book, a twenty-five poem sequence titled "Ochre" (55-103), is the most overtly ekphrastic. In this section, Wajahn introduces a sequence of images, each paired with a corresponding, loosely structured sonnet. The images are unusual because they alternate between different epochs: ancient civilizations (represented mostly by meticulous drawings that reproduce ancient cave drawings from places like Chauvet and Lascaux), and modern America (represented by an eclectic group of visual images depicting everything from turn-of-the-century portraits, to one of the infamous Abu Ghraib photos, to the poet's own family photos). Each ancient image is answered by a contemporary image. For example, the "four engraved and grooved stones" (87) in one ancient image are immediately followed by "the rubied letters" (89) of Scrabble tiles in the next, more modern photograph, or a carving of grave vultures in one

picture/poem pair is immediately followed by a photograph/poem showing Dick Cheney wearing a gas mask.

Individually, each poem describes its paired image in some way (Wojahn uses a range of “ekphrastic stances” from description, to narrative animation, to apostrophe, to epistolary persona). As a whole, however, one might say that this series resonates emblematically—a kind of Achilles’s shield inside *World Tree*. Again, this has much to do with the scope, and how each poem shifts between the political and the personal—from a meditation on the nature of torture, to a memory of fencing with his father, to poignant poems trying to imagine those who have lost loved ones or suffered life-threatening illness (see the warriors, the dancers, the oxen, grain fields, oceans all circling impossibly atop the golden shield).

Just as Thetis approached Hephaestus to make a shield for her son even though she knew Achilles would surely die in battle, in this sequence in *World Tree*, Wojahn also turns to art as a means to address collective grief over large-scale societal tragedies of war, illness, and poverty. Perhaps the most moving, and the most charged, of all these poem/image pairings are the two poems that explore torture. Poem ix, “The Killed Man” (drawings found in a cave in Cougnac, from c. 15,000 BP) and Poem x, “Sabrina Herman [sic], Soldier in the 372nd Military Police Company, Poses in Front of the Body of Manadel Al-Jamadi at Abu Ghraib Prison.” How can a poet write about this image from Abu Ghraib? If the author condemns Harman’s actions, and calls al-Jamadi’s fate unjust, where is there room for negative capability in that equation? Who would want to entertain that Harman’s action was anything but deplorable? I believe that Wojahn introduces the uncertainty necessary for poetry by way of ekphrasis—the ekphrasis actually allows him to ask a set of questions related to, but not precisely about, whether or not this action was forgivable.

In both of these poems, Wojahn focuses on the nature of representation, so that the question becomes not just how could this happen, but how can one depict this? As Wojahn notices in the poems, both the “Killed Man” and the Abu Ghraib photo are botched attempts at representing torture (the very issue with the Abu Ghraib photos is in Harman’s posing, her mockery of documentation, of representation). As Wojahn writes in “The Killed Man”:

The stick man bristles with five sticks
& his insides pour out, a mesh of ochre,

Rendered childlike. The invention of torture
Is so fresh they are confounded.

How to depict

The human figure mangled, the whole reduced
To the gutted sum of its parts, a brilliant ooze

Of sinew? (71)

What interests me is the way Wojahn uses the image to shift between a real person and a drawing, so that it is just “a stick man” whose insides are just “a mesh of ochre,” but one that calls to mind the real “human figure mangled” with its “brilliant ooze // Of sinew.” The drawing, perhaps especially because it is inexact, becomes a mediation layer or a mirroring by which the speaker can contemplate how we, as humans, have the capacity to torture others.

Furthermore, Wojahn enacts this sense of being “confounded” (71) not just at torture, but more specifically at how to represent it in this pair of poems, in which he creates his own botch of present tenses (he depicts both the distant past and the recent past in the same present tense), pronouns (who are these “they” he writes of?), scene (are we in Cougnac or Gitmo?), and tone shifting (from third-person narration to first-person imperative). In fact, like the interchangeable “Russian doll[s]” (73) Wojahn cites in Poem x, these two poems have switched sestets, so that Poem ix moves from a description of a cave painting to a portrait of prisoners who are moved from Kabul to Gitmo, and Poem x moves from a description of Abu Ghraib, then concludes with a description of a Neanderthal man.

What is also remarkable about this poem, however, is the way that Wojahn turns the tables on the photo’s abominable misrepresentation by offering a counter-representation, reframing the man not in some mock amusement-park-photo genre, but instead by using metaphor to rehumanize him, offering a more dignified image: a “Neanderthal male” who “receives his grave-goods” from his community:

armloads

Of burdock, cornflower, hollyhock.

& a cache of flints
For the perilous and beflowered afterlife. (73)

It is as if, by overlaying this depiction with the Abu Ghraib photo, Wojahn can attempt to restore to al-Jamadi the respect, dignity, and protection that first his torture, and then this photo, denied.

Wojahn situates this long ekphrastic sequence in the center of *World Tree*, and the photo of Abu Ghraib is at the center of the sequence. In some sense, the contextualization of this photo in the midst of all of the other images makes the shock of that image more diffuse against both the span of millennia and the evidence that while primal violence is a fact of human nature, so is compassion. In fact, Wojahn seems to argue that art itself, its testimony to our need to connect with others, to record and make sense out of human suffering, makes compassion the greater force. We often turn to art, as Shakespeare writes in the *Rape of Lucrece*, in order to “mourn some newer way.” As Wojahn reiterates so beautifully in *World Tree*, art and literature allow us to find consolation not just from those in our own time, but across millennia.

Forrest Gander, *Core Samples from the World*

To me, one of the more interesting debates about the relationship between verbal and visual art is whether one might approximate the other not just in the sense of a “sister art” sensibility, but in *technique*. Examples of this might include George Herbert’s “iconic” poems in the shape of “Easter Wings” or “An Altar,” and Gertrude Stein’s attempt to translate cubist techniques into her writing. I would argue that Forrest Gander’s *Core Samples from the World* are ekphrastic not just for how he includes photographs in his book, but in style—that is, even the poems that do not include pictures feel “photographic” because they build argument and meaning by way of framing and juxtapositions. Maybe this is just newfangled Objectivism, or (as Gander writes of Raúl Zurita) a poet-geologist’s “identification with the tangible world” (89). In any case, I find that reading these poems is a bit like experiencing what I imagine Mars to be—a place where rocks rule: strange, sparse, and shimmering.

Gander organized the book into four sections that contain three components each: an “Evaporation” (a lyric poem); an ekphrastic poem (or poems) paired with a photo essay; and a haibun sequence.