

Visualizing Dickinson

Maryanne Garbowsky, Series Editor

A Certain Slant of Light

A Certain Slant of Light,” an exhibition curated by artists Bill Conger and Shona Macdonald, appeared from January 15th to February 25th at the Riverside Arts Center in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois.

When artist Shona Macdonald read the poem “There’s a certain Slant of light” (Fr320), she felt an immediate kinship with the words. They took her back to her own childhood growing up in Aberdeen in the northeast corner of Scotland. She remembered Sundays being taken to church by her parents and seeing the same slanting light and feeling the emotional undercurrents present in the poem. There was a sense of darkness, of melancholy, of doom.

The poem became the impetus for an invitational art show that Ms. Macdonald and Bill Conger co-curated. Both reviewed slides submitted by other artists and chose six additional artists to complete their show.

The exhibit included work in various media: painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, and photography. The artists are not illustrating the poem, but rather responding to it visual-

ly and emotionally, attempting to create in imagery the mood that Dickinson’s poem conveys. The mood is one of foreboding with an “under-current of affliction” as Macdonald describes in the gallery notes. The notes also address the poem’s construction which, despite its appearance of “fragility,” is complex with a toughness about it.

Macdonald’s silverpoint drawing entitled “Ghost #4” has a cloak of mystery which surrounds the shapes depicted. There is a feeling of terror and the unknown lurking within. Macdonald’s drawing is in actuality blueberry bushes covered in gauze to protect them from the winter cold. They correspond with the poet’s words “the Seal Despair” and “The Look of Death.” However, they appear to the viewer as ghostly presences, unrecognizable shapes that loom up to mystify the viewer.

Macdonald chose silverpoint since it has a “silvery diaphanous quality” which over time will change in color from a cold gray to a warm sepia. The medium is transient like the subject of the poem, subtle and fleeting, difficult to hold and preserve.

A work that has a similar effect is an untitled ink drawing by Melissa Randall. Like “Ghost #4,” it presents a series of amorphous shapes that overlap and echo each other, creating a feeling of mystery and emptiness. Like the words in Dickinson’s poem, “We can find no scar,” no visi-



©Melissa Randall

Melissa Randall, Untitles (Jentel Series) Walnut Ink on Paper, 7.5 x 5.5”

ble mark, the artist presents a reality with no name, only the feeling of an “internal difference / Where the Meanings Are.”

Artist Buzz Spector crafts a collage made of “dust jacket elements” and titles it “Ghost writers # 2.” Here we see what appear to be cut outs of photos of people’s heads and shoulders but no faces. They are dark like negatives and have no recognizable features or detail. Like Dickinson’s poem, the collage makes palpable a feeling of unease and uncertainty.

Dustin Young’s graphite on paper entitled “Fragment” shows a series of side by side wooden slats that line up horizontally across the picture plane. They form a continuum of slanting angles that are light in color against a darker background and suggest the poet’s words “the Landscape listens.” In the drawing, the viewer is aware of stillness: there is neither sound nor movement as the forms move into “the Distance / On the look of Death.”

The show will travel to other sites, carrying with it the spirit of Dickinson’s words, proving once again their power to provoke, to inspire, and to live again in creative minds.

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What if we have erased your grace notes
in the midst of all this restoration? Mildew sets itself
against the false hope of scouring,
but can I breathe the same genus of mold
that laminated your genius? And how could
I miss it—the lamp with its dry wick bending
in the empty air? A lamp buttresses its tributes
to you, your birthright of whale rib and whale oil.
Even unlit, it gleams along the stays and the tethers
where your caretaker heart bridled the world
under a starred ceiling revamped by digit and ink.