

REVIEWS

Coördinates of Yes by Janée J. Baugher. Ahadada Books, 2010.

Reviewed by Tanya Grae

Pleasures afforded by Janée J. Baugher in *Coördinates of Yes* are not unlike opening a cherished jewelry box and touching the heirlooms within: burnished and intimate. In her debut collection, we find the poet's European travels as oft rendered through ekphrasis of famous artworks, standing alongside in contemplation, even if vicariously. Art and travel elide adding melded fullness to each poem, with the *coordinates* as intersections of experience and imagination—immediate depth.

Baugher relates her journey with precisely chosen words and without pretense. She brings the reader across countrysides, through galleries, stepping close, then drawing back. In the poem “Portrait de L'Artiste,” Baugher is summoner and empath for van Gogh's sense of self:

Arcs of paint. Imprecise circles.

The path on which you crunched was riddled,
riddled—paintings, chemical disparity.

The acuity

both salvaged and savaged.
With it: maddened. Without it: maddened.
Children taunting you,
chasing with stones. Alone at night with your canvas,
you sensed them in every color.

With the repetitions embodying the mental decline, the short lines add a pace. The well-chosen “acuity” to suggest the keenness of perception, but juxtaposed against a social backdrop with which van Gogh had no talent. His world was almost savant—blooming in the private spaces, in reflection. “La Chambre de van Gogh á Arles,” another poem about van Gogh offering a grittier perception, shows “On the lilac wall, portraits seem / uncertain of their hooks. / The wood floor, quite worn. The dressing table / (with bowl and pitcher), weary on its joints. / Above it, maelstrom in his mirror.” Once again, word choice relates plainly and the line breaks add dimension. Even to state, “With cobalt-green, he’s painted the panes shut— / the air in the room caves in on him.” So much is suggested through association, but the image is simple and language accessible.

Another sense, besides the obvious comparison to a gallery, is to ponder a salon, or series of parlors. Baugher invites us in and points in the right direction, leaving us to wander the images and varied circumstances—creating place—little dioramas framed by a vision and given context. Deceptively objective, the poems linger decadent. In “Conditions of a Woman,” after the installation by Armand Fernandez, we consider a litany of contents from his wife’s rubbish bin and contemplate:

The used and left-behind, and the man who loves her for it—
he who see what’s embellished and squandered

to smoke and mirrors

a reflection insisting others are more fair.
Over the image she wastes her cosmetics;

with that heel

I imagine her smashing the glass.

Unafraid to lay it bare, the poet turned reliable narrator, walks us past both the sublime and eroding. With a jeweler’s sensibility, she facets each image, clarifying. At the end of the collection, “Draining West” reflects: “Continent, what have you done? / Awake all last night at a Dublin pub / and today you spit me back. / Must I

now know my final destination, / the conjugation of new tenses? / How odd the art of retrospection.” In mapping her “Yes”-es —moments when art and place overtake, Baugher reveals herself to be fully engaged, a willing docent for the tour.

***Petticoat Government* by T.A. Noonan.** Gold Wake Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Sandra Chávez Johnson

In her latest book *Petticoat Government*, T.A. Noonan positions a seemingly personal account of her exploration into Wicca in her essay, “The Trouble with Correspondence,” alongside several poems which address body image and esteem issues specific to the female experience. The poetry creates interest and tension by vacillating between accounts of anxiety and self-acceptance. While many of the poems address seemingly personal topics, they do not sacrifice art for theme. This work holds lines heavy with meaning and as artfully written as “I am one so thick-fingered that I miss the keys; / my throat one thick, guttural vowel” from “The History of Thick.” In another poem “Mariko no jirema,” Noonan conveys a similar sentiment in the lines, “Everything I know about language / I learned from the slim backs of other girls” and “—& my name’s fat syllabic chunks / etched in every saucer.”

These poems move from real-seeming life content to translation to fantasy realism to fictional accounts of celebrity—all linked by the theme of the feminine archetype that combats normative female stereotypes. Yet the work also contains many surprising, funny lines which provide a sort of comic relief in a largely serious book. The following is an example from “Dorothy Hamill’s Guide to Practical Demonology.”

In winter, he recites Shakespeare
 (“And if my legs were two such riding-rods . . .”)
 as his wife shouts into her rosetone cell.
 (“Daddy, send me a harem and a sheaf of villanelles!”)

Petticoat Government contains inventive language within provocative poetry. It challenges the reader’s concept of femininity and offers multiple alternate definitions.

***The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton.** Harvard University Press, 2010.
Reviewed by Eric Hengstebeck

What do a Styrofoam cup, Tibetan Buddhism, and daffodil DNA have in common with *Blade Runner*, Slavoj Žižek, and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”? The answer can be found in Timothy Morton’s latest book, *The Ecological Thought* (2010). This book builds on the momentum of Morton’s critically acclaimed *Ecology without Nature* (2007), confirming Morton’s status as a pioneer in the relatively still-uncharted realm of ecocriticism. What makes *The Ecological Thought* intellectually and artistically exciting is the way it reveals environmentality in strange places. As unexpected as they are effective, Morton’s diverse sources and examples give the book a distinctive energy. From *Frankenstein* to *Solaris*, from Miles Davis to house music, from John Milton to Emmanuel Levinas, Morton creates synapse-like connections across seemingly impassible chasms of time and medium. The first chapter of *The Ecological Thought* is called “Thinking Big” and it effectively announces the theme of the book, a manifesto for tearing down the disciplinary limitations currently plaguing modern academia. Thus *The Ecological Thought* is about re-imagining and re-defining thinking ecologically, through art, science, and ethics. Nonetheless, the book remains highly accessible. One need not be familiar with, or necessarily interested in, theoretical trends to follow and appreciate Morton’s argument. And for those who are interested, the book conveniently includes many footnotes that delve into its core conceptual underpinnings.

What *The Ecological Thought* essentially offers is a fresh set of critical terms for engaging ecologically with some of the most demanding issues facing the world today, regardless of one’s particular discipline. Morton argues that if we are to take the modern ecological crisis seriously, we must learn to think radical interconnectedness, which means learning to see the co-process of discovery and creation at work in all objects. He thus introduces the concept of the “mesh,” one of three new and potentially highly productive concepts found in *The Ecological Thought*. What the mesh reveals is how we are never quite what we appear to be: ecological existence is always a type of bare existence. To develop and explicate the meaning of bare existence ecologically, Morton uses the concept of the “strange stranger.” Fittingly, Morton’s concepts are themselves enmeshed in webs of other concepts: the logic of the strange

stranger contains traces from sources as diverse as Buddhism's "compassion," Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" (*homo sacer*), Žižek's "neighbor," Levinas's "face," Derrida's "arrivant" (*l'arrivant*), and Julia Kristeva's "intimacy." Finally, Morton employs the concept of "hyperobjects" to theorize the significance of all the long-lived toxic objects, from plutonium to Styrofoam, which have been mass-produced since the industrial revolution. Because of their ability to penetrate our environment, right down to the DNA level, these hyperobjects pose a special challenge to the imagination. More terrifying than sublime objects, because they erase the safety of aesthetic distance, they engender a sense of uneasiness and thus function as the objective correlative of the strange stranger. While it is uncertain whether or not these concepts will ignite a new trend in critical thinking, one thing is clear: the future of ecocriticism depends on books like *The Ecological Thought*.