

Ruskin Art Club

founded 1888

A tax exempt 501 c (3) non-profit corporation

www.RuskinArtClub.org

Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)

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"We seek in the arts, in Nature, and in the mysterious power of beauty, the instruments not only of personal transformation, but, in the spirit of John Ruskin, of the transformation of the physical, social, and cultural landscape of our world."

- Ruskin Art Club

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER

"Ruskin and Poetry"

A dear friend, and Ruskin Art Club member, Anne Petach, recently alerted me to a poem about Ruskin of which I was completely unaware.

Ruskin's own voluminous verse, mostly written when he was a child, is, as even his most fervent admirers would attest, merely "serviceable." He went on to write his true poetry in his prose -- as majestic, in its own way, Oscar Wilde would later claim, as the Turner landscapes it praises:

"greater, indeed [than Turner's paintings], one is apt to think at times, not merely because its equal beauty is more enduring, but on account of the fuller variety of its appeal, soul speaking to soul in those long-cadenced lines, not through form and color alone, . . . but with intellectual and emotional utterance, with lofty passion and with loftier thought, with imaginative insight and with poetic aim."
(*"The Critic as Artist"*)

But most of the poetry written about Ruskin occupies a much lower rung of the aesthetic ladder than even his own minor efforts -- along the lines of the dutiful panegyric, or the sentimental *homage*.

However, the poem brought to my attention was of a different order altogether: Denise Levertov's "The Faithful Lover," part of her 1990 collection



*Valley of The Yosemite, Union Point
Eadward Muybridge (circa 1870)*

Evening Train published by New Directions. Both its excellence as a poem (incorporating lines from Ruskin’s *Praeterita* into its weave) and its engagement with one of the thorniest themes in Ruskinian aesthetics -- the inescapable tension between Nature and art -- reminded me of other modern and contemporary poets who find themselves “walking with Ruskin,” the title of Robert Cording’s 2011 collection, (published by CarvanKerry Press) celebrating a “Ruskinian sensibility” in “earthy details that can only be written by the senses”; or my friend Charlotte Innes’s *Reading Ruskin in Los Angeles* (Finishingline Press, 2009), with its evocation of a grandfather who perished in a German concentration camp, his sole legacy a 1902 set of Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*. Not to mention the more indirect Ruskinian echoes in the modernist poetics of Marianne Moore, among others, or in the work of Wendell Berry.

Denise Levertov (1923-1997), born and educated in Britain, came to the U.S. in 1948, where she associated with the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, etc.) but, from the beginning, wrote with a remarkably individual voice about her evolving humanist, religious, and political commitments. Critic Amy Gerstler wrote

in the LA Times that Levertov possessed “a clear, uncluttered voice -- a voice committed to acute observation

The Faithful Lover

By Denise Levertov

Play with a few decades, shift them:
try to imagine Ruskin in the New World,
walking with John Muir in the wilderness.

He, whose enraptured first sight of the Alps
transformed him, that meek Protestant Sunday
when he and Mama and Papa and dull cousin Mary
were patiently waiting the secular week’s beginning
before attempting the sights,
but all unawares

came face to face
with the sublime -- unmistakably not clouds,
surpassing all that engravings had promised,
floating west of Schaffhausen, sharp, *tinged with rose,*
far into blue -- suddenly -- beyond!

-- changed him from docile prig (poor child, he was 14 and knew
so much and so little) to a man of passion,
whatever his failings.

Imagine him in Yosemite. Would loyalties already divided
-- Rock Simple or Rock Wrought,
strata of mountains, strata of human craft,
tools of Geology or tools of Art -- have split him?
Would wilderness, legends unknown, or if known offering
no toe-hold for his mind’s expectant footing,
have swept him wholly into its torrents of non-human grandeur?

Or wouldn’t Art have pulled him back in the end
to layered history felt in the bones
(even Geology a fraction of that loved
for its poetry of form, color, textures,
not as a scientist loves it)?
Back to where human hands created

*rich tessellations or the shadowy Rialto
threw its colossal curve slowly
forth . . . that strange curve, so delicate,
so adamantine, strong as a mountain cavern,
graceful as a bow just bent -- ?*

Back to where nature -- even the Alps, still so remote,
unsung through so many centuries --

lay in the net or nest of perception,
seen then re-seen, recognized, wrought in myth.¹

¹Levertov’s note: *The quotations are all from Ruskin, mainly from Praeterita*

and engagement with the earthly, in all its attendant beauty, mystery, and pain.”

Her Ruskin poem, “The Faithful Lover,” is all of that, but, in “imag[ining] Ruskin in the New World, walking with John Muir in the wilderness” -- in Yosemite, in fact, it raises one of the essential issues in Ruskin’s aesthetics -- the confrontation of the “tremendous,” the numinous in Nature with Ruskin’s attempts to capture its essence, to divine its deep structure in Art -- not only in the rich “symphonic music” of the prose that Wilde admired but in the ephemeral medium of sketch and watercolor.

It’s worth noting in this connection that Ruskin’s “Nature,” to which he, indeed, urged an existential “faithfulness,” was not the bucolic, rational, and benevolent Nature of the early Romantics. Engaging the natural world, for Ruskin, always meant encountering and registering its inscrutable terrors and destructive power.

“But it has not, I think, been sufficiently considered how evident throughout the system of creation . . . is [the effect of fear]; not the . . . fear of immediate danger, but the fear which arises out of the contemplation of great powers in destructive operation,” Ruskin writes of alpine thunderstorms. *“It is well for us to dwell with thankfulness on the unfolding of the flower and the falling of the dew and the sleep of the green fields in the sunshine; but the blasted trunk, the barren rock, the moaning of the bleak winds, the roar of the black, merciless whirlpools of mountain streams, the solitudes of moors and seas, the continual fading of all beauty into darkness and of all strength into dust -- have these no language for us?”* (The Stones of Venice, Vol. 3)

Levertov suggests, it seems to me, that Ruskin, like most of us, faced with the “non-human grandeur” of raw natural power, “the torrent” of a Nature that, in the end, owes nothing to us and is manifestly oblivious to our attempts to interpret it, can expect to find rescue from such magnificent indifference in the comforts of Art and myth, in the “strata of human craft.”

I’m not so sure. At least I’m not so sure in Ruskin’s case. A friend of mine, after hearing me read Ruskin’s spellbinding description of a waterfall in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (“Of Water, Painted by Turner”) commented that it’s no wonder that a man who could perceive the natural world with such precision and intensity would blow a fuse every once in a while. (He was referring to the periodic mental breakdowns that marked Ruskin’s life.) While we remain the beneficiaries, I am more aware, as I grow older, of the personal costs of Ruskin’s prodigious visionary bequest.



Falls of Schaffhausen, John Ruskin (1842)

NEWSLETTER ESSAY:

“Ruskin and the Plastic Crisis, Or Modern Manufacture, 2021”

By Amy Woodson-Boulton



Andreas Gursky, 99 Cents, 1999

You may have read the increasingly alarming news about the health and environmental effects of plastic. I’ve often wondered how John Ruskin, tireless critic of the cheapness and ugliness of industrial products and processes that he was, would have reacted to this omnipresent synthetic material. Ruskin’s design ethos of “truth to materials” shows us that the economic logic of plastic was already at play in the nineteenth century. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) he railed against the substitution of wood for marble or plaster for stone. In many ways, his works show us the kinds of decisions that led to plastic, cheap imitator par excellence, and the defining product of the twentieth-century post-war economic boom and its destructive alignments of extraction and disposability. Ruskin decried the mass production of historic style in cast-iron or carved plaster ornaments to decorate the proliferating cities and suburbs all around him, signs of an economy that valued profit above all else and certainly above either the treatment of the workers or the quality of the final product.

The same operations of industrial capitalism that Ruskin identified in the nineteenth century would drive chemists of the twentieth to develop synthetic polymers applicable to numerous uses and available through the apparently endless supply of fossil fuels. Plastic has now reached such global saturation that it is evidence in the rock strata for the Anthropocene as a geological epoch and embodies multiple aspects of our current crises: our disposable economy, reliance on fossil fuels, rapidly changing climate, and the unevenly distributed toxic effects at all stages of plastic’s production, use, and disposal. These negative externalities fall along historically constructed lines of inequality, and such disparities continue to make plastic seem deceptively inexpensive.

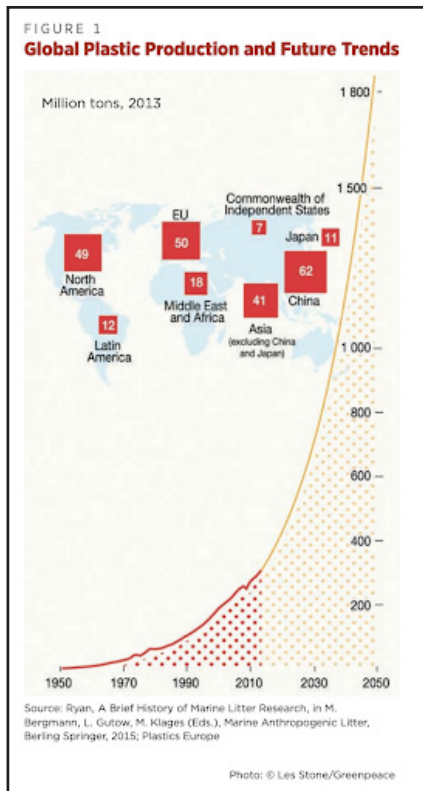
Hailed for its cheapness and its adaptability to extraordinarily varied uses, plastic is the perfected logic of industrial capitalism: its triumph and, as we’re increasingly aware, its toxic trap. We now know that like other cash crops and industrial goods before it, plastic’s vaunted cheapness is only the result of our inability to properly account for the true cost of its production, use, and disposal. And now we’re increasingly learning that the fossil-fuel economy that supports plastics is not only driving devastating human-created climate change but that even using plastics is toxic to human health.

As readers of this newsletter will know, Ruskin did not just call out the design flaws or even the exploitation of labor endemic to industrialization. He carefully observed, and railed against, the changes happening to the air, the water, and the land around him. As he asked his audience at the Bradford Mechanics Institute in 1859, “*How much of [England] do you seriously intend within the next fifty years to be coal-pit, brick-field or quarry?*” He continued,

*For the sake of distinctness of conclusion, I will suppose your success absolute: that from shore to shore the whole of the island is to be set as thick with chimneys as the masts stand in the docks of Liverpool: that there shall be no meadows in it; no trees; no gardens; only a little corn grown upon the housetops, reaped and threshed by steam: that you do not leave even room for roads, but travel either over the roofs of your mills, on viaducts; or under their floors in tunnels: that, the smoke having rendered the light of the sun unserviceable, you work always by the light of your own gas: that no acre of English ground shall be without its shaft and its engine; and therefore, no spot of English ground left, on which it shall be possible to stand, without a definite and calculable chance of being blown off it, at any moment, into small pieces. (“Modern Manufacture,” in Rosenberg, *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 223)*

In the case of plastic and its toxic effects, we are reaching a similar state of peril in our plastic economy. Despite widespread fears that we might reach “peak oil” in the twenty-first century, new deep-drilling and other unconventional methods of oil extraction like hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) have led to a boom in plastic production over the last fifteen years. The following graph by Greenpeace, reproduced in a recent (2019) report by the Center for International Environmental Law, shows the current exponential rate of plastic production. This toxic feedback loop leads to more drilling, which leads to more plastic production, and so on. Further, with the collapse of the global plastic recycling system, we can see more clearly how land used for drilling leads to other toxic effects like plastic incineration, plastic in waterways and oceans, and plastic overflowing landfills. Like Ruskin’s iron and coal economy above, we are starting to see a plastic country emerging, covering the land and both visibly and invisibly invading our air and water.

As in the first Industrial Revolution, the plastic economy pushes the most toxic effects onto low-income and/or communities of color. Indeed, from extraction to production to use to disposal, this uneven distribution of “negative externalities” hides the true costs of plastic, just as the poorly distributed effects of the coal economy pushed those effects onto miners and industrial workers and hid the true cost of goods. Indeed, Ruskin pointed this out in “The Nature of Gothic” in reference to a simple product like glass beads. And as in the nineteenth century, we seem trapped in this cycle; industrial interests warp our politics to put “the economy” above all,



counting it as “wealth” instead of (as Ruskin called it) the “illth” of exploitative practices. Plastic seems cheap, and people need jobs; what do we care that we are learning of the extraordinary health effects of plastic: the increasing risk of cancer, obesity, epigenetic effects, developmental disorders, hormone disruption, and other systemic effects from exposure at all stages of its lifecycle. Our whole system now seems so addicted to cheap, disposable goods and the fossil fuels from which they are made that we simply cannot imagine an alternative.

And yet. Even as Ruskin called attention to the fallacies of his time, and the dangers of the choices he saw his country making all around him, there are numerous movements gaining momentum to end our addiction to plastic. Bills at the state and federal level as well a California ballot measure are starting to rein in our use of plastic, seek alternatives, and redirect the economy away from single-use materials. Even as our political system seeks to respond, we see in the news that plastic microparticles are appearing in unborn babies and Siberian snow, causing disruption

to human fertility and infant development. In the spirit of Ruskin, we need to think about the full impacts of plastic and the kind of extraction, production, and design it demands.

Amy Woodson-Boulton is Associate Professor of Modern British and Irish History and past chair of the History Dept. at Loyola-Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her work concentrates on cultural reactions to industrialization, particularly the history of museums, the social role of art, and the changing status and meaning of art and nature in modern society. She delivered the 2017 RAC-sponsored “Ruskin Lecture” at USC on “Ruskin’s Truths in the Age of Fake News.”

UPCOMING EVENTS [VIRTUAL]

The Ruskin Art Club is regrouping, as all organizations are these days, under the “virtual” banner. Until public authorities indicate that we can safely resume in-person events, all our activities will be in the form of virtual, online presentations. Please register for these events online at info@ruskinartclub.org. We will then send you the Zoom link for the event.

APRIL 2021

“The Spanish Style House: From Enchanted Andalusia to the California Dream”

Text by Rubén G. Mendoza, Photographed by Melba Levick,

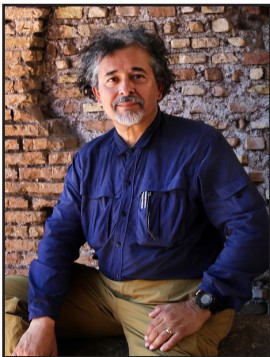
Thursday, April 8th, 5pm PDT

Luminous new photography showcases contemporary and historic homes in the beloved Spanish Style in Southern California, while offering, as well, a rare look at the original inspirations to the style born in Andalusia, Spain. This presentation will include photographs of the Ruskin Art Club’s historic 1922 clubhouse designed by Frank Meline (now a private residence) and review a host of 12th through 18th century palatial Spanish estates and their Andalusian expressions in southern California for the period spanning the 1920s through the present. Photographer Melba Levick and writer Rubén G. Mendoza present their latest book from Rizzoli International.



Dr. William Deverell, Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, will moderate.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Rubén G. Mendoza is an archaeologist, photographer, and founding faculty member of the California State University, Monterey Bay. He is co-editor and author of several books, including *The California Missions*. He has published some two hundred manuscripts and scores of images spanning a range of topics, including pre-Columbian and Colonial era art and architecture, California missions’ art and architecture, American Indian science, technology, and medicine, and modern material cultures.

Melba Levick is an internationally renowned photographer based in Los Angeles and Paris, with more than sixty books to her name. Her most recent Rizzoli books include *The California Missions*, *The Ranches - Home on the Range in California*, *The California Casa*, and *Classic Homes of Los Angeles*.



The Craft of Poetry: Poets in response to the work of Kazuki Takizawa

Saturday, April 24th, 6pm PDT

Join us for an evening of poetry hosted by Brendan Constantine and welcoming poets **Kaveh Akbar**, **Paige Lewis**, and Los Angeles’ newly minted Poet Laureate, **Lynne Thompson**. This program marks the return of a special series where poets are invited to create new and original works in response to Craft Contemporary’s exhibitions. This evening we celebrate the work of glass artist **Kazuki Takizawa**. The poets will read original work inspired by Takizawa’s art. This event is made possible thanks to generous support from the Ruskin Art Club and Denenberg Fine Arts.



Breaking The Silence II (2017), Kazuki Takizawa

Kazuki Takizawa is a Japanese glass artist based in Los Angeles, California. He graduated from the University of Hawaii at Manoa with a BFA in glass art in 2010 and currently owns and runs KT Glassworks.

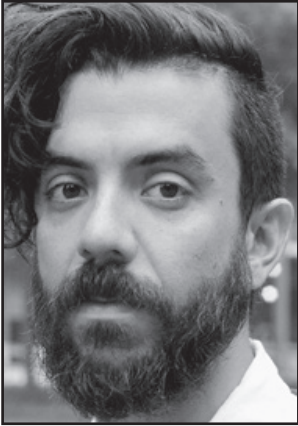
Brendan Constantine, an ardent supporter of Southern California’s poetry communities and one of its most recognized poets, has presented his work to audiences throughout the U.S. and Europe. He currently teaches creative writing at the Windward School in LA.

Poet **Elena Karina Byrne**, longtime Literary Programs Director for the Ruskin Art Club, will release her fourth book *If This Makes You Nervous* with Omnidawn in October 2021. A separate chapbook entitled *No, Don’t* was issued by What Books Press in 2020. She is currently enrolled in Antioch University Santa Barbara’s MFA program in Writing & Contemporary Media.



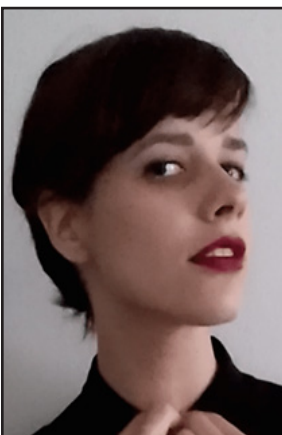
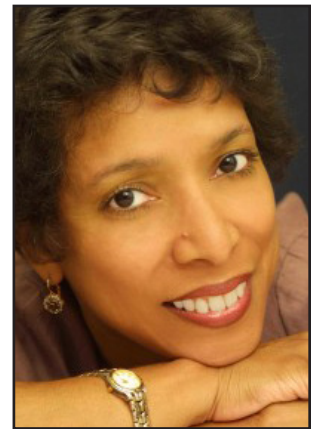
In Between Light and Shadow (2017), Kazuki Takizawa

ABOUT THE POETS



Kaveh Akbar was born in Tehran, Iran. He holds an MFA from Butler University and a PhD in creative writing from Florida State University. He is the author of *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* (Alice James Books, 2017) and the chapbook *Portrait of the Alcoholic* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017). Akbar is the recipient of the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, a Pushcart Prize, and a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. He is the founder of the poetry interview website Divedapper. He currently teaches at Purdue University and in the low-residency MFA program at Randolph College.

Lynne Thompson, a native Angeleno, is the author of *Fretwork*, *Start With a Small Guitar*, and *Beg No Pardon*, and received an Artist Fellowship from the City of Los Angeles in 2015. Her other awards include the 2016 Stephen Dunn Poetry Prize and the 2017 Tucson Literary Award (Poetry). One of Thompson's poems was included in the 2020 *Best American Poetry* anthology. Her most recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *New England Review*, *Nelle*, *Pleiades*, and *Colorado Review*, among other publications. Widely anthologized, her poems also appear in *Coiled Serpent*, *Poets Arising from the Cultural Quakes & Shifts of Los Angeles* and *Wide Awake: Poets of Los Angeles and Beyond*. She was appointed LA Poet Laureate by Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti on February 24, 2021.



Paige Lewis is the author of *Space Struck* (Sarabande Books, 2019). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry* magazine, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Best New Poets 2017*, and elsewhere. Paige curates the video series *Ours Poetica*, produced in partnership with the Poetry Foundation and Complexly. Paige teaches at Purdue University and in the low-residency MFA program at Randolph College.

MAY 2021

**Mini-conference: “Ruskin and the Transcendentalists”
“Black Devil and Gentle Cloud: Ruskin and Emerson”**

by Professor Sara Atwood; Jim Spates moderates

Thursday, May 6th, 5pm PDT

This is part one in a series of three lectures of the Ruskin Art Club’s ongoing series of presentations on **Ruskin in America**.

American intellectual life in the 19th century, especially after the Civil War, was characterized by the search for “American” as opposed to Eurocentric cultural responses. Ralph Waldo Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists played a large role in shaping the language of that response -- in particular, notions of God’s presence in Nature, a relationship not mediated by religious tradition or community but by the intuitions of the individual seeker. Ruskin’s “gospel” of truth to Nature and his celebration of the artist’s direct encounter with the natural world, through American art movements as well as through direct engagement with American thinkers, played a notable if neglected role in the formation of American aesthetics.



Sara Atwood

Sara Atwood’s book, *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals*, was published by Ashgate in 2011. Further publications include contributions to the Yale University Press edition of Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (2013), *Teaching Victorian Literature in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave 2017), *John Ruskin and Nineteenth-Century Education* (Anthem Press 2018), *William Morris and John Ruskin: A New Road on Which the World Should Travel* (University of Exeter Press 2019) and *Victorian Environmental Nightmares* (Palgrave 2019). She has lectured widely on Ruskin, both in the U.S. and abroad, focusing particularly on education, the environment, and language. She is co-director, with Prof. Jim Spates, of the Ruskin Society of North America (RSNA), a board member of the Ruskin Art Club, and a Companion of the Guild of St. George (UK). She teaches English literature and writing at Portland Community College.

Mini-conference: “Ruskin and the Transcendentalists”
“Ruskin, John Muir, and the Building of Mountains”

by Gabriel Meyer; Sara Atwood moderates

Thursday, May 20th, 5pm PDT



Gabriel Meyer

This is part three in a series of three lectures of the Ruskin Art Club’s ongoing series of presentations on **Ruskin in America**.

Gabriel Meyer is the Executive Director of the Ruskin Art Club. An award-winning foreign correspondent who has covered civil conflicts in the Middle East, the Balkans, and East Africa, he is the author of two novels, a major poetic cycle, *A Map of Shadows* (2012), and two non-fiction studies, *War and Faith in Sudan* (2006) and an (as yet) unpublished “biography” of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher entitled *The Testimony of Stones*. He has lectured most recently on Ruskin as part of Lancaster University’s Ruskin Beyond Britain series in April 2021. He was awarded an honorary doctorate for his journalism by the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology at UC Berkeley in 2017.

Pay a visit to the improved and updated **Ruskin Art Club** website!

Please note that the web address has changed:

We are now www.ruskinartclub.org.

The domain name is not all that's new. We've added new features to almost every tab including new background articles and Board of Directors' bios. We've reorganized the Resources pages with more useful information and references to many more Ruskin-oriented organizations and collections, along with an expanded library of recommended videos (art exhibitions, Ruskin-themed videos, and lectures), and we've added a unique page devoted to Ruskin's music. Our new and enlarged YouTube channel is perhaps the most notable addition to our website with its archive of recent lectures as well as videos of annual "Ruskin" lectures and other noteworthy events we've hosted in the past. By the way, when you catch up on a lecture you've missed or browse the channel, **be sure to subscribe!**


We've made it easier than ever to become a **Member** of the Ruskin Art Club, to **renew your membership online**, or to **donate** to the club.

You can also register to attend an event on the Calendar page.

Please tell us what you think of the changes and feel free to suggest improvements or additional features you'd like to see.

Contact us at our new email address: info@ruskinartclub.org.

(Email to our old address will be redirected.)



For news of Ruskin Art Club events, especially our new season of **virtual programs, lectures, and field trips**, visit us at:

www.RuskinArtClub.org
Ruskin Art Club on YouTube