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Searching for the Sublime

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Searching for the Sublime

Kheng Saik Lim

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Searching for the Sublime

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The influential philosophers Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant understand the sublime as events and objects that cause an emotional reaction so magnificent that the intellect fails to comprehend it. It is thus deeply felt and experienced but remains undefined and non-understood. Searching for the Sublime is a suite of paintings that seek to respond to these definitions of the sublime. Together they address and evoke themes of mystery, fear, power, and the unknowable through the medium of painting.

Keywords: the sublime, painting, art, knowledge, power, oil painting, MFA
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INTRODUCTION

When I was about 5 years old, I was watching TV alone in the living room. As I remembered, it was likely an episode of Star Trek, and some of the crew from the USS Enterprise were being held captive by hostile aliens. The leader of the aliens picked up a pair of tongs, went to a container and took out a larva from a creature and proceeded to insert the larva into the ears of the human captives. I remembered being horrified by the scene, by the pain that the crew were experiencing. I ran into my parents’ empty bedroom and buried my face in the pillows. The fear of the torture scene quickly metamorphosed into a horror at the realization of my own mortality. I became aware that I was made of flesh and blood, the same substance hanging from the racks and hooks in the butcher’s section at the market. I do not remember much of what happened next, how I was comforted, or if I sought my parents out. Most of what followed is lost to time, but I still retain vivid memories of the thoughts and emotions. There was fear and horror. There also was curiosity and a consciousness of leaving behind states of innocence and ignorance; it was replaced by an awareness of a power (or systems of power) beyond my control.

For many years, it remained too complex and elusive for me to be able to elucidate the substance and meaning of that experience. It was purely sensory, purely emotional. It was not until I read about Emmanuel Kant’s work on the sublime that I had words to attach to that experience. Kant states that:

The feeling of the sublime, is at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason, and a simultaneous awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of sense of being in accord with the ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law.1

In that statement, I found a reason for the curiosity that I felt towards the feelings of dread and horror. In my regard towards those feelings, there was an impulsion to comprehend them, but being faced with overwhelming complexity and rawness, I could only let it wash over my senses, relinquishing desire and ability to grasp the then present.

Further reading exposed me to Edmund Burke’s theory that the consequences of a reckoning with events and forces beyond our powers of comprehension are what constitute the sublime. The shift was away from the object itself but rather the experience of the viewer as he/she confronts the object. And, according to Burke, this experience is most commonly and powerfully manifested as terror, for the realization of a powerlessness and a possible negation of self produces the fear and terror of annihilation.2

As a 5 year old, the concepts of mortality, power, and the known/unknown were ripped into my consciousness, so to speak. I experienced an unspeakable terror and power other than my own: I had beheld the sublime. It was foundational learning, providing me the near constant awareness of the sublime, shaping and affecting my worldview, and seeping into much of daily activity, especially the times when I make art. I have had moments of the sublime in such diverse times: in my dreams, driving through the vast Utah landscape, experiencing works of art, walking down the streets of San Francisco and New York City, and being alone in a sunlit living room.

I named my MFA Thesis exhibition “Searching for the Sublime” and included a group of four paintings in it. They vary in techniques and style, but each serves to reinforce the others. I try to make these paintings in the Kantian sense of “revealing a reality that is fundamentally

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indeterminate, undecidable and unpresentable. The very nature of it being “unpresentable” forces the image to address the sublime in indirect ways, and these paintings should be regarded as subtle, oblique entrances to the sublime experience.

CONCEPTS

The two most influential ideas about the sublime come from Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant, and they have played major roles in shaping my works of art that address these themes:

Edmund Burke states that the sublime is a thing so magnificent and powerful that it jolts the mind out of its banal functions, shocking it to experience a sensation of awe and terror. In fact, terror is “more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.” This terror is closely linked to the danger that the sublime experience brings, and this danger comes from privation:

Privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death.

The function of art in presenting the sublime is that it provides a remove in which this awesome power can be experienced. With this remove and detachment the feelings of terror can be somewhat allayed and turned into the pleasure of relief, and with it comes the experience at one remove of the sublime (Sublime, 35). Art is the filter in which this power that causes terror becomes less intense, thus allowing the soul to be in this “agitated zone between life and death.”

And so, to gaze at a painting of a churning ocean or an erupting volcano allows us the necessary

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distance from these terrifying events to avoid the paralyzing effects of terror and experience this power together with the pleasure of relief.

Emmanuel Kant adds another layer to Burke’s explanation of the sublime experience. For Kant, the sublime also can be brought upon the person when he or she comes into contact with an event or thing that is so complex and wide in its scope that it is impossible for the person to intellectually grasp. There is then the realization that “we cannot encompass it by thinking, and so it remains indiscernible or unnamable, undecidable, indeterminate and unpresentable.”7 In this way the complexities of the post-modern, globalized world can be a source of the sublime. Kant further says that with this acknowledgement of our limitations comes a kind of pleasure because we then have a better understanding of the limits and location of our reasoning selves.8 There is a pleasure, akin to the relief spoken of by Burke, of knowing the perimeter of safety in the extended and unknown sublime.

**CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND THE SUBLIME IN CONTEXT**

As I focused on addressing the sublime in my artworks, there are a few artists whose work I have been particularly drawn to. It is not a coincidence that their works have been connected with the sublime as well. They are Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, and Luc Tuymans.

Looking at Gerhard Richter’s *Six Gray Mirrors* (Figure 1) in the Dia: Beacon is a lot like looking into emptiness and absence. The middle gray behind reflective glass seems to negate the existence of anything, containing “neither feelings nor associations,” (Dia: Beacon) and the reflective glass resists any visual penetration into the work. This is a work that confronts you

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8 Ibid, 16.
with the prospect of nothingness, of complete, total privation. The viewer is left with just a reflection of him/herself “in a minor key, washed out, muffled,”9 appearing even less substantial than the ‘nothingness’ of the gray which it hovers upon. His other, more famous squeegee paintings seem to me to be works of controlled chaos and chance, and even though much of it is beyond the direct control of the artist’s hand, there always seems to exist an underlying “consciousness”, a “secret order to disorder”10 that verges on the frightening.

Anselm Kiefer is known for his large-scale paintings that incorporate a variety of materials like paint, straw, tar, fabric, ash, charcoal, and burlap. There is a savagery to his images and a rawness that brings mythologies and histories to the here and now, to the ever-present timeless. In his panoramic landscapes, e.g. *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* (Figure 2), seemingly innocuous plains and forests becomes all-encompassing, as if barely able to contain the secrets buried deep beneath layers of material and paint, the ragged, gouged marks becoming wounds and scars from an unspeakable and almost-forgotten violence. The same goes for his interior spaces that can be either cavernous or intimate, devoid of figures, but always saturated with tragic overtones. His works seem to lament the timeless inhumanity of man, standing as mute witnesses of sublime suffering and pain.

Luc Tuymans’ paintings are deceptively simple and banal. His subjects are characteristically overlit, washed out, and blurred out. The delicate and subtle ways his images are constructed hide an undertone of horror, for “Tuymans’ best works veer between innocence

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and panic, tightly coiled yet never sprung.”\textsuperscript{11} It is like the fear that blurs and recedes the vision and makes the mouth dry. It is paralyzing yet irresistible. The destruction of the images, taken from photographs, television, and the Internet, signify impending mortality. His is the sublime that comes from the terror of the unrevealed and undiscovered, hiding in plain sight among painfully banal situations. I responded particularly to his painting \textit{Still Life} (Figure 3), which is a monumental still life painted in response to the September 11 attacks in New York City. In the face of such terror and violence, Luc Tuymans decided to paint a subject of such banality that it “introduced an element of discomfort…that would have been attenuated by the representation of the impossible world,”\textsuperscript{12} making “banality…larger than life…(taking) it to an impossible extreme.”\textsuperscript{13} It points to the utter failure of man and his art to comprehend, let alone represent such an unthinkable act, and so \textit{Still Life} is a capitulation, an acknowledgement of the “inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason”\textsuperscript{14} It is a numbed and deliberately facetious response to an overwhelmingly sublime act of violence from man to man.

\textbf{PORTRAYING THE SUBLIME}

For this show I have decided on four paintings that address feelings of the sublime that is fear combined with a sense of pleasure. \textit{Power I} and \textit{See} (Figure 8 and Figure 9) appear formally disparate with one another, while \textit{Television I} and \textit{Television II (Transcendence)} (Figure 4 and Figure 5) share the same viewer’s space, but when examined they all carry the undercurrent of

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 182.
ambivalence and the unknown. *Power I* and *See* almost act as jarring bookends of the show. This feeling of disparity is further augmented by the arrangement of the works in the B. F. Larsen gallery. No one standpoint affords a view of all the paintings; this brings a sense of fracture for the viewer as his/her expectations are frustrated. By creating this fracture it allows each work to be regarded on its own and less as a continuum over multiple works. A sense of confrontation is then created between image and person, lending the image greater time, space, and strength to evoke the sublime.

I have attempted to portray situations that can evoke the sublime ‘at one remove’ in the viewer. While some of the works have their roots in a personal experience I had, the paintings are meant to be primary sources of instigating the sublime rather than representing or illustrating sublime scenes and situations. This makes it a much more challenging goal to achieve, and more often than not the work hits a lower mark than intended. However, I feel that the probable futility of this effort lends itself well to the essential idea of the sublime as unpresentable and unknowable, and this struggle and reaching actually provides the impetus to me to push my abilities further, making painting ever interesting to me. And if the viewer senses the struggle and effort in making the image and the failure in it, I think that still creates an imprint and echo that is still sublime.

**WORKS**

*Television I* and *Television II (Transcendence)* derives from the mille fleur background that I saw in *The Hunt of the Unicorn* (Figure 6) and Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* (Figure 7). In addition to the obvious decorative purpose and creative freedom in which they were made, I feel that they have a somewhat sinister effect of veiling and also of overwhelming the subject. In the last panel of the *Unicorn* the creature resides in a pen with the rest of the visual field filled with
mille fleur, signifying the complete capture and subjugation of an animal famed for its wildness. In the *Annunciation* Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden into the world, again signified by mille fleur. The unpretentious artificiality of mille fleur is striking, setting itself at an even greater remove from reality than the already idealized figures the artworks pursue. The result is a disconcerting duality of idealism and falsity and the element of danger and fear that such uncertainty brings. The lush greenery is a signifier of a place closer to the paradisiacal world before the Fall, before the world of thorns and thistles and the trials that come with it. But at the same time it occupies all negative space, almost suffocating the work with sheer detail. It obscures and hides, and it distracts by over-informing the viewer. These paintings hint at the ‘ineffable chaos of becoming, the secret order of disorder.’\(^{15}\) It beckons you closer with its beauty and myriad details, and then proceeds to trap you when the seduction is complete.

*Television I* is a picture undergoing a metamorphosis, which is a “kind of wayward attraction, a movement of withdrawal and substitution, a continual play of becoming.”\(^{16}\) Allure and fear constantly switch off each other, creating a tension that does not let up. There are alternate areas of lush and sparse vegetation with varying shades of green, a color that Luc Tuymans associates with decay. There are also areas of green that appear fluorescent and artificial, plastic-like, that put the authenticity and ‘naturalness’ of the vegetation into question. The soil alternates between a deep, moist dark and a dry matte tautness. This sets up differences of more permeable surfaces and resistant ones, and all these different elements create an environment of flux and uncertainty. The title references the nature of the televised image. It is


seductive in its appeal, but because the image is a transmission,\(^7\) its origins and intents are unknown and thus the television can be an insidious object. We accept it into our living rooms and consume the images shown behind its glass screen, mindlessly being swept along its currents. There is also awareness that each blade of grass was painted by the conscious hand over a long period of time. The image then becomes a repository of intention and action over time, and as the ‘unreality’ of the image becomes clearer, a powerful and urgent question of motives surfaces. With no ready answer at hand, the viewer is put in a constant state of questioning the unknown. *Television I* functions similarly as its namesake with the power to lull and seduce, but at the same time using the medium of painting to draw attention to the nature of the image, to question its veracity, intents, and plausibility.

*Television II (Transcendence)* is subtler in the application of the paint. It is generally painted very thinly, with subtle differences in color tones and amounts of oil and medium in the paint. There are interesting image shifts as light will catch on certain areas of paint and blot out others, creating ghost images and images that come slowly as the eye gets accustomed to the shifts. The lack of detail and the emptiness of the image is the primary conduit to the sublime here, the “manifestation of the hidden essence.”\(^8\) It is a less ‘dangerous’ image because it feels more true and honest compared with *Television I*. It functions less as an independent image secure in its own emanation than an image that depends on the grace of another source of light for its existence. Because of this, it achieves certain transcendence by acknowledging its immateriality and with the image undergoing metamorphoses through a union with an external source of being.


Over the course of a summer spent in the Mojave Desert a couple of years ago, I would take frequent runs along a path that took me under multiple power lines suspended by towering pylons. They always felt alien and imposing against the starkness of the parched land and bare sky. I would keep my eyes fixed on those pylons as I approached, went under, and passed them by. The various beams would crisscross as my point of view changed, creating a rhythm of shifting latticework that would boggle my mind. Sometimes I would lose perception of depth and direction. I could also hear a constant hum from the lines, and they reminded me of the vast amount of energy, enough electricity to power the city of St. George, flowing above my head. I felt the connection between the complexity of the pylons and the power it carried on its latticework. When viewed head on, these pylons are composed of simple, predictable systems; when viewed obliquely and in motion, they become unpredictable and complex. Somehow the complexity of the shifts of lines, angles, and shapes contained the same feeling of ‘piercing’ power and sensed but unseen energy similar to the power lines, and again, the “secret order of disorder” spoken of earlier.

*Power I* is a direct response to that feeling. The structure is painted black, as in a silhouette to remove perception of depth and the hierarchy of beams and columns; this further heightens the visual chaos as lines and shapes intersect and collide. The result is similar to looking at a one-way mirror: an uncertainty and ambivalence at being able to see the object in its entirety (the flat mirror-like surface and reflections) yet being acutely aware of another world of hidden secrets, and an unshakable suspicion of being scrutinized by ‘the other’. The background consists of sprayed and flicked paint that creates a dazzling effect in contrast to the black lines of the frame. This contrast is intended to make the space of the image pliable, to either be flat or to be as deep as outer space. The colors are also meant to be competing with the frame for visual
supremacy, so that conflict is ever present within the picture, so that when a person looks at it he or she is immediately pulled in to the already present tension.

Large areas of flat color are the dominant features of See. The flatness of the image sets up a visual tension between the surface of the painting and the illusion of deep space. It is a confrontational image, and the black ‘opening’ could be a foreboding of the privations that Burke talks about in the terror of the sublime. The narrow band at the top is reminiscent of a stormy, scorching sky. The viewer is thus forced to find refuge in other areas of the image, only to be pushed back by the electric brightness of the yellows and into the black.

This painting shares formal similarities with the portal-like works of Mark Rothko and the strong, hard-edged color field paintings of Barnett Newman. However, it departs conceptually from the high modernist painters in that while they were intent on making images that were sufficient in and of themselves, my painting functions within the confines of an illusionistic space created by the three walls and slight tilt of the back shape. I agree to a greater degree with the statement made by Francis Bacon that “…art is recording. I think it's reporting. And I think that in abstract art, as there's no report, there's nothing other than the aesthetic of the painter and his few sensations. There's never any tension in it.” By putting an illusionistic space in front of the viewer, I believe it pushes the experience beyond the physical presence of the painting itself and into a hypothetical situation where an encounter with privations and extinction feels more possible and so have a much greater impact.

CONCLUSION AND POTENTIAL

In researching and making the paintings for this project, I have come to a deep appreciation of painting’s magical qualities to respond powerfully to both the physical and

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metaphysical. This has been especially useful when addressing the sublime due to its extremely expansive properties, where illusion would compensate for material limitations in its portrayal. This project is a continuation of my fascination with the sublime, and I already foresee future projects in which its concepts will be pushed further in terms of technique and scale, conceptual rigor, and historical contexts.
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Figure 2 Anselm Kiefer, *Bohemia Lies by the Sea*, 1996

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Figure 5 Kheng Saik Lim, *Television I*, 2016

Figure 4 Kheng Saik Lim, *Television II (Transcendence)*, 2016
Figure 6 Unknown, *Hunt of the Unicorn*, 1495-1505

Figure 7 Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1425-26
Figure 8 Kheng Saik Lim, *Power I*, 2016

Figure 9 Kheng Saik Lim, *See*, 2016
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