

## A REVIEW OF JOHN YAU'S *BORROWED LOVE POEMS* BY MATT ULLAND

John Yau is a second generation New York School poet who has written as much, if not more, art criticism as poetry and has collaborated with several artists on creative projects. His recent collection, *Borrowed Love Poems*, continues this melding of various art worlds.

Yau studied poetry with Ashbery, and, of the first generation New York School poets, Ashbery is the most obvious influence. Like Ashbery's, Yau's poems are engaged with the worlds of visual art, movies, and popular culture; they combine high and low diction; they are at times very funny and at times lyrically poignant; and their themes often circle around an "I" without a fixed, permanent self.

The book is structured in five sections, each of which is fairly thematically coherent. In the first section, the visual arts take center stage. The poems bring in Jackson Pollock, Eva Hesse, Philip Guston, Max Beckmann, and others. These poems often mimic the artists' styles transferred into words. In the Max Beckmann poems, he imagines a sort of self-portrait in a scene Beckmann might have painted. (Beckmann was a German Expressionist painter of often carnivalesque, disturbing scenes.) In "830 Fireplace Road," Yau builds a poem entirely out of variations on a sentence by Jackson Pollock and in "830 Fireplace Road [2]," the dizzying disjunctive verse mimics Pollock's dizzying canvases splattered with dripped paint. Similarly, "Broadcast from 791 Broadway" echoes Frank O'Hara's sophisticated and funny riffs on the New York scene with delightful throw-away phrases such as "The Statue of Librettists" and the "Museum of Modern Fate," tinged with genuine pathos: "Since I left you ... // artists / have stopped skinny-dipping in the reflections / carried past their windows on the shoulders of dead

and dying poets / disgusted perhaps by the sight of real flesh and blood.”

The second section of the book is devoted to the movies. Peter Lorre and Boris Karloff make repeat appearances, along with an invented Charlie Chan-type character, Genghis Chan, Private Eye. In this section, movies are a triggering point for the poems, poems are re-imagined as movie scripts, actors record poems and speak to the deceased Edgar Allan Poe. The mixture of poetry and other art forms suggests a fertile cross-pollination of forms which Yau revels in. Yau also sends up the self most clearly in this section. The word “I” appears incessantly and yet it is always attached to a fiction: “I order the wholesale massacre of the white settlers. / I live in Old Baghdad and make tents” (a litany that goes on for pages in “I Was a Poet in the House of Frankenstein”). And Yau sends up Asian racial stereotypes with Genghis Chan and Dr. Fu Manchu.

The third section is less thematically strict, but is notable for its negative autobiographies--we hear about an “I” but only by descriptions of what the “I” is not: “I never reached the rank of colonel / ... / I am never sure which principles are mine” (“Things I Should Tell You Before It’s Too Late”). There are also two experimental “Metabolic Isthmus Sestinas” that not only follow the artificial rules of the sestina but within each stanza repeat the same words in each line, mixed in different orders: “Sex thought really all there was / Was sex thought really all there” etc., as if each line enacted the sestina form in miniature. These inventions are entertaining to read and surprising in terms of how far Yau can wring new meanings out of each line, though the experiment ends up reducing the poems to little more than their patterns.

He takes the experimental impulse further in the fourth section of “Vowel Sonatas,” consisting of five poems each built around one vowel. Every word in the first poem contains the

letter “e” (except one word); the next poem follows this pattern but with the letter “a,” then “i,” “o,” “u,” and “y.” Yau was inspired to write these poems by the example of Ernst Jandl’s poem “die grosse e.” As with the sestinas, the experiment is fun to read and impressive, though the reader is left with little but that initial amusement.

All of this suggests a highly experimental and somewhat comic book. While this is true, the strength of the book is that it is not merely comic. Besides the serious investigations of the self and of racial stereotypes, the book is also framed in two lyric sequences. It opens with “Russian Letters,” which acts as a sort of proem setting up the theme of the limits of language in the face of experience (including of art) in a tone which is richly elegiac: “Did we let a few random phrases / haunt us // or did we mutter / about the dragonflies of death // Did you become a book I dreamed / or did I destroy // and contradict myself / like a moth // flying into language’s / colorless flame” (“Russian Letter [2]”). In the title sequence that ends the collection, the elegiac tone returns: “I will whisper in your ear / as if it were a rough draft” and “What can I do, if a red meteor wakes the earth / and the color of robbery is in the air” and “What can I do, now that I have sent you / a necklace of dead dried bees[.]” The poem, and the collection, ends on a note of nearly apocalyptic yearning: “What can I do, / I who never invented anything // and who dreamed of you so much / I was amazed to discover // the claw marks of those / who preceded us across this burning floor[.]” Yau mixes the comic and the serious, high diction and low, popular culture and high art, moving lyricism and avant-garde experiment in a book that is uneven yet often moving and insightful.