



Cover Art as Ekphrastic Entry Point in Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

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Abstract

In popular novels, ekphrasis has become incredibly famous in the last twenty years. Artworks by famous artists, especially paintings, are the most common and noticeable things that are examined. The connection between the written and the visual in Ali Smith's work is something that needs more attention. This is especially true when looking at how a copied artwork is used as cover art and then later on as an ekphrastic object in the story. The reprinted picture is used as both a paratextual and ekphrastic object in Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014).

Key Words: ekphrasis, cover art, *How to be Both*, George/Georgia, Francesco del Cossa/ Franchesco

فن الغلاف كنقطة دخول Ekphrastic في كتاب علي سميث "كيف تكون كلاهما

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المخلص

في الروايات الحديثة، أصبح فن الوصف الإيكراسي (Ekphrasis) شائعاً جداً خلال العشرين سنة الأخيرة. تُعد الأعمال الفنية لرسامين مشهورين، وخاصة اللوحات، من أكثر العناصر حضوراً ولافتة للانتباه في هذا المجال. إن العلاقة بين المكتوب والمرئي في أعمال علي سميث تستحق مزيداً من الدراسة، خصوصاً عند النظر إلى كيفية استخدام عمل فني منسوخ كصورة غلاف، ثم لاحقاً كموضوع إيكراسي داخل القصة نفسها. تُستعمل الصورة المعاد طباعتها كعنصر مجاور للنص (paratextual) وكعنصر إيكراسي في رواية سميث (*How to Be Both*) الصادرة عام 2014.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إيكراسيس، غلاف فني، كيف تكون كلاهما، جورج/ جورجيا، فرانثيسكو ديل كوسا/ فرانثيسكو

Introduction

Ekphrasis is a word that was first used in rhetoric, but now it is mostly used in poems from the late Middle Ages onwards to describe places, buildings, people



and works of art in vivid detail. The word “ekphrasis” comes from the Greek word “ekphrazein”, and “ek” in it means “come out”, and “phrasis” means “speak, say”, so the word ‘ekphrazein’ means “speak out” (Xinyu 69). Marjorie Munsterberg explains that the purpose of this literary device is to make the reader imagine the thing being talked about as if it were real. However, in many cases, the subject never existed, so the ekphrastic account shows how creative the writer is and how good they are at writing. Most people who read great Greek and Latin texts did not care if the subject was real or made up (Munsterberg 9).

According to Munsterberg, ekphrasis grew over time and gained a certain kind of expressive power that let its verbal visualization grow even further than what was possible with actual visualization. That is because it can add things that are not visible, like sound and movement. It can also bring to the reader's attention details that might not be obvious or noticeable in a certain way, such as how an artistic composition is put together. Additionally, it enables writers to make their subjects seem real to their readers, even though those subjects may not exist in reality (9).

There has been much variance about ekphrasis because of two main ideas: the idea that a text must be “a representation of a real representation”, and the idea that conflict or “paragone” defines the hierarchical “relationship between word and image.” Some critics, including Heffernan and Bergmann Loizeaux, have pushed for a way of understanding ekphrasis that insists on the specificity of the object of ekphrasis, to a real picture (or representation) that we can refer to. One of the most important definitions of ekphrasis that has been used for many years is "ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation" (Museum 3).

A few early examples show both the variety of approaches used today and what may become an unavoidable overabundance of definitions. For example, Claus Clüver develops a nuanced understanding of ekphrastic prose fiction by examining various examples of the genre in an essay that discusses books like Ali Smith's *How to be Both* (2014) and others. Ekphrasis is a method of representing static visual arrangements as semiotic objects. It discusses how a real or imagined viewer perceives or responds to specific features of real or imagined shapes, or it proposes that these features are present in virtual or imagined reality. It only has spoken materials (252). With Clüver's meaning, ekphrasis can be used to describe more than just words. It can also be used to describe made-up visual arrangements.

As Brosch says, one example of narrative ekphrasis is "the performance of seeing." Narratives can reflect on certain ways of seeing and the relationship between the subject and the object of an important act of visual scrutiny by setting up a visual observation (“Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels” 406). A lot of the time that words and pictures meet in modern literature, it is because of larger



artistic themes that make us think about how we see things, how art is made, and bigger questions about beauty.

Modern fiction that thoroughly incorporates visual encounters to the point that the story's logic depends on visuals uses ekphrasis in creative ways. Smith's *How to be Both* shows how skillfully words and graphics are integrated. Perhaps the most inventive and natural usage of ekphrasis. The experience extends beyond interpreting Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa's works. Saint Vincent Ferrer (1473–1475) in London's National Gallery and his Hall of Months frescoes in Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia (1469–1471) (Murphy 133).

How to Be Both (2014)

The main ekphrases of the novel serve as a brief treatise on what the narrator believes to be the performing self-consciousness that is at the heart of all art, and they are set in both the 1460s and 450 years later, respectively. In one part, the story is told by a teenage girl named George. In the other, it is told by the fictional character del Cossa, who is female in the book and whose historical identity is mixed with her role as a character in the painting. She travels through time to see George. Smith also published a book that explores different ways of putting things together. In some versions, George's character starts the book, while in others, del Cossa's does (Murphy 133).

Readers will have completely different experiences with the text and characters depending on which version they read. The book is split into two parts, and both have the title "one." Ali Smith keeps one part from being more important than the other by confirming what seems to be a statement about relativity. It was Smith's idea to present the novel in two different ways after seeing an illustration of a fresco that revealed a "underdrawing" of a boy beneath the top layer, which depicted a woman. Smith talked about this in an interview with *The New York Times*. She said, "It struck me as a great metaphor for how stories work"(Lyall). There are usually at least two stories going on in a great story: the one that the readers see and the one that you cannot reach.

Thus, the link between the parts becomes more intricate. In the novel's structure, points of perspective affect how the reader feels and how the characters interact. Text's dual tale raises questions about art's purpose and life and death. George's story is told from a third-person point of view. The main character is a teenager named Georgia, but she prefers to be called George. The story is about how she deals with her sadness after her mother dies suddenly. The story is full of memories, and through George's memories, the reader gets to know his mother, Carol. Carol plays an important emotional role in the book, and her interest in the paintings of the Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa connects both the stories

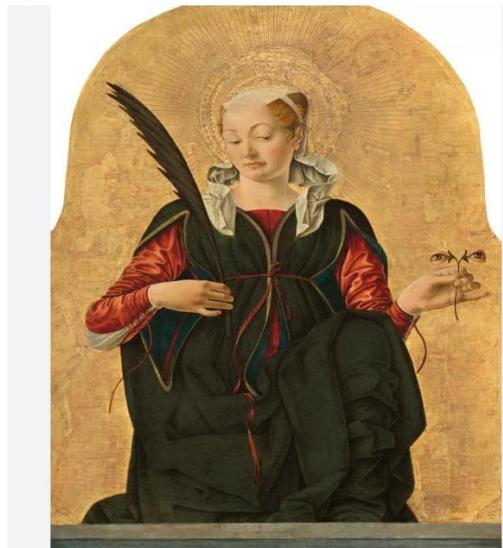


and the characters. George becomes deeply interested in a painting by Cossa that is in the National Gallery. It is a devotional portrait of a monk named Vincent Ferrer. There are many pages with thorough descriptions of these works of art, and how the characters react to them is an important part of the story. In the other part of the book, Franchesco's ghost tells the story from the first-person point of view. She follows George after visiting the National Museum in London, and in doing so and through many memories she shares with the reader her own life and art. By adding the letter "h" to the name Francesco, Smith makes Franchesco, which is centered on a real Renaissance painter with the same name. This is done to make it clear that this character was fictitious. (Bilge 114)

The way Saint Vincent Ferrer allows the narrator and the spirit of del Cossa to bridge temporal and artistic frames is of great aesthetic and ekphrastic importance. The painting dominates the composition, not just as a plot diversion or epiphany. The main point of Clüver's argument is that Smith's approach is important because del Cossa's works can be thought of as verbal descriptions of many performances just like a ballet, a song, or a play. These representations "create what we call 'images' of visual, aural, kinetic, or performatic phenomena in the reader's, viewer's, or listener's mind." (249– 250).



Saint Vincent Ferrer



Saint Lucia

This imagined transcendence of the verbal is made possible by the way that picture becomes text and text shapes picture. On the inside front and back pages, there are pictures of del Cossa's frescoes that surround the whole book. This suggests that the book is completely connected to the paintings. According to Yvonne Liebermann, "the integration of two images that frame the book: one at the start of the novel and one at the end" emphasizes the merging of verbal and visual representation. The pictures are of two people from Francesco del Cossa's March fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia: an indul worker and a musician who might be a



man or a woman (146). Brosch agrees that there is much integration, but she reads it ethically, which shows how technological advancements often intersect with other issues. Though the painter's empathetic spirit is interested in her, George's character gets over her loss by remembering how her mother read the artist. Art connects people with diverse perspectives and levels of awareness across ontological gaps without being didactic. Ekphrasis advances the characters beyond the viewing subject-perceived object relationship. It also introduces them to others from their modest role. (Brosch 419)

Art can be pretty simple and presented similarly in some situations. George, for instance, looks very closely at del Cossa's Saint Vincent Ferrer (1473–5) every time she goes to The National Gallery in London. But when a copy of the picture on 'the cover of the Penguin UK paperback' version of *How to be Both* is given to George, the lines between the constructed worlds and the real world become very blurry. The next part of the text describes the picture in a way that not only matches George's gaze but also allows the readers to see in another way. It is studied as a "paratextual" element where a copied artwork is used as the cover art, and its appearance as an ekphrastic object in the story helps us figure out whether the visual or the verbal is more important in the novel (Cheong 343).

However, what makes Smith's work stand out, especially 'the Penguin UK paperback' version of *How to be Both*, is that the image on the cover is discussed in the text. Since H gives George a copy of the same picture that is on the book's cover, it becomes both "a paratextual and textual part" of the book, and the cover art is no longer just that. As a piece of paratext, the cover picture can be understood. According to Priet-Arranz the ekphrastic descriptions of the picture on 'the Penguin paperback' version's front cover were taken by photographer and film director Jean-Marie Périer of Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy, two famous figures in the French yé-yé movement. This ekphrastic shift from visual to verbal hides the movement (Priet-Arranz 185):

Inside there's a photograph on thick paper. It's summer in the picture. Two women (both young, both between girl and woman) are walking along a road together past some shops in a very sunny-looking place. Is it now or is it in the past? One of them is yellow-haired and one of them is darker. The yellow-haired one, the smaller of the two, is looking at something off camera, off to her left. She's wearing a gold and orange top . . .

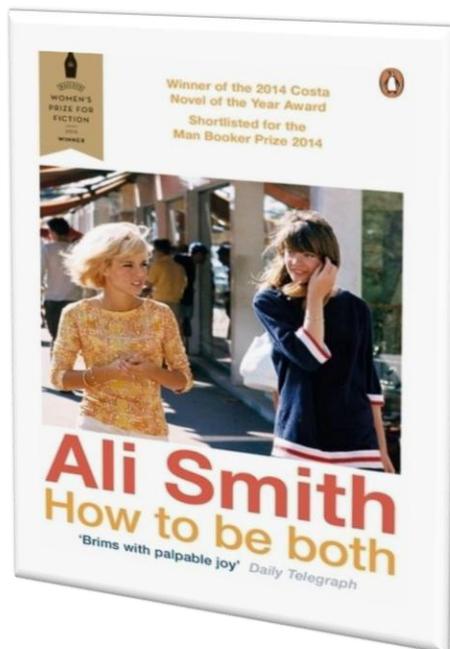
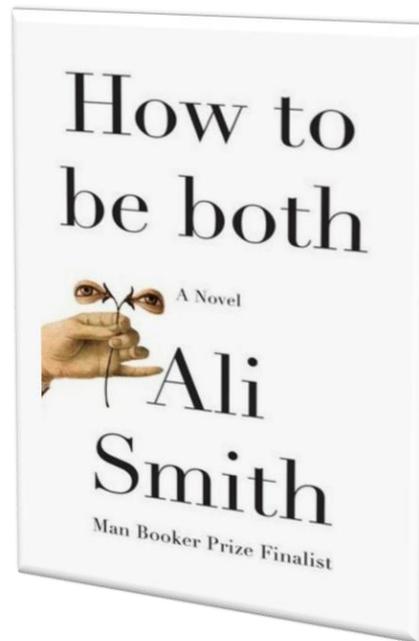
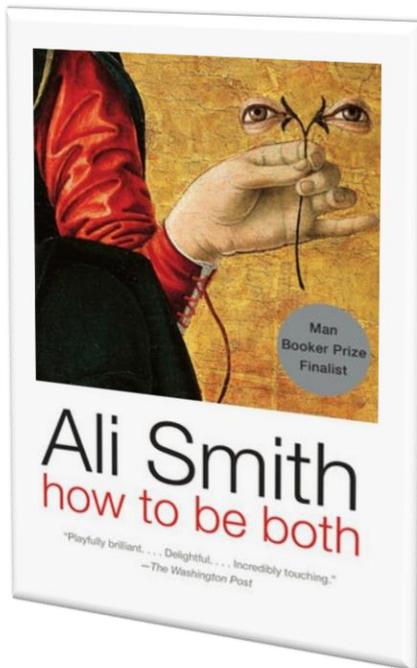
Who are they? George says.

French, H says. From the 1960s. (Both 81-2)



The North American editions of *How to Be Both* have cover art from previous works in the novel. The designs of the cover art of these editions will be interpreted differently about the novel because the connections between cover art, depending on the artistic medium of the original artwork, and its reappearance in narrative form will raise other thematic and formal issues. The cover art for “the Random House USA, Anchor, Knopf Doubleday, and Penguin Random House Canada paperback editions” is different from the Penguin UK version. It shows a close-up of St. Lucia holding "eyes on a sprig in her hand" from del Cossa's Saint Lucy (around 1473/1474). The front cover of the Pantheon Books hardback version is less bright and has a cutout of St. Lucia's hand with "eyes on a sprig" against a white background. This picture showed up again in Franchesco's section as an entry at the very beginning of his section. For readers of these versions, the connections between this picture and the sections discussing Francescho's choice to paint her "eyes on a sprig" rather than on a dish or in her palm will have varying interpretations. (Cheong 346-47):

she had eyes on a sprig in her hand, eyes opening at the end of the sprig like flowers will, cause the great Alberti writes that the eye is like a bud, which made me think of eyes opening like plantwork, cause St Lucia is the saint of eyes and light and is usually seen blind or eyeless and many painters give her eyes but not in her face, instead they put them on a platter or set them in the palm of her hand – but I let her keep all her eyes, I did not want to deprive her of any. (Both 346)



The different versions of the cover art

It is clear that *How to be Both* has graphic art from the very beginning. The cover is a copied photograph. On the inside of the front and back covers, there are pictures of a man in 'white' and a figure in 'red' from another del Cossa painting called *Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva* (1476–84). George gives a detailed description of the picture, but the white-painted man broke the rules of the still image when he showed up as a character with whom Francescho has a sexual



relationship. The link is clear to the reader when Francescho meets "one of the working men" whose physical features match those of the painted figure: "his sleeves are frayed by the strength of his hands and forearms: his knees have made holes in the cloth, being so strong: the line of dark hairs above his groin sits visible: his eyes are reddened by work" (Both 283). However, in this show, one character is based on a real painter and another character is based on a painting by the real painter. In this constructed world, though, these people seem to live on the same level as the real world. (Cheong 350) The ekphrastic description of the photograph is part of the story so that it can be thought of as a textual element. However, the reprinted image is not part of the story and is instead a paratextual element. This makes the line between "text and paratext" less clear.



del Cossa's Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva

In the Penguin Canada hardback version, the front cover is a close-up of the same photograph as in the Penguin UK paperback edition. The references to photography and the photograph itself will be more prominent, which may lead the reader to focus on the visual aspects of the work rather than the painting. The close-up may reveal more details in the photograph, but the fragmentary image emphasizes that what lies beyond the frame is unseen and unknowable. Here, ekphrastic description in *How to Be Both* is informed not only by a self-conscious desire to engage with, through particular works of art, the ways of making that painting and photography involve about the novel Form, but also by Smith's frequent questions about literature and art. The reader may not care much about



these publishing houses' cover art choices for *How to be Both*, which is aimed at different audiences from different countries. However, cover art, especially in this novel, has a big impact on how it is read and seen. This suggests that the book can be considered an art object, even if its artistic value is not in its physical properties, since books are mass-produced and cannot be considered singular like most plastic or visual artworks (Cheong 347).

As part of *How to be both*, George outlines the topics and defines the image's composition by referring to the light, objects, and terrain. She even detects where one of them is gazing, alerting the reader to what may be off camera and unreachable. Thus, viewing a photo requires identifying what is included and excluded. The camera's technical operations are important, but the photographer's eye frames the photo. These phrases can only be read linearly and initially make sense of in the same way, but by following them, we feel George's gaze travel in our brains. "Is it now or is it in the past?" interrupts the narrative, underlining our need for context to understand the photo (Ibid.). The photograph suggests time as well as geographical distance, which may affect how the readers see it as an artifact and what it shows. The time between a photograph is taking and its viewing is vital to its interpretation, despite their distinct approaches to photography. George's description may seem impartial as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag suggested. This ekphrastic writing may not improve the reader's view of the photo, but it does show some of the essential contrasts between word and image, particularly in the reader's reception.

Conclusion

Ali Smith uses ekphrasis to structure his work and expand the meaning of ekphrasis by making the readers think about the limits of what art is. At the same time, he marks a key stage in the development of the novel, where a pictorial turn has taken over the form. The use of artworks in the book, such as reprinted photos, paintings, and ekphrastic writing, demonstrates the author's emphasis on experience and emotion. Reading ekphrastic descriptions and looking at the reprinted picture at the same time is part of the novel, these visual and verbal descriptions are both paratextual and textual parts of the book. Ultimately, these aspects of the story, like the structure of the novel and the connection between words and pictures, show that the author feels anxious about the novel form.

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