

1. Hadara Bar-Nadav from the *American Book Review* comments that "the especially ambitious ekphrastic poems in *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* ally Bang with such twentieth-century writers as Gertrude Stein and Barbara Guest." How have Stein and Guest inspired your current work?

I think Bar-Nadav is suggesting not influence, but only shared affinities. I've read poems by Barbara Guest but I wouldn't say I was influenced by them. I would claim Stein as an influence. Her work taught me that indirection can often be a more effective way of communicating than directness. Andre Breton called Picasso's painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, "an explosion in the laboratory"; in the realm of poetry, I think Stein's *Tender Buttons* played a similar role for me. Once that explosion occurs, nothing is ever the same again.

2. Melinda Markham from the *Antioch Review* believes that *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* reveals a "believable world in which one art form refracts endlessly off ahistorical others, and 'reality' as we know it disappears." How do you understand this interpretation of your work?

I think the statement you are quoting, certainly taken out of context as it is now, could describe literature in general: a believable parallel universe that refracts off of all other previously created worlds and which, while one is reading it, dissolves one's sense of the material world (presumably by momentarily distracting one from it).

3. *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* provocatively opens with the poem entitled, "Rock and Roll is Dead, the Novel is Dead, God is Dead, Painting is Dead." This title connects directly to that of a 2003 painting by Bruce Pearson, and each succeeding poem correlates to other cultural artifacts—whether it is a painting, sculpture, photograph, or film. How did you decide which pieces to use for your own work?

I looked for artwork that I enjoyed, which is often work that has a certain degree of openness to it—meaning, it tends to be non-dictatorial about how the viewer is meant to read it. It was also important to me that the work had an evocative title. I found Surrealist art to be a particularly rich vein. I also found possibilities in abstract expressionism, and conceptual art. Among the first poems I wrote for the book were some based on paintings by the contemporary German painter Sigmar Polke. Polke, who sadly just recently died, often places objects and figures here and there on a canvas—as if he's giving the viewer various elements in a story; at the same time, he refuses to delineate the connections that would create a complete, and possibly pat, narrative. That methodology appeals to me as a poet. For me, poetic image acts as an element in a story but the compression of poetic language obscures the lines that might tie those images up into a single unified story. The image instead leads to multiple possibilities.

4. Please explain how art influenced you in writing these poems. What is it about the world of art that you found inspirational?

In poems, I often find it easier to speak from behind a mask. These artworks presented me with another way to mask the self, a way to place myself inside a pre-constructed space where I could briefly animate characters, allow them to speak, or act, and then retire them back into a dummy case. My hope is always that what occurs on that stage, as well as the set design, will illustrate the abstract, or personify values, or enact ideas.

5. Your poem “In the Garden” states that “...Here we are and we're doing the best/that we can, this side of passive at the center of patience./That is the game that we play...We are posing. We are poised./This is where we live. We are ever/but only when ever is all that there is.” How would you explain these particular lines? What was your focus when writing this piece?

The poem takes its situation, and some imagery, from the painting, “In the Garden” by the Portuguese artist, Paula Rego. The painting shows two girls, one who looks a bit maternal, one who looks younger, more sexualized (a spaghetti-strap top, one strap fallen off a shoulder) and who holds in her arms a dog who is sleeping on its back. They might be mother and daughter, but I conceived them as sisters. A small lion and a monkey menace one another in the immediate foreground. To my mind, whenever we have a garden in art or literature, it's impossible not to think Eden. So I imagined this as Eden, the original promise of which is endless protection and constant pleasure. The girls possess this sense of ever-ness but the speaker seems to have a prophetic knowledge of the eventual fall, suggested by “we are ever/but *only* when ever is all that there is”. Which of course is what happens with any sort of pleasure, it only lasts until it's over. Of course until it is over, one deludes oneself into thinking it will never end. The speaker also seems aware of the fact that when one comes on stage, it is as a fabricated self; she knows she is posing, here as a mythical inhabitant of Eden, and as the speaker in a poem.

6. Donna Seaman from a 2004 *Booklist* review writes on *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* that “the eye is a reigning image and metaphor, Alice in Wonderland a companion and muse...” Indeed, this iconic literary figure resonates in many of the poems such as “Rock and Roll is Dead, the Novel is Dead, God is Dead, Painting is Dead,” “Rococo,” “The Tyranny of Everyday Life,” and most notably in “Alice in Wonderland.” Please elaborate on this fascination with Alice.

Alice isn't the only recurrent character I use in my poems—I sometimes use Mickey Mouse, occasionally Ophelia, Freud appears more than once. Sometimes I invent characters, like Louise in *Louise in Love*. I think my attraction to Alice has to do with her frustrated amazement at Wonderland's pervasive irrationality. I can also take her out of Wonderland if I need to and introduce her to a new set of circumstances. She'll still have her way of looking at the world because all worlds have their “wonderlandish” aspects. Ultimately, however, Alice, and all of the characters, are another form of masking.

7. The chronological structure of your collection is fascinating, as you begin with a reflection on contemporary work, then chronologically descend, but ultimately conclude with another contemporary piece of art—this time one of your own. Please explain your reasons for the chronological structuring of this collection?

At some point I realized that if I arranged the poems (and the artworks they were based on) chronologically, I would actually be tracing the history of art from Surrealism forward. In particular, I'd be tracing visual art's effort to free itself from a tyrannical allegiance to representing material reality; I'd end up demonstrating how over time art moves farther and farther away from the virtuosity of pure representation—where its success rests on conjuring in paint the fine detail of the lace ruff around the neck, for example, or the just slain roebuck hanging from a meat hook. I felt that in some ways, that same trajectory existed in poetry. Over time, the poetic frame has become more and more fractured and distorted and poetry has moved away the idea that the poet is a believable stand-in who gives utterance to some universal human

experience. The chronological arrangement of the poems demonstrates that shift in focus in both visual art and poetry.

The book begins with the present moment—the year 2003, which is when I completed the manuscript. That moment also stands for all of the moments when the demise of art, literature, music, or religion is being foretold (“Rock and Roll is Dead, The Novel Is Dead, God Is Dead, Painting Is Dead”); the irony is, of course, that in spite of these forecasts, we go on making art and music, writing novels, and believing in something. The book moves back in time towards surrealism, that decisive moment when the effort to represent an external reality is replaced by an effort to represent an internal dreamscape reality. Odilon Redon comes in (“The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity”) as a precursor of surrealism. Towards the end of the process of arranging the book I found an image online of a painting of an architectural detail from 1 B.C.E., a decorative pattern called “egg and dart.” For me, that small fragment was a still-living artifact of the ancientness of this attempt to represent reality and the vexed relationship we have between a thing and its image. That poem effectively took art history back to 1 BCE. I then added a final image of my own, a mixed-media collage, as a lyric endnote to the book. That poem (“What Moonlight Can Do for Ruins”) allowed me to come back in time to the present moment, the moment of finishing the book, but also to come on stage as myself. I was still, however, on stage with an artwork in front of my face and speaking from behind it. The book begins and ends with art still being made in spite of being told we can no longer make art the old way. The moonlight, a classic lyric trope, is the light through which poetry often views the world, and especially the poetic past, so it seemed appropriate to end in that light, looking back at the ruins of art, and of time, that ever-eroding force.

8. There seems to be much presupposed when readers begin *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*, specifically that they would have familiarity with these cultural artifacts that relate to the poetry. How did you understand your audience when writing these poems?

I assumed that readers would not know these works but would only understand that I knew them, and had taken their titles as my titles, just as readers, while they are reading Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” don’t know what the Grecian urn that inspired the poem looked like. I assumed that readers who were curious about the relationship between the artwork and the poem, could, in most cases, find the work. If readers were to look at the work, or if they already knew the work, they would see that some of the poems have an enormous debt to the artwork, but others have relatively little. A few of the works, for instance, are abstract paintings. In those cases, except for the title, my debt is only to what was idiosyncratically suggested to me by looking at color and form.

9. Certainly *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* is not your only applauded collection of poetry. Your two most recent collections, *Elegy* and *The Bride of E* have both been well received by critics, and *Elegy* was even awarded the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award. What keeps you focused on your work? How are you able to balance prestige while remaining true to your own aesthetic?

I keep focused on my work because I like to write. I like it better than anything else I’ve ever done in life. I remain true to the pleasure of doing it. I write what I feel compelled to write and mostly I’ve been successful at getting it published, and some people have been very kind when they’ve evaluated it but I don’t do it for the evaluation. The reception of it is an after-the-fact aspect of writing. And of course there is a certain pleasure when the art one creates finds approval but for me that pleasure is a lesser second to the primary pleasure of making.

10. Your bio page from Washington University-St. Louis mentions that you are currently working on a translation of the *Inferno*. How would you explain this current project?

I'm currently putting the *Inferno* into contemporary English and replacing the original terza rima with the music of contemporary poetry: alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme. In addition, because Dante incorporated the work of poets he admired into the original, I've similarly worked into the text, when it fits the translation, quotes from poets who have lived since then, both high-culture poets like Shakespeare and Milton and Browning, but also low-culture poets like Bob Dylan and the Stones. I also occasionally replace medieval elements with modern technology—in one place a speeding arrow, for example, is replaced by an Ultimate Aero, the fastest car ever invented. My hope is that the poem will be more approachable and yet maintain the power of the original. It's very much a poem about religious and political hypocrisy—and that landscape seems to never change.

Bio note:

Mary Jo Bang is the author of six collections of poems, most recently *Elegy*, which received the 2007 National Book Critics Circle, and *The Bride of E* (2009). She's been the recipient of a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University and a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Jubilat*, *Kenyon Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Paris Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Washington University in St. Louis. Her translation of Dante's *Inferno*, with illustrations by Henrik Drescher, will be published by Graywolf Press in 2012.