

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Maxine Chernoff and Emily Skillings

Tuesday, May 15, 2018

Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
New York City

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Emily Skillings is the author of the poetry collection *Fort Not* (Song Cave, 2017), as well as two chapbooks, *Backchannel* (Poor Claudia, 2014) and *Linnaeus: The 26 Sexual Practices of Plants* (No, Dear, 2014). Recent poems can be found or are forthcoming in *BOMB*, *Boston Review*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Harper's*, *Hyperallergic*, *jubilat*, *LitHub*, and *Poetry*. Skillings is a member of Belladonna*—a feminist poetry collective, small press, and event series. She has taught poetry at Yale University and at the New School. She splits her time between Brooklyn and Hudson, New York.

I love Emily's poetry because it reminds me of John Ashbery's, but it's not. Back in the day, as much as we loved John and his poetry, we had to scramble to find ways not to be engulfed by its over-arching influence. In Emily's day, which is your day, she doesn't have to worry about that, so she doesn't. Which means she is freer to open her poetry to that influence, to revel in its coursing through her veins.

Also, there's a clear view of a woman here. So, somehow, she picked up that she could be elusive and also direct, disjunctive and simultaneously earthy, as in her poem "Backchannel," which begins:

I buy an orb-shaped glass orb
and a designer candle
and go home to touch myself.

Take off everything but my shag coat,
turn on some minimalist drone
sent to me by a man.

There's a lot of learning, which she wears lightly. She can toss off Cranach the Elder and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, or more precisely, "... the Expressionist skyscraper / proposed but never built / by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe / for Berlin's Friedrichstrasse..." I sense a pattern, by which she continually binds the present moment to various points in the historic framework. I, for one, find that endlessly stimulating.

Her poem based on the idea of breastfeeding leads to a revelation: “I’m not / even thinking now, / just acting— / pure, unbridled / physical being.” She does that via her poetry, and I’m jealous. I’ll probably never write a poem from the point of view of the one providing milk. But that’s not what I’m jealous of. It’s that “pure, unbridled / physical being” that Emily enacts so gracefully in her poems. Please welcome Emily Skillings.

Maxine Chernoff is the author of sixteen books of poetry including *The Turning* (Apogee Press, 2008), *To Be Read in the Dark* (Omnidawn, 2011), *A House in Summer* (Argotist, 2011), *Without* (Shearsman, 2012), *Here* (Counterpath, 2014), and *Camera* (Subito, 2017). With Paul Hoover, she translated *The Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin* (Omnidawn Press, 2008), which received a Pen Translation Award in 2009. She is co-founding editor of the long-running and award-winning journal *New American Writing*, and has reviewed fiction for the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *New York Times*. She lives in Mill Valley, California.

Sometimes, in Maxine Chernoff’s poems, the listener is swept along by a rhythm so compelling it causes the mind to drop whatever it was contemplating and sit, transfixed, as the poem rolls by, a distant freight train traveling to an unknowable destination:

The mountain’s white page
got lost in the story
as did the knowledge
of caves’ deep plunge
a woman sat weeping...

[from “How I Wrote Certain of my Books”, *To Be Read in the Dark*, 2011]

As she puts it, at the end of a poem from her recently published collection, *Camera*, “the material / world holds / issue, no issue.” [from “Argument”]

Elsewhere, her language spreads more languorously, as in this section from her poem “Findings”:

A cape of rain, season’s slow reply
 falls on lips, words shipped, a canopy
of salt-filled sky, eyes wander,
 grass gives way way and words bend earth,
sky’s whiteness capping afternoon.

[*Camera*, 2017]

In all her various modes, Chernoff eschews both narrator and narrative, relying instead on declarative statements, “eyes wander,” or passive voice, “words shipped”. But the poet remains a consistent presence, subtly crafting the reader or listener’s responses by what she judiciously leaves in or out. As she knows and lets the reader know, “words bend earth,” but

the poet would never to presume to tell us what to do with that knowledge. Therein remains the inexhaustible promise of her poetry. Please join me in welcoming Maxine Chernoff.