



13/15

Webb

# Ekphrasis in Still Life with Black Birds

Finding a new space - art and prose  
in collaboration

Joanne Reardon

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a site-specific collaboration between the author and the Cotswold artist, Richard Kenton Webb: *Still Life with Black Birds* at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester. The collaborative project was formed of a series of black and white linocuts and a short story, both of which were displayed together in the Museum's dedicated gallery space during September 2014. The paper considers the borderline between collaboration and ekphrasis in terms of the more traditional definition of ekphrasis associated with poetry, which is concerned with the poetic description of a work of art. The paper will consider a new "intermedial" space where the outcome of ekphrasis and collaboration, an exhibition of images and texts as well as a printed book, comes directly out of the dialogic process which precedes it – the "intermedial" space being the dialogue between the two art forms. It will also consider the way ekphrasis arising out of collaboration stimulates consciousness through the way words work in dialogue *with* the artwork.

## Background

This paper focuses on a site-specific collaboration with the Cotswold artist, Richard Kenton Webb: *Still Life with Black Birds* which was exhibited at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester in September 2014. We are practice-based researchers who have known each other for over thirty years but have only recently started working together. The collaboration took place over two years with work passing back and forth between us. The work was neither *descriptive* (associated with the more familiar use of ekphrasis in poetry where the poems describe the artworks) nor *illustrative* (where the artwork illustrates the narrative). The work emerged from dialogue and discussion arising from a shared past as well as a shared interest in crime fiction which was an influential aspect of the collaboration. Both of these things allowed us to dispel the idea, as poet Harriet Tarlo and artist Judith Tucker explore in their own paper on site-specific ekphrasis, *Off Path, Counter Path. Contemporary Walking Collaborations in Landscape, Art and Poetry*, “that one art form is privileged to ‘speak’ above another” (Tarlo and Tucker, 2017: 106). The final published work, in the exhibition and the accompanying text, became a new and complete work in its own right which represented the contribution of both practitioners in equal balance.

Kenton Webb had sketched 15 images which he sent to me in March 2013 asking if I would be interested in writing a prose narrative to accompany them. The artwork depicted scenes from a crime narrative which I explored and developed in a written text, *Still Life with Black Birds*, a crime narrative set in an archaeological context. The final results of the collaboration comprised a series of black and white linocuts and a short story, both of which were displayed together in the Museum’s dedicated gallery space and were accompanied by a lecture and a reading from the work as part of the outreach project in public engagement which ran alongside the exhibition. For the purposes of this paper I will not distinguish between the linocuts and the initial ink drawings sketched by the artist, focusing on the images rather than the medium to trace the development of the project.

Both writer and artist worked within the conventions of a crime narrative but used the museographic context of the museum to enhance and manipulate the content by using an existing archaeological

display at the Corinium Museum to underpin the creative approach. The Corinium has a display within the museum shown in Figure 1 which reconstructs the excavation of an Anglo-Saxon burial site discovered in Lechlade, Gloucestershire in 1985. This display inspired ideas for the nature and setting of the “crime” shown in the sketches and revealed in the final text which was centred around the search for an Iron Age bowl, a grave that should not be opened and the narrator of the story, a protagonist who deals in stolen artefacts and who can change identity at will.



**Figure 1: Anglo Saxon burial, Corinium Museum. Photo: J. Reardon**

There were further influences on the written text – my own experience of studying Archaeology at Leicester University as an undergraduate and the essay, “The Woman in the Field”, written by Kathleen Jamie in her book *Sightlines* (2012) and which I went back to in the writing of *Still Life with Black Birds* as it seemed to deal with many of the same ideas I was intending to explore in the text. Jamie’s account is about a Neolithic grave site and much of her description echoed my experience of being on an archaeological dig on a Roman site as a student. Re-reading Jamie’s text allowed me to recapture the authenticity I needed for my own text and introduced an extra dimension to the process of reflecting on this work in this paper in thinking about the practice of ekphrasis as inter-textual.

Following the exhibition, *Still Life with Black Birds* was published in a signed, limited edition by Artist’s Choice Editions in 2015.

## Collaboration or ekphrasis?

During the process of working on this project, I discovered that the nature of collaboration is as much about working apart as it is about working together. The drawings came before the writing and already had a clear visual narrative so the process of working in different mediums to deliver one unifying story placed competing demands and expectations on me as the writer in terms of creative outcomes and this challenge, particularly in terms of how I have come to understand the nature of ekphrasis, underpins the basis of this paper.

The boundaries between what constitutes collaboration and what might genuinely be termed ekphrasis rests on how the writer translates and interprets what already exists in a visual text without being too literal about translating it into a written text. The writer also needs to be mindful of James Heffernan's assertion that ekphrasis is "dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (Heffernan 1993: 5) and it is this idea that represents the more traditional thinking behind what is thought of as ekphrasis where poetry describes a work of art. *Still Life with Black Birds* is a work of prose and was my second prose collaboration. The first collaboration was with the artist Iain Andrews on *Mythopoeia* at Warrington Art Gallery and Museum in 2012 where I reimagined the story of "The Twelve Wild Ducks" reproduced in Angela Carter's *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (Carter: 1992) in my story "My Mind's Eye" (Reardon: 2012). I am in the process of working on a third project with the artist Natalie Sirett, writing in response to a series of sculptures, found objects and paintings around themes found in fairy tales and to be displayed within a museographic context. However, each time I find myself asking the same questions about the nature of collaboration: am I working in response to a work or creating something independent of it? Or, is the real collaboration what happens in the dialogic space between these two things and is this "intermedial" space where the dialogue occurs what ekphrasis *really* means?

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the literature on the study of ekphrasis in Creative Writing by examining this "intermedial space" through the creation of *Still Life with Black Birds* where the outcome of ekphrasis and collaboration,

an exhibition of images and texts as well as a printed text, comes directly out of the dialogic process which precedes it. The paper will consider how narrative which is "one of the most powerful impulses in ekphrasis [can] deliver story out of the single moment" (Loiseaux 2008: 22) and the way that ekphrasis arising out of collaboration stimulates consciousness through the way words work in dialogue *with* the artwork.

## Learning to read visual language

A traditional ekphrastic approach is defined by Leo Spritzer as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (1962: 72) but, for me, this seems too narrow an approach to describe the way of working I have developed as my ekphrastic process, even though this has come to be seen as the definition of ekphrasis most widely used and understood. During the first centuries CE the word ekphrasis was a rhetorical term for descriptions that would bring anything ranging from a person, a place, a thing and even ideas to life in so vivid a way that they each would become clear in the audience's mind. Ekphrasis is traditionally associated with poetry and its definition: "the use of detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device" comes from the mid-17th century: via Latin from Greek where "ekphrasis 'description', comes from ekphrazein 'recount', from *ek-* 'out' + *phrazein* 'tell'" (Oxford English Dictionary). In ekphrastic process the writing, usually coming after the work of art, is responding to a statement already made about something, with John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Leeson 2004: 507) and W H Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (Leeson 2004: 657) being two of the most famous examples of this. Comparisons then are made more often between poetry and painting in terms of a dialogue which aims to connect the conscious with the unconscious self. Although this exchange of the conscious with the unconscious self is always at the heart of *any* ekphrastic process (and I would argue from my own experience that this is easier to do through poetry), it is this dialogue and the fact that I work mostly in fiction, that raised questions about the nature of ekphrasis in my writing practice.

Ekphrasis can be seen simply as an exchange between the visual and written element coming out of the fact that in everyday life, we turn what we see into verbalised accounts of what we've experienced. What a writer does is to translate or reinterpret this

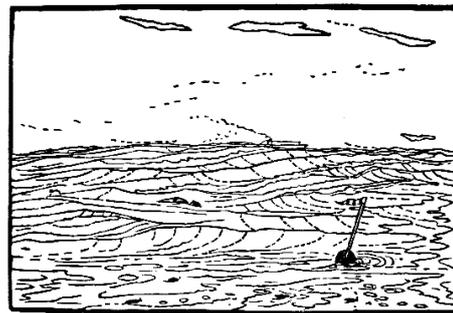
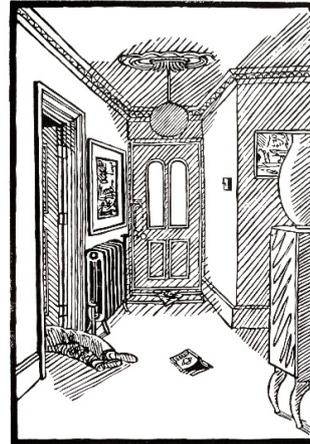
element in the written word for readers so that they can experience it too. Poetry can be more responsive in this sense, finding the precise word to encapsulate an image or an idea. This is explored by Tarlo and Tucker where they discuss whether “sometimes what is problematic to achieve in one discipline might be relatively straightforward in another” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017) and illustrate this by their example of it being “difficult to draw birds circling in the distance without resorting to cliché, while the single word ‘gulls’ located high on the page encapsulates all” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017).[1] I can concur with this having also written poetry as part of an ekphrastic collaboration in October 2019 as part of an exhibition of prints by Natalie Sirett at the Burgh House Museum in London.[2]

Ekphrasis in prose fiction requires a different approach. Narrative can be found with ease provided it has the elements it needs to sustain it – characters, ideas and a landscape from which they can emerge to create a story. “The job of the poet” Jeanette Winterson writes in *Art Objects*, “is to delight and disturb the reader when the habitual pieces are put together in a new way” (1996: 75). I would argue that this is what happens when prose fiction appears in an unexpected context such as alongside an art work in a museographic context, not telling the viewer what they are seeing, but offering a new way of seeing it. Cognitive science has shown that viewing a visual object involves the creation of a visual image – a picture in the mind if you like – which the non-visual part of us can interpret and verbalise if we want to so that it is possible “that a piece of information obtained through the nonverbal channel can be verbalized, while verbal information can be expressed in mental images” (Nęcka 2011: 217). In this way we could see all creative writing as ekphrastic, viewing it the way W.J.T. Mitchell describes in his classic essay on this subject where “there is no essential difference between texts and images” (Mitchell 1994: 160). In *Still Life with Black Birds*, where both writer and artist were trying to achieve similar aims (in creating a crime fiction) to entice a viewer/reader to the new visual and verbal text, we were both looking to come together in a single response which could only be translated through what must surely be an ekphrastic process.

### The process

In March 2013, Richard Kenton Webb sent me a series of 15 images, sketches which displayed a clear

linear narrative depicting some kind of crime story. The images in Figures 2 and 3 show the key images which suggest this – *Vincent* is an image of a body lying in a hallway; *The Sea* pictures a body floating in the sea. There were also images which showed rural and urban landscapes such as winding country lanes and urban roads and a series of images featuring a London bus.



**Figure 2: *Vincent*** (left) **Figure 3: *The Sea*** (right) reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb.

The drawings had been done on a trip to Belgium in November 2012 and featured scenes inspired by English coastal walks, standing stones from the Brittany coast at Carnac and the Cotswold hills where the artist currently lives and works. There were also images of settings that were formative in the painter’s early life – Greenwich and Blackheath. As he created them, the 15 drawings “felt like a crime narrative” to Kenton Webb (2014a: 72) and emerged organically from the artist’s passion for detective fiction and particularly the work of Henning Mankell (a passion shared by the writer) as well as his work as a painter which is predominantly in abstract landscape art. The drawings were sent to me because

I have known the artist for a long time and worked with him on several smaller projects including *Listen* at the Celia Lendis Gallery in 2014 where I used a poetic narrative to guide visitors around the paintings in an exhibition of landscapes of Brittany and Spain. I had accompanied the artist to Brittany where some of the prints in *Listen* were created so this is a good example of the way the exchange of a conscious with an unconscious self as discussed in the earlier part of this paper, was informed by my own experience of these landscapes.



**Figure 4: Brittany No. 5**

colour linoprint, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“You are a traveller trusting the hand that drew this map: black lines draped purposefully over the shoulders of hills and mountains and across the boundaries of a landscape half remembered half hidden. The line is where the colour starts, in startling contrasts of cerulean blue and vermilion – now orange, now red, cadmium and turquoise, filling seas and grasping air, sticking to gateposts and hedges and rivulet-running down pathways that lead to...where?” (Reardon in Kenton Webb 2014: 16)

The shared interest in crime fiction between us was also an important influence in this collaboration. The focus of my PhD at the University of Lancaster was a crime novel *Pleasure Land* (Reardon: 2011) accompanied by a critical reflection on the conventions of crime fiction which I was trying to explore and to experiment with over the course of my novel. One of the key elements in this was research into the work of crime writers such as Henning Mankell and in particular the way he uses

landscape in his writing where “the bleak unforgiving soil of Skåne in the south of Sweden where the books are set, makes for a compelling, absorbing character whose voice inhabits the landscape as much as the story” (Reardon: 2011). The initial drawings sent to me by Kenton Webb were mostly of remote landscapes and it was from these landscapes (rather than the urban images of the London bus etc) that the character of the shape-shifting archaeologist, who is also the narrator of the story in *Still Life with Black Birds*, emerged and owed a great deal to the enigmatic and troubled detective, Kurt Wallander, found in the novels of Henning Mankell (Mankell: 2003, 2004).

As a dialogic form, ekphrastic writing would always seem to be responding to someone else’s work and it occurred to me that the very dialogic nature of the process, and the fact that we had known each other for a long time, demanded that this would not so much be a response as a conversation. This conversation would be the “intermedial” space where the final published work came into being. Kenton Webb stated in an interview at the time of the exhibition that, “We are open to the viewer’s interpretation of the images and texts, but there is a completed story within all of them” (Kenton Webb 2014b: 23) and in the early stages of our discussion there was an intention to create a looser text, one which could be moved around beneath the pictures at the exhibition to change the events of the narrative. However, as Kenton Webb states there was “a completed story” in each one of the pictures so where was my new text to come from?

From the early work of the imagist poets such as Ezra Pound, poets have seen in artworks “an immediacy, a presence, a ‘hereness’ that they have wanted for words, but that they suspect words can only gesture toward” (Loiseaux 2008: 4). Working with prose rather than poetry in response to artwork is a different process and offers different challenges but given that Kenton Webb’s work is also largely abstract, this “immediacy” felt like something I could exploit for the reader because this was a crime fiction and the narrative could only be achieved through dramatic action in prose rather than poetry. This was also something I was starting to explore in *Listen* in 2014 (Fig 3) by creating a narrative journey for the viewer through the exhibition. There was, as I found when I first looked at these initial 15 drawings, the kind of “dramatic confrontation” Mitchell talks about where he finds “no essential difference between texts

and images” (Mitchell 1994: 162). The story was in the images and my role as writer was to exploit the antagonism that existed between the visual and the written representation of the same “completed” story in a new work. I wasn’t being asked to illustrate them; the two of us were working in reverse to the way in which an illustrator may bring their interpretation to a written narrative which presents possibly more challenges for the writer than for the artist. In the artist’s mind, the pictures already had a narrative so where was the space for another one? And whose story would this ultimately become: the artist’s or the writer’s? A new narrative was needed, influenced by what already existed in the visual text. This is where the idea of an “intermedial” space started to form. The new work, arising from our collaborative dialogue within this space would create a third “text” to the two existing ones which comprised the sketches and my narrative together in one space.

The concept of “interpretation” Kenton Webb talks about here is evident in the episodic nature of the final written text where, although there is a ‘separateness’ about the two, neither the visual text nor the written text can really work on its own. This was also the reason why I chose to have the story narrated in the first person by a narrator who is always elusive, “running, shifting shape, watching for shadows” (Reardon 2015: 35), a character drawn from the influence of Patricia Highsmith’s Tom Ripley, a character of such “insolence and audacity” (Highsmith 1983: 75) that he could carry this new work on his own. I was looking for an abstract character to match the abstract nature of the images, one who could become whatever the reader wanted him to be and inhabit this new story that artist and writer had created together. It was the image of the two characters in a library in Figure 5 that triggered this, the key questions: what are they doing there and why a library? This produced the idea that here were two men searching for something, one is a great archaeologist Vincent Landre and the other his protégé and partner in crime, the narrator of the story who is known only as ‘Pete’. It is Vincent’s murder that kickstarts the search for the Iron Age bowl as it becomes clear others are searching for it too. In this section of the story the reader is introduced to the interdependency between the narrator and Vincent. The setting of the library resembles the world of a nineteenth century explorer, where worlds are still yet to be found and the search for an object with almost supernatural powers seemed appropriate in this context:

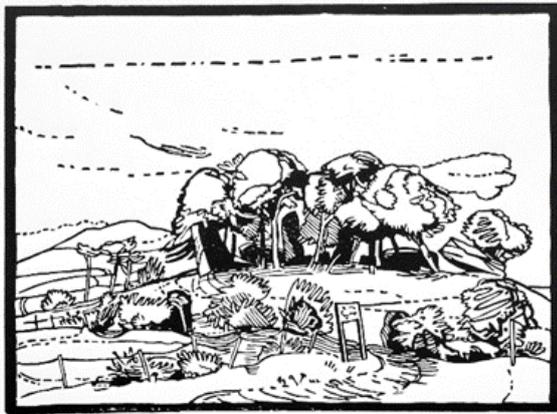


**Figure 5:** *In the library*, reproduced by permission of the artist Richard Kenton Webb

“We would spend hours in his library, the world at our shoulder, poring over manuscripts, searching long-forgotten dig sites and maps – following the road less travelled, searching for the things less found. It was in those things – the things that were yet to be discovered, that we knew our future lay and one day we would find the object that mattered most in the place where it was least expected to be found.” (Reardon 2015: 7)

Wallace Stevens compared the relation between poetry and painting to the dialogue that takes place between our inner and outer worlds, between our conscious and unconscious selves where: “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us” (Stevens 1951: 169), one where the dialogue between the two forms of art and language is absolutely necessary. I would like to come back to this for a moment. Kenton Webb has always used this idea to underpin his work and in *The Landscape as Discourse* describes the process of drawing as “the way I make my thought-life visible. The way I give my unconscious life a voice” (Kenton Webb, 2015: 10). As a way of thinking about the ekphrastic process then, with Jeanette Winterson I started to understand it as functioning in “a world apart, a place where the normal weights and measures of the day have been subtly altered to give a different emphasis and perhaps slide back the secret panel by the heart” (Winterson 1996: 43). The image which slipped back this “secret panel” and which would not let go, was an image of the burial site seen in Figure 6, *The Burial Site*. Perhaps this tapped into my memory of studying archaeology and having access to ancient and secret places hidden from

the world through time. It was certainly this image which took me back to Jamie's essay "The Woman in the Field" (2012: 43) and awakened the sense of a story undiscovered waiting for someone to find it. This is illustrated in the extract below Figure 6, where a man suddenly appears at the opening of the grave; a visitor from the past perhaps? The opening of the grave has put the characters into "contact with past lives through objects, nature and remnants that haunt the contemporary landscape" (Till quoted in Tarlo and Tucker 2017: 16) and drag the events that started with Vincent's death towards a deadly conclusion where the ground refuses to yield its contents and drags anyone who tries to change that back into the past with them.



**Figure 6:** *The Burial Site*, reproduced by permission of the artist Richard Kenton Webb

"We are almost losing the light when we start to move the capstone. *We lifted it with our bare hands* Vincent had told me, so it should have been easy for us to move it now. But we have to bring poles and planks from the barn, so that we can heft our combined weights against it and even then it's hard going. Just when it needs something more to release it, we hear a peal of thunder rolling in from the sea followed by the iron hammering of rain, the lash of it like ice on our skin. It's then that I turn, for barely an instant, and see on the hill behind us, the familiar figure of a man. He is some distance but I see his face clearly and know the smile that is starting to form on his lips." (Reardon 2015: 29).

### The museographic context

The site-specific nature of the project also presented unseen opportunities for the ekphrastic process. I had the sketches as a starting point but, somewhat

surprisingly, I also found that the museum itself was starting to inform the story that would emerge. I am interested in the way a visitor to a museum can come across an interesting artefact in the collection, be drawn to its singularity of shape or colour and then afterwards want to know how it was made and where it came from. Elisabeth Loiseau raises this point when she talks about the way fiction can be helped by the museographic encounter because the museum or art gallery is the way most of us now encounter art or archaeological artefacts and this therefore "shapes the narrative impulse of ekphrasis" (Loiseau 2008: 22) for the visitor. The study of Material Culture as a discipline focuses on the lives of objects: "In studying objects ... we study ourselves, as a species, and the diversity of human experience through time across the planet" (West et al 2014: v) and understanding the life of an object helps us to tell our own story. It also helps the writer to tell the stories of others. The display of works within a museum encourages this kind of understanding from the viewer and display is often manipulated specifically for this kind of contemplation. For example, the way artwork is often displayed on a white background which sets it apart or in the museum context where artefacts are arranged in sequence, suggesting a narrative or story attached to them. This is shown in Figure 7 below which shows part of the exhibition of *Still Life with Black Birds* in the Corinium Museum.



**Figure 7:** *Still Life with Black Birds*, Corinium Museum, 2014. Photograph: J Reardon

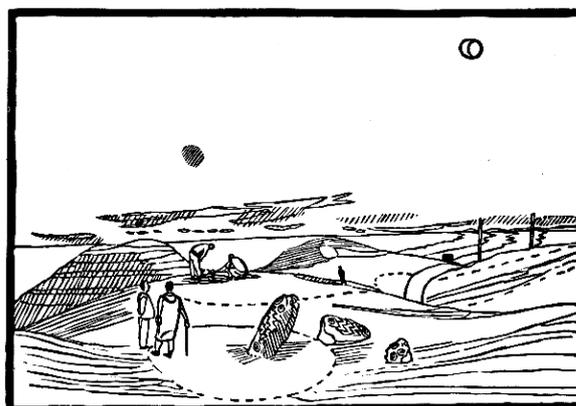
Displaying artefacts in this way allows a new narrative to emerge from the ekphrastic process where "narrative [is] seen as language's way of distinguishing itself from the image, of doing what the language can't" (Loiseau 2008: 22). Contained within a museographic context then, the reader and

viewer are given an unspoken invitation to bring their conscious and unconscious selves together within this contemplative space and to be open to developing an understanding of this new narrative.

The Corinium Museum houses one of the most extensive collection of Romano-British antiquities in Britain and dates from when Corinium was the second largest city in ancient Britain. It also houses Prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon collections with one of its most famous exhibits that of the grave of a sixth century Anglo-Saxon “princess” (so-called because of the high value of the artefacts contained in the grave) discovered in Lechlade, Gloucestershire in 1985. She was found buried with more than 500 individual pieces of jewellery and ornamentation, including an ivory ring, a large amber necklace from the Baltic region and gold and silver brooches from the Rhineland. The grave is recreated in the museum exactly as she was found [3]with artefacts from the grave site displayed in cases around it.

The standing stones and the remote landscape surrounded by sea that was evident in the sketches for *Still Life with Black Birds*, together with my encounter with the grave in the museum further embedded my idea of a land of secrets waiting to be revealed. It recalled that experience of taking part in an archaeological dig in Yorkshire as an undergraduate student in the rain and the wind and recalling the hardship of it, the chipping away at the palimpsest of life below the ancient soil combined with the hope that some secret treasure might emerge from the ground. When I came across Kathleen Jamie’s essay “The Woman in the Field” (2012) many years later, which charted her experience of an archaeological dig (which coincidentally took place around the same time as my own), I identified with her awareness of “the pulse of ancient energy in the land” and the way it was “quietly persistent” (Jamie 2012: 46) waiting for the right moment to reveal its secrets. She describes one blade of corn growing taller than any of the others in the field indicating an ancient disturbance and remarks on the way “It knows a secret, which everyone else has forgotten, and which it discloses to the sky” (49-50). This discovery and the intertextuality of the encounter with Jamie’s work together with the drawing of the standing stones and the grave in the museum, gave me the first idea that there should be a secret at the centre of the story in *Still Life with Black Birds* and landscape was becoming ever more important as a key to this.

When we started discussions on the collaboration we decided to bring the diverse locations and landscapes Kenton Webb had created to build a story set in two locations which would be “imbued with memories, residues and the echoes of events” (Kenton Webb 2015: 17) and we both decided that using the standing stones as the central location to this would bring such echoes into the text. London would be the second location, the one where the inciting incident occurred, with the body in the hallway seen in Figure 2, *Vincent*, the murder which kickstarts the search for the secret which is the artefact buried in an Iron Age grave waiting to be discovered. London is the site of Vincent’s home, where the library is located and in which Vincent and “Pete” look for the “long-forgotten dig sites and maps...searching for the things less found” (Reardon 2015: 7). In the image of *The Burial Site* (Figure 6) the standing stones were less obvious but as the story started to develop, Kenton Webb made them more central to the narrative I was writing. At this point the “Black Birds” from the title started to emerge too:



**Figure 8:** *Standing Stones*, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“It is one of those flat grey days that you get at the start of spring with winter still clinging to its coat tails, and the capstone is where we expected it to be, near the trees, where the trench ends and the settlement begins. A drunken circle of hobbled boulders and stones, some tipped over, others upright, have been hidden for decades by undergrowth, but as we uncover them we notice the birds watching us, hanging in the sky like a constellation of black stars.” (Reardon 2015: 21)

This was the “magical” point at which the drawings started to listen to the text in closer detail and the

text in turn started to “look” at the images. The images in Figures 6 and 8 show these “hobbled” stones, leaning over and hidden in the trees, different shapes and sizes. Tarlo and Tucker discuss the physical act of walking as part of their collaboration as they navigate paths together and see things through “four eyes not two” going on to consider the way that “Collaborative fieldwork involves diversions and negotiations as we deliberate and agree on paths and ways off paths, a process far more self-conscious when walking together than walking alone” (Tarlo and Tucker 2017: 114). This mirrors exactly the way *Still Life with Black Birds* was starting to take shape. The “paths and ways off paths” becoming the emerging narrative, both visual and textual, with artist and writer starting to see the same material in different ways which then became the final text.

New images appeared, the standing stones as they would have been in antiquity which are shown in Figure 8, *Standing Stones*, for example shows characters from both the past (who are watching the dig) and the present (the diggers) to create the link between past and present where “You are placed in time. But within that there’s a bit of room for manoeuvre” (Jamie 2012: 71). The standing stones in the story were located on a remote fictional island off the coast of Scotland. I’d visited Mull and Iona in 2008 so I was drawing from my own memory of the landscape of these remote places and Kenton Webb used his memory of the stones at Carnac [4] which we had also seen together in 2012. The real places we both knew from memory were just the starting points and if the truth of a new place created by the writer is “both experienced and invented” (Mort 2001: 181), I wasn’t worried about creating a place that didn’t actually exist. The imagined landscape came from our shared memory, of using “four eyes, not two” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017) and Kenton Webb responded to this by creating new drawings that came only from imagination and from what was being created in my text as it emerged. In using the landscape in this way, we both found a “rich plurality, even ambiguity, of meaning” (Lodge 1992: 139) which allowed us to find the space for our new narrative. The final story that emerged is that of a lost, ancient bowl, a bowl that legend has it, possesses power over life and death. An archaeological dig is close to unearthing it but there is a race to get there first – a race between the archaeologist who has come to claim it and the hundreds of restless black birds clamouring in the trees who have been guarding it for centuries. One man has already been murdered

because of it and as the storm gets closer, the birds are restless; the race to find the bowl becomes a race against time itself. Using the landscape and its features to drive the narrative allowed us to explore the setting as “past and future...the eye through which each present slips” (Mort 2001: 181).

On reflection, Jamie’s essay represents a clear source of unconscious interaction for me in terms of the emotional drive of the narrative in *Still Life with Black Birds* and in the course of writing this paper I’ve gone back to the essay to see how the two texts are in dialogue with each other. The weather is what I remember most about the dig I worked on as a student. This is also something Jamie references in her essay when describing the moment her dig uncovered the Neolithic henge and “the instant we began to violate the grave, a tremendous clap of thunder rolled down from the hills” (Jamie 2012: 64). In *Still Life with Black Birds* the narrator describes a storm that was “Gothic in its dimensions, a magnificence of storms, wind and rain” (Reardon 2015: 27) at the moment when the grave is uncovered. What stood out to me reading Jamie’s essay again, however, was the emotion that runs through it, the way that years after the dig she recounts that “whole summer had lingered in my mind, full of possibility” (2012: 65). It was this idea of ‘possibility’, I realise now, that I had carried from Jamie’s essay into the emotion and tone of *Still Life with Black Birds*. This sense of finding the one treasure everyone has been searching for permeates the narrative in *Still Life with Black Birds* and it matters not how the protagonists achieve this aim nor whom they must kill or betray along the way. As the narrator says, “It was in these things – the things that were yet to be discovered, that we knew our future lay and one day we would find the object that mattered most in the place where it was least likely to be found” (2015: 7). There was a sense that I was excavating the story as I wrote, uncovering characters and ideas. Jamie’s narrative talks about the moment when they discovered the grave hidden in the henge they were excavating as “thrilling, transgressive” adding “So, in its quiet way, was writing poems” (2012: 66). A similar discovery was also part of the “intermedial” space I had come to occupy as I interpreted the images in prose – I didn’t know necessarily what it all meant but it felt right, it felt “authentic...a true expression of – what? – a self, a consciousness” (Jamie 2012: 66), this started to feel, to me, what is meant by ekphrasis.

## Landscape

It's not an insignificant point that at the heart of this collaboration was the fact that Kenton Webb and I have known each other for many years, so working with this artist unearthed for me what Loiseaux called "an often hidden source of ekphrasis" (2008: 26) that of a collaboration between artist and writer which comes out of a friendship. Ekphrasis that arises from this kind of close collaboration produces an unusual creative energy and this, I think, is evident in our finished work. The poet, John Yau, describes ekphrasis of this kind as ekphrasis arising from "the 'company' of friends and others with whom he shares mutual interests and concerns" (Yau in Loiseaux 2008: 162). The mutual interest in this case was crime fiction and landscape, and the result is a celebration as much as a revelation of this shared interest.

"Landscape," writes Lee Martin, "is any fiction writer's starting point" (Martin in Steel 2007: 172) and the standing stones were mine, creating a connection between my conscious and unconscious self through the many dialogues I've had with the painter as someone whose work in landscape I have known and understood for so many years. Kenton Webb is primarily a landscape painter and explored the idea of place in *The Landscape as Discourse* (2015) published as part of his residency in Tasmania with LARQ (Landscape Art Research Queenstown). "Places may sing songs of other senses, people, emotions and happenings" he writes, "They may suggest...histories that we carry for (for better or worse) of other areas or circumstances, which affect how we view the present as much as the past," (Kenton Webb 2015: 17). These other things – the people, emotions, happenings that became the bedrock of the story that sprang into life from the landscapes of these drawings can only have emerged through the unconscious dialogue which has grown out of years of talking and discussion, between us.

This dialogue on the landscape also took account of our mutual interest in crime fiction. Landscape so often acts as a metaphor in crime fiction, particularly in detective fiction where the landscape shapes the voice and reflects the world the detective sees around him. The writer Henning Mankell (whom we were both reading around the time of collaboration) exploits this with his detective, Kurt Wallander, by setting the Wallander novels in the border area of Skåne in Sweden because "Border areas have

a dynamism all their own. They set off a reflex of unease" (Ferguson and McKie, 2008). *Still Life with Black Birds* being set on a remote island which is so far from the mainland that the only thing visible in the sea around are "sea tankers...so small they hover on the horizon as though they are balancing on a wire" (Reardon 2015: 16) exploits a similar unease. The archaeological team exist almost outside the normal world where they "live as they did in the Iron Age, breathing the breath of our ancestors and beating back our own pasts" (Reardon 2015: 16) the sense of opening up the past always at their fingertips. Kenton Webb introduced a detective who is trailing the two archaeologists and although it's not a central part of the narrative, it introduces a tension surrounding the search for the bowl.



**Figure 9:** *The elegant detective*, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

The detective who haunts the two archaeologists, trying to catch them out, has disappeared and this is why Vincent invites the narrator to come back and help him to find the bowl. The detective has doggedly followed the two men for years: "We dodged each other, me and Vincent and our detective, like cat and mouse, year on year, until a letter reached me on a dig in Patagonia. Our detective had disappeared" (Reardon 2015: 9) and although his disappearance is not explained, the implication is that someone is always watching them. This idea of being watched which is evident in all crime fiction also underpins a building sense of unease in the narrative. This sense

of unease was also where the black birds were key to the story. Through research on the topography of Iron Age henges I discovered the way these ancient burial sites would often be found with the bones of birds – corvids mostly, which were arranged in symmetrical patterns around the edges of the graves (Searjeantson and Morris 2011: 85-107). In *Still Life with Black Birds* the discovery of these bones leads the team to the grave itself.



**Figure 10:** *The Dig*, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“The smallest bones appear first, patterning the surface of the soil like stitches in the thread of the earth... The birds know something is trying to fight its way into the light as they watch their ancestors emerging from the earth. After the toy-like skulls come the larger skeletons, more identifiable as corvids – jackdaws, crows and rooks, and the voices in the trees become clamorous, the ravens’ calls as deceptive as human tongues.” (Reardon 2015: 29)

The living birds appear as a menacing presence as they watch the past being uncovered, waiting for their moment to wreak revenge. The suggestion in the story is that the birds are the guardians of the burial place and disturbing them means disturbing the past. “Violate” is the word Jamie uses in her essay to describe the moment they uncovered the Neolithic grave suggesting that once the past has been excavated there’s no going back.

Kenton Webb asserted that the images themselves each comprised a “complete story” but during the process of collaboration we did find a new narrative that came out of the collaboration and released, for me, the mimetic impulse in ekphrasis to represent a real world from the images in the story. The

birds, who were not in the original drawings, are an example of this. Just as there were gaps between the 15 images I was initially presented with, gaps where the story lay, I found that the pieces of the story acted like “frames [equating] to paragraphs in a story or stanzas in a poem [so that] to move between them is to move across the white space of the page” (Mort 2013: 33) and this felt something akin to the way we encounter pictures in an art gallery or the arrangement of artefacts in a museum where we see “the idea of the series, or works of art arranged in a meaningful sequence” (Loiseau 2008: 22). The movement and the direction of the narrative therefore appeared in these spaces between the pictures giving licence to imagine what lay in between.

### Conclusion

The “intermedial” space of the final work came out of an ekphrastic process, yes, but also as a result of working through these ideas together. Whether or not this *was* collaboration or ekphrasis, I’m still left uncertain. The definition of “collaboration” can be defined as: “the action of working with someone to produce something” but it can also mean: “Traitorous cooperation with the enemy” (Oxford English Dictionary). This project was a bit of both. When thinking of collaboration it is generally in the first definition of working together towards a coherent outcome, but we weren’t doing this because there was one story in the drawings and then another emerged because our two mediums demanded that we tell the story differently and neither way is better. What resulted was a conversation and in terms of collaboration, it’s a conversation which is ongoing and of which the text of *Still Life with Black Birds* is only one part.

Although I have been engaged in ekphrasis for several years, I’m not sure when I set out on the first project in 2012 with Iain Andrews that I understood it as such. It’s only since the growing interest in ekphrasis as a way of working for writers has started to be discussed and explored more, that I’ve started to examine my practice in more detail. In this digitally enhanced age it’s possible to say that we tend to think in more visual terms anyway and to have a greater awareness and understanding of the transfer of narratives between the different platforms of seeing, writing and reading but more often, we almost don’t know that we are doing this. However, engaging in a collaboration with a

visual artist means that, as a writer, you are forced to think about this process and to examine it in detail, which brings everything, every word written and every brushstroke, into a sharper and closer focus. The eventual form this focus takes - poetic or narrative alongside chosen visual medium - is this collaborative “intermedial” space which creates an entirely new work, and this has helped me to start to understand the ekphrastic process in which I continue to be challenged and engaged.

---

## Notes

1. See Tarlo and Tucker for illustration of this example in more detail. “Off path, counter path: contemporary collaborations in landscape, art and poetry” *Critical Survey* Vol. 29 No. 1, Spring 2017: 105–132.
2. This comprised a collection of sonnets to accompany prints and drawings around the Medusa myth. This ekphrastic collaboration which includes images and poems from the collection can be found at <http://www.sirett.com/medusa--her-sisters-book.html> [accessed 3/1/20]
3. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3556716.stm> [accessed 3/1/20]
4. See <https://www.ancient.eu/Carnac/> [accessed 3/1/20]

## References

- Andrews, I. and Reardon Lloyd, J. (2012) *Mythopoeia* Warrington Art Gallery and Museum <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/mythopoeia> [accessed 3/1/20]
- Carter, A. (ed.) (1992) *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, London: Virago
- Corinium Museum <https://coriniummuseum.org> [accessed 29.06.19]
- Ferguson, E. and McKie, R. (2008) “The man behind Wallander, the Swede we’ve fallen in love with” *The Observer* 14 December <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/14/sweden-books-television-wallander> [accessed 29/6/19]
- Highsmith, P. (1983) *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, New York: St Martins Press
- Jamie, K. (2012) *Sightlines*. London: Sort Of Books
- Heffernan, J. (1993) *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Kenton Webb, R. (2012) *Colour Forms*. Moreton in Marsh: Celia Lendis Galleries
- Kenton Webb, R. (2014a) *Still Life with Black Birds* in *Cotswold Essence*, Vol September-November
- Kenton Webb, R. (2014b) *Art Detective* in *Cirencester Life*, Issue 32
- Kenton Webb, R. (2015) *The Landscape as Discourse*. Queenstown: Landscape Art Research, <https://landscapeartresearchqueenstown.wordpress.com> [accessed 29/6/19]
- Leeson, E. (2004) *The Times Book of English Verse*. Glasgow: Harper Collins
- Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin
- Loiseaux, E. (2008) *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Mankell, H. (2003) *One Step Behind*. E. Segerberg (trans.) London: Vintage
- Mankell, H. (2004) *The Fifth Woman*. S. Murray (trans.) London: Vintage
- Martin, L. (2007) “Writing the Landscape” in J. Steel (ed.) *Wordsmithery: the writer’s craft and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- Mitchell, W. T. (1994) *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Mort, G. (2001) "Landscapes and Language" in J. Bell and P. Magrs (eds.) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. London: Macmillan
- Mort, G. (2013) "Finding Form in Short Fiction" in V. Gebbie (ed.) *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*. Cromer: Salt
- Necka, E. (2011) "Perception and Creativity" in M.A. Runco and S.R. Pritzker (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Creativity*. 2nd ed., Vol. 2. London: Academic Press
- Oxford English Dictionary online <https://premium-oxforddictionaries.com> [accessed 29/6/19]
- Reardon, J. (2011) *Pleasure Land and Talking to the Dead: A reflection on "Pleasure Land"* PhD thesis, Lancaster University, unpublished material
- Reardon, J. (2012) "My Mind's Eye" in *Mythopoeia*. Warrington: Warrington Art Gallery and Museums.
- Reardon, J. and Webb, R. K. (2015) *Still Life with Black Birds* London: Artist's Choice Editions
- Tarlo H. and Tucker J. (2017) "Off path, counter path: contemporary collaborations in landscape, art and poetry" *Critical Survey* Vol. 29 No. 1, Spring 2017: 105–132
- West, S and Soar, K. (2014) *Lives of Objects*. Walton Hall: The Open University
- Searjeantson, D. & Morris J. (2011) "Ravens and Crowns in Iron Age and Roman Britain" *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 30 (1) 85–107
- Sirett, N. [www.sirett.com](http://www.sirett.com) [accessed 29.06.19]
- Sirett, N. and Reardon, J <http://www.sirett.com/medusa--her-sisters-book.html> [accessed 3/1/20]
- Spritzer, L. (1962) "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' or content vs. metagrammar" in A. Hatcher (ed.) *Essays on English and American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Stevens, W. (1951) *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage
- Winterson, J. (1996) *Art Objects*. London: Vintage
- Yau, J. (2008) "Active Participants" quoted in E. Loiseaux *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## Bibliography

- Kenton Webb, R. artist website: <http://richardkentonwebb.art> [accessed 29.06.19]
- Kinloch, D. *The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis* <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmnw20> [accessed 29.06.19]
- Mankell, H. (2006) *The Man Who Smiled*. L.Thompson (trans.) London: Vintage
- O'Connor, F. (2004) *The Lonely Voice, A Study of the Short Story*. Hoboken: MHP Books

---

## About the Author

**Joanne Reardon** a writer of drama, prose and poetry. Her collaborative and ekphrastic work with visual artists on site specific projects includes short fiction with: Richard Kenton Webb, *Still Life with Black Birds* at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, *Mythopoeia* with Iain Andrews at Warrington Art Gallery and poetry, *Medusa and her Sisters*, with Natalie Sirett at Burgh House Museum in Hampstead. Her work has also been performed on BBC Radio 4 and she has worked as a Readings Producer with BBC Radio Drama as well as being Literary Manager at the Bush Theatre and National Theatre in London. She has an MA in Creative Writing from UEA and a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University and is now a Lecturer for the Open University. Her short stories have been published by The London Magazine and Cinnamon Press and her first crime novel, *The Weight of Bones*, will be published with Leaf by Leaf in Autumn 2020.

---