

The Special Relationship

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De Chirico's Threads, Carol Rumens, Seren, £9.99, ISBN 9781854115348;
Writing The Picture, John Fuller and David Hurn, Seren,
 £20.00, ISBN 9781854115317

Although there might seem no immediate connection between these two books from Seren, they are good examples of the strong relationship between the visual and the verbal which exists in much contemporary art. Visual artists – photographers, painters, conceptual artists – frequently include words and letters in their work, with meanings gnomic or overt; and poets sometimes write in direct response to the specific images of paintings and the emotional trigger of photographs or, as with Rumens and De Chirico, are inspired by an artist's entire work.

The first half of Carol Rumens's exciting new collection, *De Chirico's Threads*, is divided into two parts: the eight cleverly-wrought 'Sonnets for Late-Elizabethan Lovers', and the larger group of 'Itinerary Through a Photograph Album', which displays her skill with various forms and subjects, from the glittery tongue-twisting: "He could swish a cape, or doff a silk topper, his sweeping off-er, his tile, / with sheer *aristo* style for a wow-them bow: / He could do Oscar Wilde in an oyster wasp-waister", lines from 'Count Dracula Creates his Online Profile'; to the Japanese-print perfection of 'Englynion, Bangor Pier, November': "I walk across the pearl-grey Menai Strait, / Then I wait at the pier's end, / Watching the broad ripples fanned // By a boat, one sea-mew swimming. / Through dimming light, as I turn – / Snow-bright Snowdon, a thin moon."

Slyly inserted, one into each section, their significance deepened and elucidated by what is to follow, are two poems which already announce the subject and theme of the whole book; but it is not until the second half, where Rumens makes a connection to another art form, theatre, in what she describes as "a verse-drama with soundscape", that the twentieth century Italian artist Giorgio De Chirico establishes himself indisputably as the main character. The piece is written in incisive, witty lines, strongly cadenced, with musical cues, and much rhyme and wordplay. I should love to see it performed. The cast of this drama include Giorgio's younger brother, the composer Alberto Savino, his sister Adele who died at the age of six and haunted him to the end of his life, Mama, and Papa the railway engineer who tells his son: "A permanent job on the permanent way / Isn't for your sort. Art? / I've no objection to Art. / It's tradition, not fantasy. Copy / The masters, boy, that's the way", as well as Ariadne his Muse, who says: "[...] Hey, but it would amuse me / To be a guy's muse for a bit. I think it would amuse me." Other characters are Apollinaire *Le Poète Assassiné*, the French Surrealist André Breton and the Italian painter Carlo Carrà, who maddened De Chirico by copying his style (and profiting more from it than he did), journalists, agents, forgers, and that vitally significant personage for Giorgio, the Minotaur.

After his first success, De Chirico abandoned the original surrealistic dream-like style forever associated with his name, and adapted a Classicism which everyone called dead. Rumens's witty dialogue is the vehicle for a serious argument between the Classical and the iconoclastic. Apollinaire berates him: "You that futured in style, / Thoroughly neutered!" De Chirico replies: "I have outgrown that marble theatre." And the Minotaur sums up: "[...] Art is no trick. Art is a lover's gaze. / Always the animal heart must work at art's un-marbling. / Horns push through. But marble is matter, too. It's a little troubling."

The relationship between the visual and the verbal is also well expressed in the conversation between poet and photographer which introduces John Fuller and David Hurn's collaboration, *Writing the Picture*:

JF: I think the poet works in the opposite way from the photographer.

Something is gradually constructed that has to pass muster as an alternative reality. But the photographer is exploiting reality itself, almost directly.

DH: I think the best photography not only reproduces the visible but also makes visible the unseen. [...] I hope to produce pictures that promote thought and stimulate the imagination. Something that a poet can pick up and work on.

JF: ... And that work is both an interpretation of a photograph and an extension of its implicit meaning. The poem can give a voice to the photographer's intensity of silence.

Fuller's technical virtuosity is matched by Hurn's, and is given much scope by the varied subjects (all with a Welsh setting) chosen by the photographer. They range from the clever poem to accompany a picture of two elated young men at the Cardiff Business School graduation in 2009, starting: "MBAs of the Business School Rule, OK?", to the alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse which accompanies an image of sun rays striking through the tall, mist-shrouded trees of 'Tintern Forest'. An elderly woman asleep in a deck chair on the beach is given the lines: "I fell asleep in the middle of my life / And woke up as a grandmother". The striking picture of an open-mouthed, raucously-laughing woman standing directly in front of a posing naked man performing for a hen-night has inspired a darker poem: "When will the shrieks of laughter / Turn to disgust in the dark. / The little boy at bath-time / Become the threat in the park?" Two photographs which at first glance could not seem further apart: a dreamy little girl with what looks like a long bridal veil over her head and shoulders, plucking large white daisies, and a young woman with face entirely concealed by tangled blonde hair, crouched against a toilet bowl, her jeans pulled down to expose a thigh into which she is injecting a hypodermic needle, are united by the lines: "Bronwen, daughter of Llyr, / Bride of sorrows." Fuller's heartfelt response to a group of wrenching photographs from the Aberfan disaster of 1966 which closes this beautifully produced book does indeed make visible the unseen: "Wise and wonderful their last words / Haunt us like the shining of flannelled faces / To be blinded in the darkness."



Ruth Fainlight's *New & Collected Poems* is just published by Bloodaxe Books.