

Susan and Carl Landauer

Open Eye, Open Palette:
The Art of Lawrence Ferlinghetti

*I asked a hundred painters and a hundred poets
how to paint sunlight
on the face of life*

Ferlinghetti, opening lines of "Instructions to Painters & Poets" ¹

The philosopher Benedetto Croce once began a book with an expression of intense exasperation, half conceding that art was no more than "what everyone knows about."² After years of struggling with verbal definitions, Croce had concluded that the entire enterprise of aesthetics was dubious, since words and images were fundamentally incompatible. The estrangement of verbal language and the visual arts has been vital to a whole segment of modernism. This was at no time more evident than in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the artists rallying around Clement Greenberg attempted to purge painting from all that was extraneous to its physical properties, resulting in a period of American art that Susan Sontag famously called the "Aesthetics of Silence." Yet this was precisely the moment when Lawrence Ferlinghetti and other poet-painters on the West Coast began to flourish. Drawing from their predecessors (visionaries and mavericks like William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti), but more importantly from the rich tradition of Asian culture — the great Chinese and Japanese calligraphers as well as Yosa Buson and other Japanese Edo period poet-painters — they combined poetry and painting as they mixed jazz, dance, and performance art. The phenomenon stretched from Venice Beach to Topanga Canyon and from Big Sur to San Francisco, thriving in the studios of Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen and their younger peers Ferlinghetti, Wallace Berman, Stuart Perkoff, and George Herms, as well as many now forgotten, whose "vow to Holy Poverty" in face of the intolerant, unethical culture of the Cold War era meant rejecting commercial discourse.³

By his own account, Ferlinghetti's first foray into art began in the late 1940s almost by accident while in Paris working on his doctorate in literature at the Sorbonne. "A guy I was rooming with left his painting equipment behind," he recalls, "so I picked it up and gave it a try."⁴ This casual introduction quickly developed into an obsession; for the next three-and-a-half years he sketched from live models and attended "open studios" at the Académie Julien and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where the abstract painter André Lhote presided over a renowned atelier. In 1950, Ferlinghetti produced what he considers his first significant painting, *Deux*, a Surrealist reverse image inspired by Jean Cocteau. Ferlinghetti moved to San Francisco in 1951, serious enough about pursuing his art to rent a studio in the Audiffred Building, a landmark Victorian on the Mission Street waterfront.

When Ferlinghetti arrived, the city's own innovative variant of Abstract Expressionism was in full swing, and North Beach was vying with Greenwich Village as a center for the new poetry. Ferlinghetti has always rejected the term "Beat," preferring the term "San Francisco Renaissance." Whatever one chooses to call it, there was a new movement afoot in literature that embraced intuition and stream-of-consciousness as a route to authenticity. It was one more manifestation of a powerful culture of spontaneity that pervaded all of the arts at the time; as Allen Ginsberg put it, "The whole point of modern poetry, dance . . . performance, prose [and] music, was the element of improvisation and spontaneity and

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open form. The development of poetics as well as jazz and painting, seems to be chronologically parallel.”⁵ Yet, as Ferlinghetti recalls, painters and poets kept their distance: “There were two revolutions going on at the same time just seven blocks apart but with no connection at all,” he recently said. “The only painter that had an interest in the poets was James Weeks.”⁶ It was true that many of the Abstract Expressionists at the California School of Fine Arts on Russian Hill — notably Clyfford Still — held strict views that painting should have nothing to do with literature. But Ferlinghetti himself was far from ignorant about their work. The Audiffred Building was one of the city’s most energetic hubs of activity, at various times housing Hassel Smith (whose studio Ferlinghetti had taken over), Frank Lobdell, Ernest Briggs, Jack Jefferson, Sonia Gechtoff, Julius Wasserstein, and Joan Brown. Moreover, Ferlinghetti served as West Coast correspondent for *Art Digest*, often writing reviews of exhibitions of San Francisco painters — even being described as the group’s “spokesman.” [at times. By who?]

Indeed, much of Ferlinghetti’s own painting of the 1950s was clearly in the Abstract Expressionist mode: large-scale canvases filled with big-brush, body-length gestures. He particularly admired Franz Kline, recalling his “disastrous” effort to follow what he heard Kline did by “dipping a plank of wood in a vat of black paint” and hurling it at a canvas. Few paintings survive from the period, but photographs taken at the time show that he painted both figuratively and abstractly, a pattern he would follow throughout his career. But while Ferlinghetti used Kline’s black, his own painting rarely expressed the dark, gloomy mood of war-traumatized veterans like Lobdell or Jefferson. He [Ferlinghetti? And how did he see it?] had seen first-hand the scorched and blackened earth of Nagasaki just six weeks after the bomb had been dropped and agreed with Norman Mailer’s assessment of the 1950s as “years of conformity and depression” when “the stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life.”⁷ Yet Ferlinghetti’s response shows little of the cult of darkness and death that bordered on morbidity, as for example in the black pine coffin Wally Hedrick kept in his living-room scrawled with the words “Art is dead” or the black walls of Billy Jahrmarkt’s Batman Gallery, where Bruce Conner showed his repellent *Black Dahlia* (1959), named after one of the most notorious unsolved murders in the history of Los Angeles.

The angry roar of protest found in poets like Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Stuart Perkoff appears less frequently in Ferlinghetti’s painting and poetry despite the occasional expletive undeleted (or in his hybrids, since many of his paintings combine words and images, and like Patchen’s are literally “poem-paintings”). This is one of the reasons that Ferlinghetti rejected the term “Beat,” with all of its down-and-out connotations. From the beginning, he has preferred the life-affirming energy of Gregory Corso and especially Jack Kerouac. He vividly recalls how “*On the Road* really struck me with its great gusto” and enthuses about Kerouac’s brilliant ability to capture the thrill of “riding the rail” along the California coast. Ferlinghetti perhaps makes known his temperamental inclination nowhere more clearly than in his recent anthology of poetry, *How to Paint Sunlight: Lyric Poems and Others* (1997-2000). The volume begins with a short preface: “I would side with the irrational visionary romantic who says light came first, and darkness but a fleeting shadow to be swept away by more light. . . . Poets and painters are the natural bearers of it, and all I ever wanted to do was paint light on the walls of life. These poems are another attempt to do it.”

Ferlinghetti’s preference for sunlight to shadow is, as everyone knows, not for lack of political engagement, since Ferlinghetti the activist has contributed greatly to socio-political reform, particularly in the area of free speech. But more and more, he has moved away from what he now calls “agitprop” — art with a specific message to convey. As he explained in a recent interview, “Political paintings have to be lyrical also. You could say that my political paintings are the most lyrical and my lyrical paintings the most political.” In fact, he believes that his recent show named after his painting *The Lyric Escape* (1985) was especially politically powerful.⁸ The same could be said of his exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco, filled with sensuous nudes.⁹ In that show, only one painting contained a specific reference to politics — the single word, “boobeoisie,” H.L. Mencken’s sniping term used by Ferlinghetti for further comic effect.¹⁰ Explaining the political objective of the shows, he said: “My work

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is now about finding a way to escape from the present morass of disaster or whatever is descending upon us.”

Ferlinghetti’s poetry has always tended towards the visual while his art of recent years [while his recent art instead?] can be deeply, even explicitly literary. Many of his paintings feature borrowed texts in graffiti handwriting, whether a passage from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* in *City Full Passing Away* (2002), the final words of *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* in *Welcome O’Life! From James Joyce* (2008), or a line from St. Vincent Millay’s Sonnet XXVIII, “We rose from rapture but an hour ago,” wrapping a silkscreen image of Millay in *Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2008). There are, of course, endless references, borrowings and plays on the literature of the past in Ferlinghetti’s poetry whether slipping “Willa Cather’s Nebraska”¹¹ or “Chekhov’s cherished cherry trees”¹² into his poems or playing with the final “Yes” of Molly Bloom’s monologue ending *Ulysses*.¹³ Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Ferlinghetti’s poetry is so often pictorial, creating cityscapes of San Francisco and New York. The poems of Coney Island of the Mind, for example, are filled with images of the street: the “Chickens in Chinatown windows,”¹⁴ the “statue of Saint Francis/in front of the Church/of Saint Francis,”¹⁵ and the “Brighton Beach Express.”¹⁶ And a memorable poem from *Pictures of a World Gone By* begins: “Away above a harborful/ of caulless houses/ among the charley noble chimneypots/ of rooftop rigged with clotheslines.”¹⁷

Confirming this observation about his poetry, Ferlinghetti cites a second poem from *Pictures*, one about finding a copy of Yeats’s poetry on the Third Avenue elevated train. There he describes the El “with its flyhung fans and its signs reading SPITTING IS FORBIDDEN/the El/careening thru its thirdstory world/with its thirdstory people.” Even when Ferlinghetti plays on Eliot’s *Wasteland*, in turn drawing from Dante’s *Inferno*, in “I had not known/ life [instead of Eliot’s “death”] had undone so many” he continues on “inside Woolworth’s sweet machine.”¹⁸

In contrast to these cityscapes captured in words and even the tragic travelogue images of an America whisking by on a train ride between coasts, Ferlinghetti’s paintings of recent years focus so often on psychologically charged portraits. He explains that he has drawn his image of Pound for *Ezra Pound* (2009) from the very schematic *Head of Ezra Pound* by the French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, which is used by New Directions for its Pound publications, such as on the blue-gray cover of *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*.¹⁹ But Ferlinghetti’s image, with its accompanying text, “I have beaten out my exile,” transforms Gaudier-Brzeska’s stylized graphic into a deeply emotional image. Some of Ferlinghetti’s paint strokes roughly follow Brzeska’s sharp lines but the result is an image full of passion, a forlorn man who has not exactly beaten out his exile — this, despite Ferlinghetti’s own ambivalence about Pound, whose poetry was so important to him, and yet whose floating images appear with little swastikas in an earlier painting, *Palimpsest of Ezra Pound* (1995), to express Ferlinghetti’s contempt for the poet’s fascist sympathies during the war.²⁰ There is also an intensity in the face of *Picasso Jeune* (2007) — about which Ferlinghetti stated: “I imagine in that picture he had just arrived from Malaga, Spain, and he was still very rough-looking.” Similarly, the silkscreen image of Edna St. Vincent Millay is chosen and positioned for emotional impact. Indeed, there is little question about the deeply emotional pairing of *Vivienne Eliot in 1915 upon Marriage to T.S.* (2009) and *Vivienne Eliot in 1938 upon Entering an Asylum*.

In his *Martha Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1987) and *Mother Russia* (1991), Ferlinghetti creates two looming female figures with small birds positioned at the bottom left of the large canvases. Pointing to one of the paintings, Ferlinghetti suggested that the bird “just appeared.” But in both, the birds — following the coloring of the female figures — appear as spiritual *Doppelganger* of the two women, reminding us of James Frazer’s discussion in *The Golden Bough* about myths in which the spirit flies away from the body and may, as in the case of a West African story, be embodied by a bird.²¹

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Birds have, indeed, been important images in Ferlinghetti's verse, often suggesting the spirit, so that just after mentioning the erection of the new statue of Saint Francis, he intones: "just off the Avenue/ where no birds sang," suggesting spiritless void. Mother Russia (who, Ferlinghetti explains, started out as the martyred German radical Rosa Luxemburg) and Martha Washington are painted as iconic figures. Mother Russia's face is constructed using a hammer and sickle, and Martha is essentially faceless. But the birds are there to represent their spirit. In her discussion of the sense of loss in Ferlinghetti, Rosella Siligato has focused attention on Ferlinghetti's lines: "It is the dead bird/ in the heart/ that kills us."²² Indeed, the dead bird signifies the loss of spirit. With his painting, *Birds leaving Earth* (1988), massive numbers of birds are fleeing the atmosphere, leaving the darkened mass soulless. And yet, the image reverberates with Goya's famous print *Sleep of Reason* with its swirling bats with owl-like heads monstrously taking over as the human figure of reason lays his head folded in his arms upon his writing desk. Perhaps with this image from Goya — an artist central to Ferlinghetti's imagination — in mind, the birds leaving the earth are not as full of life's energy as they appear elsewhere in his poetry and painting.²³ Typically, they represent light, so that a recent poem entitled "The Light of Birds" begins: "I early learned to love birds/ the light of birds the kingdom of birds."²⁴ They are, indeed, images of aspiration: "living their separate/ weightless lives."

No matter what his subject, whether he makes specific references or not, literary or otherwise, Ferlinghetti has always aimed for both the concrete and the ineffable. Like the Symbolist poets, he knows that ellipses — those gaps that viewers and readers must fill in with their own imagination — are essential to retain the mystery of both poetry and art. In the matter of visual language, he understands that however many cultural references he marshals, his art must be intuited rather than intellectually processed. As the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer asserted: "All cognition of form is intuitive; all relatedness — distinctness, congruence, correspondence of forms, contrast, and synthesis in a total *Gestalt* — can be known only by direct insight, which is intuition."²⁵

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- ¹ *How to Paint Sunlight: Lyric Poems and Others* (New York, New Directions 2001) 3.
- ² Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996, trans. Patrick Romanell) 3.
- ³ Painter-poet-musician Saul White may be one of these unsung heroes, walking out of Leo Castelli's gallery in the early 1960s when Ivan Karp asked him to make paintings just like one he brought in as an example. His antagonism to the art market left him during his last years living, painting, and writing in his son's garage in San Pedro, California.
- ⁴ Ferlinghetti quoted in Benny Shaboy, untitled article in *Studio Notes* 26 (August — October, 1999), <http://www.studionotes.org>
- ⁵ Ginsberg, quoted in Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation in the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.
- ⁶ Unless otherwise noted, quotations and biographical information on the artist come from an interview with the artist by the authors, 10 October 2009.
- ⁷ Quoted in Jack Foley, *O Her Blackness Sparkles!: The Life and Times of the Batman Art Gallery*, San Francisco, 1960-1965 (San Francisco: 3300 PRESS, 1995), 1.
- ⁸ *The Lyric Escape*, Berkeley Art Center, 2009.
- ⁹ *Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Drawings from Life*, Italian Cultural Institute, San Francisco, 2009.
- ¹⁰ Peter Selz, "Ferlinghetti: Drawings from Life," *Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Drawings from Life* (San Francisco: Italian Cultural Institute, 2009), 8.
- ¹¹ "Wild Dreams of a New Beginning," Ferlinghetti, *Who Are We Now?* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 10.
- ¹² "Wooden Russia Still," *Open Eye, Open Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 60.
- ¹³ "A Coney Island of the Mind," *A Coney Island of the Mind: Poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 45.
- ¹⁴ "Dog," *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 67.
- ¹⁵ "A Coney Island of the Mind," *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 17.
- ¹⁶ "The Long Street," *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 73.
- ¹⁷ "Pictures of a World Gone By, 1" *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 77.
- ¹⁸ "Berlin," *Starting From San Francisco* (New York: New Directions, 1967) 54.
- ¹⁹ "Well, one — the portrait of Ezra Pound in this show — is from a portrait of him done by Gaudia-Brzeska, the image that New Directions uses for all Pound editions." Interview with Ferlinghetti by the authors, 10 October 2009.
- ²⁰ Ferlinghetti explained: "That swastika painting got me in trouble with Ezra Pound's daughter. Jennifer Wilson, the head of the Ezra Pound Association in Idaho, bought that painting and installed it in the Ezra Pound house. They had a conference there and Mary, Pound's daughter, saw it and became really furious and hostile towards me." And he elaborated: "I'm not a follower of Ezra Pound — I'm a student of his poetry, and as a Sephardic Jew, I can't forgive his anti-Semitism."
- ²¹ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan, abridged edition, 1975; originally 1922), 785.
- ²² Rosella Siligano, "Silence is Complicity," *Ferlinghetti: The Poet as Painter* (Rome: Progetti Meali Editore, 1996), 70.
- ²³ He even opens *A Coney Island of the Mind* with a reference to the continuing aptness of Goya.
- ²⁴ "The Light of Birds," *How to Paint Sunlight*, 33.
- ²⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 378