

The Album

By Peg Boyers

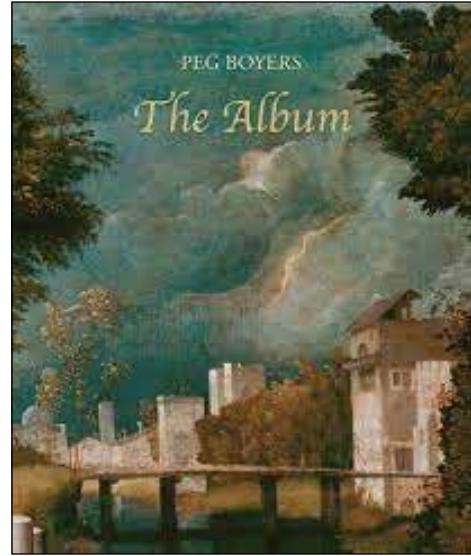
Dos Madres Press

www.dosmadres.com

Loveland, Ohio

ISBN: 978-1-953252-28-9

68 Pages



Review by Dennis Daly

Never have I read ekphrastic poems so undetachable from the sources of their inspiration. It is as if Peg Boyers in her new collection, *The Album*, wrote within the individual art objects, delivering fresh, insightful versicle pieces, birthed out of the same aesthetic DNA. Boyers and the editors of *Dos Madres* also deserve not a little praise for publishing this year's most beautiful book of poems.

La Tempesta (after *La Tempesta* by Giorgione, 1504) opens Boyers' collection with its symbolic inferences. This painting was George Gordon Byron's favorite because of its magical ambiguity. Some art historians believe that the painting was a warning to Venice to avoid war with Pope's threatening army. Boyers, however, has a more versatile approach. Her protagonists are art aficionados, who have just purchased a tie, adorned with the lightning bolt from the painting, from the museum shop. The lightning bolt is the demarcation between the lush foreground with a young woman nursing her infant and a young man eyeing her and an urban background. Previously these art connoisseurs have focused on this foreground ignoring the darker rest, including ruins and an impending storm. Here Boyers details the background or the rest of the story—notice how contemporary it sounds,

*the deaths accumulating among the old and the unlucky young,
illnesses and overdoses claiming them relentlessly
with each passing season.*

*But the ruins in the distance—the dilapidated bridge to the
approaching night—beckon with a steady, [patient
insistence*

toward the lightning, the inexorably tormented sky.

*So we gather our cloaks—
not against the storm (which will arrive)
but against our dread of the storm.*

In *Frau Durer on Melencolia I* (after *Melencolia I* (1513) by Albrecht Durer) Boyers' narrator—Durer's wife—speaks with insistence and resentment. She demands consideration from her husband and her moment in

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the sun. She has had it with his self-pity, profundity, and black humor. Like many spouses of artists, she has converted fear and exasperation into umbrage and malignity. She declaims,

*Don't you know that happiness is not arrived at
with measure and weight? Or art with contrived ideas?
Throw away your theorems and faddish alchemy.
Resist tedious Allegory.
This print is a treatise.
It has no truth. No grace.*

*Take St. Luke as your model, ardent
worker in his studio, painting the Virgin,
God guiding his hand.
This can be your fate, too.
Have faith, my husband.
Incessant study has not served you.
Knowledge is a trap, reason the spring.
Go back to craft. Retrieve the lessons of the goldsmith.
Find freedom in convention, relief in labor.
Make art your prayer.*

Henri Rousseau attained fame by espousing nobility in primitivism, a movement within post-impressionism. At first mocked for his artistic simplicity and shunned by many for his lack of sophistication, Rousseau ultimately had considerable influence on later avant-garde artists. Boyers uses Rousseau's first jungle painting for her poem *I Dreamt I Was a Tiger* (after *Surprised! or Tiger in a Tropical Storm* (1891) by Henri Rousseau). Interestingly, Boyers metamorphosizes herself into a Tiger. Not only a tiger, but a hungry tiger preparing to spring upon its prey. The prey, it should be noted, is beyond the frame of the painting. The poet sets herself up as a middle-aged predator following her instinctual needs. She explains,

*Not in my Maidenform bra. But braless, wild—with the cold
eviscerating stare of a cat on the prowl, alert
for the kill. All appetite. No manners.*

*It is 1965. Sumatra. Island of gold, named by invaders
drunk on panning the banks of the Siak.
I am thirteen—ivory bones and teeth,*

*jaw and claws of steel, black blood running through me, pumped
by a still fearsome heart. I feel young, but in tiger years
I'm middle-aged and worried about my thinning fur:*

*my stripes start thick and gleaming but disintegrate
into spots near the end, like a rash. Between
each pair, a cluster of freckles.*

*Where will it end, this fading? Will I go gray and, surviving
into palsied age, turn white? And then? What then? Will
I expire into a colorless vapor? Or burst?*

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I'd rather eat. It's what we do. Feed till we're sated. No restraints.

Picture-perfect antebellum society serves the thematic needs of Boyers' poem, *The Fate of Pleasure* (after *Outing on the Hudson* (c. 1850), Anonymous). The poet's words capture the solemn Sunday idyll reassuringly detailed in this sedate and scentless painting. Then she fills in the bloody and inconvenient particulars. Imagining the respectable strollers from the very best families living in their faultless towns as beneficiaries of the slave trade. The cotton mill shown in the distance probably depends on slavery. One of the ships on the river is a slaver. Specifically, she identifies the makeup of the waiting ship's cargo—runaways. Boyers, describing the action of that ship's captain, puts it this way,

*...He lures them with lies, promises of protection, a dignified
life. He'll keep a few, chain the rest. The catch of the day he'll stash below—*

*necessarily confined to reside below
in the dank, unlit hull, darkness like their skin, darker than smoke,
dark as their master's satin top hat, upright and dignified
on his proud Southern head, dark even in as his patent boots. His white
masterly jaw under a full, black mustache stays clenched against all idle-
ness, though today he's agreed to give his Yankee wife the best*

hours of the day, strolling without purpose...

The best art suggests multiple meanings of universal interest. The best poets know how to choose and direct those meanings with wordcraft. Peg Boyers composes her ekphrastic wonders in this remarkable tradition.