

Renee Gladman's Poems Explore How Words Can Be "Read" as Images

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September 28, 2022

There are some books that are difficult to read because every sentence contains such creative richness, such thoughtful unexpectedness, that they inspire the reader to put it down and leap to one's own journal, eager to participate in such expanding circles of imagination.

Renee Gladman's *Plans for Sentences* is such a book, with Gladman's fine watercolor-and-ink drawings on the lefthand page, and her "plans for sentences" on the right. But in a switch, the text is instead titled as numbered "figures" (Fig. 1, 2 and so on), thus questioning what is traditionally a visual dichotomy of figure and ground and, in the process, how ideas are organized into lines of words that could also be "read" as visual, and how those lines of words establish a new space of imagination that is both literal and aesthetic.



Fig. 48 (excerpt from *Plans for Sentences*, copyright 2022 by Renee Gladman, printed with permission of the author and Wave Books)

This is writing on writing, but also ekphrastic writing responding to its own conjuring of visual landscapes. Gladman incorporates ideas of ecopoetics, as she proposes possibilities for how cities can be imagined; how we might incorporate traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into

imaginative visions of coexistence with the earth; how pathetic fallacy can be reimagined as vibrant acknowledgment of who and where we are, and how we might write/draw the two together.

Fig 48

These sentences will be places of moss

These places will emerge from something thick inside something glowing and will light upon a
series of dense clauses, a paragraph for the planet

These dense woods will hold the history of where we moss and where we blacken and will be the
fog void, inverted and full

Here, Gladman moves marvelously from sentences to moss, to places emerging into grammar and a “paragraph for the planet.” (The passage perhaps also references the Intermediate Disturbance Hypothesis in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* where she observed on the Kickapoo river cliffs that “the diversity of species is highest when disturbance occurs at an interval between the extremes” pg. 67.) How amazing to feel hope again in the possibility of language saving the planet! Next, Gladman moves to woods holding “history” where “we blacken.” Here I think of Fred Moten’s afterword, “Anindex,” in Gladman’s book of drawings on black paper, *One Long Black Sentence*, in which he writes “Line bore, also means digging, depth in bearing, burying piercing pall like tilling black ground in space in this and that regard—embracing, cosmographically mapping every time you tap your feet.”



Renee Gladman (photo by Philippe Mangeot)

The legacy of nature, woods and land in the USA is brutally complex: the histories of trees used to lynch, woods used to hide and escape, to travel through toward freedom, underlie their surface-pretty pastoral images. But Moten, in response to Gladman, presents how people of color might map their way through that history to terrain of woods, paper, art, words. Finally, she explores the ekphrastic, the visual concepts of emptiness and fullness, how the void in visual art allows for a space of change, but in Fig. 48, that space is fog, inverted, yet full, a paradox in the compositional space she generates.



Fig. 44 (excerpt from *Plans for Sentences*, copyright 2022 by Renee Gladman, printed with permission of the author and Wave Books)

And that is just one page, one figure, one plan among many similarly exciting figures and plans. The drawing facing that particular plan comprises a complex of lines in mossy greens, and could be almost a city; its lines come together to form vertical structures and voids, achieving a density at the bottom edges of the elaborate configuration and, in line work that suggests buttresses, distributing energy back toward the top of the vertical forms. Is this vibrantly green drawing, across from the textual mention of moss, too predictable? Almost, but no—instead, it magnifies the impact of the text, makes the moss visual, tangible, vivid.

The consistent verb throughout is “will.” *Plans for Sentences* prompts new ideas about how language can (will) lead to opening spaces, new places, to imagining a world from the ruins of this one, still as firmly grounded as we need to be in relating to our own ecology.

[Plans for Sentences](#) by Renee Gladman is published by [Wave Books](#) (2022) and is available online and at independent bookstores.

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