

Dia Art Foundation

John Ashbery and Paolo Javier

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, March 10, 2011, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Paolo Javier

Paolo Javier is the 2010-13 Queens Borough Poet Laureate. He is the author of four chapbooks and three full-length poetry collections, including *The Feeling Is Actual* (Marsh Hawk Press, Fall 2011). Javier curates two reading series: PRJCTNS, devoted to live film narration and performance, and Queens Poet Lore, a roving poetry series set across the borough. He edits 2nd Avenue Poetry (2ndavepoetry.com), a tiny press of innovative language art, and lives with his wife in Queens.

There is always something familial, community-based, about Paolo and his poetry, so that when he takes those wild flights of fancy, and he do, you have the safety net of knowing that everything is going to be cool. Paolo and his poetry will catch you before you crash. The first section of the first poem in his 2004 collection, *the time at the end of this writing*, has a meditative rhythm, appropriate to the season, but the wit also causes the lines to snap, to steal a word from the poem's title:

Yellows leave fall on the sidewalk, so the storeclerk sweeps.
Yellow leaves tumble past my weeds. My landlord emerges yellow

in a gold Camry. Down a camera creek of Mercurys a sleek Continental glides. Content in a rental, with a panda on his back

a man passes. He makes a pass, pauses, the sun in his mouth. He has
hurt teeth. Off-yellow, fall. Trees leave. The storeclerk weeps.

The rhythms of language, but also of a daily life, of occurrences, and past situations, particularly those engendered by birthright: there is always in Paolo's poetry a sense of who he is. He identifies himself, or sees how others identify him. He questions it, aided by a sense of humor.

Paolo is invested in sound, and hearing him read is an intensely aural experience, which is what first drew me to his work. As I got to know it better, I realized his is a multi-dimensional approach, drawing on the visual arts, popular forms, theater and other brands of performance, not to forget the occult, with which he is deeply invested.

He's written a few perfect poems. One is "The Room In Tina's Room," which starts out sexy, turns elegiac, and ends, "Take a bow, then // write about it in a poem. Write poems. That's my right." He's right about that, and we are the lucky beneficiaries.

In his 2005 book, *60 Iv bo(e)mbs*, Paolo's poetry became more fragmentary, picking up velocity as it went. Larger spaces between words indicate a breathlessness that is almost suffocating, but he is never at a loss for sound refractions: "my gusts of candor call for statements to come defend" as his poem "The Shame" begins.

In Paolo Javier's latest publication, *The Feeling Is Actual*, he writes, "I've been / a grand-gesture guy in the past. & in all likelihood, / I will continue to be one in the future." Javier hits the big notes in this collection: sex, romance, even aging and regret. The poetry often comes in the form of prose, as the discussion of a play or movie takes the place of life, the characters you and I. Humorous investigations, both abroad (Philippines) and at home (Queens), and visual poetry, in which comics collide with opaque found texts: "He said he was interested / in humiliation / so I stood / him / up." All this with a multi-cultural vantage, which comes to the fore in later sections, abetted by found images and typography. "if im like a piece of bok choy / then you are probably / a piece of broccoli... /its just the communication thing". Listen to this poet, watch him, lap it up.

John Ashbery

has read twice before at Dia, and it is a pleasure to welcome him back.

What had you been thinking about?
the face studiously bloodied
heaven blotted region
I go on loving you like water but
there is a terrible breath in the way all of this
You were not elected president, yet won the race
All the way through fog and drizzle
When you read it was sincere the coasts
stammered with unintentional villages the
horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls .
. . I worry

The sound of JA's poetry coming from a recording on one of John Giorno's Dial-A-Poem records. Its phrases entered directly into the consciousness, with no mediation of thought or logic. Or, there was only necessary the logic of the words — their sounds and phrases that functioned like musical phrases. It all made a most marvelous, giddy, sense that, of course, could never be paraphrased or synopsisized. It could only be described in the most bland terms possible. I remember a high school English teacher, who liked Ashbery's work and often included it in our discussions, but bound as he was to determine what a given poem was "about," he was fated to accept the dull conclusion that all Ashbery's poems were about the same thing — the meaninglessness of modern life. The sound of his poetry, especially if you could hear it aloud, assured you the opposite was the case.

I remember at John Ashbery readings in the 1970s that it was not considered appropriate to laugh at the hilarious juxtapositions one heard. People were listening intently, trying to figure out exactly what the great poet was saying. Some time after that, people realized that laughter is an appropriate response to some of the poetry's disjunctive qualities. In fact, the same lines can engender very different responses in different listeners. It seems that poetry's ability to give delight is in direct proportion to the delight the poet experienced while writing it. If that is the case, then Ashbery must have had a lot of fun.

Ashbery's work has been hugely influential partially because of its clearly defined stylistic shifts. *The Tennis Court Oath* (1972), for instance, is largely composed of sentence fragments. While this would not remain a characteristic of his poetics, it was a brave laying-bare of an attitude towards sentences. The collage approach that marks his poetry, the combining of pieces of language from diverse sources into a linguistically unified rhetoric, is tour-de-force writing, and it remains stunning today.

With *Three Poems* (1972), Ashbery invented a new kind of poetry, one mainly written in prose. The beginning of the first poem ("The New Spirit") could be an aesthetic map for a generation or so:

"I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way."

Some of the poem "Coma Berenices," again written in prose, from *Where Shall I Wander* (2005) is devoted to that kind of typically Ashberyian text that hovers tantalizingly between the silly and the profound:

The snowball is a model for the soul because billions of souls are embedded in it, though none can dominate or even characterize it. In this the snowball is like the humblest soul that ever walked the earth.

And yet, the poem ends on a distinctly flat tone. Whether one takes it as philosophical or gloomy depends on the listener:

All in all this has been a fairly active and satisfying year, and I'm looking forward to the next one. Where it will take me I do not know. I just hang on and try to enjoy the ride. Snow brings winter memories. There is a warning somewhere in this but I do not know if it will be transmitted.

Ashbery has had an active interest in theater, writing and publishing plays.

He has been prolific as an art critic and editor of arts publications. His translations have added significantly to our knowledge of modern French literature. He has won many prizes and honors, including a Fulbright Fellowship, selection by W. H. Auden for Yale Younger Poets Series, a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the Bollingen Prize, two Guggenheim Fellowships, a MacArthur Fellowship, and the International Griffin Poetry Prize. Please welcome John Ashbery back to Dia.