

Ekphrastic Fantastic! Using Visual Art to Spark Creative Writing

Ekphrasis is a Greek term used to describe what happens when an artist working in a particular medium (in our case writing), takes inspiration from a work of art in a different medium (in our case painting and collage).

There is a rich ekphrastic tradition in poetry and prose. Early writers admired the fine physical detail in visual works of art. They tried to translate a painting's physical beauty, essence or ideas into words, often using long vivid description.

But words are different than images. Images can freeze moments in time more easily than words can. Words, on the other hand, move through time and must be read in a line, one after another. Words and images have different superpowers. No ekphrastic poem can ever replicate the piece of art, or capture its "true" essence. It can only tell its own version.

In this spirit, we encourage you to use Clayton's paintings as spring boards, or points of departure for your creative writing explorations.

We think Ekphrasis becomes interesting when it shows us what we can't see by looking and accounting objectively. We think written description is great when it isn't exactly accurate, when it shows us what only you the writer can see.

Be inventive with your description; let it reveal your own particular way of looking at the world.

For instance, here's an example of an imaginative, inventive description from the first of Clayton's collages:

"The monsters kiss revealed my red and blue veins, my soft muscles and tendons. Was I going to dissolve into a pile of gore?"

In this description the writer imagines herself as a character inside the painted collage. Writing from inside a piece, as yourself or a character is a great way to show something about the painting we can't see from just looking at it.

Another trick to opening your imagination is simply to focus down. Try to focus on just one detail of your chosen piece – as if looking through a keyhole. This adds an instant aura of mystery. It begs you to fill in the blanks with your imagination. You can even try cutting a hole in a black sheet of paper to create your own magical masking device; or you can imagine that you're shining a small spotlight on one area of the painting, lighting it up, infusing it with your imagination.

*A girl against a black out star,
Hanging, gilded
Dipping her foot into outer space
No one knows she has conjured her own place in the sky
Just by collecting
An orange button, a lock of her mother's hair*

This example was inspired by one of Clayton's matchbook collages. Here, the writer started on the detail that most caught their attention: a girl inside a small golden charm. Once they got her down she sprung into action, leading the way to other parts of the collage: the button, and the hair.

**Now, pick an image to use as your spring board and jump in!
If you want some help, try one of these three prompts:**

Prompt 1: Imagine that you're a figure inside one of Clayton's images: a monster, a person, an animal, or an object. Describe your situation to us. What is happening? How does it feel? Use all of your senses to describe being this character inside this world. Experiment with incorporating smell, taste, touch, and well as sight.

Prompt 2: Focus first on the detail that most captures your attention. Describe it using the sensory details listed above. Now, build from those details to create a poem that conveys your thoughts and feelings about the piece of art. Maybe it reminds you of a situation in your own life?

Prompt 3: All of Clayton's pieces but one are made on non-traditional objects. In Clayton's artist statement they say they love to make art from objects picked up on the street. They love to make discarded things beautiful or to give them new meaning. They also make art as a way to connect to other people. Imagine

yourself as the creator of one of the matchbooks. Write a poem or story showing how you put it together, and why. Is it a good luck charm? A memorial? An alter to a god or goddess? A gift?