# BORDERCROSSINGS

## Painting, Poetry, Impasse

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Matthew Wong, *The Gaze*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 30.5 × 22.9 centimetres.

Michelangelo Buonarroti was not only a sculptor, painter and architect. He composed hundreds of sonnets and other poems that have a permanent place in the canon of Italian poetry. William Blake should be on anyone's top 10 list of British artists but also—a still higher bar, I think, for any compatriot of Shakespeare and Milton—of British poets.

Despite such exceptional figures, in the West, at least, the poet-artist is primarily a product of 20th-century modernism and its resonances into our own time. The reasons for this are hard to tease out, but it must have something to do with the rise of art criticism in 19th—century Paris, which brought artists and literati into closer contact—Charles Baudelaire would be the exemplary figure. Friendly interaction would have favoured thoughts of exchanging *le violon d'Ingres* for what we might term *la plume de Degas*, in commemoration of the famous anecdote where the painter lamented that his wonderful ideas for sonnets weren't quite working out, to which his friend Stéphane Mallarmé replied, "But poems are made of words, not ideas." This might have been in the late 1880s. The poet's witticism should not convince us that he did not take the painter's efforts seriously, or that the results were derisory, either in themselves or in relation to his artistic practice. As the scholar Jessica Locheed has observed (*Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 3, September 2007), "In the context of his artistic experimentation, poetry seems to have provided a means to explore form, abstract language, and synthetic articulation of the arts. Thus, the poems are intrinsically linked to the substance of the works of art themselves rather than merely possessing the same themes." And in this, he is very much like his poet friend, for, she continues, "In similar ways, Mallarmé reveals a tendency to borrow from the language of painting to elucidate his poetry."

This "synthetic articulation of the arts" only intensified in the following century, and above all in the circle around Pablo Picasso, which included such poets as Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, André Salmon and Gertrude Stein. No wonder, when the painter went through a crisis in 1935–36 that led him to temporarily abandon painting and sculpture, he turned to writing poetry as a way to recoup. By the same token, Jacob— who had been one of the first to befriend the Spaniard on his arrival in Paris—had aspired to an artistic career since his schoolboy days and had studied at the Académie Julian. Later, he would make his living as a painter, exhibiting with the swish Bernheim-Jeune, the gallery of Bonnard, Matisse, et al. Today, Jacob's poems are loved, but his paintings are forgotten. He might not have been surprised, given his appreciation for Picasso. As Jacob's biographer, Rosanna Warren, observes, having "lived for years close to a demonic genius in art … he had no illusions about the strength of his own little landscapes and theatre scenes. But they have charm." I wonder. An enterprising gallery should bring some of Jacob's paintings back to light so we can see for ourselves.

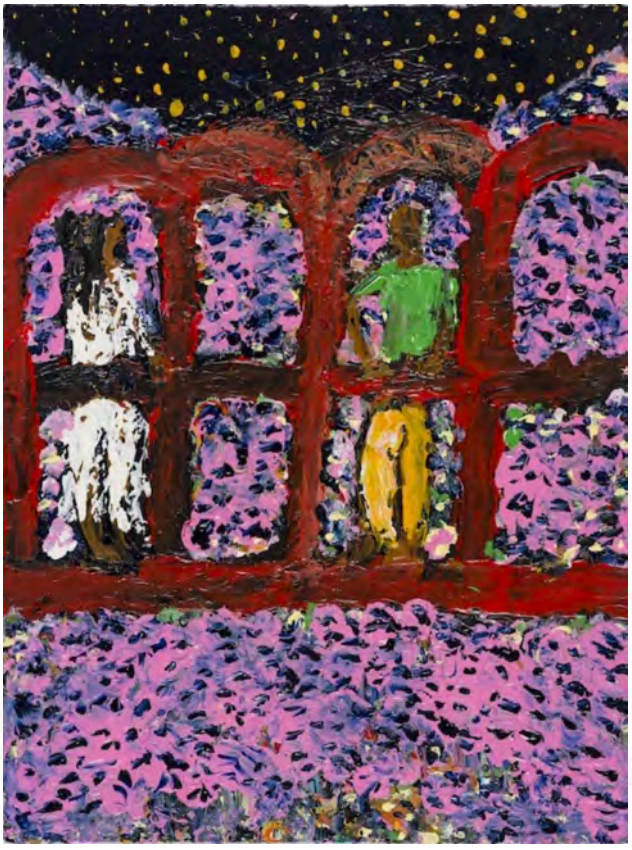
Undoubtedly a more perfect union of artistic and literary talents was that of Henri Michaux, the Swiss-born French poet. Francis Bacon wasn't just being backhanded when he averred that, while he found abstraction lacking in a crucial tension, at least Michaux eked more out of it than Jackson Pollock. "I think that he has made the best *tachiste* or free marks that have been made," Bacon told David Sylvester. "I think he is much better in that way, in making free marks, than Jackson Pollock." Few artists have ever treated painting quite so much like a form of writing as Michaux sometimes did—a writing meant not to be read but to invade the eye. The critic Raymond Bellour, in his book *Lire Michaux*, 2011, evokes Michaux's

idea of an "avant-langue," a language in formation and related to a "*préécriture pictographique*," a pictographic protowriting. He describes writing, in Michaux's sense, as the "unprecedented peopling of a void, in all conceivable forms," and one could easily say the same of his paintings.

If there's anyone in the anglophone world whose works in poetry and art have been so exquisitely attuned, one to the other, as those of Michaux—or of Francis Picabia, whose poetry has long been as fascinatingly indigestible as his art and vice versa, and who delphically asserted, "The work of art has not lost its reason for existing, it has lost its value"—I can't think of them. But poets have kept painting, from DH Lawrence through Rene Ricard, and artists have kept on poetizing—perhaps even more numerously (though I don't mind name-checking Roy Kiyooka and Dorothea Tanning as two good examples), and with good reason, because language is everyone's possession, and really Joseph Beuys's slogan "*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*" might have been more convincing as "*Jeder Mensch ist ein Dichter*." Or how about "*Jeder Künstler ist ein Dichter*"?

Milton Resnick, *Untitled*, 1991, gouache on paper, 45.72 × 30.48 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York. Courtesy Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York.

That the writing of poetry has remained, for generation after generation, an important resource even for painters who never thought of pursuing a parallel career as poets was vividly illustrated by a powerful exhibition last fall and winter at the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation in New York. The exhibition, "U + ME," was an unexpected cross-generational and cross-cultural pairing of paintings and poetry by Resnick—the American painter born in 1917 in the town of Bratslav in what was then still the Russian Empire, now Ukraine—and the Canadian painter Matthew Wong, who was born in 1984 in Toronto but spent a large part of his childhood and youth in Hong Kong. It was a great pleasure to see two artists' poetry blazoned on the gallery walls along with their paintings.



Matthew Wong, *The Bridge*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 30.5 × 22.9 centimetres.

Milton Resnick, *Three Dancers*, 2000, gouache on paper, 66.04 × 104.14 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York. Courtesy Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York.

Both Resnick and Wong are somewhat unclassifiable figures. Resnick was for a long time very close to Willem de Kooning, and in 1949 he was among the founders of "The Club," the meeting place of the Abstract Expressionists. Yet his mature work turned out to be very different from that of his peers, and later he was dismissive of his whole cohort, saying, "It's over for us. Something else must be done. We didn't make it: learn from our failure." In 1961 he went through a crisis and, like Picasso, turned to poetry. As with Picasso, he emerged with a renewed commitment to painting. The works for which Resnick then became widely known were massive, overloaded with pigment, dark, hard to see. In 1984 he began to reintroduce simple figurative elements of almost pictographic bluntness into his work, now made on a smaller scale than it had been; the recent exhibition focused on those later paintings, full of mysterious evocations of things seen or imagined and full of longing for something unnameable and ultimately enigmatic. In ill health, he took his own life on March 12, 2004, at the age of 87.

Wong's story is much different, though, like Resnick's, his art seems fuelled by a Romantic sense of artistic mission. But instead of the WPA Federal Art Project and the tiny bohemian world of downtown New York painters in the 1940s and '50s, he found a world for himself to grow in on Facebook. Wong is sometimes referred to as self-taught, which is not quite right—although his formal art education was in photography rather than painting, his eye was prepared when he then began assiduously studying both Western and Chinese painting. Resnick's paintings were produced in the course of a career that stretched over many decades of asking himself, "Where is the end of this silly, crazy thing I'm doing? How far do I have to go before it is so dense, so compact, nothing will escape?" and they bear the burden or glory of time. By contrast, Wong was like a meteor, producing a powerful body of work in just seven years. His paintings share with Resnick's the feeling of having been produced with a sense of intense solitude, but Wong, who from early in his life was diagnosed with autism and Tourette Syndrome and was subject to depression, was also hungry for contact, which he found abundantly in the safety of social media—which also helped spread knowledge of the work he was producing in Edmonton, Alberta. As Raf Khatchadourian observed in a deeply researched article on Wong for *The New Yorker*, "Wong bent perspectival space to fit his own emotional coördinates, and he allowed discrete categories to dissolve into dream dialectics: what is inside might be outside, or the other way around. Trees take on the shape of leaves; forests take on the appearance of folkloric embroidery. But it is also possible to ignore the representational elements and receive the images as pure abstraction." His paintings exhibit an emotional vulnerability more naked than that of Resnick's, which, for all the nuances they harbour, always strike the viewer with a kind of blunt force. Perhaps because of their very tenderness, Wong's paintings were greeted rapturously

on his New York solo debut in 2018. John Yau, for instance, declared his synthesis of Asian and Western traditions to represent "the future of painting." But Wong cut his future off. He committed suicide on October 2, 2019, a month before the opening of his second show.

Matthew Wong, *Afterglow*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 31.1 × 23.2 centimetres.


As Yau notes in his essay for "U + ME," both Resnick and Wong made poetry out of situations of impasse in painting. He quotes one of Wong's:

In the vast room
He sat alone
In front of the painting
In silence
And after a while
Let out a sigh

How vast, really, was the room in which Wong painted? I don't know, but I'd put money on its not having been very big. It seemed vast in proportion to the smallness he felt in relation to his artistic aspiration. The sigh is the breath with which he exhales his anxiety, releases it from his body so that he can proceed.

In his paintings, Wong often pictured himself as a tiny figure in an immense field or a dense forest. And even when the figure is not so small, it seems to be on the outside of things. For instance, a 2016 painting on paper in this show is called *Infinity*. In it, a greyish foreground *Rückenfigur* faces a dark road that seems to lead only to a broken-down fence, with nothing but an indistinct distance beyond it. With the poem in mind, we can see that the infinity evoked in the painting is really, for Wong, the infinity of painting. The problem of how to be inside the world is equivalent to the problem of how to be inside the picture.

Matthew Wong, *Infinity*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 31.1 × 23.2 centimetres.

Resnick's poetry of impasse is more garrulous than Wong's, but likewise states the situation bluntly, beginning,

Not your day you can't do a thing.
You are supposed to have eyes
True your body feels wrong
Easy to talk easy to stand for something
But you must surrender the higher certainties

Milton Resnick, *Untitled*, 1991, gouache on paper, 45.72 × 35.56 centimetres.
Photo: Jason Wyche. © Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York.
Courtesy Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York.

Poetry, I'd hazard, was for Resnick a way of talking himself out of standing for something, talk himself out of blind faith in any certainty higher than that of actually doing the work, talk himself out of climbing, talk himself out of sacrificing—what for what? WH Auden wrote of poetry as "A way of happening, a mouth," and just as Wong's ends with an expression of the mouth—in his case, a sigh—so does Resnick's: "When there's nobody to love / You send kisses to the stars."

In another poem, Resnick conjures a kind of apocalypse of the art system—a wish for there not to be anything to painting beyond the making of it:

Let the sky fall on museums
And the moon tear galleries apart
I will swim the mighty Hudson River when
it happens

Wong, perhaps, looks for smaller revelations. In one poem, his protagonist is seen repeatedly "eating at a Chinese restaurant / In a nameless American city somewhere / In the Midwest"—Wong himself had studied at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor—

and at the end of the meal
He cracks open his fortune cookie
And every time it says the same thing:
"Has your work come to nothing?
No, it has come to this."

At around the same time as the Resnick/Wong exhibition, another New York show highlighted a painter/poet of Resnick's generation who is less heralded but should be better known. Elise Asher, born in Chicago in 1912, had her first one-person show in 1953 at the Tanager Gallery in New York—a cooperative now legendary for having launched painters such as Lois Dodd, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein and Tom Wesselmann; she was already presenting herself as a poet-painter, and published her first book in 1955. The press release for her recent show at New York's Eric Firestone Gallery cites connections with poets and writers such as ee cummings, Henry Miller and William Carlos Williams. In 1958, she married fellow poet Stanley Kunitz, who twice served as what is now known as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and they were together until her death in 2004, age 92.


Elise Asher, *The Summing Up*, 1961, oil on gesso board, 60.96 × 76.2 centimetres.
Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

Like Resnick's, Asher's art is related to abstract expressionism, but in an idiosyncratic way. Her typically delicate, flickering brush marks do not emulate the muscular thrust of Franz Kline or the "melodrama of vulgarity" that Willem de Kooning so magnificently assents to. Usually, there is a containment of the image (if that's the right word for configuration formed by the accumulation of Asher's lyrical brush marks) within the canvas, as in Philip Guston's abstract works or Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, but the overall affect tends to be lighter than their work—at times almost rococo, yet forceful. As Holland Cotter wrote shortly after Asher's death, her art was "idiosyncratic, tender and tough."

The recent exhibition, "Elise Asher: The Vintage Years," featured work made between 1957 and 1966. Asher's work underwent a striking development during this period. While her paintings of the 1950s are purely abstract, in the works of the 1960s, the abstract gesture begins to transmute into script; writing and painting become almost synonymous. Just as Cy Twombly was, around this time, breaking down the distinction between abstract gesture and script, so was Asher. Poetry becomes incorporated into painting—subsumed. Paintings like *The Thing That Eats the Heart*, 1960, or *The Last Absurdity*, 1964–65, are almost entirely legible, and then not quite, at least for me. Words emerge clearly and then subside into the mystery of colour and texture. They arrive at a strange and deliciously unstable equilibrium between two different modes, seeing and reading.

Elise Asher, *The Last Absurdity*, 1964–65, oil on canvas, 127 × 152.4 centimetres.
Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

I don't know if Asher found in poetry a way around getting stuck in the problems of painting the way Resnick and Wong—like Picasso before them—seem to have done. But she must have understood how poetry relates to impasse, for she wrote about it in a poem published as early as 1948, which concludes:

My brain is crushed foliage.
Though on my idling eyes are traced
Ant-trollies in the grasses
And in my drowsing ears resounds
Time's tick through fleshless spaces
And now slack energies within me faintly stir;
Still, budge budge, I cannot budge –
The air is pitched in nooses around my torso.
The elements of freedom hold me prisoner.

But of course, to find the inner resources to speak this imprisonment is already a sort of freedom. The impasse becomes the achievement. Resnick had instructed Reed, his student, to persist, "knowing that you will be defeated, but making a good showing anyway." That's something that poetry can teach to painters, or to anyone. ∎

*Barry Schwabsky's recent publications include a monograph,* Gillian Carnegie (*London: Lund Humphries, 2020), and the catalogue for the retrospective exhibition "Jeff Wall" at Glenstone Museum, 2021. His new collections of poetry are* Feelings of And (*New York: Black Square Editions, 2022) and* Water from Another Source (*New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2023).*