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Close Listening: Mary Manning and Ben Estes in Conversation

On the occasion of Mary Manning’s current photo exhibition at Canada and Ben Estes’s new book of poetry, *ABC Moonlight*, published by The Song Cave, we talked about reflecting, arranging, and the emotional logic needed to recognize life around us.

—Mary Manning and Ben Estes

Mary Manning

I’ve been spending my mornings with *ABC Moonlight*. What a title! It’s like the name given to a mysterious business. I can see it painted on the door of a van. *ABC Moonlight* is a serious, mysterious business. There are three trips within it: the folded poems, the sixteen pickup, and the dream work. Each section feels distinct and full. Their flow, braided together, feels natural and unmistakable; yet a kind of mystery of consciousness exists. How did each begin for you?

Ben Estes

I’ve always loved ABC-themed businesses! ABC Pest Control is one in my town that I drive past almost daily. I knew it was the title of the book as soon as I thought of it; maybe writing poetry felt a bit like a job that day. But really, the process of sitting and reflecting, which is an integral part of writing for me, has been difficult to access these last couple of years. And what’s a more classic symbol of reflection and contemplation than the moon? *Moonlight* is the product of reflecting; hence, *ABC Moonlight*.

The book has three sections, each given a different job to do, with different ideas of narrative and poetic intention. I’m excited to hear you use the word “consciousness” because I feel like that is a through line among the sections. The initial bits and pieces that turned into the first long poem of the book, “Twelve Folded Poems,” were written as love poems to someone that did not exist. I was newly single, and in my mind this phantom was a scarecrow, and I began writing poems through their eyes. Then the darkness of that idea began subconsciously



Mary Manning, *Ambient Music*, 2022, chromogenic print, 24 × 16.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

creeping in, and with it came the fires and floods and desperate world-weariness we all are experiencing. The second poem, "Sixteen Pickup Pocket Quarry," is the result of an exercise I'd set up for myself. I have never had any luck sitting down and deciding, "I'm going to write a poem about a waterfall," and then sitting down and writing a poem about a waterfall. But with this poem, it's exactly what I tried—because I understood the impossibility and impending failure of the task! For me, those were two elements of the subject matter that I most wanted to be in the poem. It's about a friendship I had as a teenager, a "first love." Remembering that time included elements of exaggerated teenage memories, questioning how much of what I felt was actually real at eighteen years old, and the inability to process a very adult situation while barely an adult myself. Yikes. And the last section, "A Shadow Theater," was literally written while unconscious! It is based on the dreams I was having at the beginning of quarantine. Again, writing and reflection were feeling impossible, but my head was still processing everything anyway, and my dreams were intense. I began writing everything down. So consciousness—what I know, what is unknown, what is remembered and what is fabricated—is very much the glue holding this book together.

So much of my writing process has to do with a really basic search for meaning. I'm constantly making lists. Lists of things I have to do, lines from books, quotes from movies, lines that I write about things that I see while out on a walk in the woods. None of it ever gets attributed; I have no desire to let cultural references slip from my sleeve; it's never been about that—so it all becomes one big soup. Then, when I sit down to write, I'll go to this long list, which can sometimes be over five hundred items long, and randomly pull maybe ten phrases out and write them down. The fulfilling part is to try to make some kind of sense out of it all. Sense-making out of seeming nonsense. Tie it all together, listen to what it's telling me, and write that in. It's such an important thing for my brain to do that links so directly to my heart. I think it's one of the healthiest things that I regularly do for myself. Slow down, look into a list, and search for meaning. The hope then is that reading something written with this kind of intention might feel familiar to a reader. I have no time for non sequiturs. I need to find the logic. Writing is not just about trying to figure out a "poetic" way to describe something. It's not even about trying to be a good writer, since I don't really know that I am. It isn't about virtuosity at all.

This gathering and arranging I feel I can see in your work too. In your show at Canada in 2018, you had some pieces composed of multiple images, and it felt like a really new element to what I knew of your work. It took me a while just standing and looking until I said to myself, "I think Mary is writing poems!" It felt as though you were creating a brand new alphabet, a language of images, and you were speaking fluently. It'd be images like: *branch / sweater / carpet / branch / branch / hands*; but then because they were photographs, visual elements with emotional tones and associations, of people we may know, the places we may live, each kept adding and accumulating in ways that words alone aren't able to do. Does this new body of work follow some of those same impulses?

MM

I guess the intention to present a composition of images that mirrored what poems do was kind of already in my work as log posts via my website Unchanging Window. I didn't consciously adapt that into what got made as "Art" once I began showing in galleries. It just crept in, as through lines do. I've always been drawn to the magic of experimental film with its edits and decisions, the precision and wonder of what-follows-what, and the gathering of images. This applies to the poetry that I'm drawn to as well. So it became an impulse of sorts, like you say. The compositions in 2018 were all made of small, handheld lab prints. With the new work, I'm exploring the language a bit differently through scale, and, like ... echo. There is

a lot of language in the images themselves that will say different things to different people! (*laughter*) The new work explores sound and punctuation through scale and emphasis. Some quiet things that may feel very loud.

So much has happened since that first show. The ways in which I would gather, or see the world, shifted. I am only just beginning to understand that. The ways in which I too search for meaning, in my looking, became slightly more drawn inward. Close seeing. It's almost impossible to not reference the pandemic and the cloak it's thrown over everything. But I felt really sure that I didn't want to make reference to it directly in my work. (I heard someone call it COVID-core the other day and cringed.) But even with your quarantine dreams, and the resulting last section of *ABC Moonlight*, it's impossible that it isn't there. It's always there now.

You had moved out of the city before the pandemic began, so were you maybe more accustomed to a more solitary existence? I wonder too how you see your Quaker beliefs in relation to your working practices now.]

BE

I'd moved outside of the city almost two years before lockdown. I was already in a headspace where I wasn't feeling super social. I moved here to kind of "figure myself out" again, live alone, and feel better about trusting myself and the decisions I was making. By the end of those two years I was feeling pretty proud of where I had gotten. I was making artwork again; I had an apartment that I was able to rent by myself; I had gotten an old car that I could drive to the woods and go for walks; and I had just started seeing someone new that lived in the city. I feel like I was in the best possible emotional state I could have been in going into quarantine. Yet still, I feel like everything I've made afterward exists in a different way. I might just have a different set of standards now. I want a little bit differently than I wanted before. Like you said, it's always there now. I think that search for logic, or the search for some kind of meaning in the nonsense, feels much more urgent. And maybe that's where Quaker thought comes in, because I do think that same urgency is braided into their beliefs, "letting your life speak" through one's own insights regarding things like personal integrity, or equality, or what "community" means in trying to live a simple life or being an agent in protecting the natural world. They believe those things can be found in quiet and open listening with intention, which unconsciously I guess really does describe so much of my writing practice. In that way it is also a spiritual one for me. Which is much easier for me to kind of tap into when walking through a field or on the edge of a lake listening to the frogs, which feels so cliché, but it's really true for me. I wonder if you could maybe talk a little about living in New York City and your recent desire to draw inward and image making?

MM

About three months before the pandemic, I began to attend Friends meetings, and even in that short amount of time that intention for close listening helped me in the early days of quarantine. Then during that first summer I was invited into a very beautiful, mostly queer, Buddhist sangha. It's been getting easier to register how much these tweaks in listening/non-listening and just letting go, which also sounds cliché, have pivoted my outlook toward ways of making. Pre-pandemic, much of my energy was directed outward into the day-to-day of being social and being at the thing, or whatever. When that changed and things got so scary in the city, and after losing my father to the virus, I felt more equipped to exist in stillness. To look at what mattered to me, who mattered to me, and direct energy there. I raged for a while, but then I knew it was time to care for myself again. It's like, yeah, nature helps, but so does getting lost on city walks tripping on buildings and sky, looking closer at the objects I live with, and how

light wanders around the room. I wanted to live, and I felt that others around me wanted to live, and maybe that's how they'll understand why I see what I see.