

BOOK REVIEWS

where the real may be revisited and examined and exorcized of its absurdity. Landers grabs hold of the "Code Orange" mentality of our post-September 11th world and shakes it: she allows us to look at those demons head-on and to reckon with them accompanied by Dante rather than by CNN's Anderson Cooper. This is the power of the poet.

Lisa Jarnot's new book Night Scenes will be published by Flood Editions this spring. She is the owner and operator of Catskill Organics Farm.

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE
REAL

AVENUE B BOOKS / 2007

REVIEW BY MOLLY LOU FREEMAN

A "cosa mentale," wrote Leonardo da Vinci of painting, reflecting upon art making as thinking, as thought itself, a matter of the realm of the mind. The interplay of visual / forms and thinking in terms of form finds a vivid, unprecedented example in Stephen Ratcliffe's latest epic: a singular poem / series of 474 days brilliantly described as *REAL*, the book's title.

In consideration of art and idea—the mimetic and pictorial—as intellectual motion, Stephen Ratcliffe, elegantly takes up questions of phenomena and the essence of perception, representation/s and descriptions of reality, proposing a kind of documentary on noticing and thinking about what and how one sees and perceives.

A series of days, a description of looking—at and as—experience, reveals the remarkable "reality" of appearances:

6.11

Left edge of white cloud moving across pale blue

6.12

Silver brightness of small cloud at top of ridge

6.13

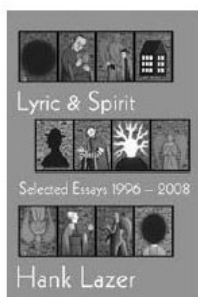
Width of pink-orange in otherwise grey-

6.14

Hummingbird darting down from pale blue of sky

6.15

Profile of finch on lower left perch of feeder



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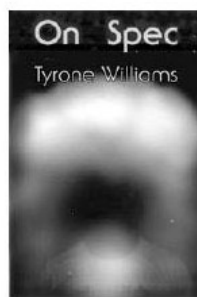
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6.16

Silver section of the horizontal line at the top

6.17

Bright orange film of cloud in vertical window

6.18

Three long notes followed by a five-note trill

Looking out (the window), noticing the phenomena of weather, of color, the shape of land, a bird, for example, Ratcliffe's thinking is philosophical as the world he describes is merely there, objectively so, especially since his style renders the seen as fact: things occur, things are. Yet inherent to such limpid vision, the poetic line and the poet's lexicon—of color, spatiality, framing, perspective, for example—are like the telling line in visual art: and by the most exquisite, inherent of gestures—a form, or figure—become a study of rendering how one sees. The poet composes life and art, following the theme and variation of movement of thought over time. Each line is an image, an idea, sometimes incomplete: the act of elision suggesting, perhaps, a form of abstraction. A most intriguing feature of the collection is just this: how the poem composes philosophical paintings, reflections of and upon man's propensity to create images, to mimetically represent, to describe. Thinking of the Aristotelian notion from *Poetics* of "the pleasure derived from representations," one sees the two enduring impulses of painting here (as suggested by French critic and poet, Jean-Christophe Bailly): to pictorially embellish by means of repetition and variation and to mimetically depict.

Drawing upon and extending certain modern and contemporary innovations in visual art (amongst other genres), Ratcliffe composes a pictorial poetics. The poem holds the moment still, seizes it as in painting, frames it, often thus focuses upon the theme of landscape, of the figure, of elements of still life, with the rigor of a personal syntax like the gestures of a visual artist "abstracting" media. The epic poem also has a quality of montage, of film clips, a certain photographic and documentary mastery and majesty. (Informed by looking and reading, the poet also celebrates notions of theatre, an awareness of music.)

The harmony between the realms of the representational and abstract makes reading Ratcliffe's work a profound intellectual and visual pleasure. The poet places us in the continuous present—that of the apprehension of ideas and images—and recalls, "Aristotle saying it's better to be out there / than here in this book. Man in green shirt / looking at Mondrian's grid, in which the picture / itself is the image" (4.25). Interrogating notions of the frame, the interplay between the poem on the page and the mind seeing and composing scenes (seens), Ratcliffe offers the reader singular, philosophical reflections of representation of the everyday—visions

of the essence of the "real" world.

REAL proposes a masterful correlative to da Vinci's notions of the visual—in the now. Ratcliffe explores the figure, the landscape, the composition of perspective in the service of the poem and as the action of pictorial composition—with exquisite rigor of syntactical form—to mimetically and philosophically examine the sentence and poetic line—a system of notation of the reality—like a painter's.

What, in fact, is real? being one central question, the poet looks at the relationship between things seen and perceived—"New green shoots on the apple branch in a vase / inside the window to the left of the viewer" (4.2) or "... articles of which fall to the floor / beside the older man who had wanted to paint / her picture whereas she had thought to write / something about him." (4.5)—and we are invited to wonder at nature, the human, and their composition / transcription in the form of the poem and / in terms of visual art. We read into a lexicon of color, of tone, of line, of perspective, of placement of form, of dimensionality of surface—of images and of meaning. Considering painting, the poet notes: "Mondrian wants us to look not at the image in painting but the painting itself as image" (5.31), and so thought and the moment stay still, like the idea of an image in epic visual and poetic notation, forming "the rhythm of seeing" (3.17).

REAL, as the title evokes, is both nominative in its formulation—a real visual record, a daybook (like Bonnard's cloud diaries), a meditation of the "first person," a "man" watching, documenting weather, a woman, the garden, the ocean—and it's epistemological: about thinking, formulating thought and watching its formation. From one day to the next, a "Line between the blue of the sky below thin white cloud and the jade green opacity of water across which no swells approach, the man [is] sitting on the white board thinking..." (11.7). Like the first person, we are drawn into reflection, the poem placing, proposing the "line" of language between meteorological elements—"blue...white...opacity... the white board": yes, sky and surf, but suggestive of form (a page, a canvas) and the questions of making and the meanings of form: "actual orange of a butterfly landing next to orange flower on a fence" (4.1). Or, there are:

two yellow petals on the stem in the green glass
bottle to the left of a rectangular darker green
plane of the tobacco plant left above it.
East wind moving across the surfaces of more
distant leaves, small dry cypress needles
raining down on window next to man in red
jacket's right shoulder. The woman on bench
with hair in braid reaching into bag for jar
of blackberry jam, looking up... (11.8)

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The sentence is a system of transcription, a depiction of the real in the mimetic sense and a system of objectification, of visual wonderment. Ratcliffe's contemporary epic poem abstracts the real in homage to painting, each line an image, a consideration of images: of form, of figure, of nature, the bouquet in a glass (like Diebenkorn's poppy), the flat planes of color (like Cézanne's trees and mountain), the bottle in a still (recalling Picasso, Morandi), then the film clip of a woman gazing, looking up, her pose, composed. Ratcliffe's poem offers us a discretely luminous reflection of the thinking which subtends visual composition:

Each poem, each day, is five sentences, whereby a study of the figure also frames the composition. The poem is a frame for everyday, in California, Paris, Barcelona, Connecticut (or elsewhere). Poetry is figurative abstraction: the mimetic subject is "The viewer's perspective on the bird appearing / between green of field and

blue space of sky / above it, in relation to its point of view / approaching the corner of the fence" (4.23).

The "first person," the observer, the poet, notices elements of his landscape to compose and explore the real and abstract "two-dimensional image" (3.25). The play of perspective is all about the appearance of things and the sensation of seeing: "the light grey feeling of a sky visible / through the upper left corner of the window. Wind sound also missing, the yellow and green / motion of branches above a field where scotch broom appears to be standing about to be seen" (3.27). In a sense, the corner is the page and the poem is the landscape. Ratcliffe tells us he is thinking about perception as much as he is thinking about art: "Constable's impromptu sketch of blue and yellow / cloud on the back of a palette, Cézanne's green / and yellow apples in the corner" (1.8). In their interrogation of the nature and rendering of everyday reality,

the poems are meditations on elements of the present moment, and the nature of representation.

As contemporary genres are not singular, the visual is theatrical, "off-stage action," and musical, a "profile of a rust-colored bird on a branch of a musical score whose direction reads 'Allegro con spirito,'" "a diva in the background sounding like a bird on a telephone wire" (12.19). (References to music abound: Handel's suite in D, Cage, the Goldberg Variations, thoughts of *Aida* in Milan...) Or there's the cinematic "close up," images "continued from an earlier series of events," notes on "how the woman appears." The figure is a form of idea. Or like film, the poem, a picture plan-sequence, a surface, a composition, describing and following its formation. The "dramatis personae" establish spatial, temporal, human relationships and amongst them: hummingbirds, blue jays, chickadees, gulls, song sparrows, small

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dark birds, white terns, man in black sweat-shirt, woman in fur hat, blonde woman, boy in black wetsuit, woman in Paris, man in red truck calling from Wyoming, red-headed man on the twelve-foot [surf] board, outline of an apparently older man, for as the poet recalls Matisse's claim: "rules have no existence outside individuals" (6.20).

One sees, perceives, beyond "the" specific or "a" sense of the general, to reflect upon Machiavelli's prince saying, "the man who neglects the real to study / the ideal" will accomplish his ruin, the real being / 'varying circumstances of life'" (12.19). As a formal gesture, the poet often suspends the article. Everyday life is the composition of situations. Ratcliffe is reading and ordering relationships of "landscape and abstraction" (3.21).

Of central concern is also the question: how does one see and how is the scene to be set in relationship to that which frames

it? The music is subtle, the language, the word choice, is limpid, precise. Documenting vivid elements of panorama, holding life still—as Lily Briscoe, Woolf's painter, aspired—is a form composed, juxtaposed. Ratcliffe's poem derives tremendous force and elegance by the formal and philosophical means it deploys to remind the reader of a reality greater than the poem itself—the grandeur and banality of the real world—the poem being an "ideal" study. In the same poem, on the same day (2.7), just after reflecting on "the iris of Rembrandt's eye," the poet notes, "Bill Gates shouting 'FUCK' in rehearsal for Tonight show... Orin Hatch at the Senate Hearing. Reagan's [comment] 'still a lot of brush to clear at the ranch' after the White House, 'fences to mend and horses to ride'. Then a "Bird's white body [comes] circling down in front of grey-white clouds in pale blue sky, white of water breaking against the green concrete seawall" (2.7). So much happens. Using the "language of painting" (3.18), the

poet has undertaken a magnificent study of everyday life, framing within it deeper questions about how we see, think, create, render an understanding of existence...

At the end of one January day, reflecting upon Bonnard, the poet writes: "it isn't a matter / of painting life, 'but giving life to paint,' Wittgenstein wanting description to replace / explaining" (1.29). The vitality of form, of the form of poetry in this case, is of central concern. And description is the extraordinary mode.

One problem being, as Ratcliffe recalls Merleau-Ponty, "amounts to finding definitions of essences" (1.26). The plastic, epic form is a description of looking, of "giving life" to form, (birds, people, clouds change like the sea); the real proffers a frame, a context, a—stunning—body (of poetry).

Originally from Alaska, Molly Lou Freeman took degrees in poetry from Brown University and The University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Her poetry has been published in numerous American journals. She teaches at the International School of Paris and edits a journal of Franco-American poetics and graphic design entitled carnet de route.

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REVIEW BY DUSTIN WILLIAMSON

Imagine telling a blogger not to rush into publication: *Blogging for Dummies* (24)

There is something oddly circular about a review in a print publication of a book that began as blog. In some ways it feels a little like walking into a virtual minefield. Not to trivialize the effects of actual minefields on actual lives, but as poetry blogs and poetry print publications exist in a false binary, where both question the validity of the other, the whole project has an air of contentiousness surrounding it. Perhaps it would be better to say that reviewing *Fait Accompli* by Nick Piombino is like walking into a comments field. Luckily, Piombino transcends the limita-