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CRAFT, LIGHT,
and the Democratization of Art

LARRY D. THOMAS'S *STORIES BEGGING COLOR*
AND THE EXPANSION OF AMERICAN EKPHRASIS

AMERICAN CHAPBOOKS
RECONFIGURING LITERARY PRESTIGE

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CRAFT, LIGHT, AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF ART: *Larry D. Thomas's Stories Begging Color and the Expansion of American Ekphrasis*

Larry D. Thomas has long been recognized as one of Texas's most distinctive lyric voices, but his sustained engagement with ekphrasis places him in a broader national lineage of poets who use visual art as a catalyst for poetic inquiry. Across more than a decade of work—from *The Skin of Light* (2010) through *Art Museums* (2014), *Bleak Music* (2016), and his contribution to *Vanishing Points* (2016)—Thomas has developed a multifaceted ekphrastic practice that moves from descriptive clarity to philosophical meditation, from atmospheric austerity to cultural ritual. With the publication of *Stories Begging Color* in 2026, he brings this evolution to a culmination. Although modest in length, the chapbook is his most comprehensive and ambitious exploration of ekphrasis, expanding the American tradition through its multigenre sweep, its material intelligence, and its democratizing approach to the arts.

EXPANDING THE EKPHRASTIC FIELD: A MULTIGENRE SURVEY OF ARTISTIC MEDIA

American ekphrastic poetry has historically gravitated toward a narrow set of artistic media—primarily painting, sculpture, and photography. William Carlos Williams's *Pictures from Brueghel* remains anchored in a single painter; Natasha Trethewey's *Belloc's Ophelia* centers on a single photographic archive; Mark Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* meditates on a single still-life painting. Even when poets range more widely, they tend to remain within the boundaries of "fine art" as defined by museum culture.

Stories Begging Color breaks decisively from this model. Thomas engages not only painting and sculpture but also fine porcelain, stained glass, jewelry, murals, tempera, pastels, and even music. This breadth is unusual in American ekphrasis, which rarely ventures into the decorative or applied arts. Thomas treats each medium with equal seriousness, refusing to privilege oil on canvas over the craftsmanship of fired clay or faceted gemstones. The result is a chapbook that behaves like a miniature museum, one in which the boundaries between artistic disciplines dissolve and the full spectrum of human creativity becomes available to poetic attention.

MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE:
CRAFT AS A FORM OF EKPHRASTIC AUTHORITY

One of the most distinctive features of *Stories Begging Color* is its attention to the technical processes behind artistic creation. While many ekphrastic poets focus on interpretation, narrative, or emotional resonance, Thomas turns his gaze toward the materials and methods that bring artworks into being. His poems demonstrate a rare familiarity with the physical labor of artmaking: the layering of tempera, the firing of porcelain, the grinding of pigments, the cutting and soldering of stained glass, the faceting of gemstones, the tactile resistance of sculptural media.

This material literacy gives Thomas a different kind of ekphrastic authority—one rooted not in psychological projection or historical reconstruction but in an intimate understanding of craft. In this respect, he aligns more closely with poets of material precision such as Elizabeth Bishop or Seamus Heaney than with traditional ekphrastic practitioners. Thomas's poems do not merely describe artworks; they reveal the processes, tensions, and physical realities that underlie them. This emphasis on craft expands the possibilities of ekphrasis by grounding it in the tactile and the technical.

DEMOCRATIZING THE ARTS:
CHALLENGING HIERARCHIES OF VALUE

By engaging media such as porcelain, jewelry, and stained glass, Thomas challenges the hierarchy that has long shaped the ekphrastic tradition. Decorative and applied arts have often been marginalized in both art history and poetry, dismissed as “craft” rather than “fine art.” *Stories Begging Color* rejects this distinction. Thomas's poems treat each medium—regardless of its status in the museum world—as a site of beauty, labor, and artistic intelligence.

This democratizing impulse aligns the chapbook with contemporary movements in art history and material culture studies that seek to broaden the definition of artistic value. In Thomas's hands, a piece of fine porcelain or a stained-glass window becomes as worthy of contemplation as a Renaissance painting. The chapbook thus expands the scope of American ekphrasis by insisting that the decorative arts are not peripheral but central to the human impulse to create.

OBJECT-CENTERED EKPHRASIS:
A COUNTERPOINT TO NARRATIVE TRENDS

Much contemporary American ekphrastic poetry has taken a narrative turn. Trethewey reconstructs the lives of Bellocq's subjects; Frank Bidart dramatizes the psychology of artists; Edward Hirsch uses artworks as portals into personal or historical stories. Thomas's approach is markedly different. His poems in *Stories Begging Color* are non-narrative, object-centered, and meditative. They do not inhabit the figures in the artwork or reconstruct the artist's biography. Instead, they focus on the object itself—its materials, its textures, its colors, its craft.

This object-first orientation restores ekphrasis to its classical roots while simultaneously modernizing it through technical detail. Thomas's poems resist the temptation to turn artworks into stories; instead, they allow the artworks to remain themselves, insisting on the integrity of the object and the primacy of the sensory encounter.

CROSS-SENSORY EKPHRASIS:
INCLUDING MUSIC IN THE VISUAL FIELD

One of the most striking features of *Stories Begging Color* is its inclusion of music alongside visual and tactile media. By placing music within the same conceptual frame as painting, sculpture, and decorative arts, Thomas expands ekphrasis into a cross-sensory practice. This synesthetic approach suggests that ekphrasis is not merely a response to images but a broader meditation on artistic creation across sensory modalities. In doing so, Thomas aligns himself with poets who explore perception in its full sensory complexity, while still maintaining his distinctive focus on craft and materiality.

A LATE-CAREER SYNTHESIS:
THE CULMINATION OF THOMAS'S EKPHRASTIC
EVOLUTION

Because *Stories Begging Color* arrives after more than a decade of ekphrastic work, it reads as a synthesis of Thomas's evolving engagement with visual art. The descriptive clarity of *The Skin of Light*, the philosophical depth of *Art Museums*, the atmospheric austerity of *Bleak Music*, and the cultural resonance of *Vanishing Points* all converge in this chapbook. The result is a late-career statement that distills Thomas's ekphrastic concerns into a concentrated, multifaceted exploration of artistic creation.

Despite its brevity, the chapbook feels expansive. It is at once a gallery, a workshop, a studio, and a meditation on the human impulse to shape materials into meaning. In this sense, *Stories Begging Color* stands as the most comprehensive and technically engaged ekphrastic project of Thomas's career.

CONCLUSION:
THOMAS'S CONTRIBUTION
TO THE AMERICAN EKPHRASTIC CANON

Stories Begging Color occupies a distinctive place in American ekphrastic poetry. Through its multigenre sweep, its material intelligence, its democratizing approach to artistic media, and its object-centered poetics, the chapbook expands the boundaries of what ekphrasis can be. It challenges the hierarchy of fine and decorative arts, introduces craft knowledge as a form of poetic authority, and synthesizes decades of Thomas's engagement with visual and material culture.

In doing so, Thomas offers a model of ekphrasis that is both deeply rooted in tradition and boldly innovative. *Stories Begging Color* is not merely a collection of poems about artworks; it is a meditation on the nature of artistic creation itself, and a significant contribution to the evolving landscape of American ekphrastic poetry.

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