Reading paintings and poetry
Astrid Lorange

Currently, my research has me asking the simple question: what happens when we read paintings as poems? Not as though they were poems, to be sure, but in the manner that we read poems. Reading paintings in this way, I am beginning to find, offers a way of thinking about contemporary painting practice that suits the complex mediatic processes from which it emerges and to which it contributes. By this I mean, reading a painting as a poem can be an opportunity to think about the coming-to-be-made of the material, conceptual — and, I would argue, literary — aspects of painting in the context of what is often referred to as a ‘post-digital’ media environment.

So far, I’ve been interested in the paintings of a particular artist: Clare Milledge, from Sydney, Australia. Milledge’s work centres around the technique Hinterglasmalarei, popular in the nineteenth-century and which involves the application of paint and/or the removal of paint from the reverse side of glass. In addition to the glass paintings, Milledge works sculpturally, using wood, hessian, silk, wool, and other (usually organic) materials to produce environments/arrangements in which the paintings are situated. Text plays a critical role in her work; many of her paintings include text, and the titles she chooses for individual works and collections are decidedly discursive, contributing to the ongoing development of a set of philosophical investigations that preoccupy Milledge in her practice as it transforms over time (these preoccupations include conversations with Georges Bataille, moments of exchange with friends, critiques and parodies, and so on). The relationship between the text in the paintings and the paratextual content that accompany them is key to her work’s overall literariness; the text-work made visually and contextually ‘painterly’ speak back to the more polemical, though often still phrase-based or fragmentary provocations of the titles and collection names. Together, the discursive components make something like a statement of poetics; a critical orbit in which the work orients itself towards an engagement that is, perhaps above all, readerly.

In Milledge’s most recent work, the textual content is, while no more central than in previous work, slightly different. If her earlier work has tended towards using text in the form of phrases and fragments with intentionally unrevealed origins or sources, her new series of paintings use text harvested directly from the phone-based dating app Tinder, reframing a long list of users’ ‘About Me’ information in alphabetical order, producing a kind of abecedarial of first-lines by prospective dates—importantly, all men. The text is handwritten in Milledge’s very recognisable style (upper case letters, irregular but consistent), and retains the spelling and
The first two paintings in this series are *Self-Reflexive Critique: Alpha Mu* (fig. 1, a larger, site-specific window installation, featuring lines beginning with the letters A through to M minus I) and *Self-Reflexive Critique: Iota* (fig. 2, a smaller, stand-alone painting featuring lines with the first letter of the first word beginning with 'I'). Both works were installed in the University of Technology Sydney’s gallery for the show *Mnemonic Mirror*, curated by Kylie Banyard and Gary Carsley. The alphabetical conceit is clear in the works’ subtitles, and the shared title gets to the heart of this project’s textual concern: the unaltered but carefully selected collation of users’ profile bylines presented, without comment, as their own immanent critiques—unintentional but super functional critiques of masculinity, entitlement, ego, and desire.

*Figure 1: Self-Reflexive Critique: Alpha Mu*
Figure 2: Self-Reflexive Critique: Iota
Reading these works as poetic sequences, we might read the lines as cohering to make a long, constraint-based text in which a certain degree of authorial intervention (the choice of certain texts in alphabetical order) is mediated by factors outside Milledge’s control (the algorithms that determine who Milledge is matched with on Tinder, the text that the matches write). The alphabetisation generates expectation, a structural assonance; it also effects an index, a kind of bureaucratic or administrative document that registers diversity and commonality among instances of self-presentation. As poetic sequence, then, it is a variety of epic (because it aims in its very concept to be complete) that stages a small drama: accumulating an ever-increasing cast of players who, in their one line each, reveal an ecology of masculinities. Some lines are perfunctory: “Am single”; “From London”; “Looking for fun”. Some are demanding: “Straight teeth a must”; “No selfish girls, no busy girls”; “Don’t do drama”. Some try for humour, others absurdity. As a collection, they represent an oddly profound capture of the range of coded expressions that constitute hetero dating vernacular. The performance of masculinity moves between affects of anxiety, aggression, desperation, delusion and entitlement; a set of feeling-types that together form a dynamic of suppression and overtness that corresponds to naturalised notions of straight male desire. If a poem is a genre of text especially concerned with the processes by which language comes to mean in highly specific situations, then the poem is a reminder of how specific meanings become general truths through the repeated, habitual and naturalised use of language; not through leading by example (though perhaps that argument could be made elsewhere) but by emphasising the writtenness of what comes to be known as the poem itself. In the case of Milledge’s works, the poems emphasise the written dimension of the lines as both individually-authored (because written by a large number of unwitting collaborators) and generically-inflected (because written in the genre of the dating profile bio and because written in normative ‘straight romance’ vernacular). One’s being reminded of the writtenness of what might otherwise be assumed interior expression, that is, being reminded of the historic-generic forms through which expression takes place, is, I argue, at the centre of the experience of reading a poem.

A sequence, of course, not only implies order (as both arrangement and rightness-of-place), but also a sense of duration, which in turn produces a variety of story (if not quite a narrative). Ordering in a sequence, to paraphrase the poet-critic Eileen Myles, is the signal gesture of fiction; a poem’s fictionality is in the way it uses order to both disclose and obscure meaning, to build or cut, to break or follow-on. But there is another way to read sequence, as that which collects variations of a singularity, a collection of ones that are at once irreducible to one another and yet functionally (perhaps even ontologically) identical. To read a sequence is to read then in these two modes, ‘counter-rationally’ (to borrow Keston Sutherland’s term); the poem that moves through time in an odd, slight epic, linked by accumulation, and the poem that bounces on the same spot (as though timeless) occasioning infinite variations of a
singularity. A perfectly dialectical poem is impossible, and so, the poem is a contradiction of its own terms, productively so—the poem remains at odds with itself. Reading Milledge’s painting as poems, the poetic sequence is emphatic in its artifice: the language is obviously appropriated, the lettering bears witness to the effort of large-scale and manual transposition, the ordering is constraint-based, the materiality of the language (letters on a plate of glass or window) engages surfaces at once transparent and reflective, and the semantic context of the work (in a gallery, as a ‘painting’) implicates the ambient and contingent factors that condition the text and its readability. Standing to read, then, Milledge’s paintings in the space of the gallery, becomes the final performative gesture of the work’s emphasis: the body that becomes aware of the publicness of its reading, and the body that understands reading to be a critical, iterative activity—an activity productive of knowledge in excess of its interpretation, and an activity both counter-rational and exceptionally meaningful in the context of contemporary mediatic complexity.

Astrid Lorange is a writer, editor and teacher from Sydney, Australia. She lectures in history and theory at UNSW Art & Design, and runs the critical art talk series Conspiracy at Minerva Gallery in Potts Point. She is one half of the collaboration Snack Syndicate. How Reading is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein was published by Wesleyan University Press in 2014. Poetry chapbooks include Ex (Stale Objects dePress), Minor Dogs (bas-books) and Eating and Speaking (TPRP).