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**Between Realism and Abstraction: The Artful Poetry of
Sharon Dolin's *Serious Pink***

Serious Pink
Sharon Dolin
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In her collection of ekphrastic poetry (poems about paintings), Sharon Dolin experiments with the relationship between realism and abstraction in three series of poems that approximate in words the visual idiom of three twentieth century abstract painters: Richard Diebenkorn, Joan Mitchell, and Howard Hodgkin.

The title phrase—"serious pink"—is from Hodgkin, who asked us to "imagine a serious pink next to a trivial blue." Like Hodgkin, who is sensitive to the emotional valence of colors, Dolin allows painting to become a kind of Rorschach image through which she can explore the metamorphic nature of her own identity. In "After Dinner," a poem devoted to a picture by Hodgkin, for example, Dolin sees "cranberry shrubs/ blur gray/ under duck sauce." She then recalls a special meal as well as offers a meditation on the relationship between memory and form: "Of course you prefer avocado,/ fish roe on black bread—/ what you see is what you remember/ and what you remember is what's/ framed" (58). Instead of following the shopworn advice to "write what you know," Dolin explores what she thinks, feels, and dreams by writing about what she, quite literally, sees. "Look closely at the under-drawing," she advises in "Ocean Park No. 64," one of the Diebenkorn poems through which she engages with her own interiority (4). "Rosettes/ are not poppies/ but moments of attention/ burned into the wall," she writes elsewhere.

As much as Dolin has entered into a creative conversation with avant-garde painters, her work is also in dialog with modern American poets. One hears echoes of Stevens and Ashbery, both masters of recording the

process of thinking about a subject in the act of writing poetry. In "Black Painting #8: Predicament," Dolin's struggle to find a way to "read" a self-portrait by Joan Mitchell mirrors the artist's own initial act of deciding what to do with a blank canvas: "It's the same predicament:/ what to start with, what to fix/ on" (32). As with Stevens and Ashbery, Dolin veers toward detachment from other lives, as when a speaker desires escape from the pain of quotidian life: "Imagine walking with an aerial view/ filled with dreams of escape/ from suburban round of bicycle and/ espresso grounds. Dreams of a city/ never found" ("Berkeley Numbers," 14).

Like the composer John Cage, Dolin is open to the role chance plays in the creation of significance and psychological revelation. The first section of the book is in fact titled "Mistakes," a word that Dolin associates with Diebenkorn's aesthetics. "Mistakes are the only thing you can trust/ to go wrong and that's how/ they right themselves no matter how/ much you knock them over," she states in "Mistakes" (7). "Possible to make an art of imperfect accident," she asserts in "Ocean Park No. 79" (18).

Dolin grounds the rhetorical quality of her project in imagery taken from daily life through her allegiance to the gritty urban realism of W.C. Williams, himself an author of a book of ekphrastic poetry (*Pictures from Bruegel*). Like Williams, she offers glimpses of a disturbing urban environment that includes her confrontation with the homeless and dispossessed: "Red as the blonde-bearded face/ bloodied by another fighting/ over deposit cans" (47).

The relationship Dolin forges between herself as a creative viewer/ co-respondent and the work of art becomes a metaphorical vehicle for her to investigate the blurry border that exists between self and other in all social relationships, but especially in love relationships. Dolin has stated that as she was looking at modern painters, she was also becoming more deeply involved with her now-husband, Barry Magid. So, she said, the book also tracks a love story. As Jane Augustine has pointed out, "Ocean Park No. 45," Dolin's poem about the Diebenkorn painting, may be interpreted as a veiled expression of *jouissance*: "When I arrive at the idea/ the picture is done, said Diebenkorn" and "color is so saturated/ with arrivals it undoes doing."

Her veiled love poems are not always so sweet and exuberant, however. In a recent talk, Dolin noted that her series of poems based on the uncharacteristically somber "Black paintings" by Mitchell resonates with

her own mood of despair over the death of a boyfriend whom she was seeing at the time of her composition of the Mitchell series. "Blue winter rain/ that's what you've become," she states in "Black Painting #2: The Dead." The "you" could refer to Mitchell, who painted these canvases in the early 1960s after her father had died and while her mother was ill with cancer, but the "you" could also be Dolin's statement of her own mourning.

Clearly, Dolin isn't interested in reproducing in some objective, reportorial sense the actual contours and design of the visual works that serve as titles for her poems. Instead, the paintings serve, as the poet has said, "to provide a springboard for my own associations." Like love relationships, the relationship between poet and painter, and poem and painting, amount to a complex admixture of projections and desires. For Dolin, the paintings become two-way mirrors that produce uncanny self-portraits.