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Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*: Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories

Abstract

This article aims to explore the function of the image and the purpose of the works of art in Franco-Algerian author Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (2010). Similar to a scrapbook with short descriptions of people, places, and objects, the book itself does not contain any visual representations. In spite of this lack, the image—the latter intended as mental or physical picture that reproduces reality—is a central theme throughout the work. Because visual art is described and interpreted but not shown, I argue that, by means of *ékphrasis*, the word-image dialogue further enables the narrator to express the multiple aspects of her own subjectivity and the reader to participate in the emotional experience that visual art triggers. I also maintain that Bouraoui's decision to focus on the work of provocative, groundbreaking visual artists is a socio-political statement in and of itself.

Keywords

Ekphrasis, Autobiography, Readership, Visual Art, Memory

Nina Bouraoui's *Nos baisers sont des adieux*:
Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories

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Based on the assumption that one cannot access memories without reinventing them, art critics Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang describe self-expression and identity as mere constructs in contemporary art. In *Art Works. Autobiography*, they argue that self-obfuscation occurs in both literature and art, and yet, both disciplines share a common pretense: “Both claim a link between the narrating subject (the author), the life or episode of a life described, and the work that describes it” (16). By rhetorically asking how much of a life can be documented at all, Steiner and Yang suggest understanding autobiographical expression in art or literature as a “cultural technique of self-depiction and self-assurance” (11). They contend that at the core of contemporary works of art that claim to be autobiographical lies the strong desire to erase all traces of selfhood: “Many of us want to disappear. But are we trying to escape our past, or our present? Each of the artists here hides behind a mask, a persona or an invented identity in order to force attention away from their real lives, or else to vanish completely” (51). When self-concealment is not achieved, Steiner and Yang notice, artists collect evidence, data, objects, or images that ultimately meld in a way that further obscures their lives: “Let’s come back to the disappearance of autobiography. What about disappearance by accumulation—accumulation of images of the past, accumulation of roles, or accumulation of facts?” (189).

I will use Steiner and Yang’s argument as a springboard to further delve into the function of memory accumulation and the potential risk of self-obfuscation in Franco-Algerian author Nina Bouraoui’s *Nos baisers sont des adieux* (‘Our Kisses Are a Farewell,’ 2010).¹ Much like a scrapbook, this autobiographical work contains short, evocative descriptions of people, places, objects, and works of visual art. Though the work itself does not contain any pictures, the image—here, a mental or physical representation of reality—is conjured in various ways. I propose that rather than concealing or blurring the self, in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, the accumulation of images of the past permits self-identification, self-reflection, self-expression, and connection. Indeed, the (re)collection of mental images and the compilation of photographs and other works of visual art, the presence of which is magnified by examples of ekphrasis, fulfills multiple purposes. Because the narrator only retrieves memories associated with desire, ekphrasis allows for a neutral space for representing emotions, sensuality and sexuality. In this sense, the narrator’s selection also functions as a voluntary and productive means of self-construction. Furthermore,

because memories are more than a set of retrieved images, the act of bringing self-selected recollections into contemporary consciousness permits the narrator to reflect upon their meaning and to express a more nuanced self-representation. Finally, ekphrasis functions as a conduit between the author and the reader, as a medium and a gift that enables Bouraoui to both share the very personal experience of being in the world and to connect with readers on an emotional level.

Nos baisers sont des adieux

Nos baisers sont des adieux advances Bouraoui's experimentation with autobiography. It also shows thematic connections to previous autobiographical works, such as *Garçon manqué* (Tomboy 2000), *La Vie heureuse* ('Happy Life,' 2002), *Poupée Bella* ('Beautiful Doll,' 2004), and *Mes mauvaises pensées* ('My Bad Thoughts,' 2005). The format is particularly reminiscent of *Poupée Bella*'s intimate journal, portraying the narrator's experiences in the Parisian lesbian nightclubs of the 1990s. In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, however, memories are not presented in chronological order and are usually only one page long. Memories range from 1972 to 2009 and approximately cover the author's entire life. The book's content and the recurrence of names and events recalls *Mes mauvaises pensées*, in which the narrator engages in conversation with an imaginary psychologist in order to capture repressed and unconscious thoughts and desires. Indeed, in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, Bouraoui inscribes her intention to write what will become *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. In the following passage, the narrator reflects on the necessity of writing a book that celebrates all of the women with whom she has connected emotionally: "il y a un cimetière amoureux je crois, il faudrait écrire sur ce lieu, il faudrait reprendre *Le Mausolée des amants* d'Hervé Guibert, et reconstituer l'édifice des filles, puis des femmes de ma vie" (192-93) 'there is a romantic cemetery I think, we should write about this place, we should take from Hervé Guibert's *The Mausoleum of Lovers*, and reconstruct the building of the girls, then of the women of my life.'

Hervé Guibert functions as an intertextual presence throughout Bouraoui's autobiographical works and especially in *Mes mauvaises pensées*. This writer, photographer, and critic for *Le Monde* is thus evoked as a person who has had a profound influence on Bouraoui's life and work. As Bouraoui asserts in an interview, she particularly cherishes Guibert's *Le Mausolée des amants* for its ability to combine "l'érotisme, la sexualité, la littérature en tant que don de soi" ("Sur une île déserte") 'eroticism, sexuality, and literature as gifts of oneself.' In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the author insists upon Guibert's ability to write poetically about sexuality, and goes as far as to compare her discomfort to his talent: "oui, je peux écrire sur le désir et sur le plaisir, ... mais je n'ai aucun mot

pour la sexualité, je ne sais pas écrire sur ces scènes, ce serait vulgaire.... Guibert a une écriture excitante, c'est le seul pour moi, le seul, à transférer l'histoire de ses désirs, ainsi, à ne jamais être vulgaire, jamais" (70, 71) 'yes, I can write about desire and pleasure, ... but I have no words for sexuality, I do not know how to write about these scenes, it would be vulgar.... Guibert has an exciting style, he is the only one for me, the only one who transcribes the story of his desires, in this way, the only one who is never vulgar, never.' Moreover, in the 2005 tribute to Guibert "Juste un baiser" ('Just a Kiss'), Bouraoui praises the most distinguishing feature of his style: the use of "le mot-image ou l'image écrite" 'the word-image or the written image.' Guibert has therefore significantly influenced *Nos baisers sont des adieux* in terms of both its subject matter and its use of ekphrasis as a device that allows Bouraoui to write more freely about sexuality.²

Bouraoui describes *Nos baisers sont des adieux* as a series of portraits connected to one another by "la recherche sans fin de l'amour. ... Comme si le désir était une identité. Comme s'il était notre seul pays" (*Editions Stock Website*) 'the endless search of love. ... As if desire were an identity. As if it were our only home.' In the ninety-three portraits, descriptions of past images and personal reflections alternate. Often thematically or semantically connected to one another, each memory carries a title in which proper names, works of art, objects, or events are invariably followed by a place and a year.³ Among these selected memories, fourteen portraits are entitled "Sasha, Paris 2009." The title of the book also refers to Sasha, a woman who receives privileged attention throughout the work.⁴ Many critics have commented on how, over time, Bouraoui's focus has become progressively more autobiographical. In her analysis of *La Voyeuse interdite*, *Garçon manqué* and *Poupée Bella*, Adrienne Angelo notices "a distinct evolution ... from woman seeing though not seen to woman seeing, desiring, and writing" (79). More recently, Katharine Harrington also remarks on the progression of "her coming to terms with her multi-faceted identity" (89). Amaleena Damlé stresses how, "From the turn of the millennium onwards, Bouraoui's writing turned away from the abjection that characterized her earliest texts, ... she became increasingly interested in articulations of desire and fluid sexualities."

However, in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* Bouraoui's autobiographical style, tone, and perspective undergo further change. While the evocation of particular colors, sensations, scents, moods, and feelings are part of Bouraoui's imagery, in *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, her use of ekphrasis sets this text apart from her earlier works.⁵ In the process of recollection, the anonymous first-person narrator also uses ekphrasis to suspend those pervasive feelings of fear which are characteristic of Bouraoui's previous narratives. The use of the past tense throughout the book further establishes an authorial degree of both distance and control.⁶ In earlier autobiographical works, Bouraoui's explorations of the

narrator's "I" originate from the observation of an inward subject in the process of reacting to external occurrences. The object of investigation is now the outer world, to which the "I" connects. The narrator (re)collects images of the past to acknowledge the importance of relationships in the formation of her identity. By knowingly using anamnesis, the voluntary act of recollecting and reorganizing memories, she carves out and builds her subjectivity around *the other*. Agency and identity are negotiated by way of acknowledging past ties under a new light: the mutual desire that made them possible.

Both the title and the introduction to *Nos baisers sont des adieux* stress Bouraoui's aesthetic of relation.⁷ In the title, the possessive adjective's first-person plural form "Nos," 'Our,' and the word "baisers," 'kisses,' emphasize connection. The short introductory statement, which provides a thematic frame to the ninety-three portraits, defines desire as a bidirectional force: "Le désir n'est pas isolé. Il est multiple et secret. Il est par les autres et pour les autres" (10) 'Desire is not solitary. It is manifold and secret. It is from others and for others.' Desire thus cannot be experienced in isolation. It is the engine propelling human beings towards each other and a mysterious and intimate force that is difficult to disclose. Through (re)collecting and (re)envisioning her memories, the narrator recognizes the multiple forms of her own desire: "Je me suis raccordée aux hommes, aux femmes, aux objets et aux images qui ont construit la personne que je suis" (10) 'I connected with men, women, objects, and images that constructed the person that I am.' Each selected memory thus contributed to the narrator's formation of identity, or as Hélène Cixous writes in *Photos de racines*: "L'autre sous toutes ses formes me donne *je*" (22) 'The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*' (13). These reflections on the unexpected liaisons and passionate relationships of the past demonstrate how Bouraoui's process of self-identification and self-representation is almost exclusively relational.

The format of *Nos baisers sont des adieux* reflects the overarching approach to the subject matter. Memories are collected in the same way that people arrange their most cherished images in a photo album. The layout seems to suggest that the fragment is the form *par excellence* in which one is able to remember, thus echoing William John Thomas Mitchell's definition of representation as "a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments" (419). Each portrait, like a picture in a scrapbook, describes a story in itself. Instead of printed images, Bouraoui uses ekphrasis: a detailed writing that comments upon another art form, or visual images, or objects. But how does Bouraoui avoid recreating a "romantic cemetery" of absent objects, a "mausoleum" of dead relationships? In addition to the risk of self-erasure that is intrinsic to every form of accumulation, Steiner and Yang remind us of the danger of creating a shrine: "The photo album and the autobiography are both by nature amateur activities, doomed from the outset to be failures and second-rate. For in

arranging photos in an album, we are guided by the unconscious desire to show life in all its variety, and the result is the reduction of life to a series of dead fragments. Autobiography has a similar problem with the mechanism of memory: it is concerned with something that used to be, but it is written by someone who exists now" (11). It is precisely by using ekphrasis that Bouraoui aims to bring back all the sensorial details of the past and to circumvent the reproduction of "a series of dead fragments." For that matter, the author insists on describing *Nos baisers sont des adieux* as a work that recounts life's experiences and reality in all its multifaceted aspects: "C'est un livre sur la vie, un livre en vie, un livre qui bat, un livre dont on pourrait aussi entendre le son et percevoir les reliefs d'une géographie intime, la géographie des sentiments" (*Editions Stock Website*) 'It is a book about life, a living book, a book that has a beat, a book from which we could also hear the sound and perceive the relief of an intimate geography, the geography of emotions.' Rather than a collection of buried relationships, Bouraoui's "romantic cemetery" is a dynamic record of events that uncovers and revisits, by means of ekphrasis, all of the sensory details and emotional elements of the encounters described.

Sculptures, drawings, photographs, paintings, videos, books, objects, movies, and art installations function as the narrator's space of reflection. Those references, which are highly constructed fabrications of the real, also call attention to the centrality of simulation and duplication. They stand as the recognition that both verbal and visual representations, like all other representational forms, are always constructed. Both strategies, the format of the book and its intertextuality, ultimately subvert the idea of a coherent and stable "I." Indeed, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in relation to contemporary female writings, "The autobiographical is not a transparent practice. ... As a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices, autobiographical narration offers occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives. ... The past is not a static repository of experience but always engaged from a present moment, itself ever-changing" (8-9). Offering *My Bed* by Tracey Emin as an example of provocative autobiographical accumulation, Smith and Watson remark how Emin teases

the public as well as the art establishment about the limits and possibilities of the artist's representation of the "real" life in autobiographical acts... exploits and flaunts norms of gendered modesty about self-disclosure, testing the limits of decorum that women artists confront as they situate themselves and their work within and against the traditions of a masculinist art-historical practice. (4)

They therefore encourage looking at women's self-expressions as a "performative act, never transparent, that constitutes subjectivity in the interplay of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency" (4).⁸ The following section will address Bouraoui's multiple uses of ekphrasis with the intent to show how the accumulation of memories in *Nos baisers* represents renewal and construction of the self in its diversity and multiplicity.

Ekphrasis and the Accumulation of Memories

Ekphrasis, a literary description of, or commentary on, a visual work of art, is a classical rhetorical term and practice that originated in ancient Greece. According to Stephen G. Nichols, the figure of ekphrasis was used to delay the advancement of argumentation and intercede between rational discourse and sensorial responses to art. The most widely accepted contemporary definition of ekphrasis comes from James A. W. Heffernan, who defines the term as "the verbal representation of visual representation" and proposes that the practice should also be considered as a means of visual representation and mental imagery processing (notional ekphrasis) (3). Initially, the goal of ekphrasis was to make the reader envision the object described as if it were physically present; however, in modern times, the understanding and practice of ekphrasis has evolved. Mitchell observes how Murray Krieger has interpreted ekphrasis as a poetics of absence and inadequacy in which language tries to achieve the stillness and timelessness of the visual image: "For Krieger, the visual arts are a metaphor, not just for verbal representation of visual experience, but for the shaping of language into formal patterns that 'still' the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array" (153-54).⁹ Mitchell's position rests upon the assumption that words and images are two porous systems that are not in opposition to each other. Mitchell asserts that there is no alteration in meaning between a message composed of words and one composed of visual elements. The difference is rather at the level of the medium: "Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for language. ... I can make a promise or threaten with a visual sign as eloquently as with an utterance" (160). As a consequence, Mitchell argues that ekphrasis, which is understood to have been created to fill a semantic gap between language and image, is a pure invention whose motivations are rather sociopolitical: "The tensions between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture" (3). Both Mitchell's premises—the porosity between word and image and the political value of ekphrasis—are of particular importance in the reading of *Nos baisers sont des adieux*.

For Bouraoui, words and images are deeply intertwined, possibly interdependent instruments that are integral to the shaping and recognition of the

self and to the processes of both reflecting upon and articulating the particulars of the human experience. Whether conceived by the imagination or physically produced, internally constructed or externally represented, internalized words and images carry the weight of past experiences and they have the capacity to overshadow or to complicate the understanding of life. They affect everything from an individual's world view to the way that people relate to one another on an interpersonal level. The relationship between the narrator and Sasha is described as an exceptional one because between the two, "Il n'y avait aucun intrus, aucun jeu de rôle, aucune image qui s'interposait" (11) 'There was no intruder, no role-playing, no image that stood in between.' Ekphrasis is strategically used to observe the persistence of the past, to recover its emotional truth, and to provide additional space for personal reflection and sharing. The author's decision to focus on specific memories is therefore an effective way of inscribing subjectivity, or, according to Leigh Gilmore, an "opportunity for self-transformation" and a "process of self-construction" (11, 34).¹⁰ Furthermore, the author's decision to use provocative visual representations as the foundation for the work should be considered a socio-political statement in and of itself.

This application of ekphrasis exemplifies Mitchell's understanding of it as a cultural and political tool. Arguing that culture, as well as politics, are "inseparable from questions of representations," Mitchell stresses the paramount role of responsibility in their production and sustains (3):

In representations, as in dreams, begin responsibilities—the political responsibility entailed in the representative/represented relationship; the mutual obligations of the donor and debtor in exchange... there is a kind of *correspondence* between them, a mutual resonance, a co-responsiveness. The good or true representation is "responsible" to what it represents and to whom it represents it. "Responsible representation" is a definition for truth, both as an epistemological question (the accuracy and faithfulness of a description or a picture to what it represents) and as an ethical contract (the notion that the representor is "responsible for" the truth of representation and responsible *to* the audience or recipient of the representation). (421)

For Bouraoui, ekphrasis has a unique relationship with the self and its reality and it has everything to do with personal responsibility and the political charge that the representation is able to generate. Some early memories of events that took place between 1972 and 1979 elucidate Bouraoui's sense of responsibility towards herself and her readers.

When read in chronological order, those four memories demonstrate how visual representations as well as words overwhelm the child and obfuscate her

understanding of sexuality and life at large. The chapter “La Première Foix, Alger 1972” (31) ‘The First Time, Algiers 1972’ evokes the narrator’s earliest memory of sexual pleasure. At this stage, with no language, pleasure is experienced and described as an unconscious and absolute state of physical euphoria: “c’était un état, impliquant le corps et non la parole” (31) ‘it was a state, involving the body and not the word.’ Represented as a sensation of warmth, as a light similar to the sun’s rays that envelops her body, pleasure is the way in which the narrator starts to make sense of the world: “Ce plaisir recouvrait tout, il avait un rapport avec le savoir” (32) ‘This pleasure overlaid everything, it had a relationship with knowledge.’

In a later memory entitled “Le Martyr, Alger 1977” (44) ‘The Martyr, Algiers 1977,’ feelings of shame infiltrate that idyllic state of pure innocence. Pleasure is now experienced as having been tainted by violence. Hidden behind a door left slightly ajar, the narrator as a child secretly peeks at some dark black-and-white images of a war movie that her parents are watching. Through ekphrasis, the narrator recollects the movie’s most primal scene, the slow dismemberment of a male body. She is fascinated and identifies with the violence of the image. She wants to see it all. Re-experiencing that scene, she speculates: “Je pensais au plaisir malgré la violence. Je les associais. Pour la première fois de ma vie” (45) ‘I thought about pleasure in spite of violence. I associated them. For the first time in my life.’ In trying to make sense of it, the narrator remarks, “La guerre me faisait penser à la possession. La possession à la sexualité” (45) ‘War made me think of possession. Possession of sexuality.’ The problematic identification with violence finds a partial ethical solution at the very end of the memory. Confused about which side to take, the narrator envisions a place for herself in between the torturer and the tortured: “Je ne m’identifiais pas à la victime ou je refusais de l’admettre, me plaçant dans l’espace entre le fouet et le corps, comme si j’avais pu retenir le coup ou en adoucir la douleur” (46) ‘I did not identify myself with the victim or I refused to admit it, placing myself in the space between the whip and the body, as if I could hold back the stroke or soften the pain.’

The conflict between sexuality and power reappears in “La Chose, Paris 1978” (12) ‘The Thing, Paris 1978,’ where the narrator juxtaposes images of a French adult entertainment magazine with a weapon. In this chapter, she recalls spending ten days of her summer in a Parisian room where the “thing,” described as an exceptional sexual energy, manifests as both a form of madness and an indispensable element of her life: “Le désir m’obsédait. C’est lui qui engendrait la chose. Et c’est la chose qui l’engendrait. ... Je considérais la chose comme une folie. Une vraie folie” (13) ‘I was obsessed with desire. That is what generated the thing. And it was the thing that generated it. ... I considered the thing insanity. True insanity.’ In this room, she remembers finding in a closet ten issues of *Lui*

along with a rifle. While browsing those alluring pictures of women with the weapon resting on her thighs, she comments, “Les femmes, nues, ... se joignaient à l’arme que je tenais contre moi ignorant si elle était chargée ou non. J’étais excitée par la situation, parce que je la vivais seule. Personne ne pouvait imaginer la scène que je venais de dresser. Mon corps, la carabine, le lit, les magazines” (15) ‘Women, naked, ... joined the weapon that I was keeping against me not knowing if it was loaded or not. I was excited by the situation, because I experienced it alone. Nobody could imagine the scene that I had just produced. My body, the rifle, the bed, the magazines.’¹¹ This memory provides stark contrast to “Le Martyr, Alger 1977,” in which the narrator’s identification with violence evokes feelings of shame.¹²

In the fourth memory, “L’Image, Paris 1979” (74) ‘The Image, Paris 1979,’ the narrator’s freedom to experience lust is obstructed by her mother’s interference, which eventually turns pleasure into obsession. She recalls watching a film by Agnès Varda when she was a girl. Her mother would bring her and her sister to the movie theatre with the intention of creating an archive of positive images in their minds. Remembering that moment and the pleasure she felt watching the movie, the narrator recalls the catalyst-image: a close-up of male genitalia that, along with desire and curiosity, also inspired shame:

Une image obsédante, qui le devenait encore plus sous les mots de ma mère qui murmurait, comme si je n’avais pas compris—C’est un sexe au repos. Sa phrase suggérait tout ce qu’il y avait eu avant, tout ce qui n’avait pas été filmé, enclenchant en moi un mécanisme d’images bien plus obscènes que celle dont elles s’inspiraient. (75-6)

An obsessive image, that became even more obsessive because of my mother whispering, as I hadn’t understood—they are genitals at rest. Her phrase suggested all that had happened before, all that had not been filmed, engaging within me a mechanism of images that were much more obscene than that from which they drew inspiration.

The inversion of roles between mother and daughter—the child shows more sexual awareness than her mother—also stresses Bouraoui’s intention to portray childhood as a well-rounded and inquisitive period of life. If we compare the innocence of the narrator’s earliest reminiscences of sexual pleasure to the later incorporation of violence and the emergence of feelings of obscenity, the latter seems to be the result of societal repression, suggesting that sexuality is indeed a construct.

Bouraoui further engages with representations of obscenity in the chapter entitled “Une photographie d’Oleg Kulik, Paris 2008” (101) ‘A photograph of

Oleg Kulik, Paris 2008' in order to (re)create, develop and negotiate meaning through ekphrasis.¹³ In a similar manner, the narrator in "L'Image, Paris 1979" automatically associates personal (obscene) images when watching Varda's movie, much like the spectator when viewing Kulik's photograph. Because obscenity is a perennial subject of social debate, Bouraoui's preoccupation should also be interpreted as a desire to involve the reader and to encourage reflection. The valuable role of ekphrasis, which serves as a conduit between speaker and audience, is stressed in Mitchell's analysis:

Ekphrasis is stationed between two "othernesses," and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader. The "working through" of ekphrasis and the other, then, is more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a *ménage à trois* in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed. (164)

In using Kulik's photograph, Bouraoui seems to regard, and thus to portray, obscenity as a socially constructed notion that is internalized at early age and rarely confronted. The concise description sketches a few details: the artist's nudity, his posing on all fours on the roof of a car with a leash around his neck held by a man, the artist's barking at the audience, his palms and knees bruised, and finally, his arched back and spread legs. After describing the spectatorship's act of deflecting, the narrator remarks: "L'obscénité ne venait pas de l'image. C'est elle qui venait à l'image. Le désir se propageant comme une maladie" (101) 'Obscenity did not come from the image. It went to the image. Desire spreading as a disease.' Obscenity, the narrator insists, does not exist in itself but is in the viewer's eye. It is a personal way of seeing and representing reality and a projection of repressed desire, which confirms the notion of sexuality as socially constructed.

Kulik's photograph offers a supplemental platform of reflection on the aspects of various kinds of interpersonal relationships: "Je ne pouvais m'empêcher de penser aux rapports de soumission qu'induisait parfois l'amour ou la fin de l'amour" (101-02) 'I could not prevent myself from thinking about relationships of submission sometimes induced by love or by the end of love.' As the antithesis of and solution to the imbalanced nature of the master/slave relationship dynamic, the narrator proposes examples of those in which there is a nurturing climate of reciprocal recognition and support. In the portrait "Zhor,

Alger 1977" (35) 'Zhor, Algiers, 1977,' the memory of her babysitter, Zhor, evokes a different type of desire, one that is by no means related to obedience but enhanced through reciprocity, as the narrator remarks, "un désir d'appartenance à l'autre, non par soumission mais par connexion" (38) 'a desire of belonging to the other, not by submission but by connection.' Furthermore, in the fourteen portraits entitled "Sasha, Paris 2009," the narrator's relationship with Sasha mirrors the desired capacity for connection without loss of identity or submission. Set at the very beginning of the book as an example, the foundation of their rapport seems to be mutual respect, recognition, and gratitude: "Il n'y avait aucune force ou soumission, aucune mise en scène ou décor, aucun secret" (11) 'There was no power or subjugation, no *mise en scène* or embellishment, no secret.'

Finally, throughout the book, ekphrasis also functions as a manifestation of gratitude: what Mitchell calls "an offering," "a gift to the reader," or a "giving back" (164, 421). In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, gratitude should be understood as the narrator's implicit display of appreciation for the things that she has received from others. She identifies key moments of her life and recognizes the importance of others and the roles that they have played in the formation of her identity. According to Michael McCullough et al., gratitude is "a positive other-oriented emotion" that "inspires prosocial reciprocity" and it should ultimately be employed to counteract the inclination toward materialistic strivings (McCullough et al. 114, Polak and McCullough 344). Bouraoui asserts the capacity and reliability of memories to preserve the past through the mutual desire that made them happen in the first place: "Parce que je sais que l'on désire comme l'on a été désiré, j'ai dressé la liste des hommes, des femmes, des images, des sensations, des œuvres d'art qui ont construit la personne que je suis" (*Editions Stock Website*) 'Because I know that one desires just like one has been desired, I made a list of men, women, images, sensations, works of art that shaped the person that I am.' Bouraoui seems to suggest that memories are formed as a result of an exchange, whether latent as in the case of an artwork that provokes emotions in the viewer, or manifest in the attraction of one human being to another. In both cases, the transformative experience of the encounter deems memory ever-present and alive.

Not merely representing a collection of absent objects and people, the accumulation of memories in *Nos baisers sont des adieux* allows the narrator to reflect upon, contest, and (re)create reality as an additional visual ground in which to explore the truth of those memories. By means of ekphrasis, the past is brought into consciousness: written descriptions allow the narrator to place memories at a cognitive distance further from the present, which creates another, less restrictive position from which to analyze and reflect upon the events of the past. In this sense, this technique also functions as a voluntary and productive means of self-construction and self-identification. Indeed, the manner in which Bouraoui

investigates the fragmented and socially constructed self is most reminiscent of encounters that affect and influence her inner self. Descriptive images also emerge as both a responsibility and an intention to discover truths that ultimately call for political engagement. The narrator often uses visual art as a starting point of reflection.

Much like the controversial Kulik, all of the selected artists share the following characteristics: they are revolutionary, transgressive, subversive, liberating, visionary, and prescient. Michelangelo, Egon Schiele, Pablo Picasso, Robert Mapplethorpe, and nonconformist contemporary avant-garde artists such as Nan Goldin, Tracey Emin, or Marina Abramovic could be described as bold, forthright, and radically engaged in fighting the social and political limitations of their time. All pushed boundaries, incorporated personal experience into their work, and challenged popular definitions of normal, appropriate, and acceptable. They broke conventional rules of aesthetics and each in their own way reimagined the artist's view of the world and the world's attitude toward and understanding of art. The sexualized human body is central in their work. It is the ideal subject and the ideal medium of expression, the connector and the origin; it represents beauty, consumerism, desire, compassion, attachment, pleasure, pain, reproduction, war, and violence. Through these examples, Bouraoui demonstrates that words and images can be more than reflections of memory and lived experience and that through emotion, imagination, time, and space in all of their dimensions and contradictions, they can be limitlessly inspired and inspirational, creative and connected.

Finally, the narrative of the artifact being described, in many cases, serves as the space in which both narrator and reader may participate as spectator and interpreter. The use of ekphrasis ultimately functions as a literal example of the capacity of the arts to inspire personal reflection and awaken feelings of pity, shame, revulsion, fear, sympathy, pleasure, or arousal. It also demonstrates how the common appreciation for the arts exemplifies the innate desire to celebrate human achievement and to feel gratitude for life. Finally, Bouraoui seems to suggest that if humans negotiate and construct their own identity according to the images they consume, the narrator's presentation of a virtual collection of images may serve as a conduit by which she is able to invite readers to share in a communal reflection upon the very personal experience of being in the world.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

2. Two fictional books will follow *Mes mauvaises pensées: Avant les hommes* ('Before Men' 2007) and *Appelez-moi par mon prénom* ('Call Me by My First Name' 2008).

3. As an example, the portrait "La Chose, Paris 1978" (12) 'The Thing, Paris 1978' ends by the word "toucher" (15) 'to touch,' and the following one, "La Main, galerie Yvon-Lambert, Paris 2007" 'The Hand, Yvon-Lambert gallery, Paris 2007' describes the sculpture of a hand. This portrait ends by the word "souffrance" (16) 'pain' and the following starts by the word "brûlure" (17) 'burn.'

4. In the second portrait, entitled "Sasha, Paris, 2009" (27), the narrator contextualizes the inspirational source of the book's title. By describing her relationship with Sasha and their imperative of seizing the present, the narrator remarks: "Nos baisers ressemblaient souvent à des adieux" (27) 'Our kisses often resembled a farewell.'

5. Among others, Francisco Rodríguez Cantueso thus defines her style: "Elle écrit avec ses sens plus qu'avec l'intellect, d'ailleurs, son écriture est comme une peinture: des phrases courtes, des rafales, des rythmes hypnotiques, de petites touches, et toujours, la sensation" (121) 'She writes more with her senses than with her intellect; indeed her writing is like a painting: short phrases, rapid sequences, hypnotic rhythms, little strokes, and always the sensation.'

6. This is particularly evident in the way traumatic episodes are recounted. As an example, the narrator's attempted abduction in Algiers that surfaces in previous autobiographical works is reappropriated here. In *Mes mauvaises pensées* the narrator describes this event as one about which she has no memory and therefore no control: "je n'ai que les mots de ma sœur, ... je n'ai aucune vérité" (236) 'I only have my sister's words, ... I have no truth.' In *Nos baisers sont des adieux*, however, the episode spreads out across five pages. A description of the events, her feelings, and the feelings of the people around her are fleshed out and presented in full detail. Shame arises in the adult narrator of *Mes mauvaises pensées*: "j'ai honte parce que je crois avoir été séduite par cet homme. J'ai voulu le suivre" (236) 'I am ashamed because I think I have been seduced by this man. I wanted to follow him.' Conversely, in *Nos baisers*, feelings have been processed, understood and explained: "Parce que nous n'étions que des enfants. Et qu'il était difficile de se refuser à un adulte" (97) 'Because we were only children. And that it was difficult to say no to an adult.'

7. Her aesthetic is also exemplified in the chapter “La Foule, Paris 2009” (48) ‘The Crowd, Paris 2009.’

8. Bouraoui dedicates a chapter to Tracey Emin’s art. Entitled “Un dessin de Tracey Emin, Venise 2007” (20) ‘Tracey Emin’s drawing, Venice 2007,’ a sketched but vivid depiction of a naked female body inspires the narrator’s reflections on pleasure.

9. Mitchell refers to Murray Krieger’s work *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992).

10. Gilmore infers from Michel Foucault’s saying that “One writes in order to become other than what one is” (182) in “An Interview with Michel Foucault” *Death and the Labyrinth: The Works of Raymond Roussel*, translated by Charles Ruas (London: Athlone Press, 1986).

11. In later memories, such as “Esther, Paris 1994” (19) and “La Fresque, Paris 1996” (33) ‘The Fresco, Paris 1996,’ weapons metaphorically stand for penetration.

12. Additional comparisons between this scene and the one described in “La Banquette, Formentera 1994” (56) ‘The Bench Seat, Formentera 1994,’ might be useful. As in “La Chose, Paris 1978,” the narrator in “La Banquette, Formentera 1994” feels free to experience sexual pleasure exactly because she is by herself and nobody can imagine what is in her mind.

13. Ukrainian sculptor and photographer Oleg Kulik is internationally recognized for his exhibitions in which he reverses the roles of man and animal and acts as a dog.

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