

Ben Steele

The Highest Point, Still Contained

The difficulty in defining the contemporary sublime is the same as the difficulty in defining contemporary art. Even accepted traditional definitions require elaborate explanations setting out conditions and exceptions. Art's progression from Modernism through or into Postmodernism, depending on your opinion, further complicates the issue as well as the end of the "movement" phase of art which continually ushered in the new and out the old. In an era when anything can be art, and thus anything can be sublime, can anything be regarded with as much reverence as it once was, and if so, what?

Astonishment is the passion aroused by the sublime, according to Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise entitled, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. To this day many consider Burke's definition to be the most complete. He identifies terror as being the primary cause of the sublime. Terror, as it relates to pain and thus to death, which is capable of arousing delight when experienced from a certain remove or distance. Burke also identifies; **obscurity:** so as to not "know the full extent of the danger", **power:** as an ability to inflict pain, **privation:** as a deprivation of the senses, **vastness:** as a "greatness of dimension", **infinity:** not necessarily in fact but in perception, **difficulty:** as having "required immense force and labor to effect it", and **magnificence:** as "a great profusion of things, which are splendid or valuable in themselves", as all capable of arousing the sublime. (Burke, 1757)

In a way it is hard for art not to be sublime. It is the un-nameable; the unbounded, resisting explanation no matter how much is written, and refusing to be contained by anything other than what it is. Less often is the sublime specifically and consciously the

subject of art. On this account, early European landscape painting, executed around the time of Burke's treatise, is the first notable example. Vast forests, terrific cliffs, and terrible storms show man to be miniscule and at the mercy of the elements in works by artists such as Casper David Friedrich and William Turner. Tremendous ruins show nature's power to unmake anything man creates. Tiny Ships are rocked by vast oceans.

American 19th century landscape painters such as Cole, Church, Bierstadt, and Moran inherited this tradition. They unlike their predecessors were engaged in actually describing the landscape for those who had not seen it themselves. They were completely engaged in making real the unknown new world and in particular their images formed early impressions of the American west. The American landscape offered sites, such as the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and Yosemite Valley, the likes of which had never been seen before in the civilized world.

The most emphatic criticism of these works lies in the thought that no matter how convincingly they are portrayed, or how terrible the subject is that is portrayed, or how large the canvas is that they are portrayed on, they are nothing but depictions of that which is sublime. In particular, the paintings containing figures are nothing but images of other people experiencing the sublime. And that experience is what lies at the heart of the sublime. It is no surprise then that American 19th century landscape painting is often overlooked as stuffy and outdated in comparison to that which was taking hold of Europe at the same time, Impressionism.

It was with this beginning that art began its journey into formlessness, finally adopting the qualities of the sublime itself, finally offering to the viewer the experience of the sublime itself. Each new wave became more and more daring, discarding layer by

layer its ties to description. This is the great story of western art. The problem is that that story ends in the middle of the 20th century. What Impressionism had started reached its logical conclusion in the overall and absolute abstractions of Pollock, Kline, Motherwell, Still, Rothko, and Newman. The image of the heroic artist improving upon the work of past generations, offering a clearer vision of the infinite with no trace of satire or irony ended. Pop art began, in which nothing was sacred, least of all art, unless everything was sacred. Postmodernism became the new expected model in which, pluralism triumphed over the grand narrative. Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes were art that imitated life, blurring the boundaries between the two and suggesting, like Duchamp before him, that art is what you proclaim to be art. What is art when anyone can call something art? What is the sublime when anyone can call something sublime?

The problem lies in how to make a work of art that honestly evokes the sublime after the death of Modernism and belief in the one. There are those that argue that it is impossible to move past Postmodernism, implying that it is thus impossible to treat anything with reverence untainted by the slightest bit of cynicism. I may agree, if only to propose that it is only necessary to be cynical of cynicism, lest we fall from the naïve height of Pollock back to the moral depravity of Warhol. I concede, artwork made after postmodernism must be fundamentally different than that made at the height of Modernism. Having seen what else is possible makes it necessarily so. And if it is in fact impossible to move beyond, then I propose it never fully obliterated its predecessor, and the two may coexist after all.

This seeming contradiction is made possible in that the sublime is what anyone makes of it, but specifically so. What I mean is that the sublime has always related to the

experience of human consciousness in relation to the infinite. Experiencing the contemporary sublime involves turning inward and analyzing our own perceptual processes. The sublime never lay in the waterfall, but in our perception of it being there. The artworks that today invoke the sublime do not embody the sublime; they provide an experience involving self-reflection that is sublime. This definition is one that is both fixed in the idea of consciousness, and open to any individual's opinion or interpretation, thus reconciling our aforementioned contradiction.

A recent exhibition entitled *Sublime Embrace: Experiencing Consciousness in Contemporary Art*, organized in 2006 by The Art Gallery of Hamilton in Ontario, Canada, dealt specifically with this idea of the sublime. The inspiration for the exhibition came from a visit to James Turrell's Roden Crater Project:

Situated near the Grand Canyon and Arizona's Painted Desert the Roden Crater is an extinct volcano that Turrell has been transforming into a celestial observatory for the past thirty years...Turrell's crater brings the heavens down to earth, linking the actions of people with the movements of planets and distant galaxies. His fascination with the phenomena of light is ultimately connected to a very personal, inward search for humankind's place in the universe...His work allows us to see ourselves "seeing" and places viewers in a realm of pure experience prompting greater self-awareness. (Madill, 2006, p. 6)

All of the artists in the exhibition are in some way engaged in allowing us to see ourselves seeing. Bill Viola is a video artist whose ruminations on light invoke the spiritual traditions of Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are collaborators who are most known for their audio walks in which a viewer dons headphones and is encouraged to explore the familiar space of the museum as transformed by their audio track and suggestive commentary. Their work makes it difficult to separate what is imagination and what is reality. Tony Oursler

projects faces unto sculptural blobs to create oddly humanlike alien beings that speak and demand the attention of those that are listening or not listening. Most of the work in the exhibition is time based. Some, however, is not. I think it is important to re-emphasize in these cases that the art object itself does not represent the sublime. Anish Kapoor creates sculptures that invoke the idea of the void. His objects can create a feeling of limbo or an uncertainty in their form due to their dark recesses which challenge our perceptual processes. James Casabere photographs tabletop models of architectural spaces flooding them with an unnatural holy light. The disconnect which causes introspection here lies in something which tells us that we are not looking at what we appear to be looking at. That doubt in the image is registered with just as much force as belief in it.

Before closing, I feel it is necessary to look back again to examine where this specific type of the sublime may be found where we started, in painting. The most prominent example is none other than Barnett Newman. He, more than his contemporaries, was not interested in creating paintings that depicted the absolute infinite. Some would even say that his paintings avoided being imagistic completely, instead relying on a viewers interaction with the space his paintings created. His self proclaimed “zips” functioned as registering that “something” had happened, or “someone” had existed.

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or “life,” we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history. (Newman, 1948)

Newman believed it was necessary to rid painting of all the things he listed in order for it to provide a true sublime experience. I find that idea to be too dogmatic for our pluralistic times. He is absolutely right however, about the sublime being made out of ourselves, and artists will use all the means at their disposal to elucidate this fact.

Direct Quotes and influential readings:

Beckley, Bill, *Sticky Sublime*, 2001.

Burke, Edmund, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Art Forum, 1984.

Madill, Shirley, *Sublime Embrace: Experiencing Consciousness in Contemporary Art*, 2006.

Newman, Barnett, *The Sublime is Now*, 1948.

Rosenblum, Robert, *The Abstract Sublime*, Art News, 1961.

Updike, John, *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*, NY Book review, 2004.