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Saving Pictures from the Flood: Using Visual Art in Creative Writing Workshops

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with less inhibition. Davis discusses the nature and function of imagery in poetry and visual art, and describes the dilemma of attempting to convince students to "show," rather than "tell," when in their experience exciting imagery is cheap, easy and void of meaning. He talks of the ways in which the paintings of Francis Bacon stimulated his own young imagination, making Modernist poetry an accessible, emotionally viable role model for his apprentice poetry. Finally, he shows how the imagery in particular paintings by Andy Warhol, Ralph Goings and Larry Rivers can demonstrate specific ways in which a voiceless image can articulate meaning to students.

In the five years I have been teaching creative writing workshops, I have learned to use reproductions of pieces of visual art as exemplary texts, clarifying the complex functions of, and suggesting possibilities for, imagery. Paintings, photographs and pieces of sculpture have been used in writing workshops for many years as "triggers" for writing exercises — a workshop device probably brought into being by this century's famous poems with paintings as their central subjects, such as *Pictures from Breughal*, "Museé des Beaux Arts," "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and so on. I prefer to use visual art, initially at least, in an instructive, rather than an immediately creatively cathartic, way.

In order to write using specific, vivid detail, students first need to see that it is possible to communicate subtleties of feeling and perception powerfully through imagery. "Show, don't tell," is an absurd rule today until one understands that a visual image is, in true art, a kind of phenomenological language, expressing the artist's cognition of retinal experience, or exposing the artist's dreamlife, no matter how photographically realistic the image on the canvas. As the modern British painter Francis Bacon says in *The Brutality of Fact*, a book of interviews one could use as a supplemental text in a writing workshop: "An illustrational form tells you through the intelligence immediately what the form is about, whereas a non-illustrational form works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into fact." Through learning to appreciate the power of particular images, students feel better able to conceive of their own subjective, non-illustrational imagery as it relates to factual description: i.e., the imagination of the artist articulated through the rationally-observed details, though as the disguised true subject of the imagery always distinct from the imagery. If subjectivity, one's own or another's, the separation from mere "fact" or illustration, is the ground for aesthetic experience and knowledge, it is important that students learn to discern the subjective essence and the personal statement in imagery,

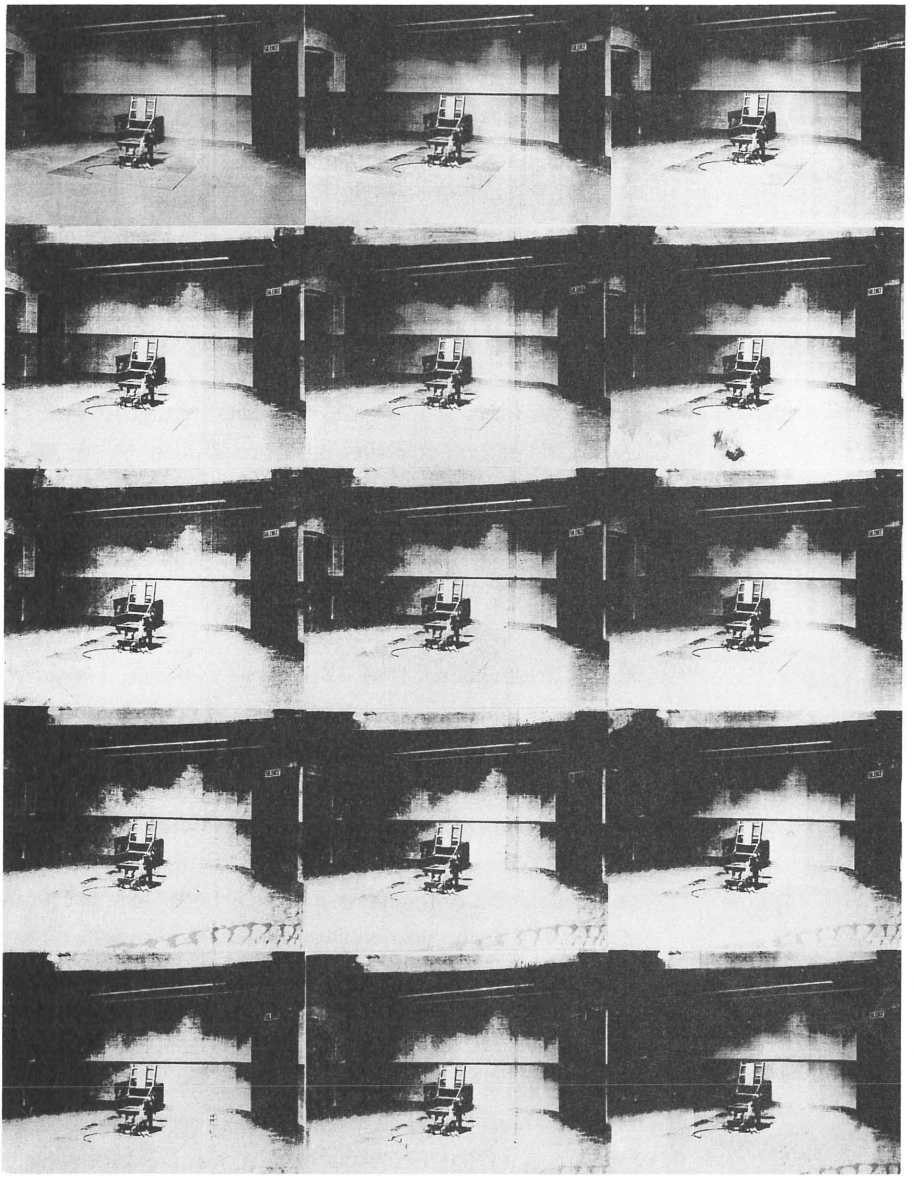

Figure 1
Andy Warhol's *Orange Disaster, No. 5.*, 1963, acrylic and silkscreen enamel on canvas, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

whether it is surreal, impressionistic or photorealistic. Describing a friend in his poem, "Her Right Eye Catches the Lavender," the poet Gerald Stern says, "Her eye is part of her mind." The rediscovery for the young writer of his or her "innocent eye," as the result of a close examination of visual imagery, often inspires astonishingly moving writing.

The interplay between illustrative objectivity and artistic expression is nearly the same in the imagery of poetry and in the imagery of painting. Whereas the painter personalizes the image by painterly brush strokes, unexpected color combinations, shadow and form, the poet uses tone, timing, syntactic surprise and diction to remove the image from the realm of description and into the realm of art. It seems to me more useful to teach students to be moved by imagery through examples of visual art first for two reasons. First, the experience is more powerful, more immediate. In a culture where one's eye is used to saturation, the student is prepared to be affected when the images of visual art stand wordlessly before us. Second, each explanation, response or simulacra seems at least plausible within the context of a creative writing workshop. The ambiguity of the image is a function of the silence around it. When the nonverbal power of the image in paint is translated into their own words (seeming an attribute of their own imaginations), apprentice writers feel more capable of expressing the interior life through a personalized imagery.

I have often been surprised by the preference many students seem to have in their writing for dry, colorless abstraction or for the baldest expositions of plot, when like many people around us who seem interesting at first glance, they express their recessed, interior selves well when it comes to dress, hair style, personal eccentricities of speech and gesture and so on. In life they show, but on the page they tell, avoiding, possibly even fearing, the textured opacity and ambiguity of linguistic imagery.

This seems unfortunate when one notices that the landscape around us all is, today, hyperaestheticized, that it vibrates with imagery. Most of the objects of the material world seem to have been created by or at least filtered through a human intelligence. I would even claim that for most college-going twenty-year-olds,

Figure 2
Ralph Goings'
Schoharie Diner,
1979, oil on
canvas.

Permission of O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York.

the sublimity of a pasture of holsteins has to do with their favorite Far Side comic.

Perhaps some creative writing students feel what many of us feel, overloaded with emotionally meaningless imagery. If the criterion for a good poem is that it contains stunning images, the world is already a huge poem or painting, one created for us by an army of strangers who are at worst disrespectful of our vulnerability to their influence and at best uninterested in our sense of our selves. Imagery seems cheap, easy; the latest Michael Jackson video seems visionary enough, and it outdoes *Ash Wednesday* when it comes to the life of the third eye. But the problem is that the writer of any age, at any time, feels impoverished of an emotionally meaningful subjective aesthetic center. There is too little depth beyond the surface, whether one looks inward to see the depth, or outward. Where, in all this glitter, is the real beauty? Where is the experience of being deeply moved?

I feel fairly certain that I learned more about poetry writing as an undergraduate, from looking closely at visual art than from reading poetry. At first, that is. I mean the absolutism of that claim. I finally learned to love poetry, prepared to respond to its tones and images, by having first responded deeply to visual art. The modern British painter Francis Bacon, for example, overtook my imagination with his canvases of violent, beautiful color, his human forms twisted in an urbane spiritual agony. A month or so later, when I discovered T.S. Eliot's poetry, I had no trouble hearing the apocalypse and the sexual dysfunction simultaneously, and all the footnotes and analyses seemed of secondary interest to the screen in my mind the images gave birth to.

Later, I read Eliot's words about meaning being like the bone the burglar throws out to the dog, and I figured out that Bacon was painting within the high Modernist/Romantic tradition. I had already begun to write my poems. They bore the marks of their fathers and they seemed easy to write: a highly creative part of my consciousness had been summoned into action (belatedly, yes) by Modernism in general, but first of all and most specially, by the wordless images of Francis Bacon. It was as if the art had

helped me to see something in the world that needed articulation. And I could use, in poetry, the imagistic language of the painter without feeling as if I were merely stealing or imitating. It is not surprising that these early poems of mine were full of images. I believed that the image was a profound moment of contact with the world. As Bacon says in an interview, "I think that no matter how far you deviate from it, you need the discipline of the subject. You need the pulsation of the image, the force of the image to go beyond decoration. And perhaps I'm peculiar, but I ask from painting something more than decoration." (p. 82)

Ultimately, the value of using visual art in the creative writing workshop is that it frees students, for the moment, from the requirement to portray their imaginative experience in language, a requirement which can be inhibiting to the typical undergraduate who does not read for pleasure enough to emotionally connect language with creative play. Even given the hyperaestheticized, explosively visual surface of life today, and the way in which the flood of drops of information a developing mind is forced to swallow can drown out that individual's articulation, it may still be possible to draw out from students through a combination of creative writing and an appreciation for visual art, the private, interior imagination.

Here are some examples of paintings I have used successfully in poetry workshops to engender discussions of imagery.

Andy Warhol's work, though it may seem trite and dated to some of us now, is good to use. His bold, dramatic, darkly funny images and his fine sense of ironic counterpoint are easily appreciated by students. Best of all, his images can be seen by the entire class from the front of the room. His Electric Chair silkscreens provide an excellent opportunity to show the suggestiveness of color. In the Electric Chair series, the same image of an electric chair is repeated on several canvases. The number of times the chair is repeated on each canvas, the formal divisions of each canvas into planes and the color wash behind the chair on each canvas vary. Each piece expresses a different emotional essence (see *figure 1*).

If one reads the large blue canvas divided into two panels, from left to right, a plot-like relationship is implied between the instrument of death, sunk in its blue shadows in the first panel, and a kind of vision of heaven, a pure blue rectangle, following it. This is a different statement from that made by the canvas on which the chair is repeated twelve times, in four even lines, stained with a luscious almost morbidly attractive lavender. In discussing these, students have the opportunity to articulate the various complex associations colors enact in us.

Students love looking through my book of reproductions of Ralph Goings' photorealist oils. What seems communicated most immediately to them is, ironically, the personality of the artist. The sly, but large-spirited, humor in his nearly completely objective renderings of the complex expression on waitresses' faces, of Rose Parade clown floats and of plateglass windows in doughnut shops reflecting supermarket plateglass windows, have inspired fine tragicomic writing.

Artistic selection of details as a method of expressing an emotional essence can be discussed by way of Goings' painting of a working woman in her polyester green uniform at an otherwise empty coffee shop table (see *figure 2*). Students tend to laugh at the image first: the mundane pathos of the woman's implied existence seems hardly worthy of an artist's attention. The monograph from which I take this example contains an interview with Goings; in it, he tells us that the snapshot from which he designed this canvas contained another woman, a friend, sitting across from his subject. He removed her from his painting. What was he trying to emphasize about the life of his subject? Once students have noticed the sun-drenched fern on the window sill, which is separated from the woman in her green uniform by a white curtain, the solitude and spiritual heaviness of this woman have affected them. The example of selection which has been mentioned can be used to begin a discussion answering the common workshop complaint, "but it really happened that way!"

Finally, Larry Rivers, in his revisionist version of Washington crossing the Delaware, raises the issue of content, the real criteria for beauty. Compared to the famous, heroic, pretentious tableaux of Delacroix, Rivers much more accurately portrays the awkwardness, alienation and chaos of the historic night — a night richer in real human drama than Delacroix thought worthy of art. More than any painting with overtly shocking subject matter, this painting confronts the simple expectations for beauty held by some students. The ungainly figure at the center of Rivers' painting seems more an anti-heroic and believeable George Washington and the implication is that his real victory, out there that night in the avocado-green murk, was to have survived. Following this discussion, students might feel more comfortable bringing the actual murky and unpretty textures of their lives into their writing, not attempting to transcend the reality of the times, of their lives, by tranferring or heightening their perceptions into abstractions.

Following a close examination of visual art works, students inevitably feel more comfortable showing the reader their worlds as their worlds are shown to them. There is a kind of fundamental guilelessness about the visual image, a higher innocence which brings out a similar impulse in students. Beyond the will of the beginning writer, the complexity of the person in real time shows itself, in subtle and particular ways, in the complexity of that person's recreations of retinal experience.

I would like to quote the modern British painter Francis Bacon at some length. He is discussing his favorite painter, Velasquez:

"It's a very, very extraordinary thing that he has been able to keep it so near to what we call illustration and at the same time to unlock the greatest and deepest things that man can feel, Which makes him such an amazingly mysterious painter . . . I think that Velasquez believed he was recording certain people at that time; but a really good artist today would be forced to make a game of the same situation. He knows that the recording can be done by film, so that that side of his activity has been taken over by something else and all that he is involved with is making the sensibility open up through the image. Also, I think

that man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. And what is fascinating now is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all."

Bacon's sense of the futility of our lives might seem a call to action to some students. As John Asbery says in his poem, "Introduction":

> **Just living won't do. I have a theory**
> **About masterpieces, how to make them**
> **At very little expense, and they're every**
> **Bit as good as the others. You can**
> **Use the same materials of the dream, at last.**

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A new taxonomy is proposed for classifying the graphic cues commonly used in visually informative text. Previous approaches have focused on typographic and spatial cueing but have not formalized the concept which I call mark cueing. Mark cues are lines such as dividers, guidelines and network links and visual tags such as bullets and enumerators. Spatial and mark cueing are subsumed under a new concept called diagraphic cueing. Together, diagraphic and typographic cueing make up the broader concept of graphic cueing. The various forms of graphic cues are surveyed, with a brief look at products such as vertical lists, tables, network diagrams and text labels.