

Dia Art Foundation

# Robert Hershon and Simon Pettet

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, November 10, 2015, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

**Robert Hershon's** fourteenth poetry book, *Freeze Frame*, appeared this year from Pressed Wafer. Previous titles include *Into a Punchline: Poems 1984–1994* (1994), *The German Lunatic* (2000), *Calls from the Outside World* (2006), and *Goldfish and Rose* (2013), all published by Hanging Loose Press. Hershon's awards include two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and three from the New York Foundation for the Arts. As a founding coeditor of Hanging Loose Press, he is making plans for the press's fiftieth anniversary next year.

Robert Hershon's poetry takes you by surprise. You think you know where he's taking you, but often you end up somewhere else. His short poem "Pace" is a perfect example of this. It begins, "on skinny old / lexington avenue / i speed up / to pass this man". Plain language, simple situation. You imagine a typical New York City denizen, frustrated by the slowness of the pace, obviating the obstacle in order to speed up. But no. he poem concludes, "so i can / slow down // i take / great pleasure / in the exact size / of my steps".

And this could be taken as one description of Hershon's poetics—taking his "steps" as a post-Williamsian correlative to poetic feet, i.e. he takes pleasure in his feet, and in his particular mode of walking. Which reminds me of another poem of his, "What I'm Wearing This December Day," which begins, "I'm wearing big shoes / for heavy weather".

Then there's Hershon's humor. It's low-key, so it doesn't overpower his poetics, but it is omnipresent and never far from the surface. Here's an example from *Freeze Frame*:

Myrna Loy was never lewd with Harold Lloyd  
She never lay with Turhan Bey and never lied  
to Alan Ladd  
(from "Myrna Loy in Real Life")

As Hershon puts it in the poem's punchline—"joy unalloyed!" For that and more, please welcome Robert Hershon to Dia.

**Simon Pettet** is an English-born poet and long-time resident of New York's Lower East Side. He is the author of *Lyrical Poetry* (Archipelago Books, 1987), *More Winnowed Fragments* (2006), *Hearth* (2008), his collected poems, and *As a Bee* (2014), the last three published by Talisman House Publishers. Pettet compiled and edited a selection of James Schuyler's art writings (*Black Sparrow*, 1998) and co-edited, with James Meetze, a collection of Schuyler's posthumous poems, titled *Other Flowers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010). He collaborated with painter Duncan Hannah on the limited edition book *Abundant Treasures* (Granary Books, 2001) and interviewed photographer-filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt to create *Conversations with Rudy Burckhardt about Everything* (Vehicle, 1987) and *Talking Pictures* (Zoland, 1994).

In reviewing Simon Pettet's 1987 book, *Lyrical Poetry*, I wrote, "I like *Lyrical Poetry* because of its intelligent confidence. It's not afraid to be glib or, I guess, musical. There's something about the music of the lyre, when it's tuned well, that rings true." I also cited his "brash humility" and "genuine sense of (his) place" in poems that evoked the provincial particularity of parts of the U.K. back then. As he wrote, in his poem "Nocturne" from that collection:

The outside      black  
unknown  
is waiting for exploration

There is a lot of love, a lot of eroticism in Pettet's poems, from Li Po to Thetis to Nerval to Lorenzo da Ponte. But more to the point are Pettet's own words, which shift and move beyond anything too literal to a general zone, where poetry itself is paramount, as in his poem "Psora":

If it's not  
real this address  
then what is it  
that I understand  
And if it has form  
what shape does it make  
in the dark?

...

His "wailing and complaint" may come from a literal itch, the meaning of the word "psora," but also from a more metaphysical itch. One is always aware of both in Pettet's poetry, and his poetics itself hovers between the two, giving precedence to neither, creating an intriguing flux state. To the freedom of the direct observation already present in his early poems, Pettet has added the deepening wisdom of years, always maintaining the lightest edge, to keep it all afloat. Please join me in welcoming Simon Pettet to Dia.