

## Beyond Imagination, Into the Abyss

*Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.*

Edmund Burke, 1757<sup>i</sup>

The sublime is often defined as beyond meaning, something that, 'by definition, is beyond definition'. For centuries artists have attempted to represent the sublime, employing strategies and effects that evoke forms of human experience beyond the everyday.<sup>ii</sup> Commonly associated with the Romantic imagery of nineteenth century landscape painters, the aesthetic concept of the sublime traditionally refers to a sense of awe and fear inspired by the vastness and immense power of nature and the elements. Artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner were among the best known Romantic painters of the sublime, and created works which portrayed many of its key symbolic tropes, such as vast mountain ranges, vertiginous crevasses, storms or blinding light.

Writing on the sublime in the late eighteenth century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant differentiated between beauty and the sublime, defining beauty as that which generates a peaceful, enjoyable experience which can be comprehended, whereas the sublime is beyond comprehension and likened to being shaken to the core. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) describes the sublime as the 'opposite of beautiful, as that which both terrifies and astonishes.' Burke suggested that when the human mind is confronted with awe-inspiring phenomena such as towering mountain ranges, dark chasms or blinding sunsets, we are seized by a sense of astonishment and reverence for the unknowable, a sensation which Burke correlates to the felt presence of God, 'the Deity by whose power such magnificent scenes are created'<sup>iii</sup>.

Postmodern approaches to the sublime developed during the twentieth century retain the Romantic sense of the awe-inspiring, but reject 'overarching master concepts, such as nature, reason or the divine.' The overpowering, unbounded sense is no longer related to a higher power.<sup>iv</sup>

The experience of the Holocaust became a turning point in twentieth century thinking on the sublime. Gene Ray writes that 'in the extremity of its violence, in its intractable core of incomprehensibility, and in its fateful legacy for the future' the Holocaust marked 'a radical break in historical consciousness...Once encounters with the power or size of nature defeated the imagination and moved us to terror and awe. After Auschwitz, however, we have had to recognize such sublime effects among our own responses to this demonstrated human potential for systematic and unbounded violence. After this history, human-inflicted disaster will remain more threatening, more sublime, than any natural disaster'.<sup>v</sup>

Charles Green and Lyndall Brown's *View from Chinook, Helmand Province, Afghanistan* (2007), depicts the region's harsh mountainous and desert landscape, the site of ongoing battles between US and British troops and the Taliban, through the narrow aperture of a military helicopter's windscreen. Disappearing into the distance, the towering spine of jagged mountain ranges amid the vast arid surrounds is also the Taliban's opium-producing heartland, and shelters large numbers of Taliban militia. In addition to the sense of awe inspired

by the geography, there is the additional unseen threat of fundamentalist militia and suicide fighters hidden in caves.

Burke connects the intensity of the sublime feeling to the human instinct for self-preservation, and the intense adrenaline charged fight or flight response triggered when we feel that our existence is under threat. Paradoxically, the sublime comprises both the experience of terror and a sense of safety derived from the distance at which an 'encounter with the terrible' is experienced, whether physical, psychological or moral.<sup>vi</sup> According to Burke, the cause of the sublime feeling is more frightening if part of the sublime object is hidden from us, 'since the imagination has scope to invent new terrors'.<sup>vii</sup>

In several ways *View from Chinook* resembles one of the key Romantic paintings associated with interpretations of the sublime, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer in a sea of fog*. We survey the landscape from an elevated position, the mountains stretching away to the horizon. However, in place of Friedrich's lone surveyor standing on a rocky ledge, the viewer in the image is positioned inside the safety of a Chinook armoured helicopter, a potent symbol of the strength and determination of Western military forces. In *Iraqi Man Walking Beside Road, View from Armoured Vehicle, Iraq 2007*, the sublime desert landscape and the sublime object of the military machine are again connected, and standing in our place perhaps, is a lone Iraqi man, dwarfed by both the landscape stretching to infinity and the machinery of warfare relentlessly rolling by. Framed within the narrow viewing aperture of armoured transport vehicles, both images evoke a strong sense of claustrophobia. The dark borders both distance us from the sublime landscape beyond, providing the sense of safety which Burke describes, but also implicate us within the sublime object of the military machinery, a possible further source of terror.

The technological complexity of modern military weaponry, incorporating surveillance satellites and the most advanced scientific knowledge of physics, is beyond the understanding of most individuals, but from our own varying levels of knowledge we understand its vast destructive potential. The physics which underpins the military machine that both provides us with this sense of safety but conversely represents 'shock and awe' inspiring terror is part of broader scientific enquiries into the nature of matter and space through the field of quantum theory, and concepts of cosmic forces that currently lie beyond our understanding.

Spanning both Romantic and postmodern notions of the sublime, Peter Daverington's paintings represent systems of knowledge that underpin both scientific and spiritual enquiries. Taking Euclidian geometry as his starting point, Daverington creates grids that appear to continue into infinity, generating depths within his paintings that suggest the continual unfolding of space, of a system with no beginning and no end. The spectacular landscapes which are enmeshed within these endless frameworks directly reference their early Romantic precedents, but more significantly suggest that these, and hence all visible matter, form part of a larger, and unseen, reality. Daverington's interest in the purity of geometry is linked to his extensive study of Islamic culture and history, in particular Sufism, and his personal experience of studying with the mystical Islamic sect, the Whirling Dervishes. Early Islamic astronomers used geometry extensively in their study of the stars and considered the circle, with its related forms the triangle, square and polygon, to be the perfect form to represent infinite space and the only symbol that could be used to represent God or Allah. From this grew the tradition of geometrical abstraction, applied extensively to the decoration of mosques to suggest the

connectedness of divine architectural space to the infinite space of the cosmos. In place of the mosque, Daverington substitutes the landscape, suggesting the complexity of the natural environment and its systems, and our interconnectedness.

In November 1755, an earthquake destroyed the city of Lisbon, and caused widespread destruction in towns and villages over a large part of Europe. Tremors were felt by many people, and the event generated a frenzy of interest in press reporting of eyewitness accounts by those who had felt the seismic effects from hundreds of kilometres away. The young Immanuel Kant avidly collected reports on the earthquake and used these as the basis of his book published the following year, *History and Natural Description of the most Remarkable Incidents of the Earthquake that Shook a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year 1755*. Ray writes of Kant's description of the mental effect of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement* as 'like the tremors or deep shudders of an earthquake. Amidst all the vibrating, gushing and shaking, this natural object that defeats the imagination opens up like an abyss'.<sup>viii</sup>

In an almost literal presentation of this notion, Stephen Hurrell's internet-based installation provides a direct encounter with the awe-inspiring power of the Earth's core. The artist's perception of the immensity of the forces of nature was shaped by his experience growing up on the west coast of Scotland in a landscape carved by ice age geological activity. By tapping into seismic monitoring stations around the world via the internet, *Beneath and Beyond* accesses the unseen shifts and movements of the Earth's crust. Through Hurrell's computer program, vibrations from these stations are transformed into a real-time audible experience of the earth moving.

Writing on the sublime in art in the late twentieth century, Jean-Francois Lyotard analyses contemporary artistic practices as attempts to put forward the "unpresentable" through presentation itself.<sup>ix</sup> Through its direct and immediate transmission into the exhibition space of the unseen, powerful and potentially devastating forces below the Earth's surface, Hurrell's work operates within this mode, imparting a compelling sense of the 'unpresentable'.

Operating in a similar mode, Nicholas Folland's haunting frozen chandelier piece, *A job for tomorrow...* 2009, taps into our apocalyptic anxieties through the presentation of an apparent paradox which destabilizes our sense of the truth. Eerily suggestive of an abandoned maintenance operation, the glowing chandelier, potent cultural symbol of excessive wealth, success and colonial imperialism, lies on a stainless steel bench where it is slowly enveloped by encrustations of ice. Unpredictable and unstable, the work alludes strongly to the potential for climatic disaster, for human civilization to be wiped out by a sudden catastrophe such as the onset of a nuclear winter. By reminding us of our mortality and vulnerability, *A job for tomorrow...* provides an experience of the sublime which is overwhelming, 'rendering us puny, insignificant and vulnerable in the face of the Earth's power'.<sup>x</sup>

In *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: the Feminine and the Sublime*, Joanna Zylińska focuses on what she calls the 'feeling of saturation, or excess, that characterises our everyday experience of being-in-the-world.' For Zylińska, in everyday life the sublime manifests from a particular kind of confusion experienced as a result of the rapid speed at which aspects of the world, such as technology and globalisation, are changing. Our ability to feel certainty about what is likely to happen is lessened, giving rise to anxieties

concerning loss of control. In formulating our ethical responses to the here-and-now reality of these changes, and how they personally affect us, our loved ones, the environment and the rest of the global population, we experience the sublime tension between 'pleasure and pain, or jubilation or horror.'<sup>xi</sup>

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe articulates an aspect of these concerns in suggesting that, "The limitless once found in nature gives way, in technology, to a limitlessness produced out of an idea which is not interested in being an idea of nature, but one which replaces the idea of nature."<sup>xii</sup> Since the mapping of the human genome was announced, the subsequent applications of this relatively new knowledge and associated biotechnological possibilities have stirred fierce debate around the consequences of 'playing God' by interfering with natural biological systems. The notion of sublime terror manifesting within this burgeoning field of biological science and industry is explored through Olga Cironis's *Handle me gently* series of soft sculptures. This herd of malformed, hybrid creatures possess a surrealist, uncanny and grotesque potential for the expression of widely held contemporary anxieties regarding the power of science to bring about unprecedented human-inflicted disaster through gene manipulation, genetic screening of human embryos, organ farming and animal cloning. Constructed using second-hand blankets and based on a child's drawings, Cironis's freakish creations speak of the vulnerability of the body and its basic needs, and question notions of engineered perfection.

Much has been written about the sublime in relation to the abstract expressionism of painters such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. The feelings of vastness and solitude suggested by many of their works has been described in terms of cosmic grandeur and pathos, and as with Friedrich and Turner's paintings, gestured towards a spiritual concept of the divine. In a similar way, the intense seeping colours and forms of Lara Merrett's organic paintings evoke a sense of spiritual potential, but for Merrett 'unbounded-ness' is linked to the capacity for human emotion in response to birth, death and love. Merrett's canvases are meditations on physical, emotional and psychological experiences that are seemingly ordinary in their nature, but generate overwhelming feelings which are far beyond the ordinary. Merrett's work connects us to the inner substance which makes us human, and the immensity of our potential.<sup>xiii</sup>

What emerges from the works presented in *Turbulent Terrain: Manifestations of the Sublime in Contemporary Art* is a sense that in our contemporary world, the sublime is no longer a rare experience but almost an everyday encounter. Through our increasing knowledge of the immense complexity of life-systems, seen and unseen, and the rapid acceleration of technological potential, our lives are indeed now characterised by feelings of saturation and excess. As the Hubble telescope beams back images from the furthest reaches of visible space, and the Hadron Collider mobilises atomic particles to discover new information about matter and the origin of the universe, the sublime, with its equal parts of terror and delight, is glimpsed.

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- <sup>i</sup> Edmund Burke, T. O. McLoughlin, Paul Langford, James T. Boulton, William Burton Todd, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: The Early Writings*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p216
- <sup>ii</sup> Simon Biggs, *Computing the Sublime*, 2003, <http://hosted.simonbiggs.easynet.co.uk/texts/sublime.htm>
- <sup>iii</sup> Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, *Romanticism & gender*, Routledge, 1993, p86
- <sup>iv</sup> Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Routledge, London, 2006, p115
- <sup>v</sup> Gene Ray, Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. New Haven: Spring 2004. Vol. 17, Iss. 1; pg. 1
- <sup>vi</sup> George Hagman, *Aesthetic experience: beauty, creativity, and the search for the ideal*, Rodopi, 2005, p125)
- <sup>vii</sup> L Walsh, R Wilkinson, Industry and Changing Landscapes, *From Enlightenment to Romanticism, c.1780-1830*, Open University Course Team, Open University Worldwide Ltd, 2004, p30
- <sup>viii</sup> Ray, *ibid*
- <sup>ix</sup> Ray, *ibid*
- <sup>x</sup> Margaret Weigel, Terrorism and the Sublime Or Why We Keep Watching, 17 September 2001, [www.margaretweigel.com/comment/portSublime.pdf](http://www.margaretweigel.com/comment/portSublime.pdf)
- <sup>xi</sup> Joanna Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs, and being scared: the feminine and the sublime*, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp2-3
- <sup>xii</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the contemporary sublime*, Allworth Communications Inc. 1999 pxii
- <sup>xiii</sup> Emily Lutzker, Ethics of the Sublime in Postmodern Culture, A Talk From the International Conference Aesthetics and Ethics, March 18th, 1997, <http://www.egs.edu/mediaphi/Vol2/Sublime.html>