

Book Launch

Undercoat: Poems about Paintings, by Mark O'Flynn

Thursday 17 March 2022

It's a great pleasure and honour to be here with you this evening, in celebration of the publication of Mark O'Flynn's seventh poetry collection, *Undercoat: Poems about Paintings*.

This is actually the third time I've had the pleasure of launching one of Mark's books. Mark and I have known each other now for many years, after first meeting during the heyday of the (very tongue-in-cheeky) so-called 'Katoomba Bloomsbury Set' that gathered around the Varuna Writers' Centre (as it was then known) back in the mid 1990s. It was at Varuna in June of 1996 that I launched Mark's first book of poetry *The too bright sun* as part of the launch of the fourth Five Islands Press New Poets Series.

That was twenty six years ago, but actually I just want to begin by noting that prior to his first poetry book in 1996, Mark had already established a deep engagement with Australian literature and his work was already burgeoning across genre and form with the publication of many poems, plays, short stories, a novella, reviews in places like ABR, all the while living the life of the theatre and the poetry scene. Of course since then Mark went on to publish a further six books of poetry, works for the theatre, a personal memoir, two major collections of short stories and three widely praised novels, the most recent of which, *The Last Days of Ava Langdon* (2017), was shortlisted for both the Miles Franklin Literary Award and the Prime Ministers Literary Award, and won the prestigious Voss Literary Prize.

Mark has been one of our most active and valued Australian authors now for decades, and of course his work has been rightly recognised with numerous prizes and awards, including the John Shaw Nielson Poetry Award, the Australian Icons Prose Poetry prize, and his work has enjoyed various shortlistings in prestigious prizes such as the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Newcastle Writers Festival's Joanne Burns Award. Indeed, the opening "Hill End" sequence in *Undercoat*, the book we're launching tonight, was awarded second in the 2012 Newcastle Poetry Prize. Born and raised in Newcastle myself, maybe we can hazard the observation that Novocastrians may have a special affinity for Mark's writing!

In this new book of poetry Mark deepens and extends his range with a particular focus on ekphrasis, which in very rough terms means using one form of art or literature to describe or respond to what is seen in a different form of art or literature. And as is suggested by the title of this new collection, *Undercoat: Poems about Paintings*, the poetry in this book does precisely what it says on the cover (a cover adorned by the painting *Orquevanx Village* by Melbourne-based painter Sharon Monagle (2018)). Arranged across 3 parts, “Hill End Poems”, “Poems on Canvas” and “The Human Face”, a study of portraiture, 36 of the collection’s 38 poems directly reference companion artworks, one is written after a visit to Francis Bacon’s painting studio in Dublin, and one entitled ‘Lostness’ appraises painterly landscape traditions with the opening couplet : “The trouble with landscape painting / is you cannot tell which way is south.” (16)

The poems survey a wide range of important paintings from Australia and elsewhere, beginning with an emphasis on colonial and twentieth century Australian traditions, especially the mid-century modernists known as the “Hill End Group” who after the second world war catalysed around Russell Drysdale and Donald Friend in the bucolic gold-rush village Mark describes as a “casual Mecca for many Modernist Australian painters”. As well as Drysdale and Friend, those painters included Jean Bellette, Margaret Olley, John Olsen, David Strachan and others, and the book responds to their work as well as work by other Australian painters who have variously responded to Hill End and its environs, such as Brett Whiteley and Michael Johnson. The two original Hill End cottages owned by Donald Friend and Donald Murray (“Murray’s Cottage”) and Jean Bellette and her husband Paul Haeffliger (“Haeffligers Cottage”) have for many years been the location of the important Hill End Artist-in-Residency program run by the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, and I must say it’s a great credit to BRAG and their program that we have such a strong collection of ekphrastic poems about the art of Hill End, as the book we are launching tonight was in many ways inspired by Mark’s 2012 residency there. As well as its focus on the paintings of Hill End the book also contains poems about paintings by other central figures from the era, such as Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd, a group of strong poems exploring encounters with artists in the high-modernist traditions of western art, such as Vincent van Gough, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Paul Klee and Monet et al, and a peppering of work by more contemporary Australian artists such as Davida Allen and Blue Mountains based artists Natasha Daniloff and Judith Martinez Estrada.

In the book’s preface, “On Poems and Paintings”, Mark writes personally about his time at Hill End and the beginning of his ekphrastic journey, when he began to:

write about some of the many paintings that have drawn inspiration from the textures and colours of the Hill End landscape. For me, this was the beginning of an abiding interest in ekphrasis as a way of looking, of considering how visual art might speak to poetry and vice versa, how the narrative of painting, in particular, might be regarded and rendered through the lens of poetry.

Now, rather than read out any of Mark's poems to highlight his approach, I just want to say a bit about the idea of ekphrasis itself, and how Mark's engagement with ekphrasis in this new book, the lens of his poetry, says so much not only about Hill End and the paintings, but also about a deeper ethos at the heart of Mark's work more generally—a generous humanist, vernacular and empathic ethos, found not only in his poetry but also in his novels, short stories and plays. So, rather than go on now to read or quote from one or two of Mark's poems (I think it's much better for us to hear them from Mark himself tonight) I'll just say a few words about how the book and its approach to ekphrasis underscores the generous ethical dimensions at the heart of Mark's work.

It could be said that Mark's poetic project was informed by an ekphrastic impulse from the very beginning. In one of Mark's earliest published poems, 'Maldon', which appeared in 1984 in *Brave New Word*, a little magazine published in Melbourne during the 1980s (1984, 5, p. 74) he responds to a place, a particular village in the Victorian goldfields (uncannily enough), by writing through a veil-like palimpsest formed amidst traces of the prior writerly consciousness of the novelist Henry Handel Richardson. The poem responds to place and life through the art of another. Likewise, *Undercoat: Poems about Paintings* is very much about responding to place through art, responding to the art of representation, and responding to art, literature and the voice of the imagination itself.

But the book is not only about the paintings themselves, it is also very much about that perhaps eternal conversation which takes place between poetry and the visual arts, a conversation in which both forms of expression are entangled and enlarged by contemplation of the function or role of art, of the imagination and of creativity in our society. Again from the book's preface, Mark writes that "*Undercoat* represents my way of looking closely. Each poem is part of a dialogue of art forms in which, as Paul Celan put it, 'Poems ... are gifts to the attentive.'" (i) Mark is certainly no stranger to "looking closely". His creative practice is renowned for its deep-dive embrace of the art of "looking closely", such as in his long, fifteen page 3566 word poem "Footprints on an Empty Ocean" published in *Southerly* magazine in 1998, where he writes on the "Soul's emerging pupa. Let there be swift dissolution. / No. To write it is to be it." (*Southerly*,

58, 3, 225-240). “To write it is to be it” could be an epigraph to any one of Mark’s many acutely extended studies of character, place and emotion which enrich his novels, stories, plays, and many other poetry sequences.

In *Undercoat*, Mark is “looking closely” at what lies beneath an artwork, the enabling substrata of personality, emotion, life’s glimpses and gestures and whispers, the weather of people as much as the weather of places, as if the real moral landscape of a painting or a poem can be witnessed in all that is lived behind it. Life’s undercoat close to the fabric. And I think this is a key to appreciating the full fathom of Mark’s work. Since his earliest publications in the mid-1980s, Mark has developed a refined and sensitive practice that reaches beneath and beyond pictorial or prosodic surfaces to find what lies beneath, to find moments of true contact, feeling and understanding that can transcend time, personality and circumstance. In keeping with the ekphrastic tradition, Mark’s work represents not only that which is set before one, but also strips back the prosodic to get back, as it were, to the undercoat, to witness and speak of the true human character of a place, its ethos or moral landscape as a shared human reality. And that’s how, just as we speak of the “character” of a person or place as it’s “nature”, Mark’s ekphrasis leads us further back through the “character of things” into the very “nature of things.”

The ethical dimension of Mark’s work is deeply humanist and democratic, a “symposium of the whole” to echo the American poet Robert Duncan. It’s worth pointing out, I think, that Mark’s ekphrastic mode speaks to the core values of ekphrasis as it first emerged in the humanist traditions of the early Renaissance, when the first translations of Aristotle during the 12th and 13th centuries sparked renewed interest in ancient Greek philosophy and literature. Take, for instance, Homer’s inaugural, animated description of Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of *The Iliad*, which was imitated for centuries afterwards, and how it conveys a complex moral and cosmological landscape beyond both the shield and the poem. Now, it’s a long way from Homer and, say, Auden’s ironic “Shield of Achilles”(1952), but the core job of ekphrasis has essentially remained the same. By “looking closely” through the melded lenses of both poetry and painting, ekphrasis can depict the very character or nature of things as much as it depicts the things themselves.

Undercoat choreographs a rich rhetorical space in-between different forms of art, through which the “character” of the living, or once living, can be prompted to speak. In many ways it is deeply personal, the poet’s heart and mind feeling its way through alignments or indeed “portraits” of those portrayed. As such it is also deeply communal, an intra-subjective sharing of place and

atmosphere across time and across space. Mark's work has always drawn on a deep connection with the social, an alert eye and ear for the vernacular, and his poetry is generous and compassionate while casting an exacting eye and razor-sharp wit over human foibles and indulgences. Mark's poems reveal intensely lived and felt moments, whether extraordinary or completely everyday and banal, when the world pivots, or experience opens suddenly, and where an essential humanity can be witnessed and brought to bear in life, as it is in poetry and the sharing of poetry.

At a time when death seems to circle us all in ever contracting spirals, Mark's poetry enriches life and the power of art and poetry to make life whole.

The Horse's Skull in Arthur Boyd's Studio

after the painting Pulpit Rock, Kite and Skull by Arthur Boyd, 1981

.... We don't know how she died,
poor Flame, but we know it was important to him.
Even horses deserve memorial. Even stones.
Outside on the flat bowling green of the paddock
the dance of rocks continues even when it ceases,
the dance of suspending a horse's skull
in air, in paint, not allowing her to disappear
beneath the grass rich with the rest of her.

Thank you,
Peter Minter

This book launch was written on the unceded lands of the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples. I pay my respects to Traditional Owners and Elders past, present and emerging.