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Book Review: Resurrection of a Sunflower

Francine Witte · Thursday, September 7th, 2017

Resurrection of a Sunflower
Catfish McDaris and Marc Pietrzykowski, editors
Pski's Porch Publishing
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One knows what to expect when visiting the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands — sunflowers, starry nights, the Van Gogh we know. But this museum is dedicated to his paintings, which tell us part of a story, limited to the visual. What about the rest of the experience?

This is where *Resurrection of a Sunflower*, a poetry anthology recently published by PSKI's Porch, and curated by Catfish McDaris and Marc Pietrzykowski, steps in. The subject of course, is Vincent Van Gogh, the paintings AND the man behind the paintings. A kind of poetry museum, if you will.

A line from the one of the anthology's poems, "NOT ENOUGH" by Alan Britt, reads, "…one art form is not enough. One art form is only one aspect of human potential." He goes on to say how painting can't do what poetry can, and poetry can't do what sculpture can and so on.

And he is right. We can look at a painting, but the poems in *Resurrection of a Sunflower* takes us deeper– the thoughts, the imagined observations of family and friends of Van Gogh. Some of the poems in this collection are ekphrastic responses to the Master's work.

Grouped by poet, many of whom have nearly 10 poems each, this is a hefty volume. It allows us to appreciate the voice of the individual poet rather than comparing one poem about the sunflowers to another poem about the sunflowers.

You can't think of Van Gogh without thinking of The Ear. The Bandage. But Neil Ellman's poem "Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear" takes one step further, in a way only the written word can, into what Van Gogh might have been thinking:

> When the deed was done
> I could no longer hear my art
> the sound of oils
> moving the river across

a barren land
of paint drying
under an obdurate sun –
the price I paid
and must endure
to live in the silence
of my art
with little left
but my visions in a dream.

Ellman also writes about the other themes we associate with Van Gogh, the starry night, the irises. Other poets employ this same strategy of the painting as prompt. Charles Joseph speaks to Vincent directly in “Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette”

Vincent, I’m sure that this self-portrait
is a much better depiction of you
than you would have cared to admit

so I imagine that that’s why
you tried to trick me into believing
that these bones belong to someone else
by smoking a cigarette here instead of a pipe.

But with the layers stripped away
the darkness of your torment
is much more visible to me here
than anywhere else

so I’m not fooled, just sad
each time I think about
how vulnerable you truly were.

Of course, the poems must be able to stand alone, and they do, as evidenced by Lisa Stice’s“Wheatfield with Crows” which does not need you to reference a painting or even Van Gogh.

the birds are hungry
steal from golden fields
gold before the reaping

and here am I, hungry
with an ache that burns
like fields on fire

As you would expect, in any museum, there are standouts. George Wallace ends each poem in his section with detailed notes, informing readers as to its genesis. But it is Wallace’s artistry, the characteristic music of his poetry that enchant.

Missing Portrait

East of coffins, in the manner of all eyes which cannot quite read the
sky, uncertain eyes set in a bold fabric of arabesques, landscapes
printed with cornflowers and forget me nots, eyes like coiled rope,
oilrags piled in a corner of the rooms, painting what you are told not to
paint, with your hands, with your eyes, with your mouth and your beard…

Similarly, Sudeep Adhikari creates magic with language in “The World is a Symbol”:

The glitter from the wings of dusted ghosts; drapes the city
and my head in a single gold.
the sad joy of the never-ending present. The pain and
elation of being a mad passion…

Carol Alexander charms us with her artistry in “Redux”

The yellow blooms of Auvers, stippled in the grass.
This warm morning of his last spring, in a field
that has defied March to the teeth, sprawl the hasty stems
and the girl child with eyes of Frisian blue.

The combination of words, image, and language, make for an incredibly satisfying experience. As you read through *Resurrection of a Sunflower*, you may find yourself researching the paintings you are not familiar with, and the ones you are familiar with will take on an added layer.

In “NOT ENOUGH,” Alan Britt ends with the thought that “the human soul requires nourishment from all directions.” Each art form, be it music, painting, poetry is only one piece of a larger puzzle. It is this blending of art forms, these poems in response to the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh that make both the paintings and poetry even larger than they individually are.

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