

Dia Art Foundation

# Tony Towle and Jennifer Moxley

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, January 26, 2012, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

### Jennifer Moxley

Jennifer Moxley was born in San Diego, California, in 1964. She studied at Mesa College, UCSD, the University of Rhode Island, where she got her BA, and Brown University, where she received an MFA in 1994. She is the author of *Imagination Verses* (Tender Buttons, 1996), *The Sense Record* (Edge, 2002), *The Line* (Post Apollo, 2007), and *Clampdown* (Flood Editions, 2009). She has translated two books by the French poet Jacqueline Risset, and she is the author of *The Middle Room*, a six-hundred-plus page memoir (Subpress, 2007). She lives in Orono, Maine, where she is a Professor of English at the University of Maine.

Jennifer Moxley's poetry has gone through several phases, but all of it is characterized by a muscular line, surprising word choices, and a fearlessness regarding writing and subject that gets transferred to the reader or listener as a sense of giddy apprehension. Endlessly ranging through forms, her books show her restlessness, coupled with a strong ambition, a sense of community, and a post-Romantic commitment to the life of the sentiments. Her strength as a poet is in her ever-renewed confrontation of reality, which often manifests itself in the dreary side of human and social interactions, but she is equally adept at seeing the humor in depressing situations, a kind of survival-guide poetics. That Moxley is able to write about such intense feelings without irony, while simultaneously maintaining a dedication to verbal and syntactic experimentation, is a substantial achievement. While she does avail herself of ironic undercutting, her main tone is of the urbane sublime. The rhythms of English poetry from Wyatt to Keats structure her syntax, which she subverts with an American language thoroughly of her time and place.

In "Though Crowded" from *Imagination Verses*, she writes,

I am not thinking of you  
always, in separation our time  
is queer requirement, the  
impossible revelation  
of a moment alone, or the  
pale counting of debts.

Here, as throughout her poetry, her erudition is conversational, her command of double and triple meanings surprising and revealing.

In later poems, such as "In Creeley's Wake" and "Our Defiant Motives," Moxley shows a resolve to move away from defeat as the motivating factor, while still recognizing its inevitability. She has created, through poetry, a way of living against defeat. Please welcome Jennifer Moxley to Dia.

### Tony Towle

Tony Towle was born in Manhattan on June 13, 1939, and grew up in Queens and Westchester. He heard Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara read their poetry on successive weeks at the New School in 1962 and took the workshops they gave there the following year. He received the Gotham Book Mart Avant-Garde Poetry Prize in 1963, and his first full-scale collection, *North* (Columbia University Press), won the Frank O'Hara Award for 1970. Towle is the author of *Lines For The New Year* (Adventures in Poetry, 1975), *"Autobiography" And Other Poems* (Sun/Coach House South, 1977), *The History Of The Invitation: New And Selected Poems 1963-2000* (Hanging Loose Press, 2001), and *Winter Journey* (Hanging Loose Press, 2008). He is also the author of *Memoir 1960-1963* (Faux Press, 2001).

In "Fugitive Visions," the last poem in his masterful *The History Of The Invitation: New and Selected Poems 1963-2000*, Tony Towle writes, "For some / can sing the loves of Romeo and Juliet, and so forth, / while I merely amplify the stammering of adolescents." Eschewing both the fragmentary, more modernist style of John Ashbery's poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* and the experimental

personality-play of O'Hara's work, Towle writes poetry in complete sentences whose dry humor evinces a wide knowledge of literary culture. Many of Towle's poems involve arcane references and invented dialogue, but he is also capable of love poems of a lyric abstraction, whose heartbreaking matter-of-factness derives from his ability to insert the poetic into the mundane.

In "After Dinner We Take A Drive Into The Night," an early poem, he writes,

I begin to feel passion.  
I walk back and forth and it is a slow movie,  
without the interest of acting, only walking.  
Far from my prying eyes she strips off her clothes.  
Oh for the wings of a bird.

There are many voices in Towle's poetry, including one he refers to as "Towle-esque," (from "Gemini" in *Winter Journey*), but riding over all of them, in control, is this hip, cool, extremely erudite, but paradoxically unassuming personality, which is the poet's. Having learned intimately from that master of wit, Kenneth Koch, Towle knows the value and valence of humor in poetry, and crucially, how not to go too far.

Towle seems to belong to a more sophisticated, elegant, mode of writing — or universe. Maybe it is the case that he has more in common with his immediate predecessors in the New York School than with such contemporaries as Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Jim Brodey, and Dick Gallup. There is little of the Beat or Black Mountain propensity to deal with life on its own terms in Towle's poems. Rather, he substitutes the terms of the poem, which he endlessly tweaks, prodding its material, stimulating himself, seemingly, with insights and entertainments born of the writing process. In this, he does share something with Padgett, but his true coevals are the poets Charles North, Paul Violi, and Frank Lima. With North, Towle shares a precise valuing of word-weight and line-rhythm, with Violi the vast imagination delighted at its ability to surpass its bounds, and with Lima the knowledge that the poem will arrive at its existence by the rhythmic placement of one word after the next. In fact, it is Towle's musicality that gives his poetry its undeniable, though difficult to parse, appeal. Romanticism is the proof of the pudding, and the rest will take care of itself. Please welcome Tony Towle to Dia.