

# *ANDREW CRANSTON: GENEROSITY AND RESERVE, OR CONSTANT READJUSTMENT, OR IS THAT A SEA URCHIN?*

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By Stephanie Burt

The experts always knew—and they knew what they had yet to know. “There is another world, but it is in this one,” Paul Éluard remarked (or quoted—there’s a deep rabbit hole here). That world, for Éluard (and possibly for his source), had to be recognized, declared, professed (“en fasse profession”) before we could see it as real. “Beneath the city is another city,” agreed the Anglo-American poet Jane Yeh, “where everything matches us.” But we have to delve underneath the first city to get there.

That is to say, we have to look again: to work willingly, to make something from what we see. Representation is work, or play, not just something given: the world gives us more the more we give to it. Elizabeth Bishop, too, knew that we have to delve into the world to get something back, that pure abstraction and surface-level photorealism are both ways to sell the world short, to turn away grace, that if you look again you can see far more. In her best, and last poem, about seeing a painting, “the little that we get for free,” “not much,” is representation itself. “That gray-blue wisp” we take to be a church, the individuated strokes that could be, must be, the beach we knew, the firs and the larches we once saw on a long trip north, the lintels and sills of the houses we’ve seen.

Yet for Bishop (an accomplished but never a professional painter herself) the sense of recognition, the world coming into focus, the self coming into place, had to come through words. She could love paintings, even large bad paintings, and show why she loved them, by laying out phrases and lines and sentences that make available to strangers the visual pleasure, the welcome recognition, that she found in serendipitously discovered paintings whose amateur artists were (apparently) people whom she once knew.

Andrew Cranston makes large, good paintings. And in those paintings we can see—even if we are not philosophers or fantasists or poets on the level of Éluard or Yeh—the pleasure, the play, and the work of finding what might be out there in the world, what’s new and cuddly or menacing or solid or bizarre or (especially) companionable, though strange. A painting by Cranston is a forest of reeds, going in, or a thick storm of rain, or a cloud of steam: we make out big things, but we get the textures first. We are moist or dry or scared or loved. We stay. We look around. We ask for directions, perhaps from the people we’ve met. They might be walking a dog or setting a table or even painting a painting. If there is a dog, we play with the dog.

And then . . . and then . . . we see how much of the world will open itself up to us,

once we wait for it. We see, in the negative space, in what the eye at first leaves behind, what the eye works to build. If we are patient enough, we fit into, or else fit alongside, that space. It does not repel or destroy or try to subvert us, it does not force us to do anything. It is more like knitting. (See it, feel it, and we might want to try it.) Cranston does not just accept any status quo, but neither does he lash out: a violent order, he knows, is disorder, but a great disorder is an order (as Wallace Stevens put it), and Cranston prefers small orders, partial orders, flexible orders, human-scale orders, habitable orders, instead.

We find those orders—interacting and incomplete on purpose—in every genre that Cranston has chosen so far, and he is a painter quite conscious of genre, like his precursors in Bay Area Figuration in the 1950s (that’s what comes to mind when an American sees this Scottish painter’s work). Still life, landscape, seascape, group portrait, “the artist in his studio”—all those genres are represented here. And all invite us in: all reveal their own representational qualities, their own ability to reveal the things and people in them, only once we try to enter their world (which is, secretly, our own) and allow ourselves to take multiple looks.

A good place to start—since its central figure makes herself comfortable, since she looks back at us—might be *Waiting for the Bell* (2021), a painting set (so it seems) in a forest whose treetops are pussy-willow-edges, or cattails, or lights in the sky (but not stars). Those soft white lights (we can see dozens of them) shine down on red, on three shades of red, no, five shades of red, no, twenty shades of red and pink and rose and ruby and burgundy, and all those reds recede behind a standing woman; no, she’s seated, in a dress; no, she’s in ecru and pine-green separates, holding a dog out to us; no, the dog’s on her lap. “That sense of constant readjustment,” as Bishop put it, and which we get through Bishop’s poems, comes to us in Cranston’s painting. There is a world inside this world, one we can visit. But we must enter patiently, let our guard down, permit the real to emerge slowly from the unreal, recognizing that we may not feel at home.

But the woman—along with her dog, and her shoes, and the lights above her—is at home: “each in his way, / is at home” (Marianne Moore). As we look again and again at her—and we are encouraged, enticed (not “forced”) to look again—we see the aspects and accoutrements of what must be her garden-in-a-forest home emerge from the reds among the other reds. Here is a wire table; here are chairs. Is the table set for an outdoor guest? Who set it? Did the painter scratch those outlines directly on the canvas, into the painting, rather than applying paint to create them? Behind our woman, behind her hat (how did she choose that hat?) the five-sided front of a house comes into view. . . . We may feel welcome. But she is at home. Or is it an eldercare home? (If not, then what do we make of the title?)

*Harvest of a quiet eye* (2019–2021) is a still life, the table set with a jar and a platter and various fruits—though, is that a sea urchin? Or else it is a Dutch-style allegory that tells us how to live (take the lemons along with the sweet melons, and understand that only half the berries look ripe). And then it is not: look closer, look again, and there’s another dog, the floppy-eared beige investigator who traipses his winning way through perhaps a third of these paintings, sniffing and scrutinizing

and wanting to know. (That dog has a pedigree, too: out of Craigie Aitchison, by way of George Leslie Hunter, for those keeping score.)

Cranston's dogs, their noses right up to the fourth wall, want to know how things taste and smell, but we, mere human observers, might want to know how the table surface feels: Cranston has used a texturing tool of some kind to make parallel ripples across that table and only that table, distinguishing it from the trees and hills and lake and sky, whose color duplicates the lake. Prior to his art career, as a 1980s school leaver, Cranston expected to become a joiner: there's a carpentry, a wood grain, to these effects that exceeds those in his precursors' work. And look closer: the shadows of the allegorical objects, each one darker than the intrepid dog, overrule those parallel lines, which show up only in the white sun.

*One day this will be a long time ago* (2018–2021)—one of several paintings completed on hardback book covers—looks from far off like another still life. There's a lampshade; there's a tilted thing on a table, perhaps a small easel or a picture frame. There are measuring cups. And then there are none of those things: a human being is kneeling, inside a structure (a tent or a lean-to) on a beach, before a pair of skillets. One skillet holds eggs. The pole for the lampshade morphs into a human figure, standing where high tide comes in. Behind that figure are two more people, or maybe one more and a dog, in the surf.

That white on an off-white spot, far away, is the sun. “Scarcely the day / to take a walk on that long beach” (Bishop again); and are the lean-tos, the tents, the approximate and temporary forms of housing in all of Cranston's paintings also versions of the approximate, now-you-find-it, now-you-lose-it houses in Bishop's poems? Go outdoors, even in the frigid rain: look hard at this world, and perhaps it shelters you, gives you the sun as a small white ball to warm you. But how warm? And for how long?

Cranston can render several northern European landscapes—and seascapes and townscapes—but his eye is always alert to how things come together inexactly, how things, people, fauna, and flora, thrive together, lend themselves to forests, to woody terrain. In *Checking for ticks* (2020–2021), the two blurred human figures inspect each other inside another tent, as if we could see them through the tent, while streaks and specks of blue and green and brown sift down outside them. What will we find? What will they find? Our two humans wear—no, comprise—streaks of lavender, overlapping to form pajamas, or perhaps tracksuits. They may well have fallen asleep, or woken up, to a pastoral, loopy post-punk, or to Debussy, or to IDM: we can't quite hear them. This couple in lavender knows each other better than we know them, and it is better so.

We do know that we can trust Cranston to guide our eye, to teach us how to see, and—if we are lucky, if we find him at his most self-referential—even to teach us how to teach others to see. These kinds of pedagogical painterly tutorials guide Cranston when he takes up the trope of the artist at work, as he does, implicitly, in paintings devoted to other arts: a woman at her vanity before her mirror, a trio of musicians onstage amid another panoply of reds, a trompe l'oeil, easel-like Cornish

seaside, a writing teacher and a student at a manuscript consultation.

*After Paul* (2021–2021) appears as if it were a studio painting but without the easel, the artist, or the studio. At once secluded—below street level? or ground level?—and swept by sunlight, this space has everything else an artist needs: a chair, a spouted pitcher of water for gardening, a tumbler, a folding table, a set of flat stones that resemble a painter's palette (half lit, half muted), and a very accommodating dog (a spaniel-golden mix, perhaps?). And a rug (is it?) underneath the chair. And a ladder for climbing in and out of the semi-secluded mental space artists need. And a wall with scratches and curvilinear patterning and false starts, like a large canvas. But of course this particular Andrew Cranston painting has no truck with canvas: in an ambiguous triumph over the words that have often overshadowed pictures, the words that have taken the place of firsthand seeing since Homer described the shield of Achilles, Cranston has painted again right onto the cover of a hardback book.

Nor is *After Paul* the only painting that settles into examples of generosity and reserve, in looking over, in looking again. Take, for a final example, that student-and-teacher painting titled *Let's talk about this story of yours* (2021). The perspective comes off wrong, not realistic, not to scale, because we are seeing a classroom after hours in the way that a child would see it. The chairs on the tables are small, because they are chairs for children; the parquet floor is extensive, extra-sharp in its tessellations, even toothy, because for a child the floor would take longer to cross. Has the teacher chosen to sit in a child's chair? Does the student occupy the adult-size chair? Have they switched chairs on purpose? Perhaps the switched chairs say something about child-mind, about openness to experience, about changing your mind.

What's on the floor? It's a discolored tile; no, it's a footstool; no, it might be an actual turtle, escaped from a classroom terrarium or dropped into an otherwise realistic setting in an emblem of artistic perseverance: keep looking, revising, overpainting, and don't take anyone else's word for what you'll find till you get to the end. That's what the turtle in the fable says, and it's what the painting says, too, and it's likely what this teacher says to the child, who has crossed his arms across his chest.

Is the child listening? What's happening outside the classroom as misty, pearlescent blues and greens, too shapely to represent trees and nothing but trees, hug the rectangles of negative space that we have to call windows? Are teacher and student stuck here until the rain stops?

We can guess. We can feel for this duo. We don't know "this story," but we know how it feels to live inside it: careful, anxious, misty, and yet persistent, like a box turtle caught in, then out of, the rain. The great twentieth-century poet of turtles was Robert Lowell: "When they breathe they seem to crack apart." But Lowell could not live, or write, without imagining violence, done to him or done by him or done in his name. Bishop tried to imagine otherwise and projected a patience into her verbal scenes that Cranston takes up in his visuals. Look closer at those pink tables without tablecloths, retired from classroom labors for at least one rainy night.

One's a pentagon: Why? Look closer at the shadows from the tables, and the turtle, cast, falling toward us, thanks to sunlight that blurs through the trees, as if the school had been built in a lot across from one of Claude Monet's cathedrals...

If we look long enough at a visual artist's work, we will probably start to think about both visual and verbal precursors: for a painter who depicts pedagogy, we might want to think about where he has learned. It is hard to think of a moment in the history of Western painting that has become, in the current moment, more middlebrow, less automatically intriguing, than the classic phase of impressionism, the trinity of Édouard Manet, Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir that launched a thousand pocket calendars (and colorists). But of course they—and their allies and their immediate heirs, from Pierre Bonnard to Hunter to Elmer Bischoff—were on to something, something about how the world breaks up as you look at it, and then how, if you keep looking, it comes back together, provisionally, shifting, resolving into a house that's like a table, a table leg that's like a dog, a turtle that stops where it will. What are the flagstones in *After Paul*, the pebbled shadows in *Harvest of a quiet eye*, if not revised and toned-down lilies? Patience, the paintings say. You don't have to stay here, or live here, or keep on looking. Or get a friendly, inquisitive, snouty medium-size brown dog, a good friend, a quiet eye. You don't have to do any of those things: nobody's making you. But you could. We'd be glad if you did.