

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

## Get Smart: Eileen Myles

by [Kayla Guthrie](#) 11/29/10

Extracting precise impressions and rough truths from flash encounters and seemingly peripheral moments, Eileen Myles' prose disjoints familiar formats from the novel to the art review by relentlessly inhabiting the exactness of her particular experience. A New York icon and writer-about-town in literary and post-punk, feminist, and queer circles, since the 1970s, Myles has published numerous books of poetry and fiction, plays and a libretto, edited two anthologies, and written essays and articles for a wide range of magazines and journals. Many of these essays appeared in her collection of non-fiction, *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays on Art* (Semiotexte, 2008), highlighting her interests, influences and collaborations, and showcasing the interconnected relationship between writers and the art world in New York, California, and, of course, Iceland.



Myles' latest book, *Inferno: a poet's novel* (O/R Books, 2010), weaves together stories from her personal and career trajectories, from the 60s to the present. In it, a mature author's tales of roads not taken and where-are-they-now chronological jumps are strung together through the eyes of a young writer, where personal victories and disappointments take on qualities that are both sentimental and formal: plot points summed up by a friend's choice of words or a sparked recollection of an old poem. With an up-close narration style than can freshly recall a decades-old embarrassment, Myles constantly adjusts the tale's setting and reroutes its sometimes hapless protagonist, who is her own younger self: an aspiring poet raised in working-class Boston who emigrates to New York and drops out of graduate school to move to the East Village, where she meets other poets and starts her own poetry magazine, dodgems, attends workshops and readings at the poet-led grassroots Poetry Project at St Mark's Church (for a time becoming its Artistic Director), and finds her identity as a lesbian and as well as an influential writer. Decades go by—residencies, retreats, book tours, readings, sex, studio visits, gossip and feuds. Myles is continuously rewriting the past, or the future, and rather than seeking authority in a trustworthy narrative, her "poet's fiction" ends up being a lucid reporting on the qualities of her own highly developed attentiveness.

"In general I think writers are not smart," wrote Myles in *The Importance of Being Iceland*, about coming to terms with the "fear of seeming dumb" which she felt was a pitfall of her mid-century American working class education: "They are something else and each writer can fill in a word here, but smart is not what that word is."

KAYLA GUTHRIE: I really enjoyed the Iceland book. When did you start writing about art?

EILEEN MYLES: In the 80s I think, because of a guy named Rene Ricard. Do you know who he is?

GUTHRIE: I'm most familiar with his character from Basquiat.

MYLES: He was in the Warhol movie *Chelsea Girls*, where he and Gerard Malanga, who was from the Factory scene but also a poet, were sitting on a bed for an interminable amount of time talking and stuff. He was a poet and an art critic.

Once, he was doing a performance at the Guggenheim, and even though I had never written about art, he said, "You should review me." I was hesitant, but I had met Betsy Baker, the longtime editor at *Art in America* and so... it happened. I was amazed I could just do it.

GUTHRIE: That was in the late 70s?

MYLES: 1981, or something like that. Somehow the whole idea of me writing art reviews was just too much of a complicated thought, but I liked art, and later on I just realized that it would be perhaps a pleasure and so I decided to do it for *Art in America*, a lot. It was pre-web; it's in the back issues. I didn't publish them in the Iceland book, but I'm going to do another volume called *Lost in Canada*. Are you Canadian?

GUTHRIE: [LAUGHS] Yes. And in fact, when you wrote about Iceland as this beautiful place that people will leave and to which they later return, it reminded me of Canada: more middle class than America, and with an even standard of living.

MYLES: And socialist. I love Canada, and I dated someone who was Canadian a few years ago, and she brought me into a deeper understanding of the greatness of the culture. I'm going back to Winnipeg soon - I was there because of Iceland. You know about that? There's an Iceland/Winnipeg connection. I love Winnipeg.

GUTHRIE: Winnipeg is really Canadian. It's fairly Northerly and gets a lot of snow, and unlike the larger cities like Vancouver or Toronto, it doesn't bill itself as sophisticated and up-to-date; it's kind of unassuming.

MYLES: It's really cold in the winter, and it's isolated. They laughed and bragged about it. I keep coming in like October and November and they keep saying you've got to come back in January to really see what this is. I met Guy Maddin, who lives there.

GUTHRIE: The filmmaker?

MYLES: Yeah. He made a film about Winnipeg called *My Winnipeg*. So this next book will have more of my writing about poetry and book reviews, but some of those early art reviews too.

So yeah, I wrote art reviews for a while and then, the thing that seemed so great was that, as a poet, to then start writing art reviews meant that you began having visual artists at your poetry readings and making that kind of connection that should just be happening. And so it brought me more into the art world.

The Iceland book also brought me into doing more catalogs. I've always done a bunch, but suddenly I'm doing a lot more: I wrote about Cathy Opie, I wrote about K8 Hardy, who else? It's been a bunch of them lately. Paul Thek. And I haven't seen the [retrospective at the Whitney Museum] yet; I'm dying to see the show.

GUTHRIE: Do you feel at home in the art community in New York?

MYLES: Yeah, but not in that way in which someone is totally in the art world and misses nothing. I miss ridiculous things. Like I didn't see the beautiful - what's his name? Burchfield. I love his work, I can't believe I missed that show, but I miss things in part because I travel a lot for out-of-town performances and readings. But still I feel very grounded in the art world.

GUTHRIE: I wanted to ask you about the concept of "strewn and buried gods" in art, which, as you write in *Iceland*, Robert Smithson borrowed from the anthropologist Anton Ehrenzweig: that cultures can be divided into two types - ones with a "buried" god, and ones with a "strewn" one. Do you see this idea of the "messy" or "visible" as an imperative in your work, for instance in the way you use personal experience, but outside of the accepted memoir format?

MYLES: That's absolutely it, in terms of the intermingling of narratives and subjects in text, and the unpredictability. A few years ago people were talking about hypertext, the idea that you would write an electronic text, and that at a certain point you could let the reader decide whether to go this way or that way, so the text would have virtual possibilities in it.

It's interesting because that's what writing feels like: you're writing something and you get to a point where you think, "Hmm... should I go here or here?" I like the idea of letting those choices show, so that it's a little awkward at certain points and you jump somewhere you didn't think you would, or you depart from the story to tell another story, this kind of weaving.

GUTHRIE: Do you think that is a feature of writing in general - this sense of many open points or connections?

MYLES: Yeah. And yet there are many conventions in writing - that it should be balanced, for instance - that I don't agree with. I think that one of the things that you can do - say, how I use my own name in a lot of my writing - the way I balance it then so that I don't feel that I am my work's subject, is that you might look out onto a street and describe it in great detail, as if it were a film or a piece of art, suddenly going into slow-time so that all the different kinds of seeing meet in time.

GUTHRIE: You've called your new book "a poet's novel": what leverage does that position afford you? What would be an example of the conventional, more "balanced" approach - like a Hollywood formula or a genre novel, where everything is tied up at the end?

MYLES: Exactly. The idea that "good fiction" doesn't stray too much: clear narrator, third person. Part of why I called my new book "a poet's novel" was because I wanted to suggest that somebody else was telling the story, and they might not be telling it in the right way. They might be taking a different approach, maybe a kind of disassociated one.

GUTHRIE: Is it strange to tell stories from your own life in a public format, or to publish the names of the people in your life?

MYLES: It is a problem sometimes, and those times I change the names. Which is why I call it fiction or "a novel," because I'm not trying to be truthful to anything. I'm using what I have access to, but I don't feel any loyalty in the sense of preserving a memory of me or my time.

GUTHRIE: In terms of animating real people or inventing subjects - and the type of decision-making you discussed earlier-do you differentiate between writing these characters?

MYLES: I think inventing characters is less interesting. I think of using real people as being like adopting, vs. procreating. There already are so many puppies and babies and people, so why do you have to make your own?

GUTHRIE: Inferno is more visibly "constructed" than your previous books-in the middle of the novel, a turning point is introduced by a paragraph that's actually a grant application, apparently written when the novel was in progress, which outlines the author's intentions for the piece, projected deadline, etc.

MYLES: In the middle section, I almost wanted there to be a kind of third person voice, besides the first person narrative. But I didn't want to write it, and I was puzzling over how could that be. I don't really think I'm capable of writing in third person, but I suddenly realized when you write a grant application you actually act as if you're somebody else. I thought it was funny. There is that academic thing, an abstract, which supposedly before an academic proposal you still have to say in "x number of words" what you're going to do. I was being very formal in a way, though I was sort of imitating a Guggenheim application that doesn't use an abstract, so it was fictitious there too. It's a world of horrible writing, the world of grant applications.

By the way, you know art writing taught me how to write prose.

GUTHRIE: Why do you say that?

MYLES: I started writing poems, and when I first tried prose I wrote bad articles and essays and columns and I didn't have a handle on it. I didn't go to a school that really taught you how to write that stuff. When I started art writing I wrote these poetic strands, and my editors would be like, "That's not a sentence!" So I started to get more in the rhythm of delivering, and got comfortable covering pages with words.

GUTHRIE: Were you writing from an early age?

MYLES: I went to a terrible Catholic high school where nothing would happen really. There were nuns talking about God, my teachers just being there because that was the only job they could get. This horrible English teacher who was the assistant football coach would gather the boys around his desk and talk about the girls' tits while the rest of us sat there, read Chapter 65 and answered the questions at the end of the chapter. It was horrible. That was literature, you know? Really bad.

In my family I'm the middle of three, and I'm like a lot of middle children. I was one of those kids that floated from group to group. I liked being able to be included in all the groups-the bad kids, the smart kids. I had a core group but I sort of needed to know I could hang out with anybody if I wanted to. It was a small school so it wasn't hard. But because I wasn't a good student I was always doing creative little projects so that I wouldn't fail, like writing a play or writing a song, stuff like that. Which is what *Inferno* opens with, the character writing a poem.

GUTHRIE: ...Due to a misunderstanding of a college assignment.

MYLES: I thought it would be obvious that you would write a poem, but it was so not obvious!

GUTHRIE: So did your family encourage you to go to college?

MYLES: No, my mom was working-class. She didn't know what it was. You know, we're talking about the late 60's. So my brother was supposed to go to college and my mother had a deluded idea that he was going to Harvard, although he wasn't that good of a student. I think actually my family had the idea that I was supposed to go to art school, but I wanted to prove that I was indeed intelligent, because that belief that I should go to art school implied that I was dumb.

GUTHRIE: The idea of art school is different now; MFAs are almost standard.

MYLES: It's very professionalized at this point in time. Even when I came to New York, people did go to grad school, but not so much. You were to hang out and become part of the scene. People said that for years: an older person would say, "So when did you come on the scene, Eileen?" and it was just as if we were on a film shoot. There was a character and that was me. And you figured out how to get your part bigger.

GUTHRIE: Was it just a matter of showing up and you were in?

MYLES: There was a sense one went to New York to become part of things. I actually came here to a graduate school and then dropped out. But there was so much going on that it was kind of unfathomable that you would ever leave such a place. Like Patti Smith, rock and roll and poetry, it was incredible. There was so much going on. So much that's just a given now, like Bruce Springsteen was just a hot skinny guy from New Jersey, that's rock and roll. It all seemed to be happening in front of you and you just had to get in line and get inside and see this thing. It was kind of an amazing time to not know and yet know that you should.

GUTHRIE: I feel like New York is still like that-maybe it's not as easy to find an affordable place to live, but in terms of the experiences you might have - so much is available that it's overflowing... "Come and get it."

MYLES: I agree, I'm glad you said that.

GUTHRIE: So would you want to be recognized as more a poet or a writer, or something else? Artist?

MYLES: I like the identity "poet," but I want to broaden the definition so that even if you're not writing a poem you're being a poet who writes about art, or who writes a libretto for an opera. I think a lot of things came out of poetry, like performance art, and a lot of art critics were poets originally, so it's kind of a foot in the art profession.

GUTHRIE: Thank you so much, it was great to meet you in person.

MYLES: I'm so glad you're Canadian.

INFERNO: POET'S NOVEL [IS NOW AVAILABLE](#).