



Episode 6: The Body Electric

[Audio from the soundtrack of *The Body Electric*]

Emer McGarry: Hello and thank you for joining us for the sixth and final episode of The Model's *Body Electric* podcast series. So, if you've had chance to join us over recent episodes you'll know that we've been presenting some fresh and exciting examples of new writing, all of which were composed in response to visual artworks from The Niland Collection.

We've also been having an ongoing conversation with the writer, Tara Bergin and Tara has been providing some really illuminating insights into ekphrastic practice and the licence and inspiration that it can give to a writer. To leave you today, I went back to Tara and asked her, first of all, if she feels that there can ever be an element of rivalry between different modes of representation at the heart of ekphrasis?

Tara Bergin: I think that rivalry between modes of representation is a wonderful way to describe ekphrasis because it captures the live energy inherent in the process and sets it up as a kind of duel, like Robert Johnson's fabled duel with the devil at the crossroads.¹

¹ Robert Johnson (1911-1938), blues guitarist and singer-songwriter, renowned as the master of the Delta blues. The legend was that he sold his soul to the devil to become a master at playing the blues.

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[Audio of Robert Johnson singing and playing guitar from his song *Me and the Devil Blues*:

‘Early this morning/When you knocked upon my door...’²

There’s a tremendous sense of being led by desire as The Smiths song goes, *I Want the One I Can’t Have*.

[Audio of Morrissey, lead singer of The Smiths, singing:

‘Come ‘round ‘cause I want the one I can’t have

And it’s driving me mad

It’s all over, all over, all over my face’]³

Yeats’ brother, the painter Jack Yeats said, ‘Painting is greater than writing. Painting is direct vision and direct communication.’ I like to try reversing that statement just to see what happens and say that ‘Writing is greater than painting. Writing is direct vision and direct communication.’ When you do that, the words, ‘vision’ and ‘communication’ take on new connotations. It’s worth trying at least, although I think that music is perhaps the most powerful of all.

² Robert Johnson recorded this song in a disused warehouse in Dallas, Texas, 1937. This was his final recording session, as he died in 1938, aged 27.

³ Song credits: *I Want the One I Can’t Have*, written by Johnny Marr and Morrissey, on The Smiths album *Meat is Murder*, 1985.

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[Audio of Robert Johnson singing and playing guitar from his song *Me and the Devil Blues*:

‘Early this morning ooh/When you knocked upon my door...’]

Certainly once you start to get involved with such a challenge as a poet, you find yourself in new territory, new ways of looking, new vocabulary and this is what a poet wants. It can be liberating to work by the rules of another artform. Asking questions like - how do sculptors work? How do potters throw? What are the names of paints? What is slip? What is a burnisher?

These can be illuminating in terms of craft as well as language, but most importantly doing that kind of research removes ‘you’ from the scene for a while. The poet is no longer relying only on themselves as the material for their poem. Suddenly the material is an external source which somehow eventually will combine the poets’ voice and experience to make a new work. I think this is one of the most valuable things that ekphrasis can offer.

[Audio of Robert Johnson singing and playing guitar from his song *Me and the Devil Blues*:

‘Me and the Devil/ Was walkin’ side by side/ Me and the Devil ooh/ Was walkin’ side by side]

Emer McGarry: So, thank you for joining us for what has been the Model’s inaugural podcast series dedicated to our current exhibition *The Body Electric*. Don’t forget that on our website The Model.ie, you can access a virtual exhibition and an accompanying

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publication, but we wanted to leave you today with Tara Bergin sharing some other examples of her own ekphrastic writing.

[Audio of typewriter as Tara haltingly says, 'this rain,' as she types...]

Tara Bergin: This rain... One difficult ekphrastic challenge was to respond in words to the large square paintings of Agnes Martin. The reason why it was difficult, is it these paintings... which are big, about six-foot square, appear almost blank when you see them at a distance. They are made of, maybe one colour, such as white with a very pale ruled grid drawn in pencil on the surface. So there is no obvious narrative, no figures or detailed scenes. They are extremely minimal. Agnes Martin once described her paintings as being about a world without interruption and hoped that a viewer might engage with her paintings as if walking into water. To arrive at a poetic equivalent, I tried drastically minimising my vocabulary and used a lot of repetition. I also made use of Agnes Martin's titles which have a beautiful clarity.

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[Audio of typewriter and heavy rain as Tara Bergin reads *This Rain*]

Tara Bergin

Paintings of Agnes Martin

This Rain

I painted a painting called *This Rain*

All night the black ran down

In the morning, the studio floor was a flooded plain

Then I painted a painting called *Milk River*

I painted a painting called *Milk River*

All night, the white ran down

In the morning, the studio floor was a flooded plain

Then I painted a painting called *This Rain*

[Audio of heavy rain]

[Running Time 5:18 minutes]