

Crossing Borders With Poetry and Art

By Steven P. Schneider

THE LECTURE HALL at the Hidalgo County Historical Museum in Edinburg, Tex., was filled with public-high-school English teachers from across the Rio Grande Valley, a bicultural, bilingual nexus of peoples and cultures. Edinburg is located 10 miles from the Pharr International Bridge and 20 miles from the McAllen-Hidalgo International Bridge, two of the main border crossings between Mexico and the United States.

The teachers were all participating in the federal Gear Up program, designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to succeed in post-secondary education. Most of those students will be the first generation in their family to go to college. I was speaking to the teachers about poetry and art, the third in a series of workshops to assist them in empowering their students to read, interpret, and create a variety of texts.

I clicked on my PowerPoint presentation to an image of a young girl with several embroidered handbags draped over her arms and neck. The image was projected onto a large screen for everyone to see.

"Do you recognize her?" I asked the group. A teacher from Brownsville raised her hand and said that she looked like one of the child street vendors you see in Matamoros or Nuevo Progreso, Mexico. "Right!" I responded. "This is a charcoal drawing of a 6-year-old street vendor from Nuevo Progreso." I then asked the teachers to describe the portrait in detail and to imagine the kind of life the girl lived. Afterward I read from my poem "Six-Year Old Street Vendor."

The picture I showed is one in a series of figure drawings titled "Borderlines: Drawing Border Lives," by my wife, Reefka. That series includes street vendors, beggars, musicians, and women from the border town of Nuevo Progreso, as well as others who live and work along the Texas-Mexico border.

Reefka's social engagement, through her art, with border life and the economic challenges of the people in our region has encouraged me, too, to widen the scope of my imagination. As a poet responding to her artwork, I must not only bring the picture into "sight," but also develop "insight" into the life she has drawn: the social and historical context. In the case of the picture I showed the high-school teachers, I had to learn about the young children who live and work along the border, who never get to attend school because of the harsh economic conditions of their families and the nature of public education in Mexico.

Reefka and I have had several recent shows featuring her "Borderlines" series and my poems, and I have listened closely to the observations of those who attended. There is a synergy from the intertextual relationship between word and image. In that greater wholeness lies the experience of poetry art: art conceived in response to

a poem, or a poem conceived in response to a work of art, often called *ekphrasis*. Because I have learned so much from this experience with *ekphrasis*, I have offered a number of workshops on the topic to public-school teachers in the Rio Grande Valley and throughout Texas. Works from the shows can be viewed at <http://www.poetry-art.com>.

Teachers in Texas, like elsewhere, are struggling to get students to read and write. In the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, literacy rates are especially low among the very large Mexican-American community. Moreover, students here infrequently visit a museum or talk about a work of art. The poetry art workshop is designed to provide teachers with pedagogical strategies to encourage students to write about works of art or photographs.

At the Hidalgo County museum, I clicked on another image from the PowerPoint presentation. This time it was a drawing of a rugged-looking man in a rugby shirt and orange baseball cap, wearing a string of garlic around his neck. I read to the audience my poem "Hey, Garlic Man," which speaks to the gritty determination of the man who hawks garlic on street corners to feed his family, selling it to "Winter Texans/Wearing John Deere hats and blue jeans/Who come to Nuevo Progreso/To save a few bucks/On medications, haircuts, and shoe shines."

Each teacher brings to such workshops a painting, a photograph, or another piece of artwork. After they have viewed and listened to my presentation, I ask them to imagine a story behind the work of art or to write down their interpretation of its "text," to engage in "imaginative insight." Finally I ask them to turn their descriptive and interpretive responses into a poem. The results are often quite amazing, and the teachers are both inspired and prepared to share this activity with students.

The highly visual culture that we live in—dominated by film, television, and video images—has been blamed for the reduced literacy rates among students today. A recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts has also attributed the decline in leisure reading to the dominance of our visual culture.

By having students write about works of art, we encourage them to make use of their keen visual skills to stimulate their creativity and writing skills. We can also use works of art to encourage students to read about the lives of the artists, and the period in which they created, and yes, even to write poems and stories about the art. We can ask them to consider the historical context of a work of art and weave into the text of their poem historical facts and references. And we can use poems and stories as stimuli for students to create paintings and drawings of their own. The possibilities



"GARLIC MAN"

REEFKA SCHNEIDER

that emerge from linking literary and artistic work together in the classroom are rich and exciting, a way of crossing borders between visual and verbal texts so that students discover things they would not otherwise experience.

I ALSO SHARE with teachers two of the more comprehensive collections of *ekphrasis*, Edward Hirsch's *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1994) and *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), by John Hollander. Hirsch's book (which includes poetry and prose) draws exclusively from the collection at the Art Institute of Chicago and includes poems about a number of the more famous paintings there, including Grant Wood's "American Gothic" and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's "At the Moulin Rouge." Hollander's book of poetry and art contains several classics in the genre, including W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" and W.D. Snodgrass's poem "Matisse: 'The Red Studio.'"

Snodgrass was the professor who first turned me on to poetry and then to the expansive possibilities of *ekphrasis*. I remember the evening clearly: The room was darkened as slides of paintings were projected onto a large screen. Snodgrass stood off to one side behind a podium, a small lamp lighting the reading surface. He spoke about his interest in each painting and how he came to write the poems that accompanied them. Best known as a confessional poet, Snodgrass cast aside his personal angst in these poems to fix his imagination on a suite of famous paintings by Manet, Matisse, Monet, van Gogh, and Vuillard.

I was sitting in the audience listening, an undergraduate at Syracuse University, where Snodgrass was my creative-writing teacher. He discussed at length the innovative use of color in Matisse's work. He then read his poem on Matisse's studio, invoking the power of "this/Terra cotta raging through the floor and walls."

The poem pays great attention to the objects in the studio, the artist's "children." In the foreground, on a table: "The crayons; these statues; the clear brandy-bowl/The ashtray where a girl sleeps, curling among flowers." The description then moves to the back wall where various

smaller paintings are hung: "Bathers; a landscape; a still life with a vase." Of the artist, Snodgrass notes: "His own room drank him."

I was thrilled to discover that poetry and art could live side by side, actually talk to each other. I was enchanted that a poetry reading could become an event that imports color and images from a painter's canvas. I was intrigued by how the poet both described the painting and interpreted its text.

These days I find poetry and art linked together just about everywhere. The Academy of American Poets has a Web page called Poetry & Art. There is a poetry journal, *Ekphrasis*. A panel at the 2003 meeting of the Modern Language Association was devoted to Women's Ekphrastic Poetry. The organizer of the session, E. Jane Hedley, of Bryn Mawr College, is currently coediting a collection of essays on gender and *ekphrasis*. Critical discussions of the topic are found in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis From Homer to Ashbery* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), by James A.W. Heffernan; *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), by W.J.T. Mitchell; and *Remarkable Modernisms: Contemporary American Authors on Modern Art* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), by Daniel Morris.

An increasing number of galleries and museums also present poetry and art together in exhibits, publications, or performances. Last July, for example, the San Francisco Cultural Center in San Francisco put on a show titled "Braided Lives: Art and Spoken Word Performance." Artists from Taos, N.M., Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay area came together to celebrate the visual arts and the spoken word.

My own border crossing between poetry and art has led to a special space of artistic collaboration with Reefka. Each of our individual work takes on a greater resonance by being linked to the other's art. In this space, neither the writer nor the artist has disappeared, but something larger has been created.

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