



Alison Elizabeth Taylor

Ekphrastics: Student Poetry and Fiction

The College of Wooster Art Museum

About Ekphrastics

The works in this brochure are ekphrastics, or writings inspired by or composed in dialogue with a piece of visual art. They were produced in the Fall 2009, *Introduction to Fiction and Poetry Writing* class taught by Daniel Bourne, professor of English, at The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio.

The assignment was to select one of artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor's works, and compose a poem or short narrative prose piece that resonated in some way with the selected art work.

In preparation for the assignment, the class looked at several ekphrastic poems, including W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* and William Carlos Williams' *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, both of which explore Pieter Breugel's c. 1558 painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

This project was a collaboration between the Department of English and The College of Wooster Art Museum, and was produced during Alison Elizabeth Taylor's solo exhibition at the museum, which ran from August 25–October 11, 2009.

Taylor's exhibition was supported in part by The Burton D. Morgan Foundation,

Slab City

Carly Herman '10

Slab City, nothing is what it seems.
The joke is on those who perceive
Realities as they ought to be,
City lights could be illuminating the dark
Or interpreted as a work of art,
Rather than as a Human-Constructed Dream.

In Slab City, RV's mimic Nature.
They mock her Organic Face in chipping paint,
Where canyons and falls have been slapped on linoleum walls,
Left unmaintained and doomed to crumble and fade.

In Slab City, is this confusion even an illusion?
Or is it truth?
Perhaps an already festering sore
Is finally pulled in one too many directions,
Torn open and infected by false reality.

Or maybe not. Perhaps
It is the swimming pool
Of our dreams.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Slab City, 2007
wood veneer, shellac; 47 x 77 inches
Collection of Howard Simon

Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Chainlink, 2008
wood veneer, shellac
34 x 46 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York



Beyond the Chainlink

Lisa Favicchia '13

A little girl stands there, curling her fingers through the chainlink fence as diamond-shaped shadows weave like spider webs across her face. The pores in her forehead secrete tiny, drops of salt water, which she wipes away with the back of her arm, always keeping one hand still attached to the fence, as if she were afraid her surroundings might disappear.

She gazes at the concrete pit through the holes, pressing her head against the warm metal of the fence. Her eyes gleam with longing, the baby curls in her hair growing tighter the more they are exposed to the extreme heat. This is the kind of heat you can see, the kind that not only creates fanciful illusions in your mind, but also seems to plaster a glaze over your eyes. The girl now wonders whether the empty pool before her is real, or simply a hazy vision produced by the heat and her own imagination.

She pulls her face back from the fence for a moment to gaze up at the sky, the charblack clouds expanding so far out in front of her, they appear to eventually kiss the ground in the same way the sun looks as if it is skimming the surface of the ocean. Perhaps the clouds might even burst open, pouring forth cool, fat drops of rain, the kind that make a smacking noise when they hit the top of your uncovered head.

The small girl longs for such rain so that the pool might be filled up again, its walls and floor now dry as dust, its old concrete cracked, like the face of an aging old man. If only the pool filled with water, the little girl might cool off her skin, which now burns so hot she can feel her veins pulsing underneath.

But then, a realization hits the small child. Rather, it would be better if the pool did not fill, that no droplet of rain ever roll down its walls and sink to the bottom. For right now, it is the pool that longs for water. If it were to be filled, she would become the tortured one, unable to reach it through the chainlink fence's burning metal. Whether a mirage or not, it would forever remain an illusion, intangible to her small fingers still curled around the links.

The Escape Artist

Alena DeHoney '12

Walls and Ceilings are just human fallacies
Soon to fall into the very earth
They were meant to save us from

He sits, bare skin to feel free
Eyes glued to TV.
Escape, he thinks he's escaping

His Eyes dance but he misses the view
In lieu to play on fake terrain
It reflects in his eyes, absorbs his brain

Past glass
Is life.

Girl with mahogany nails

(after Alison Elizabeth Taylor's *Study for Folie à Deux*)

Katy Tinsley '11

he squints at the road
as the sun streams in
through the windshield

she sits in the passenger seat
idly picking dirt out of her nails

she keeps them painted
out of a left-over sense of vanity
she likes the darkness and clean
chemical scent of Maybelline color 205

like misery, their madness loves company
and so they drive on together
hundreds and hundreds of miles
in no direction at all



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Study for Folie à Deux, 2008
wood veneer, shellac
25 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Reunited

Ashle S. Williams '13

Am I scared?
No, I was in the military.
was-
They discharged me

Everything is black
Am I dead?
Oh God no!
I want to see my son,
How big has he grown?
My wife,
Did she leave me?
My dog,
Does he still know my scent?

There's a light
I know I'm dead
But there are no clouds
No pearly gates
Just.
I sit up
An odd bird
No, there's two
These birds are strange
Dark green and royal blue
Feathers on their head
I'm not scared
One bird unfurls its tail
There are a thousand eyes staring
at me

The bird beckons me
I hold out my hand
What does he want?
It speaks to me
"Everything is going to be okay.
We're with you.
Take a deep breath.
And open your eyes."



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Era of Argus, 2007
wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Collection of Tom and Charlotte Newby

Strangers

Gaby Quiroz '12

The sun is setting as he approaches. He looks like a Hank, or maybe a Bart. The dry red dirt rises off his back wheel with every crank of his leg. I raise my arm above my eyes, block the sun, and see him clearly for just a second. He almost looks like part of the mountains.

It matters when you come across a stranger. I contemplate a smile, a nod, a wave, but in the end I don't even muster up the courage to look up. I hear the bike pass as I pretend to flick an insect off the arm of my shirt. I look over my shoulder and see "Hank" turn to look back at me. There is no smile, no wave, and no nod from him either. We are empty mirrors of each other. We each turn back into the mountains.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor

Study for Hank, 2007

wood veneer, shellac

25 x 33 inches

Courtesy of the artist and

James Cohan Gallery, New York

Untitled

Andy Tisdell '12

This is a bachelor's house; a small refrigerator, a single bed and a comfortable leather armchair account for most of the furniture. A safe rests on the floor for the man's valuables, and a few cabinets line the perimeter of the room. Most of the items in this room are practical ones, suitable for the desert surrounding the house; a workbench, crescent wrenches, high shelves full of useful tidbits. The view from the windows is magnificent, looking out over sun-drenched plains. It's a good strong home, able to withstand the storms that sweep over the mountains, a suitable place for a bachelor living out his pension.

However, there is a darker side to this house; the owner was once a violent man. An Army helmet is tucked carefully in a cabinet, with an ace of spades set into the rim like a reminder of long-vanished perils. Weaponry adorns every corner of the room. A rifle rests over the window, a Colt .45 reclines in the cabinet, two rifles lean together in a gun cabinet, an army knife dangles from a nail, a Swiss Army knife coils contentedly on a ledge. Perhaps like the owner, these once-deadly tools of the trade are now quiescent, even tamed.

Or are they? Is one missing? A cup of coffee sits neglected in the microwave, as if the owner had been interrupted while it was heating up. Bullet holes adorn the walls. What happened to the owner? Has he just stepped out for a moment, tipping up his cowboy hat to sniff the night air? Or is he out somewhere in the fading light, rifle in hands, playing some deadly game with an unknown assailant?

Outside, the sun turns and flees behind the sharp peaks of the mountains. A shot rings out in the newfound darkness and, like an echo, thunder rumbles in the distance. A weapon slips from bloody fingers; the bullet was aimed true. His jacket slowly turning a darker shade of red, the owner pitches forwards on his face. The killer squats beside the body, rummaging through the pockets for valuable items, anything that the owner might have considered too precious to leave in the house. No such luck, however; all he finds is a handful of dollar bills. The killer snarls, slinking back to his Jeep 4x4, and leaves the tableau behind him in a cloud of gravel. Behind him, the cup of coffee still sits in the microwave, slowly growing cold.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Room, 2007–2008 (two views)
 wood veneer, pyrography, lacquer
 96 x 120 x 96 inches
 Collection of Peter Tillou

Buckminster Fuller vs. Jesus

Alex Parrott '12

On the left we have noted futurist
Buckminster Fuller, grandson of a transcendentalist and a feminist,
father of the geodesic dome, which they say
holds less emptiness within its glass-eyed frame
than conventional structures.

On the right
it's Jesus, trucked around by a man who wants to impose
fish on a desert, whose shade-paneled eyes
may or may not discern the setting sun
glancing off the neurons of Fuller's brain.

Women on the stoop watch
shadows tell the time, fretfully.

The scene is already a shock of wood, human history
sprawled out in rings on a redwood stump,
drawing knotty binaries,
waiting for the knockdown—

or just a conversation, nothing more,
baking, not burning, under studio lights,
airing somewhere near you tonight.
Sand scattered to the wind.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Wonder Valley, 2007–2008
wood veneer, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Collection of Jeff and Leslie Fischer

Poem Inspired by *Paradise Gates*

Katie Smart '11

Is the grass greener?

Divided by dark bricks
Shoulders touching, yet still alone
Sitting as the antithesis of the sun

His gaze met the only others around
Hazel eyes turning green
Longing over takes, loneliness

Mother dead, feelings alive
Too young for death, too young for beer
Both in gulp them

Brown dry streets dirty his frozen stance
Trapped within his mind
Imagination alive as love dies

Small patch of grass brings them close
Another sip, pain weakening
Without her do they belong

Never before close
Never having to deal with loss
Alone always, wanting always

The Grass is never greener.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Paradise Gates, 2009
wood veneer, shellac; 47 x 70 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Oak Façade

Tiffany Steele '09

Hostility
Hidden behind
A stolid oak veneer

He
Hikes in
The sands of memory

Regret
Relived for
Words screamed in anger

Jobless
Jonesing for
Lost family and friends

Homeless
Herded on
To become rightful squatters

Shoulders
Slumping down
Burdens beat out pride

Dreary
Dogged determination
Furrows his scraggly brows

Protecting his last refuge
Shrouded in
Security



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Bombay Beach, 2008
wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
96 x 58 inches
Courtesy of the artist and the
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Intermission

Derek Rundell '11

Resting, he was hidden in the shadows of secondary characters, those background nobodies, with a history too banal even for the landscape of a Pynchon novel; lost some place where his face meant little more than the label peeling from a spilled bottle of beer; secure behind stone walls built by strong arms of men who once cared, and free from the menacing chain link fences planted by men in blue uniform shirts; found some place forgotten, beyond the canyon that stretches wide for sixty miles; and far from the families who park their loaded mini-vans for pictures on littered highway shoulders that carried them to cities. The sky was darkening, threatening rain.

Ten more minutes, says the boy struggling in shadow. Please, the clouds are little ways off still. I can't, he says. I can't, he repeats. How can I forget? Forget him? With a pale lilac parasol thrashing at my mother, pregnant with me. Him, beating my mother, and beating me. Then me, six years later. And him, my father, in his hospital bed, when the diabetes brought him down. Off his feet, out of his mind. Comatose. He lay for days, lifeless. I sat. I watched. I waited. I wanted him to die. He didn't. I continued hating. Always hating, but always wanting love.

The sun sank, and now he was here, amongst the other deserters and deserted; where arid soil gave birth to sturdy weeds and the brush was weak but constant. Here, those who knew all was wrong felt right, until ricocheting artillery shells could be heard pounding miles in the distance; they heard it take one dusty town, then begin its bombardment of another, always advancing. Here, it would eventually come, and they would have to stir off once again into the grey dust that never settled. The nameless were forever present, forever changing, until they blurred like broken bottles ground back to sand. He listened because they listened, but their hair had grown long for fear of a barber's rough hand. Untrusting, they allowed it to tangle over their ears and muffle the world's commotion. Here, all he would have was a brief and wakeful rest.

The Search

(After Alison Elizabeth Taylor's *Study for a Folie à Deux*)

Andrew Shaw '11

They only know that the dark, cool soil
Feels good between their fingers,
And that alone brings them together.

Sometimes they plug their fingers
Straight down into the dense earth,
Absorbing its untapped energy.

Their actions, slow and meditative,
Become more efficient over time.
Eventually, they reach new layers.

They take notice of each difference,
A richer color or coarser texture,
But these things don't matter to them.

Occasionally they wonder
Why they are digging,
But they still enjoy their search.

And it is because of them that I join in, too.
I don't know what I'm looking for, but
I am going to dig until I do.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Study for Folie à Deux, 2008
wood veneer, shellac
25 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Tools

Eric Stein '11

The tools lined up
ready
To repair or destroy

What mankind desires
Is their command
A vice tightens

To build progress
A gleaming fender
The hammer pounds

Sparks flying
A steel body
The wrench rotates

Clear windows aligned
Cold metal compacted
Push and press

Radiators and parts
Installed
Cracked sooty hands

The Model A
Phantom black
Loud engine shakes

My grandfather smiles
Task accomplished
But still there's more to do

Homeless in Los Angeles:

A Reverie on Alison Elizabeth Taylor's *Paradise Gates*

Nell Gram '12

Two men sit in an otherwise empty lot, just passing the time. They wear relatively nice clothes; they probably live somewhere comfortable enough. But the image reminds me of the homeless people in Los Angeles, whose guilt I carry with me. There, you pass homeless people on the street, sit near them on the bus, and walk quickly by where they hang out in front of the public library. They are the curled form under a blanket your car speeds by beneath the freeway overpass at night. "The homeless problem" is often or the subject of that night's local news.

But growing up in L.A., you learn early how to handle the homeless. Look away, deny, deny, deny. Try not to read the pitiful cardboard signs the man at the freeway exit holds up that say things like *Will work for food or Vietnam vet*. Ignore the cynical voice in your head reciting ideas you learned from someone else: *Some people say they're veterans even when they're not just to get food. Better to buy them food yourself than give them money they'll probably spend on drugs*. When you walk past them, let your gaze skitter past theirs, don't smile, don't linger even if you do drop a coin in their cup. You cannot save everyone.

I remember seeing a homeless man outside of a Blockbuster one hot and dry day, wearing dark clothes that seemed like mismatched rags, his hair long and tangled into dreadlocks. His eyes squinted out at an alien world from a face brown and wrinkled, weathered before its time. Or, maybe it was at another time and place all together, a man on a street corner with a sign. This was before I grew old enough to know that I had and they did not, before the guilt of inaction grew too heavy. When I used to take more notice, to pay more attention to the details, so that now it seems I've only ever seen one homeless person's face, and that face has become all of their faces, one interchangeable with the next.

In my mind I replace the grassy lot where the men sit, the artwork image, with my more urban memories: the familiar cement surroundings, chain link fence, gray trash tucked in corners or drifting along the ground. There is little or no breeze. Often such days are just-verging-on-too-hot, warm enough for a t-shirt but your skin isn't burning yet. You'd think a sad image like this would happen only in winter—when the two figures have to huddle together for warmth—but the reality is the homeless aren't just desperate on the cold days. Likewise, they're starved for more than food—for shelter and employment, a hot shower and clean skin, for compassion and companionship. For eyes that rest on them with acceptance, even affection, instead of judgment or denial.

The Lost Generation

After Alison Elizabeth Taylor's *Era of Argus*

Chris Hudson '12

Despondent barn
in the middle of
wasteland
is the only
witness
to this encounter.

Argi, with their
Thousand eyes
accept libation
from this wretched
soul.
please take what I have
seen!

His arm says
r.i.p.;
his eyes disagree.

By CRHH



Alison Elizabeth Taylor
Era of Argus, 2007
wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Collection of Tom and Charlotte Newby