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Poems to the Sea and Painterly Poetics: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Cole Swensen

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Chapter Three: **COLE SWENSEN**

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1. Introduction

Cole Swensen's thematic volumes of poetry have long been involved with the literary exploration of the visual arts. *Try* (1999)[1] concentrates on late medieval and early Renaissance paintings but includes poems responding to work by abstract painter Olivier Debre, sculptor Auguste Rodin and film-maker Chantal Akerman. Her collection *Such Rich Hour* (2001)[2] is concerned with *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, an illuminated manuscript that is a fifteenth century book of hours. Exploring the notion of white in *Goest* (2004),[3] Swensen includes several poems on the work of Cy Twombly that relate to his sculpture. Much of the book focuses on the materials and inventions that produce or act as vehicles of light, including mirrors, street lamps, early photography, etched glass and light bulbs, where what is seen might be heightened or impaired, for 'in all its moving parts, it could be something else'[4] and the implication for the viewer becomes 'what the eye could grasp in a glance'.[5]

Drawing, painting, sign language and shadow puppetry feature in *The Book of a Hundred Hands* (2005)[6] where ideas of perspective and form usually reserved for viewing an art object are applied to the human hand. *The Glass Age* (2007)[7] continues to examine how as spectators we are constantly adjusting our understanding through the acts of 'looking' and 'seeing'. The book offers an exploration of windows, glass and light itself as artistic devices in the work of Pierre Bonnard, while making similar reference to Gustave Caillebotte, Wilhelm Hammershoi and Robert

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[1] Cole Swensen, *Try* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).
[2] Cole Swensen, *Such Rich Hour* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001).
[3] Cole Swensen, *Goest* (Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2004).
[4] Swensen, 'Five Landscapes: Two', *Goest*, p. 11.
[5] Swensen, 'Five Landscapes: Three', *Goest*, p. 12.
[6] Cole Swensen, *The Book of a Hundred Hands* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).
[7] Cole Swensen, *The Glass Age* (Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2007).

Delaunay amongst other painters, for 'painting opens a world that was not / there just seconds before'.[8]

Both *Ours* (2008)[9] and *Greensward* (2010, with graphic artist Shari DeGraw)[10] respond to eighteenth century garden design: the former focuses on the work of Andre Le Notre; the latter on John Rocque and his contemporaries. In the second of these books, Swensens's poetic text is inserted either over or adjacent to a relevant engraving, map or archival image. The subject under scrutiny here, according to Ron Silliman, 'is the logic of the garden, or of a certain type of garden, and the logic of the poem, *our* art'.[11]

The landscape garden offers a spatial, psychological and sensory encounter which connects to the question that is central to all of her collections: how do we acknowledge, absorb and emotionally meet not only works of visual art, but also everyday objects and features such as windows, mirrors, doorways, gateways, paths and corners as human attempts to shape our negotiation of what is an essentially domesticated or landscaped environment. For example, in *The Glass Age*, the speaker notes that Bonnard's painted windows are:

> actually more concerned with the frame. It stands in the way, not
> framing the scene, but cutting it in two, thus framing not our view,
> but our awareness of viewing,
> our standing
> > in the middle … [12]

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[8] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, pp. 3-31 (p. 12).
[9] Cole Swensen, *Ours* (London: University of California Press, 2008).
[10] Cole Swensen, *Greensward* (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009).
[11] Ron Silliman, 'All Conceptual Writing is Allegorical', *Tuesday, April 14, 2009*, pp. 1-4 (p. 1) from http://ronsilliman.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/all-conceptual-writing-is-allegorical.htm, [accessed 1.10.13]
[12] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 17.

In her collection *Gravesend* (2012)[13] Swensen shifts most of her poetic attention away from specific examples of visual art towards the art of simply looking. Her writing of these poems capitalizes upon her previous engagement with the image-making of particular artists, their ways of seeing and perceiving. By applying her process-based model of ekphrasis to the port-town of Gravesend, she again furthers her research as practice. As a meditation on ghosts and ghost stories, the volume explores the effect of ghostly experience as it is incorporated into daily life and how glimpses of the supernatural might be recorded or represented.

Swensen's engagement with the process of visual perception and the consciousness of seeing dominates *The Glass Age* and *Gravesend*. Both books reflect her poetic aim to examine the ways in which 'seeing' becomes 'perceiving'. Swensen has argued that although poetry shares very little formally with the visual arts, she believes the explorative poet is in an advantageous position to be able to approach a visual image or object. The significance and value of contemporary ekphrasis for her is in its potential as a mode of perception: a way of looking that aestheticizes any object or figure, transforming it through the attentive gaze. Above all, Swensen asks, how do we as viewers 'absorb and emotionally meet' works of art; how do we 'incorporate them … allowing them to infiltrate our daily lives'.[14]

Recognition of the 'expressive potential of language itself'[15] as an art material, as well as a means of communication, is crucial to Swensen's practice. The role of the visual

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[13] Cole Swensen, *Gravesend* (London: University of California Press, 2012).
[14] Cole Swensen, Plenary Paper, 'Writing Into Art' Conference, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, June 18-19th, 2013.
[15] Cole Swensen, 'Introduction', *American Hybrid*, ed. Cole Swensen and David St. John (London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2009) pp. xvii-xxvi (p. xxi).

arts in her poetics is a dominant theme in her book of critical writing *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays* (2011)[16] in which she demonstrates her commitment to research as a primary source of poetic content. In 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84' (2008) she reflects upon the 'zest' of creative endeavour: the 'tendency to exceed that constitutes art'.[17] Acutely aware of language's inherent ambiguities, Swensen argues that Twombly, by turning his painted line into a written line, has to trust in 'the absence that each word guarantees'.[18] In her essay 'Olson and the Projective' (2008), she writes how Olson 'was after a physicality that was not beyond the available but that was more intense … a way to collapse the distance instigated by language'.[19]

In this chapter I analyse how Swensen treats ekphrasis as a medium of enquiry by focusing on particular poems in the *The Glass Age* and *Gravesend*. In terms of existing criticism, only her early poetry has been treated with extended and serious consideration, principally by Lynn Keller in her essay 'Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen's *Try*' (2005).[20] Focusing on examples of her later work, I examine the way that Swensen, like Creeley, uses visual artists as models to investigate creative process.

I show how Swensen adopts Olson's projective ambitions to create new possibilities for interaction and interpretation within the space between the visual image and its spectator: how her poems emphasize both that which we actually see and that which

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[16] Cole Swensen, *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011).
[17] Cole Swensen, 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84 [2008]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 140-143 (p. 142).
[18] Ibid., p. 142.
[19] Swensen, 'Olson and the Projective [2008]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 16-20 (p. 20).
[20] Lynn Keller, 'Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen's Ekphrastic *Try* [2005]', *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) pp. 97-123.

we don't see. Whether it's within a painting or a poem, she draws our attention to our

awareness of the medium we are looking through, each with its inherent opaque and

transparent qualities. After considering her immersion in Twombly's 'inverse

ekphrasis: literature turned to a painting',[21] I discuss the ways in which Swensen's

continuing poetic project is congruent with that of Bonnard, whose painting she

argues: 'implicitly asks what it is to see, and what it is to / look through'.[22]

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[21] Swensen, 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 140.
[22] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 7.

2. Cole Swensen's Painterly Poetics

Most theoretical discussions of ekphrasis, such as those by J.A.W. Heffernan[23] and Murray Kreiger,[24] draw upon the idea that images and texts are caught in a paragonal struggle where each has to fight for dominance over the other. Breaking with traditional practice, Swensen seeks to avoid being involved in this pointless mismatch that forces painting and poem into binary contrast: silent or speaking; still or moving; spatial or temporal.

Throughout her essay 'To Writewithize' (2001),[25] Swensen reveals how ekphrasis has the potential to bypass the anxieties of such rivalry that either provokes or inhibits the poet in front of an artwork. Reflecting the Poundian tradition from which her poetics emerge, instead of using visual art only as subject matter, Swensen advocates employing it 'as a model for formal construction, thus underscoring the arts as modes of thinking and perceiving, rather than as static objects'.[26] Swensen sees 'the traditional ekphrastic stance' as one of imposition that immediately puts the poet in opposition, 'in a kind of face-off' against what is being viewed; a situation that produces the kind of writing 'used to keep art at a safe distance, to keep it sealed in its frame, demonstrably the "other" of poetry'.[27]

Validating a model that is open, explorative and less confrontational, she wants to portray the varied and accumulative ways that visual art can enter our lives, what she describes as:

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[23] J.A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (London: Chicago University Press, 1993).

[24] Murray Kreiger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

[25] Cole Swensen, 'To Writewithize [2001]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 69-73.

[26] Ibid., p. 71.

[27] Ibid., p. 70.

a version of the daily in which art is normal – not special, not something removed from the quotidian flow and isolated in a frame or institution, but an inseparable part of the daily – and the poetic weave.[28]

Breaking with convention, what emerges for Swensen is 'a side-by-side, walking-along-with'[29] relationship between poem and artwork, with the poet utilizing both verbal and visual kinds of experience.

Materiality of the medium characterizes Swensen's reaction to Cy Twombly's impulsive handwritten gestures, an artist often considered to have been closer to poets in his process than to other painters. Twombly observed 'I like poets because I can find a condensed phrase … I always look for the phrase'.[30] Studying his polyptych *Hero and Leandro* (1981-84)[31] she writes 'why is it that Twombly always seems to be writing with his wrong hand? As if it pains him, the line that falters between language and image'.[32] Her essay 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84' combines art history, art criticism and literary research with contemplative reflection, and throughout this heterogeneous text, Swensen clearly identifies with Twombly.[33]

In an earlier essay, 'A Hand Writing' (2002), she notes the ambiguous convergence of the written line and the drawn line in works by various artists that all focus on 'a zone of "between-ness"'. For Swensen, the four images that constitute this version of *Hero*

[28] Swensen, 'To Writewithize', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 70.

[29] Ibid., p. 70.

[30] Cy Twombly, 'History Behind Thought: Interview with Nicholas Serota [2007]', *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2008) pp. 43-53 (p. 50).

[31] Cy Twombly, *Hero and Leandro*, 1981-84, Daros Collection, Switzerland. The work consists of a cycle of three canvases and a handwritten sheet of graph paper quoting the final line of the sonnet 'On a Picture of Leander' (1816) by John Keats: 'He's gone; up bubbles all his amorous breath!'.

[32] Swensen, 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 142.

[33] Originally titled 'Drowning in a Sea of Love [2008]', Swensen's text responded to Twombly's *Hero & Leandro* paintings (including two other versions from 1962 and 1984) in the Pulitzer Foundation *Water* exhibition. It resulted from her collaboration with the Poetry Foundation and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in 2007.

and Leandro have an intangible quality of their own. She therefore raises the complex issue of what written language actually conveys when Twombly's painterly strokes approximate the rendition of his handwritten letters, where questions of visibility shift to those of legibility. Swensen is fascinated by this lack of word-image distinction; by what she sees as 'a slippery instance at which writing becomes visual art and visual art becomes language'.[34]

Attentive to Twombly's compulsive urge to find a voice through written gestures in crayon and paint, Swensen explores how all four parts of *Hero and Leandro* assert the expression of both visual and written language as physical, bodily acts. Like Olson, who was 'dedicated to the immanent, actual material-world-as-action',[35] Twombly connects heart to the line via the body (the breath) to keep the beat of language and thought. Swensen values how the handwritten line maintains this sense of immediate presence, 'records the body marking the beat of the world'.[36] She notes how this has to be balanced against the incongruities of language, increased by the very nature of Twombly's gestural strokes: how the mediums of words and paint are seas to be repeatedly crossed. She therefore writes how he portrays the last letter of the doomed lover Leandro's name as 'an O for ocean' that resonates as an echo throughout the entire span of the painting:

> a shocked exclamation in a huge sweep that breaks; the name howls in a swoop through a green and wine time across three canvases to a stark observation scrawled across a sheet of paper: oh amorous breath, he will not be breathing. When next we see him, he will have exceeded … language is the epic that the ocean is, directionless as a painting.[37]

[34] Cole Swensen, 'A Hand Writing [2002]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 82-89 (p. 82).
[35] Swensen, 'Olson and the Projective', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 20.
[36] Swensen, 'A Hand Writing', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 87.
[37] Swensen, 'Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 141.

Swensen's *The Glass Age* is composed of three serial poems: 'The Open Window',

'The Glass Act' and 'Glazier, Glazier'. Bonnard's artistic practice plays a central role

in the book, particularly his paintings of rooms dominated by an open window,

although specific examples of these are only named in the second and third poems.

Motivated by Swensen's identification with Bonnard, especially how his life's work is

similarly preoccupied with visual perception, the guiding theme of each poem is 'the

infinitesimal / difference between / what you can see and what you cannot see'.[38]

Despite the narrative quality to the book, this theme is approached elliptically through

the interplay of thought, emotion and materiality. It is the sensory interconnectedness

that informs her poetic strategies in *The Glass Age*, for as Keller observes regarding

Swensen's formative approach:

> In attending to the verbal and visual as realms united within the experience of the
> writer (both "lived by" the writer), she ostentatiously keeps the aural, the textual,
> and the visual constantly in play, while often entwining the haptic sense with sight
> and hearing; her work, then, emphasizes and extends the ways in which poetry
> inevitably mixes or hybridizes the information of several senses or "modes of
> experience".[39]

Operating equally as a piece of art criticism as well as a poetry volume that does keep

'the aural, the textual, and the visual constantly in play', *The Glass Age* is a hybrid

text that undermines the differences between them, for 'a window always marks the

meeting of edges'.[40] Many edges do meet in this trio of poems, for example, the

artists and writers who participate through snippets of conversation, their voices either

placed starkly alongside that of the viewer or being allowed to subtly merge to evoke

Bonnard's Post-Impressionist manner. Throughout the book Swensen examines the

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[38] Swensen, 'Glazier, Glazier', *The Glass Age*, p. 53.
[39] Keller, pp. 100-101.
[40] Swensen, 'Glazier, Glazier', *The Glass Age*, p. 65.

speaker's contrary urge to categorize one thing as apart from another and then to

determinedly go in search of ways to link them up. Swensen states that hybrid writing

is partly defined by 'a combinatory new' that encourages 'the importance of

connection: that given elements are often less crucial than the relationships between

them'.[41]

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[41] Swensen, 'American Hybrid', pp. xxi-xxii.

3. The Open Window: Swensen and Pierre Bonnard

Like the other two poems that form *The Glass Age*, 'The Open Window' is full of

external details that are juxtaposed or connected in different ways; and these

fragments are extracted mainly from art history, literature and philosophy. An

understanding of concepts shared across disciplines is at the heart of the poem,

especially in the ways that written and visual language in general, and Swensen's

poem via Bonnard's painting in particular, might help us to see. This hybridity is

clearly evident in her process of bringing together alternative paths of thought across

several pages of the poem, showing how one thing connects with another:

… someone who turns away or toward

Sand and ash   (the ocean like glass
                                we say of a day when nothing moves)
further a natural feeling for light.

[page ends]

Bonnard's work implicitly asks what it is to see, and what it is to
look through. We think of the arguments for the materiality of
language that have played such an important role in philosophy
and poetry since the beginning of the 20th century. Bonnard argued
for a similar materiality of the window. There is nothing you can see
through. You see

[page ends]

they say
        an entire world, they
        in a single grain
                        and most of them
                        in retrospect, simply

They say to hold [42]

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[42] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, pp. 6-8.

The 'haptic sense'[43] integral to the speaker's looking and listening that Keller

identifies in Swensen's writing happens across the three pages as the poem moves

between basic acts of saying, feeling, asking, looking, thinking, arguing, seeing,

saying (again), saying (again) and holding. Setting up a parallel between perception

in poetry and painting, she uses Bonnard's artwork to question our material awareness

of the poetic text as set against a painted one. Although 'nothing moves' inside

Bonnard's compositional frame, Swensen eradicates this static image by generating a

series of transitions that allow the opacity of 'sand and ash' and 'the materiality of

language' to dissolve, not only into the transparent mediums of water, glass and light,

but also through the disciplines of poetry, painting and philosophy that might

supposedly provide windows 'to look through', windows on 'they say / an entire

world, they / in a single grain'.[44]

Apart from all this transparency epitomised by the painter's 'natural feeling for light'

with 'the ocean like glass', the opaque material qualities reflected back from

Bonnard's painterly but objective rendering of a window provides 'nothing you can

see / through. You see'. Swensen equates her position with Bonnard, that despite

their figurative and narrative strategies, like the materiality of paint, the issue of 'the

materiality of language' persists and remains impossible to overcome.[45]

As a study of the impulse to create, direct or reflect intensities of light, the poem not

only draws together the work of numerous painters who have used images of glass

and windows in their work but also makes reference to Alfred Jarry, Gilles Deleuze,

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[43] Keller, p. 101.
[44] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, pp. 6-8.
[45] Ibid., pp. 6-8.

Thomas Hardy, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Saki. For as Silliman observes: 'Swensen

reminds us that the old fashioned approach to extraneous (non-lyrical) data invading

the text is called research'. He remarks how a volume by Swensen 'sits like an ice

flow atop a surface beneath which lies all of her reading and thinking on the

subject'.[46]

The form of the poem in connected fields of text, sometimes in regular blocks,

sometimes more open-field, enables Swensen to create a fluid balance between poetry

and prose. In the opening paragraph the speaker moves with eloquent poise from a

theoretical dilemma to an emotive image:

> Pierre Bonnard, 1867-1947, painted next to a north-facing window.
> The battle over just what constitutes realism was at that moment
> particularly acute – an emotional thing, such as a cardinal out my
> window. Could streak away and shatter the composition of the world
> into a vivid wind in which the world goes astray. [47]

Locating the painter in a specific space 'next to the north-facing window' rather than

providing the date of 'that moment', she concisely manages to objectively present

Bonnard's own wavering critical position in asking, as any painter or poet might, 'just

what constitutes realism'. Similarly, she articulates her subjective response with as

much precision as possible: 'that moment / particularly acute – an emotional thing,

such as a cardinal out my / window'. The succeeding phrase 'Could streak away and

shatter the composition' makes available to the reader the contingency of the

speaker's own experience, especially those feelings and shifts towards uncertainty

which puts any work of art, painting or poem, 'into a vivid wind in which the world

goes astray'.

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[46] Silliman, 'All Conceptual Writing is Allegorical', p. 3.
[47] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 3.

In the contemplative repetition of the subject matter on the following more open-field page, the speaker continues to identify with the painter, and his act of looking:

Like most people, Bonnard painted
                                            at that moment
                    out my window
and across the street
                              most
              facing north, a cardinal first

is a color and might if
                                      flight is

spliced into the eclipse outside my window, igniting patterns,
parterres, some gardener
amiss. [48]

As the speaker crosses the line between viewer and artist, Swensen sees the need to repeat something firm and factual, what 'Bonnard painted' against what is dissolving 'a cardinal first / is a color' and also what is splintering apart 'spliced into the eclipse … igniting patterns'.

With these semi-repeats and semi-equivalences of line come questions of how to achieve movement between the observed world and its representations, in other words, the way we mediate the components of everyday life. As with any concept of realism, the composition 'at that moment / out my window / and across the street' is a series of elements randomly collected together in the perception of that instance, before they inevitably dissipate and a new arrangement occurs in the next moment. Like Bonnard, Swensen is convinced that noticing this movement and trying to reflect it, is essential to the creative process. She writes that this act of looking which

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[48] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 4.

animates a work of art should be 'applied ambiguously to life and art both' causing

the reader to become:

> constantly aware of the presence of the visual arts without being able to delimit
> them, for, finally, there is no outside to the work, no division between art and body
> and world.[49]

Swensen uses Bonnard as a springboard for reflection as well as invention and yet,

rather like the related contextual and thematic material in 'The Open Window', his

paintings arrive in the poem only as slipping glimpses. It is as if the original canvas

(1921)[50] from which the poem takes its title is a resonating but intangible image that is

constantly re-animated on most of the twenty-eight pages of the poem, allowing it to

come in and out of the speaker's consciousness.

In considering how Swensen 'sees' or relates to a painting as she channels her

thoughts into the poem, Keller perceptively points out that:

> Swensen does not maintain a distance – or any consistent relation – between the
> writer and the painting: shifting among subjectivities and perspectives, her poetry
> moves rapidly in and out of the painting and among its subjects or pictorial planes.
> The reader, following the writer, never sees from one perspective for long.[51]

The recurring image in the poem of Bonnard's actual painting *The Open Window* is

engaging and memorable not because of its intimate, passive subject matter, but its

broad areas of flat saturated colour that activates every square inch of the canvas.

Discussing Bonnard's obsession with windows in over sixty dining-room scenes

painted mostly from 1927-47, Nicholas Watkins stresses how they were used by the

artist to 'invite the spectator into the composition and at the same time flatten form'.

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[49] Swensen, 'To Writewithize', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 71.
[50] Pierre Bonnard, *The Open Window*, 1921, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC.
[51] Keller, pp. 101-102.

In this hybridity, the windows serve as:

> metaphors for the paradoxical nature of an art of colour functioning between
> representation and abstraction within light. A window, like a painting, is both
> an opening and a barrier, a three-dimensional view and two-dimensional object.[52]

In her subtle transformations of research that permeate 'The Open Window', Swensen

arrives at a comparable fluidity combining the language of concrete information with

a lyrical, sound-based poetic voice. According to W. Scott Howard, each page of her

painterly text:

> opens multiple windows, as one line of vision always ready contains the rainbow,
> or as one text reconfigures a palimpsest, Swensen's multi-disciplinary exploration
> thus yields hybrid forms of expression (from private to public speech) and several
> layers of discourse (from lyricism to dialectics) making the book difficult to
> characterize.[53]

It should be acknowledged that Swensen brings to her writing a heightened awareness

of language she has learned from her experience as a translator of contemporary

French poetry. Especially conscious of the way words are used, she pays particular

attention to the purely opaque and material textures of sound, so that the text remains

adventurously fresh and exploratory in its focus on language and process. This is

most effectively evident in 'The Open Window' when she is incorporating details on

the history of film and by doing so, making various visual correspondences. Having

already cited two possibilities on separate pages that 'the earliest movie was a

window'[54] and 'the earliest movie was a magic lantern',[55] the poet finds a way of

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[52] Nicholas Watkins, *Bonnard: Colour and Light* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998) p. 42.
[53] W. Scott Howard, 'The Glass Age by Cole Swensen', *Word For/Word: A Journal of New Writing Volume 14: fall 2008*, pp. 1-4 (p. 1) from http://www.wordforword.info/vol14/Howard.htm, [accessed 7.09.13].
[54] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 24.
[55] Ibid., p. 26.

connecting the painter to the first film of the Lumiere brothers, speculating that:

> There's something cinematic about Bonnard's compositions, each
> scene accentuating action, yet also decentralizing it, diffusing the
> focus into a plane that hums, a homogeneous intensity extending
> anarchically
>
> which is echoed in its details – the pattern of the curtain coming in
> at the same scale as that of the variegated crops in the background
> and the tablecloth in the fore. It's an equivalent world … [56]

The poem contrives to present the Bonnard interior as a painted backdrop, giving

the work a look of a magic-lantern display, a picture plane 'that hums, a homogeneous

intensity extending / anarchically'. Her acute perception of the material qualities of

the words she uses in this phrase show how each word is studied obsessively for both

its imagery and rightness of sound. At the same time, the details of the room such as

'the pattern of the curtain coming in' and 'the tablecloth in the fore' reverberate

through the transparency of the language pointing out the interconnectedness of those

objects signified.

Drawing attention to the blocks of text in which a sentence that finishes one paragraph

continues on to start the next, Silliman notes how the poem 'plays with concreteness

and abstraction' recognising on each page 'the connotative fields virtually every noun

here sets in motion'.[57] Instances where Swensen balances concreteness and

abstraction often coincide with relations of colour: the way there is coolness and

warmth in Bonnard's close-valued hues. In the open window paintings these colours

are based on complementary pairs: reds and greens, yellows and purples, oranges and

blues. These are the colours woven into the patterns of 'curtain', 'crops' and

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[56] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 27.
[57] Ron Silliman, 'Language is Eyes', *Tuesday April 24, 2007*, pp. 1-3 (p. 3) from http://ronsilliman.blog spot.co.uk/2007/04/language-is-eyes.htm, [accessed 20.08.13].

'tablecloth' so that interior and exterior textures correlate whereby both poet and painter are 'diffusing the focus', blurring the edges, finding a shimmer that 'hums'.

In the painting *The Open Window*, rectangles and lozenges of mottled reds and greens provide expanding patches of luminosity: layers of opaque and transparent paint form a systematic grid. Throughout her poem 'The Open Window', Swensen links Bonnard's tiling effect of putting flat yet radiant shapes close to the picture plane, to the dividing-up of a window and to the merging of concreteness and abstraction that is essential to the practice of most Abstract Expressionist painters:

> … the paned window cannot recede, and so
> it ascends, tiled into sky
>   it climbs
>   without diminution,
> does not get smaller in the distance –
> Rothkos, for instance. [58]

In the open-endedness of the poem, 'walking along with' Bonnard's paintings enables Swensen to bring together the concrete and the abstract, which is summarized later in the book as his 'double fixation: saturated color and utter / transparency … an immanent collision of / the present until it's tangible'.[59] Her cross-reference to Mark Rothko's stacked, soft-edged rectangles of concentrated colour helps to qualify Bonnard's move towards painterly flatness 'tiled into sky / it climbs / without diminution'.

In the process of writing, different facets get juxtaposed in the interplay of her art historical research and her more speculative poetic response. These are the

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[58] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 16.
[59] Swensen, 'The Glass Act', *The Glass Age*, p. 40.

overlapping realities of 'The Open Window', allowing the poem to fade back and

forth between these two realms of the earthly and otherworldly, as well as the

painterly and literary associations they take on.

4. Swensen's Framed 'Ghosts'

It is particularly striking how thematic elements in Swensen's collection *Gravesend* (2012) correspond with and build upon those she established previously in *The Glass Age*. The occurrence of windows and doorways to frame the speaker's view, for example, provide both books with visual and textual metaphors for the way an image can be suspended at the threshold between the physical and more ethereal kinds of reality. Swensen is interested in Bonnard's painted windows and doorways as devices for connecting separate spaces: interior to interior, but more usually, interior to exterior. In the final few pages of 'The Open Window' an uneasiness about emptiness sets in and she starts to examine how we find ways to both visually and imaginatively fill up these spaces; how we relent to our sense of something 'other' coming in:

> There's a person turning in the window – very small, very precise,
> invisible to the naked eye, turning and turning in the pane. In old
> glass, there is sometimes a tear in the window, sometimes a small
> bubble of air. Which itself has no frame. So where are you, the
> visitor, who came here to visit a painter? [60]

Although Swensen configures both the speaker and the reader as 'you, the visitor', she makes the forms of visitation more explicit on the following page:

>   … Whatever enters
> through a window is a ghost; everything else is just visiting –
> transfixed witness to the instant of the threshold, the site of the
> slip, the shift; we look up. [61]

The speaker knows there is something more than just 'a small bubble of air' in the 'old glass' to trick the eyes and unsettle our perceptions. Perhaps barely there at all

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[60] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, p. 29.
[61] Ibid., p. 30.

but someone is 'turning and turning in the pane': a ghostly apparition composed of nothing more than light but still she insists 'whatever enters through a window is a ghost'.

The 'person turning in the window' is the painter's wife Marthe, whose ghostly but almost casual presence occurs throughout Bonnard's work. *The Open Window* is typical of his interiors: an intimate receding space that he manages to compress, merging foreground and background despite the outward view. Into this sun-drenched but dimensionless world he places a reclining Marthe, showing only her head and shoulders as she dissolves into the back of her chair. Although we only get a glimpse of her at the bottom right, it is as if she is 'turning and turning' in her afternoon sleep to ensure she gets into the picture. Applying dabs of paint which move around the more you look at them, Bonnard presents Marthe impressionistically as a 'site of the slip, the shift; we look up' as if she is a figure no longer quite there. Swensen's way of writing is similarly mobile and like its counterpart painting, her poem 'The Open Window' reflects the same high degree of organisation in relation to jumps in syntax, as well as the shaping of sounds passing from word to word. Keller draws attention to how Swensen also achieves movement by 'considering multiple images of the same scene, (or) revisiting the same image multiple times'.[62] Full of motion, Swensen's poem like Bonnard's painting, alludes to the animated surface of a mosaic.

In *Gravesend* there is a similar concern for representation as Swensen continues to seek how best to gain visibility through poetic language. Again she repositions the

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[62] Keller, p. 121.

reader who is encouraged to ask: how do I come to explain to myself exactly what it is I am seeing or have seen, for she writes of 'a grey scale' where 'to say "invisible" means not to recognize for sight is always second / to a subtler precedent'.[63] For Swensen, the port of Gravesend at the mouth of the Thames resonates historically through its role in four centuries of emigration. Full of the ghosts of those who contributed to European expansion, the town is emblematic of passage: of a process of passing through an ambiguous threshold from one life to another. She makes reference to short stories, historical records, art history, folk tales, local rumours and material from interviews with present day inhabitants conducted during her three day visit to Gravesend in 2008. These textual fragments inform each poem and early on in the book it becomes evident that 'most words for ghosts are pieces … that carefully layered will make a window',[64] warning us that even the most engaging anecdote or ghostly tale is going to lack some narrative coherence and at various points, is liable to crack open.

Throughout *Gravesend* there is the implication that once we think we know what we are seeing, we will cease to see it, which raises the question of reliability; for as it is stressed, 'the ghost should not be mistaken for snow'.[65] Swensen therefore combines a referential tone established through the trio of 'Interview Series' poems with a more lyrical poetic voice that rotates around the documentary styled details that are being recollected. In favour of work that can 'incorporate the strange, the odd and the uncanny', Swensen explains how potentially the hybrid poem:

    tolerates a high degree of the restless, the indeterminate, and the uncanny because,

[63] Swensen, 'Who Only Living', *Gravesend*, pp. 20-21 (p. 21).
[64] Swensen, 'Etymology', *Gravesend*, p. 8.
[65] Swensen, 'Fairy Tale', *Gravesend*, p. 34.

like the best writing of any era, it doesn't seek to reinforce received ideas or social positions as much as it aims to stimulate reflection and to incite thoughts and feelings.[66]

Keller argues that Swensen's own form of hybrid writing shows 'an understanding of the present as "walking along with" the past'.[67] The poem 'Whole Ghost' relates to Swensen's method of bringing different times together to settle into a single image, in this case, the view from sitting in the park:

> From one horizon to the other   who counted their faces   all in attendance
> a whole country   stained like a portrait   into a sheet   held up to the light
>
> Ghosts appear in place of whatever a given people will not face   There are days
> the entire sky is a ghost   though again   it's not necessarily what you'd think
>
> bright sun   full of birds   you're in a park   and everything in sight is alive [68]

Involved in the act of looking across present day parkland 'one horizon to the other', the speaker takes in how forms bleed and melt into one another in 'bright sun' where 'the entire sky is a ghost' as 'everything in sight is alive'. Both the writing of the poem and the image in view become sites of formation, like a screen or 'a sheet' that catches the ethereal and the transitory when 'held up to the light'. There is no restrictive definition or delineation of what is being seen as the poem is open to all possibility, 'it's not necessarily what you'd think'; for the 'whole ghost' is part of the ambient world, part of our everyday surroundings.

Amalgamating the present with the past also allows the poem to satisfy the reader's desire for narrative by moving into dialogue with the history of Gravesend. The

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[66] Swensen, *American Hybrid*, p. xxii.
[67] Keller, p. 122.
[68] Swensen, 'Whole Ghost', *Gravesend*, p. 65.

ghosts that 'appear in place of whatever a given people will not face' become the residue of a tainted past: 'a whole country   stained like a portrait'. These ghosts 'all in attendance' are instances to suggest that behind the communal grief sits a guilt connected with empire and colonisation, as well as for the hardships and suffering that much of this emigration entailed.

'Haint Blue' is another poem that tries to understand the different ways that restless spirits enter and roam around the material world, getting halfway in or halfway out everyday experience. In a transatlantic shift, what was sensed as other worldly in a Gravesend park becomes a magical apparition in the Southern United States but likewise, the poem demonstrates that its roots are in reality:

> On the frame around the porch where its edges   or ashes   or an eyelash
> of feathering porchlight   quietly annihilates   all throughout Georgia
>
> the frames are painted this particular shade   because it keeps the ghosts away   or
> keeps them closer, curled up in the home   I can't remember   which one was first
>
> to point out   the robin's egg laid   on the third storey windowsill   on the inside
> a bird born within the house of such deep blue that we've never been able to find it[69]

In keeping with the way 'Whole Ghost' and many others in the collection have been set down, as the spatial energy of 'Haint Blue' unfolds on the page, a marked break or fracture of some kind occurs in most lines of the poem. It is as if the speaker is ill-equipped to confidently proceed while the narrative thread is not quite strong enough to hold itself together. As the text comes apart, fragments of insight and revelation that explore the overlap of the spiritual with the material world hover as if caught between cohesion and separation.

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[69] Swensen, 'Haint Blue', *Gravesend*, p. 78.

Observing how these fragments resonate against each other in Swensen's writing,

Keller points out how the poet frequently arranges her text to:

> leave generous space or visible fractures on the material page, is always full of empty linguistic spaces – of missing referents, absent explanatory or connecting phrases, unfinished clauses, vacated subject positions, and the like.[70]

These fissures on the page that Keller refers to in Swensen's poetic text occur in

'Haint Blue' between individual phrases: the poetic line becomes a place where as

soon as a phrase is presented, it is then immediately suspended. In the opening line,

for example, this act of suspension causes something to be left out between things,

'the porch where its edges   or ashes   or an eyelash'. In the process, Swensen

creates two spaces where the reader simultaneously senses a connection and an

abrasion in what is happening between words: there is a tension set up between

'edges', 'ashes' and 'eyelash' which the reader accepts or tries to release by filling in

the gaps.

Maintaining two spaces per line, the first half of the poem switches back and forth

between the physical reality of the blue window and door frames of the porch 'painted

this particular shade' and the ethereal glow 'of feathering porchlight'. Both are

instrumental in creating an image of this porch as a kind of luminous holding bay

capturing and radiating light. Its 'Haint Blue' frames have an aura about them 'that

quietly annihilates the darkness' and 'keeps the ghosts away'. Swensen's chief

preoccupation here is with language as material so that each interrupted phrase is part

of a network in which she can explore sound relationships through aural reiteration.

With 'frame', 'annihilates', 'frames', 'painted' and 'laid' she creates a ghostly

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[70] Keller, p. 107.

assonance that rhythmically winds through the poem, punctuated only by the regular

hard stops of these empty white spaces.

The radical spatial innovations promoted by Olson through his essays and especially

The Maximus Poems continues to have a profound influence on Swensen's use of the

page. According to Silliman, 'Swensen offers the most complex verse line since

Olson',[71] although he notes how her line escapes from 'the wheezing lunge that

propels the bard of Gloucester forward' into unbounded space:

> The essence of her line is balance, just as his is imbalance. Yet her line … not
> unlike so many of his, begins and ends in the middle – there is nothing contained
> or complete.[72]

In her essay 'Olson and the Projective', Swensen clearly identifies with Olson's

careful use of white space inside and outside the poem which she says 'the eye must

leap across, making us aware of a kind of "white time"'.[73] Discussing how Olson's

field poetics push towards a projection of 'the self's experience onto the page',

Swensen acknowledges the importance of:

> his curious hybrid genre of letter / bibliography / commentary, in which we see
> the marks on the page straining to move beyond it by moving across it in
> unprecedented ways. The tension they display keeps us aware of the very real
> limits of our perceptions.[74]

Applying this projective method to the writing of 'Haint Blue' which 'lives with the

work and its disturbances',[75] Swensen, like Olson, realizes in long broken lines

[71] Silliman, 'All Conceptual Writing is Allegorical', p. 2.
[72] Ibid., p. 2.
[73] Swensen, 'Olson and the Projective', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 19.
[74] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[75] Swensen, 'To Writewithize', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, p. 71.

moving across the page, a complex weaving together of experiential language and narrative convention.

On phrases split apart from one another, she brings together an old Southern tradition of African-American origin with a personal encounter that suggests more unearthly, dream-like connotations. As a ceiling paint made from indigo dye mixed with milk and lime, 'Haint Blue' was used 'all throughout Georgia' as a soft-green paint for porches 'because it keeps the ghosts away'; for local opinion knows that lime not only dissuades restless spirits, it also repels mosquitoes who could be carrying yellow fever. Once the middle of the poem is reached, Swensen allows the first person voice to enter as witness to a heavenly event involving 'the robin's egg laid' although as an all-seeing eye the speaker is perhaps unreliable, for she confesses straightaway that 'I can't remember   which one was first / to point out'.

While the speaker is in dialogue with those ghosts who got inside, who must have crossed over the porch to be 'curled up in the home', the mesmerizing activity is again taking place in a window space 'on the third storey windowsill'. Despite there being something off-kilter in the speaker's account of what supernaturally led up to this act of seeing, the last line which starts with 'a bird born within the house' holds together without any visible fracture, and the story gains credibility from all the vocabulary staying in touch. Left disorientated within an interior of 'such deep blue', the reader is still left gaping skywards, looking for a bird that could either be soaring up or plunging down through the spaces Swensen has created inside the poem. The bird like any other ghost is deemed invisible because 'we've never been able to find it' and could arrive literally out of the blue.

Lawrence Venuti argues that ekphrasis might best be understood as a type of translation. Having translated the ekphrastic poetry of Ernest Farres from Catalan into English, Venuti is well aware both of the release of the visual imagination through poetic engagements with painting, and the issue of compensating 'for the violence of translating: the sheer loss of the multiple contexts'[76] in which the work originated. Being concerned with 'saying what cannot be seen, a saying that prompts a different kind of seeing' he states that the poet is free to speculate using paintings 'as springboards for reflection and invention'.[77] By way of deliberating on both processes, Venuti's experience is especially resonant for writers engaging with ekphrasis, indeed with any form of translation: they have to accept the possibility of erasure and loss, not just as conditions, but as actual qualities of the process. Here the act of translation can be seen as the making of a palimpsest in which the original, although erased, still maintains a ghostly 'presence' that emanates throughout the reconstruction. As a translator of eight books of French poetry into English, Swensen sees her role in this activity as 'receptive but not directive' searching 'for the overtones and undertones, for the peripheries and margins'.[78] Again comparing her writing process to 'open-sided' acts of walking, she argues that her method 'can afford to lose something, and in fact must lose something, for a translation that loses nothing will not gain anything either'.[79]

Swensen demonstrates this awareness most effectively in the poem 'Some Ghosts in Paintings' which distils the themes of disappearance and reappearance that run through *Gravesend* as a collection. In a companion poem on the previous page she

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[76] Lawrence Venuti, 'Introduction' in Ernest Farres, *Edward Hopper* [2006] translated from the Catalan [2009] (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010) pp. xi-xix (p. xvii).
[77] Ibid., p. xv.
[78] Cole Swensen, 'In Praise of Error [2008]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 100-105 (p. 104).
[79] Ibid., pp. 102-103.

establishes that inhabiting a painting is the perfect opportunity for a ghost: 'at last

they could be seen, could slightly live / in the visible'.[80] In 'Some Ghosts in

Paintings', Swensen makes direct and ordered reference to five particular works.

Ostensibly she just reconstructs each image in the medium of writing and yet the

application of paint or words is scrutinised; both acts are seen as simultaneously

revealing and obscuring:

> *Atelier du peintre*, Gustave Courbet, 1885. At the far right edge, just coming through the door or perhaps from behind a mirror is a man who isn't there.
>
> *Sea and Rain*, James McNeill Whistler, 1865. A human husk stepping carefully over something very fragile in the sky.
>
> Frederick Bazille, *Rose Terrace (Terrace at Meric)* 1867. But where is the terrace? the trellis? the woman who sits at the very, very edge of the park bench, a mere sketch
> <div align="center">a white dress</div>
> <div align="center">sat down</div>
> <div align="center">in a garden</div>
> <div align="center">Bazille died</div>
> in the Franco-Prussian War shot just before he turned 29 he saw her there and wanted to finish it but under the circumstances, had no idea what that would mean.
>
> *Les Jardins des Tuileries*, Monet, 1876; first woman on the left, white dress, her head and chest bending too much into the world.
>
> Edward Hopper, 1963, *Sunlight in an Empty Room*. [81]

Swensen translates these five images with precision and each of her lines is carefully

placed according to symmetrical weight. All are named and dated, and apart from the

final painting, given an accompanying sentence informed by what would seem to be

close observation of the original. Although art historical information does provide

fixed points of reference, each description surprisingly gives the reader the opposite: a

detail of apprehension where what is seen, is actually quite precarious. The figures in

these paintings are 'just coming through', 'stepping carefully', sitting 'at the very,

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[80] Swensen, 'Some Paintings of Ghosts', *Gravesend*, p. 42.
[81] Swensen, 'Some Ghosts in Paintings', *Gravesend*, p. 43.

very edge' as well as 'bending too much'. The poem moves from Courbet's crowded interior to Hopper's empty one, while taking in a beach by Whistler and two gardens, a private one by Bazille and a public one by Monet. The final line of the poem is simply 'Edward Hopper, 1963, *Sunlight in an Empty Room*' as if the title alone powerfully conveys the luminosity and bleakness that comes together in Hopper's late works. If a female figure in Bazille's painting is left unfinished as 'a mere sketch' then Whistler's 'human husk' is a ghost image 'coming through' from a previous painting underneath. Either way, their painterly effect of transience matches the poem's evocation of an overwhelming sense of melancholy and loss.

Using the most minimal means, the speaker manages to convey how the materiality of the object is fusing with something vastly more mysterious and immaterial. The voice is both objective and factual, yet brings to the five paintings the subjectivity and indeterminate qualities involved in the creative act; the making of both painting and poem. Exploring the intersection of the tangible and intangible worlds, a poem such as 'Some Ghosts in Paintings' fulfils Venuti's definition of a new kind of painterly poetics that explores 'a different kind of seeing'. For Swensen, adjustments of position, of perspective, of perception are constantly necessary in 'walking along with' an image or object of her attention.

Much of Swensen's writing records and engages with the complexity of sensations and perceptions involved in looking at works of art. As my critical analysis shows, she has found new ways to reconfigure ekphrasis presenting a non-traditional and non-paragonal relationship between word and image. At the heart of her painterly poetics is a projective sense of always wanting to extend possibilities, to reflect what

Keller aptly identifies as 'a fluidity of boundaries between writer and work of visual art'.[82] At its barest and simplest it is an approach where, according to the speaker of 'The Open Window' (as poet; as painter; and as viewer), 'objects close to me rise up towards my eyes' and where figures pass 'through matter cut / at just the right angle'.[83] Generating such potently striking images in each new successive collection, Swensen works toward an insightful open-endedness to create poetry as instances of experience, and as an affirmation of process.

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[82] Keller, p. 104.
[83] Swensen, 'The Open Window', *The Glass Age*, pp. 20-21.

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