

*IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“FRAGMENTARY RUINS AND THE ENDURING
IMAGE”: CAMMY BROTHERS ON DRAWING AS A WAY
OF THINKING

Season 6, Episode 4
Recording date: June 5, 2023
Release date: March 26, 2024

Transcript

Caroline Fowler: Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host, and director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

Sara Houghteling: For this season, you'll hear from me, Sara Houghteling, Special Projects Coordinator in the Research and Academic Program. I'm also a novelist. I'll be speaking with four art historians about the craft of writing as it relates to their scholarly practice.

It's my pleasure today to welcome Dr. Cammy Brothers. Dr. Brothers specializes in Italian and Mediterranean art and architecture of the Renaissance. She is professor at Northeastern University, where she holds a joint appointment in architecture and in art and design. Her first book, *Michelangelo, Drawing and the Invention of Architecture*, was published in 2008, and received the Morey Prize from the College Art Association and the Hitchcock Prize from the Society of Architectural Historians. Her new book, *Giuliano and the Ruins of Rome*, was published by Princeton University Press. She writes frequently on art for the Wall Street Journal and is currently at work on the architectural legacy of Islamic Spain, which focuses on the cities of Granada and Seville in the aftermath of the reconquest.

Cammy Brothers: *Art historians think of a lot about, "What was the artistic intention? How was it realized?" But what I was trying to say is that there's a lot that just happens spontaneously on the page. And what's so exciting about looking at a page is that you can see that idea—that visual idea—in formation.*

Sara Houghteling: Hi Cammy. It's so great to have you here today. I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about your background: how you became an art historian, and in particular, a scholar of the Renaissance and Italian and Mediterranean art and architecture?

Cammy Brothers: Sure. I guess, in superficial terms, it was slightly unlikely as an outcome. I grew up in Iowa City, Iowa. It has a wonderful art museum, but it's not exactly known for that. When I came to college, I had

varied ambitions. I was interested in marine biology, which is probably even more unlikely of coming from Iowa. And I liked literature and I liked studio art. So I started taking courses and those kinds of things. And I switched my interests slightly when I did a summer program in Florence, I think it was either after freshman or sophomore year. And, as one would hope, that course had an art history component and a lot of visits and so forth. I'd already taken Italian starting in high school. I was interested in Italian because my mother had spent a junior year abroad and I'd looked through her books and postcards and so forth. And I like languages; I was already taking Italian literature courses. And then when I did the summer program, I got the feeling that my academic emphasis was completely wrong. And a couple of friends—this was Harvard undergrad—suggested art history was an interesting way to go. I took my first course with John Sherman. It was a course on Italian Renaissance. He was such a wonderful lecturer. And that then gave me the sense that this is actually the right thing.

Sara Houghteling: I love the image of you looking through your own family archive of time spent in Italy before archival research became a formal scholarly pursuit.

Cammy Brothers: Absolutely. These little artifacts that people don't think anything of, I think can be very suggestive to children. So it encourages me to collect postcards as well, even now.

Sara Houghteling: As I mentioned before, you've written two wonderful books, *Michelangelo: Drawing and the Invention of Architecture* and *Giuliano da Sangallo and the Ruins of Rome*. Could you introduce us to these books?

Cammy Brothers: Absolutely. They have two major things in common, I would say. One is the material focus on drawings, but seeing drawings not really as an end in themselves, but as a way of thinking through different kinds of problems. In Michelangelo's case, it's a way of thinking through Invention as a mechanism of coming up with ideas—so, actually seeing ideas form on the page. In Giuliano's case, it's drawings as a way of understanding the ancient past and the fragments of ancient Rome, and putting the pieces back together again. The other thing that two books have in common is that they're trying to find a space between the visual arts,

between painting and sculpture on the one hand, and architecture on the other.

I've found that even though Renaissance artists and architects very often did many different things at once, that art historians typically don't. And so we can be blind to those very rich areas of overlap and connection and interplay. So in the Michelangelo project, I was trying to understand parallel ways that Michelangelo worked with his figurative drawings and his architectural drawings to come up with quite unexpected, radical new ideas through a series of graphic operations.

And in the book on Giuliano, I was trying to position Giuliano between architecture, painting, poetry, and other arts so that his drawings and his architecture weren't just seen as idiosyncratic or unusual or retrograde, all of which have been ways that he's been, in some regards, described—but rather triangulating between different ways of engaging culturally with the ancient Roman past.

Sara Houghteling: Thank you, that's a wonderful introduction. And I'm fascinated also, in both books, the way in which you're working through these ideas of drawing as a way of thinking. And since the focus of our conversation today will also be talking about the craft of writing and thinking about how it's done, I want to add, of course, that the process of writing is also a way of thinking.

I wonder if you could read a brief section on the background of this recent book, *Giuliano da Sangallo and the Ruins of Rome*, which will be the primary focus of our conversation today. And this is a slightly excerpted version of the quote, but I think it touches on a lot of interesting topics.

Cammy Brothers: Sure.

“The story of this book, not unlike its subject, is one of dormancy, revival, and reinvention. Giuliano da Sangallo and his drawings after the antique in the *Codex Barberini* and *Taccuino Senese* were the subject of my doctoral thesis, which, after completing, I never wanted to see again. Yet my first book, on Michelangelo, brought me back to Giuliano, persuading me that it was impossible to understand the innovations of the mid-sixteenth century without

recognizing what the earlier generation, and Giuliano specifically, had done to lay the foundations....My Ph.D. thesis had been a series of cases studies, but in returning to the topic, I have instead approached it thematically....Teaching in architecture schools, first at the University of Virginia and then at Northeastern University, has allowed me to see how the broader topics of representation and the uses of the past might be framed in a way that could be of interest to students and architects.”

Sara Houghteling: First, I love the strain of humor throughout your writing. There's really a wry voice. Both in your journalism in *The Wall Street Journal* and also in both of these books. Maybe we'll have time to talk about that later. But as you said here, you wrote another monograph in 2008, your Michelangelo book, before you transformed your thesis into a book. Can you tell us more about this process and about turning your thesis into a book—which is the more common writerly path for a lot of scholars.

Cammy Brothers: Yes, absolutely. It certainly is the common path, but honestly, I have no idea how people manage it because I found the process of writing my dissertation so difficult, and by the time I turned it in, it did feel painful, I guess I would invert the question: I don't know how anyone does it! How they can immediately view this text that they've labored over with fresh eyes? I think that there are so many burdensome conventions of thesis writing, of dissertation writing—reciting the bibliography, and demonstrating to your advisors and committee of readers that you know everything and have read everything and so forth.

This makes it fairly uninviting to readers other than the people who are required to read it. And now if I read my dissertation, I don't think it's terrible. But when I finished it, I just couldn't look at it. And to outsiders, I think Michelangelo's architectural drawings probably seem like a very similar subject to Giuliano's architectural drawings. But to me, Michelangelo's appeal was that he seemed completely unlike Giuliano, that Giuliano had seemed very archaeological and devoted to the past. And Michelangelo was very fast and loose with ruins, antiquarianism and so forth. So for me, it was very liberating to turn to a different topic. I felt like rather than being connected to my youthful inexperience of not knowing how to deal with a vast topic—for my thesis, I just broke it into case studies because that seemed manageable. By turning to a new project, I

felt I could actually use what I'd learned in terms of being a slightly more mature thinker in approaching a new topic.

Sara Houghteling: It reminds me of what an editor friend of mine once said: that if you're not sick of your book, you haven't worked hard enough on it. So it sounds like you worked very hard on your dissertation. I'm so glad it became a book, but that it had a little extra time to marinate!

Cammy Brothers: I should clarify what I did—I felt like I could never look at my thesis again. And in a sense, I didn't, because I did not reuse the thesis. I just still loved the topic. And so I returned to the topic, but wrote an entirely different, unrelated book—unrelated, in terms of how I approached it. And so I think that maybe it's useful to know that it can be done, that you don't have to be burdened by what you did as a grad student forever.

Sara Houghteling: And in terms of thinking about teaching and writing, I wondered if you could talk about how your teaching shapes your writing, and if there are particular ideas writing the history of art or writing the history of architecture that you find yourself returning to each year in the classroom?

Cammy Brothers: I guess I find it interesting to think about how all of us, by necessity, all of us who teach have to be able to speak to first year students, 18-year-olds, who probably have had no art history, no architectural history, and to make things interesting for them, to bring the buildings alive or the works of art alive. And somehow we all manage to do this in the classroom, but then very often there's a huge gap between that kind of communication and the communication that happens in scholarly books, which can be very arcane and very sophisticated, with difficult language and so forth. And I guess over time, more and more, and this is true also because of the newspaper criticism that I've done, I've tried to make the gap smaller, so I've tried to think of how would I explain whatever idea I'm trying to explain to a first year student in my writing. That's one element.

I've also spent my whole career teaching at architecture schools, so I'm thinking about not only how to make historical ideas interesting to students, but also to my colleagues who are mostly architects. That's quite

a different audience. They're very sophisticated in thinking about architectural problems and volumes and language and space and drawings and so forth, but maybe don't automatically think that what happened 500 years ago in these fields is relevant. So trying to frame these questions in ways that are contemporary and relevant has been another part of my professional experience and career, and I think that's also shaped the way that I think about historical problems in my writing and scholarship.

Sara Houghteling: If I were to blurb you, Cammy, I would say a hallmark of your style is very limpid prose. The writing is obviously very complex and multilayered, but the sentences have a real ease to them. There's a beautiful rhythm to them. The ideas are very complicated, but the sentences themselves are poetic and yet they're not tangled. So even in terms of just thinking about the process of writing—on the sentence level—it strikes me that you've done a really lovely job of balancing those different audiences.

Cammy Brothers: Thank you so much. It's nice to hear. I was going to just say, I don't know if this was something that would come up, but I guess it's a connection between the writing and the teaching: that I think the idea of saying things aloud and speaking ideas is very important to me. So I didn't mention this when you were asking about my background and so forth, but my mother worked for the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. While I was growing up, one of her duties was to organize all the readings and make sure that they ran smoothly, and so I would go along. She was a single parent and I was an only child. So I'd go to readings twice a week, or thereabouts, from the age of five until I didn't want to go anymore, which was probably when I was a teenager. So I was constantly hearing things read aloud. And we read aloud in the house together. She would mostly read to me, but I remember reading Dickens together. And anyway, the point is that I was surrounded by the spoken word.

I still find it really important in my writing that if I think a sentence is too long, then I read it aloud. If I can't say it without hesitating, then I cut it. So that oral aspect of writing is important to me. You can't have run on ideas or sentences when you're teaching a class, but sometimes that complexity gets added in when you're writing.

Sara Houghteling: This reminds me of the moment in the intro to *Michelangelo: Drawing and the Invention of Architecture*, where you write about drawing as a way of thinking, and then you make the connection to an essay by Kleist.

Cammy Brothers: Yes, absolutely. The Kleist essay that you're mentioning is "On the formulation of thoughts while speaking," and that was something that Joanna Klink, a poet, and a friend from high school, sent me. And it's one of these little short essays that you read and you just think, "They've understood so much!" It talks exactly about an experience that's so familiar to anyone who gives a lecture: that you may have your notes, but very often it's the pressure of formulating an idea out loud that actually brings it to fruition and brings you to a place that you couldn't have anticipated.

I found that just a perfect analogy for what I was trying to describe about Michelangelo's drawings, which was that it's not just about intention. I think our historians think of a lot about what was the artistic intention? How was it realized? But what I was trying to say is that there's a lot that just happens spontaneously on the page. And what's so exciting about looking at a page is that you can see that that visual idea in formation. And then in the book on Sangallo, I turned to Kleist again. I was reading his play "The Broken Pitcher," and I found this idea of a broken thing as such an interesting and challenging and not precious way of thinking about ruins and fragments—there's so much literature on fragments and a lot of it is influenced by Romanticism and a lot of it is quite precious and fraught and so forth.

But what Kleist plays with—and he's a funny writer, and that's part of what I enjoy about him a lot—is that depending on who's looking and whose perception, an elevated fragment may just be some broken thing, in his case, this broken jug. But so your broader question about how or why do I use literature or make these references, I guess I find that ideas and analogies can come from a range of places. And just like I'm trying to make the case with the artists that I describe or work on (Michelangelo or Giuliano or whomever else), that often their range of references were broader than our own.

Their inspirations could come from a lot of different places. I also find that as a scholar, that it's interesting rather than trying to keep things out of the

text that you feel like are not strictly relevant or not exactly contemporary to what you're working on. It's possibly more engaging to be more inclusive. And so to let some of those ideas that may have an impact on how you're thinking about things actually into the text, which is the kind of thing that I think I probably wouldn't have dared to do when I was a graduate student.

Sara Houghteling: I am really struck by how often you turn to literature in your work. Perhaps you could read us an excerpt from the Petrarch section?

Cammy Brothers: Yes, of course.

"It is in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* that perhaps the most profound, if less explicit parallel to Giuliano's project can be found. In verse, Petrarch aches for Laura, a fictive or real woman or an amalgam of both, establishing her as an object of desire whose absence serves as the necessary condition for his poetry. Rome, I would venture, was Giuliano's Laura. Just as Petrarch's love of Laura—whether contrived or actual—prompted him to produce an enormous collection of gem-like poems, connected in theme, subject, and language but also fragmentary and scattered, a unity made out of disunity, so Giuliano's love of Rome inspired his enterprise, unprecedented in scale and ambition, of collecting fragmentary images of Rome, made coherent by his assemblage and arrangement of them. Literary scholars have speculated on the historical existence and biography of Laura, while generally agreeing that, in a sense, they did not matter. For there is no question that the Laura who has survived is the one eternalized by Petrarch's verses. However, in the case of Rome, there has been a more pressing need to distinguish the accurate from the fictive, thus censuring the imagined, subjective city that Giuliano fashions through his drawings....Analogously, ancient Rome was a site for the projection of an architect's interior vision, and in this sense the more fragmentary the remains, the more they could be reshaped. The exterior world becomes an accessory to the formulation of the architect's design. Therefore, holding Giuliano up to the standards of modern-day archeology becomes a moot point, akin to reading Petrarch's sonnets for Laura's biography."

Sara Houghteling: Are there contemporary writers you turned to as you wrote your first book?

Cammy Brothers: There are certain writers that I was drawn to when I was working on the Michelangelo project. And one is maybe surprising: Johannes Wilde. He was a professor at the Courtauld Institute, and he wrote a catalog for the British Museum's collection of Michelangelo drawings. And his little catalog entries on these Michelangelo drawings I find some of the most beautiful things ever written about Michelangelo. They're maybe a paragraph long and they're so dense with ideas, but so lucidly expressed, I would just turn to them again and again, whenever I was stuck and marvel at how he did this, how he could write a paragraph about some drawing and evoke so much in it?

And it's interesting because this is what I was so attracted to because he was writing in a second language, he's a German scholar. And well, I'm not sure if to anyone else, they would seem elegant—I don't think there's any specific beauty to the language, but they're so rich and what they say is said so concisely that I think that in itself is an extraordinary achievement. And the other thing that you can read of his are his lectures, which were edited by his students, John Sherman, who taught me, and Michael Hirst, whose lectures I sat in on at the Courtauld when I was a Master's student there. And these, I think, are also fantastic in terms of the density of their thinking on Michelangelo, but also they're fascinating as writing because they were based on notes—on the edited notes that his students took.

So a somewhat unexpected kind of source for what I find really wonderful writing, but I think it's close to speaking. I think that's what I really like and something that I think I strive for. I think it's quite hard to do in scholarship and I would not claim that I do it in my scholarly writing. I *strive* for it in my critical writing. And it's something that when I'm stuck, I go back to this idea of, “How would you say this? How would you explain it to someone that knows nothing, and so forth?”

Sara Houghteling: In the vein of close reading and keeping with these literary references, in the chapter “Ruins and Representation,” there's a wonderful section entitled “Outsides and Insides.” Could you read this for us and discuss the kinds of writerly moves you're making in this passage?

And I should add that we're including copies of these images in the podcast's Resource Section.

Cammy Brothers: Sure.

“Beyond Giuliano’s layout of the pages and his approach to details, his drawings in the *Codex Barberini* push against the intrinsic limitations as well as the fundamental character of the section and elevation. Both can represent only one cut through a building or frontal view, and one moment in time. Furthermore, the section and elevation are abstract rather than pictorial techniques, in the sense that they represent an idea of architecture as designed or analyzed rather than the building as it can be observed. By contrast, Giuliano attempts to encapsulate multiple aspects of the experience and perception of a building within a single drawing, and to do so pictorially.

The pictorial aspect of Giuliano’s approach and his focus on how a building is perceived address the problem of the legibility of sections and elevations. The story that opens *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, about drawing outsides and insides, what can be seen and what must be imagined, may illustrate the point. At the age of six, the narrator was fascinated to learn that boa constrictors eat animals whole, taking months to digest them, and he attempted to draw a boa constrictor who had just consumed an elephant. He approached it much as an architect would draw a building, representing the exterior contour as seen from a single view, or something like an elevation. But when he showed his drawings to the adults, they saw only a hat. To make the subject clear to his obtuse observers, he redrew the same subject, this time revealing the interior of the boa constrictor’s body so that the elephant inside could be seen, almost as if he has sliced through it. The metaphor of the slice is also used for architectural sections, and, in a sense, the second drawing the narrator had produced was a section through the boa constrictor. Again his effort failed, but in the process the narrator has described both the purpose of the section and elevation as well as their potential futility.

Like the narrator of *The Little Prince*, Giuliano was particularly concerned with how to represent the outside and inside of ancient Roman buildings in a way that could be readily understood. More ambitiously still, he sought to represent exterior and interior in the same image. On folio 37 of the *Codex Barberini*, Giuliano represents two round temples side by side, one at Ostia and one in the Forum Boarium, on the Tiber, in Rome (figures 181 and 179). Giuliano's inscription in the top right corner of the folio ("how the temple whose plan is drawn below appeared inside and outside") modestly states the impressive ambition of the drawing, one that no established convention of representation had achieved. In representing the two temples, Giuliano essentially compresses the information that would otherwise have required three drawings to convey into one drawing. He incorporates elements of a perspective rendering, an elevation, and a section. But his method is far more than rich in information or efficient in its compression of multiple elements into one. Through his unusual technique, fictively breaking through the outer wall of the temples to see inside, he shows the relationship between interior and exterior. Round buildings always pose a challenge to perspectival techniques, and here Giuliano has relied primarily on shading through ink wash to show the depth of the interior volumes."

Sara Houghteling: *The Little Prince* reference is both surprising, but so important also to the question of, as you say, how to encapsulate multiple aspects of perception in an illustration.

Cammy Brothers: I was trying to, in a sense, estrange a familiar convention. So, I think that sections are one of these things where if you're an architect or you've taken a certain number of architectural drafting or drawing technique courses, or if you've taken a few architectural history courses, you stop thinking about, but they're super odd when you think about it.

Why one slice, and why a slice? And what is that supposed to mean there? People sometimes say, "Oh, that's like a slice through an orange or a slice through a cake. But from a point of view of intuitive conventions and unintuitive conventions, I think sections are not at all intuitive, they're not easy to understand, they take a lot of explaining; I was trying to recover

their oddity, because that helps us to understand how they came into being, and how it was possible to be innovative within or around that convention and to make it a problem or see it as a limitation to be pushed against.

One of the things that *The Little Prince* does brilliantly by having this narrator be a child is to make everything seem odd and strange and unusual and also aided by the illustrations. So in terms of including literary references, this is possibly a stretch or the most unexpected of the ones that I include. Yet I felt like it was useful because it gave the reader the idea of or the possibility of seeing the convention of the section as a child would, through a child's eyes, and in such an absurd image as a boa constrictor eating an elephant.

Sara Houghteling: We've touched on the introduction and the middle of the book. Now I'd like to ask you to turn to the epilogue, "Rome Remade," where we have this beautiful passage that starts on page 250. Could you read it for us and give us an editorial gloss?

Cammy Brothers: Sure.

"In the *Codex Barberini* and *Taccuino Senese*, Giuliano da Sangallo created an image of Rome to match the humanist idea. While a number of other architects sought to extract information from the Roman ruins, drawing them in the most efficient way possible, Giuliano saw the ruins as a subject worthy of sustained engagement. His drawings catalogued the fragments and their rich ornamental details, revealed the fragility of the ruins and their timeworn surfaces, and reimagined the broken monuments whole. His aim was not an objective rendering of the city and its monuments as he found them, but a remaking of them to suit the needs and aesthetic standards of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. In various ways, his drawings made it possible for patrons and fellow architects to see the value of the ruins. Georg Simmel wrote that every ruin has become "an object infused with our nostalgia." But this did not happen automatically. The attention Giuliano devoted to drawing the monuments conferred importance on them, as did his carefully lettered, often didactic inscriptions. His changes, improvements, and reconstructions all made the ruins more legible and relevant to a Renaissance audience. Together, his books did the work of

creating a unified image of the city, one that was personal and subjective but also directed outward.

Over time, the city began to conform to the image. The valorization of ruins and fragments as aesthetic objects had profound consequences for the city itself. Giuliano, through his sustained, creative engagement with the city, not only developed a new vision of antiquity, but also shaped an enduring image of the city that in turn shaped the city itself. Rome became what it is not just through the construction of streets, avenues, and squares, but through its image. Specifically, the survival of the ruins, and their preservation may be understood as a legacy of the image of the city generated by Giuliano and his contemporaries and continued by later generations. The process by which this occurred was an attenuated one, taking place over centuries and with the contribution of scores of artists, architects, writers, patrons, and popes. But a crucial early step in this process was the one made by Giuliano, in providing a way to see and imagine the relationship between the fragmentary ruins and the idea of new construction.”

Sara Houghteling: Cammy, I imagine a number of our listeners are also writing their own books, and I wondered if you could speak as a writer to the techniques you're deploying here in the book's epilogue.

Cammy Brothers: I did an epilogue rather than a conclusion for my first book as well, and I find that helpful and slightly freeing because a conclusion I think by implication is a summing up. And I felt like I've summed up every chapter. I don't really need to sum up the entire thing, but I do have some things that I feel like I haven't fully done. And so what I tried to allow the epilogue to be was to consider if I had another several hundred pages to write, this is what it might be about. So what I'm letting myself do is—and I think scholars often don't let themselves do this—is that I'm not *proving* anything here. I'm suggesting—I'm saying there are all of these other artists and architects and patrons and popes that followed on Giuliano and helped shaped the city and its image, and it would take another book to demonstrate that, to show you all the images and show you how they got from Giuliano to Piranesi to the present state of Rome and so forth. And I'm not doing any of that—I'm only pointing in that direction. But it felt important to point there, partly because the case that I'm trying

to make throughout is that Giuliano's significance hasn't been recognized either in an architectural realm or in the "image of Rome" realm. And so at least *suggesting* that felt worthwhile. That is certainly also advice that I give to graduate students. I think people are often stumped by conclusions, but it's because you feel, "Oh my gosh, haven't I said enough already?" But of course, we often have things that we haven't managed to do, or haven't managed to include. And so I was trying to allow myself to do that, to include those ideas, albeit in an abbreviated manner.

Sara Houghteling: I often think about this in fiction writing: how can the end of a story or a novel be equally resonant and resounding as well as come to a satisfying conclusion?

Cammy Brothers: That's interesting. I can't remember who I was talking to at a conference recently, but somehow it was about different ways of approaching problems—scholars who try to sew everything up and figure out every problem as opposed to posing the problems and opening up ways of thinking about them. I'm definitely in the latter camp, and so the epilogue also feels like an opportunity of saying, "Here are some ideas that could be interesting to pursue, and I'm not going to do that here."

Sara Houghteling: We could have a whole separate podcast on your exhibition reviews and journalism for the Wall Street Journal. We have time to touch on one or two articles here. So first, could you tell us about how you got started writing for the paper?

Cammy Brothers: That feels so lucky and really happened by chance. I think I got a email out of the blue from Eric Gibson, who's still the editor that I'm working with at the Journal. This was more than 10 years ago and it was when I was in Virginia and I guess my book on Michelangelo had crossed his desk and he'd read enough of it to feel like I was maybe someone who he could ask to review a show of Michelangelo's drawings that was down the road in the Muscarelle Museum of Art at William and Mary.

I was happy to do that, and I did that one review. And looking back, I think he had to do a lot of edits for it, but still, he must have seen enough potential that he kept sending me things. And I think initially, I just did a couple each year, but over time, I've been doing more, maybe four or five a

year now that I'm in Boston and more shows cross my path. It's a great opportunity because I think many papers, like the New York Times, they have their art critics and they really don't seem to commission many outside people to review things, but the editor I work with at the Journal does. It's been great for my writing overall, because there are 800 words and there are a team of editors who goes over everything and anytime there's a phrase or a word they feel won't be immediately obvious to the readers, it's flagged. And so over time, I can anticipate that and I've gotten better. I think my texts now are edited much less than they were when I started writing. I've gotten more of that internal voice that knows what are the words and phrases that will be legible and not to a non-art scholar audience, a general interest audience.

Sara Houghteling: As a reader and admirer of your work, it's quite fun to see writing in a different mode about an artist who on the surface seems pretty remote from your scholarly focus on the Italian Renaissance. In keeping with that, I wondered if I could ask you to read from the beginning of the November 2020 article "On the Road to Abstraction," which is about Jackson Pollock.

[Cammy Brothers: Yes, absolutely.

"The largest painting Pollock ever made, "Mural" is almost 20 feet wide and 8 feet high, made on commission for the entry foyer of Peggy Guggenheim's New York apartment. A calligraphic web of black lines provides the scaffolding for a raucous parade across its surface. Abstraction comes from the Latin verb meaning "to take away," and it often helps to know what is being taken away. In "Mural," you can still see the figure, both in the spindly, calligraphic black lines and in the fleshy knobs of pink and white, but at the same time Pollock is saying goodbye to all this, like so much baggage of art history he no longer needs. At first it seems to be a painting made up entirely of lines. But the more you look, it seems he has made figures out of the voids as well. Are the figures the black calligraphic strokes? Or the pink lumps in between? Or both, skeletal structure and the flesh around it?

Pollock himself described the painting as "a stampede...[of] every animal in the American West, cows and horses and antelopes and buffaloes. Everything is charging across that goddamn surface." It

was as if Pollock had hurled a firebomb into the center of one of the staid western scenes he made in his youth and captured the action as the animals made a run for it. In place of the browns and greens of his landscape paintings, his palette proclaims its distance from the natural world: Pepto-Bismol pink, hospital-scrub green, acid yellow.

The best way to look at the painting is to keep moving, across the long surface, in time with the figures, or up and back, mimicking the steps Guggenheim and her guests must have made. The architectural scale of “Mural” evokes Italian fresco painting, while its energy and density call to mind Renaissance works such as Uccello’s “Battle of San Romano” series (at the Uffizi, the National Gallery, London and the Louvre) and Michelangelo in his “Battle of the Centaurs” (at the Casa Buonarroti).

Sara Houghteling: The writing here is so descriptive and vivid. Can you tell us what you're thinking about as a writer when you're doing something like this? and translating images into words for your reader.

Cammy Brothers: First, I’d like to say something about why I wanted to write about this painting. So I do mostly cover Italian Renaissance art for the Journal, and mostly it's my editor's suggestions what I review, but I can also pitch things.

And this is something that I pitched because this is a painting that is at the University of Iowa Art Museum, and that was the museum I grew up with, and this was the most important, most prominent painting that I actually wrote the wall label for when I was in college as a summer intern for the director.

I don't know how long the wall label stayed up, but I did do that as an assignment. So in my head, and I loved this painting as a kid and have always found it. odd that other people don't all love Pollock. Like I found it hard to understand how you can't love Pollock. So I found it kind of an interesting descriptive challenge to try to make readers see what I see, which I suppose is often, or I guess that's what descriptive writing is often about, but I felt like here it was especially crucial because people just see, in the later Pollocks anyway, careless flicks of paint, and this painting in particular is this crucial one where you can still see the remnants of the figure and can maybe understand something about it, even Pollock's

training as a figurative artist. That's why I found this notion of abstraction something that I wanted to kind of dig into and try to make vivid in the writing.

Sara Houghteling: It's almost like there's an element of the form mirroring the content.

Cammy Brothers: Exactly. The development, I think, is crucial for Pollock. And also, you know, what I do in that last paragraph of making the comparisons to Italian paintings or so forth, or "The Battle of the Centaurs." "The Battle of the Centaurs," it's just this web of bodies. The subject is really secondary. It's all about the surface, even though it's a three-dimensional thing, the kind of vibrating surface. To me, there really is a parallel to Pollock.

I guess that's also something that I find useful and important for me as an exercise in doing these Wall Street Journal pieces, even when I'm writing about Renaissance painting. Most of my scholarly work is about architecture, but keeping alive the kind of part of myself as a writer and thinker who's able to look at anything and try to bring it to life, explain it or understand or investigate it with a reader or with an audience. I think it's great that you're doing this series and bringing attention to the writing that art historians do. I think it's not something that is talked about much in grad school in my experience, and with more attention to writing, it's a way of broadening our audiences, and that seems helpful for all of us.

Sara Houghteling: It's been such a pleasure to talk with you, thank you so much.

Cammy Brothers: My pleasure. Thank you.

Caitlin Woolsey: Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the resources referenced in the conversation, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was co-created by Caroline Fowler and myself, Caitlin Woolsey and produced by me, with music by Light Chaser, sound editing by C. J. DeGennaro, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Sara Houghteling.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally-recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors, past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all.