

Panel 8
Sound, Text, Aesthetics

Beyond the Canvas: Gender in Elizabeth Jennings' Poetry

Kaiyu Sun
University of Graz

Taking its cue from the conference's focus on the interconnectedness and interactions of different art forms across aesthetic and cultural boundaries, this proposal aims to investigate the intricacies of Elizabeth Jennings' ekphrastic poetry. It examines the often neglected poetry of Elizabeth Jennings, focusing on her significant use of ekphrasis—the literary representation of visual art—as a key to understanding her poetics of silence and its feminist implications.

Specifically examining paintings in words, this paper investigates her ekphrastic poems, particularly those engaging with portraiture, and argues that they reveal a cooperative engagement with painting. This includes Jennings' emphasis on visual elements like faces and colors, and her distinction between modes of viewing—a “look” versus an introspective “stare.” According to Susan Sontag, the aesthetic of silence represented by the stare creates a paradox of a resonant or eloquent silence. This paper contends that Jennings' approach of silent ekphrasis challenges gendered dynamics within ekphrasis, as theorized by W.J.T. Mitchell. I argue that Jennings' ekphrastic poetry fosters a “sister arts” dynamic over intermedial conflict and stresses an inward, non-binary gaze, advocating for an intermingled way of viewing words and images. Thus, Jennings creates opportunities for developing ekphrasis with a queer connotation. This re-evaluation positions Jennings' work as a valuable site for interrogating gender in art and appreciating a unique voice in late-twentieth-century British poetry.

Biography

Kaiyu Sun is a doctoral student in English Literature and Culture at the University of Graz, Austria. Her research interests lie at the intersections of literature, visual arts, and culture, with a specialization in the engagement between English poetry and painting. Her most recent scholarly contributions include a presentation on Elizabeth Jennings' poetry (Academic Conference, University of Klagenfurt, Austria, 2025) and another on Van Gogh's still-life paintings in contemporary fiction (Academic Conference, Nanjing Institute of Technology, China, 2023).