

The Painted Word: Exploring the Art of Expression in New York City

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Just as Mike Goldberg's *Sardines* depicts no image of sardines, Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not A Painter" contains no clear explanation as to why he is not a painter. No, these art pieces serve as explorations *around* their subject matter than portrayals *of*. *Sardines* bursts with raw colors that might remind of gutted fish, and "Why I Am Not A Painter" veers into what it means to be "I," to be "Not A Painter," and to also *be* "A Painter." In every essence, the poem both is and describes a collision between writers and artists of The New York School. It delves into the raw creation of art: of how poets explore the medium of language while painters navigate visual space. Intriguingly, O'Hara breathes a fluidity into the poem that calls forth more similarities than differences between writing and painting. Despite this, the answer to the title still lies within the poem, similar to how the word "sardines" remains in Goldberg's painting. Indeed, O'Hara discovers a difference between poets and painters in which the words of poetry open up a stream of thoughts whereas visual art requires the reduction of many thoughts into one perceptible image.

The poem opens with immense enjambment, which portrays the lack of boundary between painters and poets as well as between O'Hara's various thoughts. O'Hara begins with a strong declaration about his identity: "I am not a painter, I am a poet" (1). The two statements are complete, independent sentences, yet O'Hara links them with a comma and without a conjunction. He does not place a period after "painter," which would cement a downward inflection of the word, produce a pause, and emphasize a strict difference between the two identities; he creates only subtle caesura, leaving room for some connection between painters and poets. The anaphora and many monosyllabic words induce a confident tone, which makes the word "Why" feel rhetorical: "Why? I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not. Well"

(2-3). There is an expectation that O'Hara asks "Why" to provide an answer and not because he is unsure himself. However, the speaker meanders onto another thought without answering the question—or at least without answering it directly. Lines 2 and 3 neither fully explain nor negate O'Hara's initial statement. The sporadic movement of thought captures the realistic inner workings of the mind, achieving an authenticity that is characteristic to Abstract Expressionism. Like many artists of the 1950s, O'Hara creates a sense of intimacy in his work through the many "I"s that emphasize the personal voice of the poet. As such, he already undermines his declaration that he is "not a painter" by exhibiting the same rawness of expression that painters sought. Furthermore, the stanza break after "Well" allows for the reading that he is a painter, only "not well." In this case, grammar becomes the vehicle that distinguishes O'Hara as a poet since the period separates the two identities. Nonetheless, O'Hara creates a fluidity between thoughts and identities while portraying an inconsistency between language and content.

The next section is an anecdote that describes the development of *Sardines*. O'Hara continues: "for instance, Mike Goldberg / is starting a painting. I drop in" (4-5). It is unclear whether "for instance" refers to how he "would rather be / a painter" or how he is "not" a painter. This ambiguity captures the Abstract Expressionist value of not having a subject but having a story.¹ It does not matter what the "for instance" describes as long as it moves the poem forward with ease. The mixing of verb tenses between present progressive and simple present further immerses the speaker into the scene. It conveys how people in New York are in perpetual motion, and O'Hara catches a glimpse of their actions when he "drop"s into their space. Almost paradoxically, "is starting" expands the process of creating art. The present progressive tense stretches the time. It illustrates a duration of time in which Goldberg must prepare and plan for

¹ Smith, Hazel. The Sense of Neurotic Coherence: Structural Reversals in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara. Accessed April 23, 2024. <https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/39283/1/383548.pdf>.

his painting. This, along with the word “drop” as opposed to “stop by” or “visit,” portrays the speaker’s descent into a slower atmosphere of thinking about and “beginning” to create art amidst a fast-paced New York City.

Contrary to the deliberate atmosphere that envelopes the “starting” of a painting, there is a swiftness that takes over the body once one begins to paint. The dialogue between O’Hara and Goldberg expresses this creative flow:

“Sit down and have a drink” he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. “You have SARDINES in it.”
“Yes, it needed something there.” (6-9)

In another act of connectivity, the painter and poet share a drink. O’Hara hints at bodily ease, and the stream of monosyllabic words—with multiple simple verbs—conveys the fluidity of their physical movements. The poem’s pace quickens. The rapid repetition of “drink” further expresses the men’s swift motions, which also mirror the swiftness in which Goldberg responds to O’Hara. The explanation for adding sardines is quick and simple; he “needed” to fill up space, so he did. O’Hara provides “no causal account linking choice to the interiority of the subject ... These trivial choices do not represent or reveal a subject; they order and constitute a world. This absence of an inner reality—beliefs, tastes, interests, or personality predefining or circumscribing choice—and its replacement by a desire that surfaces in a spontaneous engagement ... is the central feature of personal poetry” (Clune 2005, 184). Goldberg paints through a series of innate responses to the work rather than laboring toward a pre-imagined conclusion. The end-stopped nature of lines 9 and 10 disrupt the free verse to stress Goldberg’s confidence in “it” needing something. This confidence without particular reason signals artists’ trust in their intuition; they paint through unconscious outpourings onto canvases, allowing their feelings to guide their art. Similarly, O’Hara describes the scene in an “I-do-this I-do-that” way without projecting an

“inner reality.” Goldberg tells him to have a drink, so he does. The imperative verb turns into an action verb in a moment of “spontaneous engagement” that epitomizes the poem’s candor.

O’Hara builds on the free-flowing process of art as the painting develops. He responds to Goldberg with the same simplicity:

“Oh.” I go and the days go by
and I drop in again. The painting
is going on, and I go, and the days
go by. I drop in. The painting is. (10-13)

All the verbs that refer to O’Hara and are in simple tense: “I drink,” “I look,” “I go,” “I drop.”

He makes definitive movements that cease upon the conclusion of that verb, whereas the painting “is going on.” The word “painting” itself is a noun and verb, just as how the painting is both a solid image that exists now *and* is developing in time. However, the former mention of “starting a painting” makes “the painting” sound like a noun. Consequently, the enjambment of “The painting / is going on” gives agency to the art piece. The piece *is* in the present progressive tense because it *is* a process that pervades time and action. It exists as an entity without the hands of the artist, choosing when it continues forth and when it is finished. The agency of “the painting” intensifies the process of painting because it charges the artwork with life. Similarly, the repetition of “days go by” and “drop in” enhances the absorbing atmosphere. “By” connotes lateral movement as well as speed, so the “days” seem to fly past the speaker while he sinks “in” this space of creation in a way that feels firm. The overlapping diction and ample verbs also continue the “I-do-this I-do-that” sense, where what “words *do* supplants the notion that words *mean*” (Magee). Both visually and structurally, the words move across and down the page in the same free-flowing way that Goldberg strikes the canvas. O’Hara thus captures the speed, vibrancy, and rhythms of urban life through the words’ connotations of movement rather than mere denotations.

Goldberg then completes the painting with a stroke of confidence:

finished. "Where's SARDINES?"
All that's left is just
letters, "It was too much," Mike says. (14-16)

O'Hara implements immense enjambment with "is / finished." For an instant, the art simply "is."

Despite all the movement from O'Hara, Goldberg, and "the days," the painting experiences a moment of pause without moving toward any direction. The space after "is" forces one to embrace *Sardines* as it is. This line reminds of line 2, where O'Hara claims that he "would rather be." Both the artist and art piece must have a moment where they settle and "be" themselves without becoming something or someone else. Interestingly, critic Marjorie Perloff challenges this moment of stillness in stating that static images "have no place in the poet's world ...

O'Hara loves the *motion* picture."² While the fluidity of O'Hara's language conveys his fervor for capturing the moving present, it is undeniable that the enjambment also forces odd moments of pause. This notion of sitting in completeness can still convey Goldberg's natural process of painting. The completeness strikes instantaneously, just when it feels right. Indeed, the painting flips from being unfinished to "finished." Goldberg does not have to "finish" it because the painting is complete on its own accord, simply when it *is*.

However, the paradoxical diction gives insight to the different ways in which poets and painters approach the conclusion of an art piece. Since the image of sardines "was too much," Goldberg reduced it to just "letters." The "all" and "just" establish that there is very little "left," yet O'Hara describes the remnants as "letters" rather than "a word." He sees multiple letters and not a single word, meaning he witnesses plurality rather than singularity in "SARDINES." This observance of multitude is the basis of the difference between Goldberg and O'Hara, where the

² Perloff, Marjorie. "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention." *Boundary 2* 4, no. 3 (1976): 779–806. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302703>.

painter feels he *reduces* the excessive image of “SARDINES” into something less, but the poet still observes abundance in what remains.

The third and final section of the poem discusses how words open up O’Hara’s world, filling his mind with images each time he writes. O’Hara shifts to explain his own process of creation:

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in. (17-24)

Opposite to how Goldberg takes the image of sardines and diminishes it into a single word, O’Hara follows the words of poetry toward an endless chain of images: of not just orange but of feelings regarding orange and of life overall. Several of the heavily-enjambed lines in this section end with prepositions such as “of” and “in.” This, unlike how the painting just “is,” forces one to track the words onto another line and attach onto another idea. The asyndeton pushes one thought onto the next, which reflects how each word of a poem leads O’Hara to write more. Additionally, similar to how O’Hara saw “letters” and not a single word with “SARDINES,” he sees a “whole page of words, not lines.” Although the lines consist of words, O’Hara describes it as such to emphasize how he sees *more*: there are more words than lines on a page, and it is as if each word evokes a new image. Even as he adds “another page” he cannot get enough because the thought of oranges only leads to grander thoughts about life. The lack of structural constraint continues to pervade the poem to depict the spontaneity of art. The pace almost feels too fast, though, as if the speaker does not have time to catch up the words. Consequently, the muddled syntax of “so much more, not of orange, of / words, of how terrible

orange is / and life” raises confusion as to whether there should *not* be more of orange, words, the terribleness of orange, and life, or if there *should be* more of everything but orange. The latter reading makes more logical sense since O’Hara wants more, but regardless, the confusion portrays the flood of ideas that the speaker confronts. The addition of “and life” to “how terrible orange is” epitomizes the open-endedness of writing.

Despite the unending stream of thoughts, O’Hara’s life moves on and he finishes the poem. O’Hara describes how orange persists in his mind:

and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven’t mentioned. (24-26)

For O’Hara, a color leads to the consideration of life. Then “Days go by,” and the color ends “in / prose.” Instead of O’Hara dropping “in” to the space of art—of oranges and sardines—, orange floods “in” *his* life. The subject matter is now present not only in the poem at hand but in the prose that he writes and reads: in his everyday language and the way he thinks. The intangibility of the color “orange” makes its presence “in / prose” feel uncontained, yet O’Hara writes that his poem “is finished.” It is difficult to explain the definitive end beyond the idea that art pieces are contained in spaces whereas life continues. Similar to the idea of a lunch break—one cannot separate O’Hara from *Lunch Poems*—there is a temporal structure of break that positions the worker, or the poet, “within, but liminally outside, the restriction of the employer’s time clock.”³ The ideas that arise during lunch and during the process of writing still flow through O’Hara’s mind, yet the lunch break ceases, and the time of creation ends. Life continues.

The poem’s final lines sum up the indirect relationship between text, image, and subject matter in poets’ and painters’ work. Even after twelve poems, O’Hara has not mentioned:

³ Lowney, John. “The ‘Post-Anti-Esthetic’ Poetics of Frank O’Hara.” *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 2 (1991): 244–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208364>.

orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
 it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
 I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES. (27-29)

Both ultimately sum up their works through language, yet observing the works incites visual images. O'Hara only sees the title plaque "SARDINES" because he observes the entire painting in the gallery. Again, the subject matter lies just outside of the explicit text. Not only that, there is a merging of text and image,⁴ where the painting itself becomes a word and O'Hara's poem offers an image. This intertwining exists because of the ample conversations between poets and painters in New York. Their art influences one another, and it is difficult to pull them apart. As such, O'Hara ends the poem with the *word* "SARDINES," just like Goldberg does with his painting. He does not open new images, but perhaps the word "SARDINES" itself prompts the reader toward another thought.

"Why I Am Not a Painter" is about the layered relationship between writing and painting. The poem is built upon the vibrant grounds of the New York School, where poets and artists conversed in spheres that emphasized authenticity, immediacy, and spontaneity. In this context, Goldberg and O'Hara shared not only the aim of capturing the present in their respective artwork but the intuitive method through which they composed their art. Each captured the exciting, chaotic movement of life and confronted the inevitable conclusion of their artwork. As the world outside of art continues to move, painters reduce their flow of images into one standing piece, and poets allow these images to flow out of their artwork and into the words of their everyday life. Despite this difference, both results embody the Abstract Expressionist value of celebrating individual freedom and expression. It does not matter whether O'Hara is a painter or not. What

⁴ Smith, Hazel. "Why I Am Not a Painter: Visual Art, Semiotic Exchange, Collaboration." In *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*, 166–94. Liverpool University Press, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjkg4.10>.

matters is his freedom when it comes to writing, painting, and observing the world in the most natural way, allowing vivacity to rush through art and life.

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