

CHANGING VIEWS

Poems of the Ulster Museum

An Ekphrasis Project by students from the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's,
in collaboration with the Ulster Museum.



THE SEAMUS HEANEY
CENTRE



ANNUAL
FUND

Changing Views
an exhibition featuring works from the
collection of the Ulster Museum

To travel – to journey for education and leisure – was once a privilege, a pastime only open to the wealthy. Today the world is more accessible to many of us, artists included.

For centuries, artists provided a window to the world that was only available to a few, bringing back views of the familiar and unknown through their eyes. Many of these 'living pictures' inspired viewers to become visitors, and turned the places depicted into the travel destinations of the modern era.

This exhibition considers the varied forms the art has taken, including works that were published in the first widely read encyclopedia, the birth of Romanticism, the Picturesque and the route of the Grand Tour.

The role of the 'artist as traveller' has changed as the world has become easier to explore. The shift in how people travel has allowed artists to interpret the world around them in new ways. Artists' motives have changed from showing an idyllic version of a place, or being hired to 'take the view' of the Empire; to seeking to educate, agitate and inspire.

Anna Liesching
Curator of Art, Ulster Museum

With the *Changing Views* exhibition, I hoped to deconstruct the role of the 'artist as traveller' and explore how the actions around travel have often been affected by social and political activity. However as the world has opened up, the way that artists interpreted where they went, and who those artists were, has evolved. This was a lot to explore in a limited space within the confines of the existing art collection. I struggled to find ways to highlight the untold narratives and shed light on the singular way art history has often been recorded.

Poets and academics at the Seamus Heaney Centre facilitated a solution to this struggle by inviting the students to look again at the exhibition and challenge what was there. Though this is the third time we have embarked together on this ekphrasis exercise in the Ulster Museum art galleries, it was the first time we invited members of the Seamus Heaney Centre to react to a specific exhibition, to engage in a conversation around one subject. The centre of this project became a discussion on what was not there, whether that be the people not represented, or a possible meaning or personal story behind a painting.

The poems that have been written have provided multiple strands, or fictional echoes, to the factual narrative of the exhibition. They act as a reminder to the viewer that there is much more to what we view, what is displayed, collected or even created.

Stephen Sexton
Lecturer in Poetry, Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's

Composed by students of the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's, and undergraduate students from the School of Arts, English and Languages, these poems celebrate, reflect, interrogate, contextualise and reimagine *Changing Views* at the Ulster Museum.

This exhibition explores the role of the artist as traveller and the attendant privileges of such a position: who gets to travel; where and why; whose version of Mexico City or Bruges or Tahiti becomes an extension of its history; what do they see — and importantly — what don't they see?

The same concerns about representation motivate these poems. How can language narrate an image in ways paint cannot? At a time when the *real* world — whatever that is — is out of bounds, the images we have of it matter. What do they say about us, and to whom? There is always a gap between the representation and the represented. These poems have us consider the real places beyond their representations, and the people beyond their representations. They remind us too, as one poem puts it, that “the blue city in the distance / actually exists”.

NOAH SWINNEY

ON JOHN RUSKIN'S "SKETCH OF A LEAF IN A NOTEBOOK"

The painting would have been a derivative landscape
of a mountain, (veiled by the blue tor of distance,

its peak perfectly snow-capped) had
it been completed. But the sketch shows instead

a bit of rough handling. And the mountain
stands alone in an empty page of a notebook.

But that's not strictly true – the page is not completely blank:
if we were to turn the orientation portrait-wise we would see

some initially unintelligible pencil marks, scalloped
almost like scales. But soon we'd recognise them for

a finely rendered surface of terracotta tiles,
the roofing of what appears to be a chapel. Yes there

is what looks like a small bell-tower and a window
that was likely once stained glass and surrounded

by ivy. The rest has unfortunately been left stumbled
and unfinished on a forgotten hill disappearing

into the silence of the page. One
wonders what it was about this spectacle,

this chapel, that couldn't live up
to the artist's obscure object of desire. But look,

on the right hand side of the page—scrawled and slanted
and written in haste—an elegant handwriting: words!

If only we could make out what they said. Maybe
they would shed some light on why

the fallen chapel and why the blue mountain. Alas,
the letters are indistinguishable from each other, we are

made to stew in our heady dissatisfaction.
But doesn't it seem as though urgency has dictated them?

Isn't that frustration flickering behind the faded words?
Don't they seem suddenly desperate to tell us something,

explain how that dark stain above the mountain has taken on
the presence of a strange and ominous moon.



Leaf from a Sketch Book (date unknown) by John Ruskin (1819-1900)
Pencil, watercolour & bodycolour on paper

JESS MCKINNEY

LEAF FROM A SKETCH BOOK

John Ruskin, date unknown

The season has just shifted and it is difficult
to trust Spring to stick around,
like it's hard to read the words
scrawled in Ruskin's sketchbook:

perpetual...outline...underneath.

That is the privilege of distance—
the cross stitch of the alps,
dappled as an artichoke bulb
suspended above the church spire
and weathervane piercing
that valley of the mountain,
blending blue into sky,
weeping and white-tipped
with snow or light
from God's touch.

The dark spot
where the eye draws
(maybe a stain)
is shaded distinctly
as the shadow of the cross.

JESS MCKINNEY

EAST PROSPECT OF THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY

Susanna Drury, 1739

You painted a coast that could be cloud,
caught a turning curd of milk,
the whole sky, in vellum.
The calfskin pulled taught,
awash with water and lime,
went motley with the holding
—all that basalt,
igneous and magnesium-rich.

Cacophonous is the silence
aside shouts from fishers in the distance
and the women in their long skirts.
Pastel clad and intrepid,
they have occupied the columns
and are refusing to move.
They read the entry in the encyclopedia
and are waiting for you to be credited.



East Prospect of the Giant's Causeway (around 1739) by Susanna Drury (active 1733-1770)
Gouache on vellum



Neighbours, Apple Valley, California, Mojave Desert, (around 1936) by Edith Scott
Pencil & watercolour on paper



Californian Beach, Venice, California (around 1936) by Edith Scott (1885-unknown)
Pencil & watercolour on paper

BEBE ASHLEY

WRITING AUDIO DESCRIPTION AT THE ULSTER MUSEUM

I want to talk you through the time and space of early California.
The brush strokes are confident in the white space of sea foam.
The colours are cold and I am sure the sea wall is seeping.

I am happy in the landscapes I've never seen in person.
It does not matter that this is a window-less room,
Venice Beach is lit well and I wouldn't want to change my view.

The pigment of the watercolour is easily saturated in the paper.
I am trying to list the most important blues when
I am distracted by something new: a close, but different blue.

JOHN REID

THE TRAVELLED EYE

After 'Plum Girls' by Doris Rosenthal, 1940

Their black eyes, their black hair
their imagined olive-coloured skin
their patterned and plain blankets
their skirts, delicate pretty bows
little light between, but defining them
their gaze upon unsure gaze
an image of sad self-consciousness
the beautiful art of misery.

...por que estan tan infelices?

Three unsettled girls, conjoined
in a black triangle of dark looks
anchored by a small woven basket
a paused moment from picking plums.
Their folded, soft-edged composure
graphite-dusted shapes and shadows
in a puzzling triangle of composition
for the artist's travelling eye.

.....por que estan tan enjodas?

An image of beauty and blackness
presented through the plight of poverty
harsh light and dark shade
sadness and anger, silent stares.
I think of the artist's sense of distance
in capturing a reality devoid of colour
beautiful but sadly overcast
as in my own unsettled stare.

.....por que estan tan tristes?



Plum Girls, Mexico (around 1940) by Doris Rosenthal (1895-1971)
Lithograph



A Greek lady (1913) by William Walcot (1874-1943)
Etching with drypoint

GRACE TOWER

ONE LAST LOOK AT AFTERNOON

William Walcot, from the perspective of A Greek Lady,

Sunlight is thumb-soft on your face,
I kiss your cheekbone's burned cells.

Each time I visit, your body moves further
down the bed, glacial, like the green sleeve

of a pear sliding off to rot. Empty of words,
we hear the plughole giggle, slap a palm on it

and you pull a rose from your nightdress,
offering me its freshly forgotten dream

of America as if, there, sanity is sweet-
talked like a wheat stalk between teeth.

I fetch a memory: the dog biting its own tail
in Piazza San Marco, combing the thick ink

across copper then ripping back the paper
like a wax strip to reveal a slick image.

With a blank face, you ask for one last look
at afternoon, your body a black X framed

in the bay window, foreground to spring's
bright architecture. The breeze threatens

your fleece from my fingers and you jump.
Tomorrow burns new dawn on my wrists –

the shape of your pain pinched in the gravel,
and my tears falling like finches in the rain.

MILENA WILLIAMSON

BLUE

after 'Wet Evening on the Riva, Venice' by Emily Murray Paterson

The canal spills into the street and sky.
Umbrellaed figures make their way

on or off gondolas, heading home
with a float of footprints.

Streetlamps blink, a trick
of colours colliding into white.

A palace appears, shaped
by raindrops bouncing off.

The riva is awash with light.
There are the puddles we believe to be.

CAIT PHENIX

WET EVENING ON THE RIVA, VENICE

after Emily Murray Paterson

Keep your black umbrella upright,
try not to slip or fall—
the promenade is wet with light,
slick with cerulean paint. Above all,
don't move. Try to stay very still.
Hold your hazy pose, your blurry form,
let the muddy colours instil
a sense that the rainy weather will transform
your body in the damp lavender evening,
that somehow you will appear strolling,
that there is motion and meaning
in the smoky grey clouds rolling
in. That the blue city in the distance
actually exists.



Wet Evening on the Riva, Venice (between 1910 and 1930) by Emily Murray Paterson (1855-1934)
Gouache on paper

CAIT PHENIX

QUAI DU ROSAIRE, BRUGES

after Susan Fletcher Crawford

Sent like a stenographer
to record the canal babbling,
it is hard for me not to imagine
you more like an archer
than a clerk taking notes,
this image loosed like a bolt
from its thin arrowlit mount.
How heavy had the weight
of thick good paper been, the heft
of scalpels and tarlatan rags,
the burden of inking balls and brushes
carried across an ocean?
Did you work from sketches
or start right there,
taking aim on the bridge's parapet
navigating by depth-perception
the belfry looming,
and you skimming copper
into the water like so many
little penny shavings
wishing for the perfect shot.
A marksman nocking
a carbide-tipped arrow
to furrow and engrave
your intended impression.
A scout in Bruges
looking for any give
in the city's fortifications,
in the cobblestones,
in the brickwork banks
held together by medieval ichor.
Addressing every stone,
every arch examined
marking out the waterway sunken
with ink, the two canal dwellers
teetering in their boats.
Looking for your way in.



Quai du Rosaire, Bruges (date unknown) by Susan Fletcher Crawford (1865-1918)
Etching with drypoint

VAHNI CAPILDEO

YOU'LL HAVE TO FEEL YOUR WAY

after The City Walls Salonica, a print by Robert John Gibbings, Ulster Museum

VERSION I

This version essentially consists of notes taken after visiting the Ulster Museum. It was made (i) while looking at the print in memory, while travelling (ii) while looking between the image of the print sent by Anna Liesching, and the wall of books opposite my bed in my mother's study in Port of Spain (iii) after walking round the gallery again with Pádraig Regan in preparation for the discussion with students and presentation of their work.

These lines were put together with the intention of creating a text background to black out, not with the intention of drafting a poem. Still, I wanted the text to have integrity. Anna Liesching asked us to think about the spaces between what is on the wall of the museum and to write to/from/with what isn't there. Therefore, this text was created to be solidly and actively not-there behind/with the words or letters which would remain visible after blackout and/or erasure. Nonetheless I'm not satisfied with it.

The motivating idea, which doesn't come across clearly enough in what I've written, is that this artist's interpretation of a landscape exceeds and sidesteps its existence as a visual object. The simplicity and mystery of the visual representation, and the placement of us as viewers approaching and beholding a no-longer-distant yet not-yet-entered habitation, switch on other senses than sight. Perhaps this 'view' could be appreciated as being less 'about' glimpsing a partly lit Salonika looming ahead at night, and more about feeling one's way into a strange city by movement and touch. The bright and dark and starkly geometric depiction of the steep and fortified place is both abrasive and attractive, like unknown gradients under the feet they lead upwards, or stone walls roughening the hands that reach along them for reliable guidance.

The poem needs a lot more revision to create the sense of rounded versus angular shape, sight versus touch and movement, which I wanted; even though it is intended to be blacked out, I'd have liked it to be more strongly structured for contrasts.

A scarf of day or lamplight
rounds the altitudinous
corner of a city built
with nightblack blocks; a bright cloud
clarifies just how unknown
these fortifications scaled
by hopeful travellers' eyes,
the byzantine simplified
by one with a wounded neck.
Salonika, I have no
sight of you save monochrome,
a vision arms would rest on,
feet would point at; mind pokes holes
because there are no windows,
only footnotes to Shakespeare
citing your fame for witchcraft,
only waterbright ribbons
cut by knives so we watch you
rise like a confident storm.

VERSION II

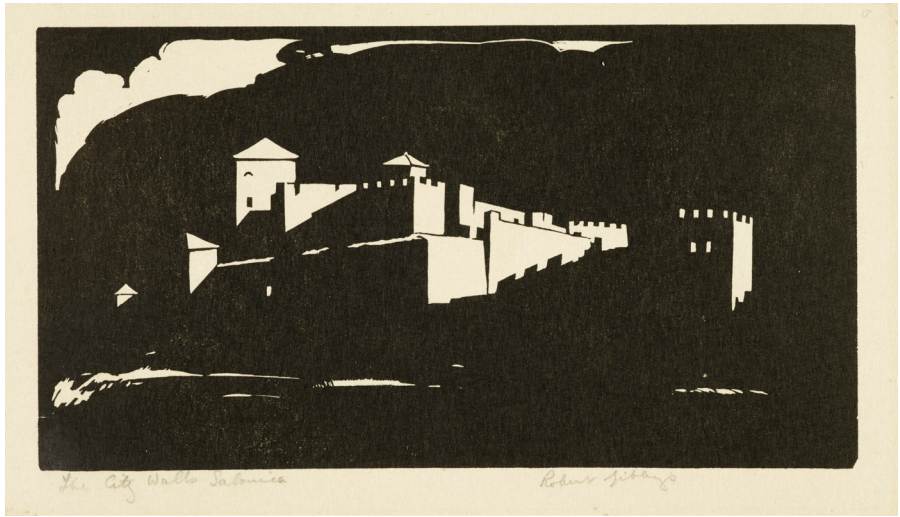
Here the layout of the text has altered, in preparation for creating an erasure or blackout. It has been justified as a block. Single spaces between words have been replaced by tab stops. Ideally I would have placed a layer of slightly damp paper thickly painted black over a print-out of the poem laid out this way. Then I would have used some type of kitchen implement, like an apple corer, to score the black overlayer lightly with small rounded and pointy gaps, to show through bits of text like lamplight through ancient or guarded windows. This is technically beyond me to do well. The shape of the shinethrough would have led the process, and different selections of text would have shown through from what appears in Version III below.

A	scarf	of	day	or	lamplight		
rounds	the	altitudinous					
corner	of	a	city	built			
with	nightblack		blocks;	a	bright	cloud	
clarifies	just	how	unknown				
these	fortifications		scaled				
by	hopeful	travellers'	eyes,				
the	byzantine	simplified					
by	one	with	a	wounded	neck.		
Salonika, I		have	no				
sight	of	you	save	monochrome,			
a	vision	arms	would	rest	on,		
feet	would	point	at;	mind	pokes	holes	
because	there	are	no	windows,			
only	footnotes	to	Shakespeare				
citing	your	fame	for	witchcraft,			
only	waterbright		ribbons				
cut	by	knives	so	we	watch	you	
rise	like	a	confident	storm.			

VERSION III

The process was looking at Version II and imagining a completely blacked-out version with the text behind it, next to the visible text block of Version II, and 'excavating' areas of brightness. Then I highlighted Version II in black, turned the text white, tried to remember the excavations, imagined new arcs, and then turned back discarded text black.

A day am i
round inous
it a city
locks bright cloud
now
the s e
ul tra
the s e
ne w wo n
Salonika, no
you sa
w
feet o n mi les
the f sp are
r
cut i so you
e like n



The City Walls, Salonika (1918) by Robert John Gibbings (1889-1958)

Wood-engraving

Padraig Regan
Ekphrasis Project Tutor, Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's

Who knew that Greece borders California? That Bruges is within walking distance of Venice? As I walk around Changing Views, I begin to think about my own steps. I become conscious that each small step in the gallery represents crossing huge swathes of land and sea out there in the physical world, journeys that could have lasted weeks or months at the times when the images in the exhibition were made. I begin to think of the exhibition as a reconfiguration of the world map. And, as we all know, maps are never neutral. Look at the spatial gymnastics of the Mercator projection to see how our understanding of the planet is warped not just by the impossibility of translating a 3D form into a 2D image but by centuries of colonialism. Look at the surprising accuracy of medieval maps made for calculating taxes and tithes to see the necessary connection between visual and economic control of the land.

*

That an exhibition is an act of collage is not a novel insight, but in relation to this exhibition this idea hits me afresh. Just as a photograph cut from a magazine or some letters excised from a newspaper can never quite be divested of the ghosts of their original material surrounds, so too do these pictures carry with them something of the places where they were made. But, more troublingly, they also carry with them something of the times in which they made, and all their attendant attitudes and economics. What unites these pictures is that they represent an elsewhere, or rather, they create an elsewhere and package it for a market. A market of which the museum is a constituent. And so, the attitudes to the other that the pictures are made from are not just reflected in the collection of the museum, they are symmetrical to the values of the museum as an institution.

*

In an essay on the work of Seker Ahmet, John Berger discusses what he calls the 'traveller's view of a landscape'; he writes that "the problem is epitomised by the horizon. The traveller/spectator looks towards the horizon: for the working peasant bent over the land, the horizon is either invisible or is the totally surrounding edge of the sky from which the weather comes. The language of European landscape could not give expression to such an experience".¹

1. Berger, John, *About Looking*, 88-89.

In *Changing Views*, the organization of the pictures is predominantly horizontal. Rural scenes unfold from their horizons. In cityscapes, where the line where sky meets land is obscured by buildings, we are presented with views down long streets which sweep away to their vanishing points, views which seem incompatible with the actual bodily experience of being in the city, which is all blockage and diversion. The spaces depicted here are observed, not inhabited. This is the perspective of the landlord. The most notable exception to this is the leaf taken from a sketchbook belonging to Ruskin. Here a mountain floats completely detached from the geography it should arise out of. Some sense of distance is suggested by a blue wash which hovers like a low fog around the mountain's base, but even this rudimentary depth is subverted by a church drawn in the opposite orientation whose boundaries just about overlap the bottom of the mountain. Some hand-written notes at the page's left or bottom (depending on whether you hang it according to the orientation of the mountain or the church) further remind us of the flat picture surface. It is worth noting that this is the only work in the exhibition not intended for public consumption. What this object offers us is the possibility of a new way of experiencing space, one that is perhaps radically voluntary; it is up to us to decide what the spatial relationship between the mountain and the church is, if we accept that there is one at all.

*

I think this is akin to what is happening as I walk between the pictures, crossing the globe as I do so. I become conscious of directions of travel. At first I follow what I suppose is the intended path through the exhibition; I turn right as I enter the room, then continue clockwise until I reach the door again. Then I begin to cross and re-cross the floor, not quite at random but following chance associations between images. I wonder about the implications of this. On the one hand I think about whether I am indulging in what has always been my privilege as a white person with a European passport, as someone who has only ever travelled voluntarily, that is to see the world organised around my gaze. But on the other, I allow myself to think that this crossing and re-crossing, this entering and exiting various positions might be in some way an escape from the spatial logic that hold these places separate. I wonder if this might be a way to make the spaces in the images inhabited.

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Special thanks to Jenny Browne, Fulbright Scholar 2020.

Plum Girls, Mexico by Doris Rosenthal - with permission from the Artists Estate.

The City Walls, Salonika by Robert John Gibbings - with permission from the Artists Estate.

All other artworks are held by the Ulster Museum, shown with permission from National Museums NI.

Changing Views



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