

GUGGENHEIM



How Poetry Can Amplify the Meaning of Art

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“Can you taste the green radiance in the room?” “What does it mean for these clusters of eyes to exist on lumpy asphalt paper?” “Are those two nebulous dancers communicating with each other?” These are the kinds of questions that Ama Codjoe, 2023 Poet-in-Residence at the Guggenheim, asked Hunter College students during the Ekphrastic Poetry workshops held at the museum in November.

Ekphrasis, from the Greek word for “description,” is a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art. According to the Poetry Foundation, “through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.”

In response to the current exhibition *Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility*, Codjoe wrote “Thirteen Ways of Looking,” an ekphrastic poem inspired by artist David Hammons’s 1969 artwork *Close Your Eyes and See Black*. Codjoe’s poem employs techniques reminiscent of those used in crafting verbal descriptions, detailed observations that communicate the experience of engaging with an object to people who are blind or have low vision.



Encouraging the students to follow a similar process to her own, Codjoe selected three artworks from the exhibition for them to consider in their assigned groups. The artworks Codjoe chose—Sandra Mujinga’s *Spectral Keepers* (2020), Titus Kaphar’s *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) III* (2014), and Sondra Perry’s *Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II* (2013)—served as points of departure, or rather, points of entry into their poetic exploration. The activity began with an emphasis on “looking, just looking”; later, the students were encouraged to “write furiously.” By the end of the workshop, each group produced a collaborative poem that they then shared with their fellow participants.

In addition to teaching students to pause, focus, and meticulously describe their impressions, Codjoe emphasized the necessity of play and experimentation. The prompts she gave were generative and aimed at eliciting expansive associations, and space was made for breaking rules and trying new things. The resulting poems are, in many ways, a written collage translating the artworks into literary form.

All art responds to or derives from other existing material. Artworks address one another, intentionally or not. This is a crucial lesson focus for Dara Meyers-Kingsley, distinguished lecturer and director of the Office of the Arts and the Muse Scholar Program at Hunter College. The students who participate in the Muse Scholar Program are characterized by their interdisciplinarity; while the students are undertaking their own various majors, they are linked by their common interest in the arts, coming together weekly for Meyers-Kingsley’s class *Explorations in the Arts*. Through this course, Meyers-Kingsley hopes to not only teach her students about the creative processes that artists use, but to also highlight collaboration (between individuals as well as disciplines) as a key component upon which the ecologies of a thriving art world rely.

Meyers-Kingsley takes her students to as many different museums, performances, and events as possible, encouraging them to grow familiar with cultural institutions and to engage with them often. When asked why she brings each year’s cohort to the Guggenheim, Meyers-Kingsley said interacting



“When eyes shut, I see magenta,
bright and bold
Returning to the place I know,
dizzy and spinning.”

--“In the Void,” Karla Juarez, Karla Lazala Coronado, Albert Melgar, Jalessa Obas, Arissa Ramoutar, and Cindy Sarabia (inspired by Sandra Mujinga’s *Spectral Keepers*)

with the museum’s boundary-pushing shows that continuously redefine the canon is vital to students’ learning. The museum building has also starred in Meyers-Kingsley’s lesson plans—she says its architecture is ideal for learning about space and context in conjunction with the artworks it houses.

A collaboration with the Guggenheim’s Poet-in-Residence program was an excellent fit for the Muse Scholar Program. Meyers-Kingsley describes both herself and Codjoe as advocates for access to the arts in education, and poetry as a tool through which to comprehend one’s experience. As Codjoe explained during the workshop, language is a vehicle for working more deeply with something and finding things out by having to talk about them. “We take things for granted if we don’t have to articulate them,” she says.

The students who participated in the workshop seemed to agree. “Poetry has to be grand, and that makes you dig deeper in order to find the language,” said Mateo Quijada.

In a complementary way, approaching art through writing poetry complicates our engagement with the artwork at the same time as it expands our understanding. Lyrical writing offers very open-ended structures, which need not come to conclusions. Combining systems of verbal and visual representation



Silence,
White sterile glow
Two screens hung up, two figures moving
Shaking, static, two bodies, white room.

—“Mirrored Invisibility,” Shua Alatraste, Phoebe Chester, Muriel Hickey, Mateo Quijada, Sophia Sookram, Ryan Stawski (inspired by Sondra Perry’s *Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II*)

expands the possibilities of both language and art. An ekphrastic poem does not attempt to resolve or explain an artwork. Rather, it charts the artwork’s resonance as it moves through different levels of perception and creates conditions for new art to germinate (in this case, in poetic form). Conversely, the language that grows from the viewer’s interaction with the work needs to rise to the challenge of pinpointing the often ineffable encounter with art. By describing it through poetry, we work to listen to our thoughts and to activate underused language pathways in our minds.

After participating in Codjoe’s Ekphrastic Poetry workshops, students left the museum with a deeper appreciation for poetry and art, as well as having gained creative tools that will enhance the rest of their learning experience. Promoting this kind of educational opportunity is at the core of the Guggenheim Academic Engagement department’s collaboration with colleges and universities because it can be applied in a variety of scenarios students face, from acquiring new knowledge in an unfamiliar subject to communicating clearly with others in everyday life.