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Seeking the Sublime

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RIT

Seeking the Sublime

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Studio Art
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a search for the sublime. Definitions of the sublime have transformed over the centuries. In the modern era, that has come to encompass an idea of the Technological Sublime. This thesis will examine a more nature-centric idea of the sublime, with a thoughtful examination of the current digital culture and its impact. As we continue to become more distant from our natural world, and more immersed in the digital landscape, we miss opportunities to connect with our true nature and gain first hand knowledge of the sublime understandings that nature can impart to us. This thesis explores our natural and digital culture - culminating in mixed media printmaking and installation. Concepts of our material culture, and the non-material sublime are at the core of the investigation. Reflections on the human experience and our social culture are seen in visual imagery of invented landscapes in printmaking, forms and materials of our natural world and abstract digital imagery. Research includes time spent in nature and elements collected from our digital culture. Printmaking and mixed media combine representations of invisible forces - electric, thermal, radio, with elements drawn from the current digital culture - AI responses, news feeds, and promotions, that often 'exist' only briefly in our digital landscape, into the material world. They now become artifacts of this current period in time.

Keywords

Sublime

: lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression, or manner

: of outstanding spiritual, intellectual, or moral worth

: tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublime>

Technological Sublime

In his book *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye points out a number of different places this term is mentioned, starting with Perry Miller in *The Life of the Mind in America*. “..awe inspired by large-scale applications of technological prowess”

Digital Culture

Gmail AI responses, advertising, news apps, social apps, gaming apps, time spent on a screen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	p.4
Content	p.6
Evolution, Work and Methodology	p.6
Painting	p.6
Printmaking	p.9
Installation of Sand and Stones and Lightbox	p.11
Conclusion	p.12
Works Cited	p.13

INTRODUCTION

By visually animating inanimate items from the natural world - rocks, leaves, driftwood, seeds and strawberries - I seek to bring them to our attention. For me, these forms provide access to the energies and forces in the physical world that we cannot see or fully quantify. Our interactions with these items allow us to experience the sublime - that feeling of awe - as something that is being triggered within us. This sense of the sublime, found in the beauty of the natural world, presents the opportunity to believe there is something beyond what can be seen or scientifically known. For me, this journey was about focusing my attention on the mysteries of this material realm of existence. My thesis work is the visual journey of my search for belief beyond what we can see with our eyes, senses, or scientific devices. By seeking the sublime in nature I have space to contemplate and be in touch with deeper mysteries. Jenny Odell describes *'patterns of attention - what we choose to notice and what we do not - and how we render our reality for ourselves...have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time.'* (xxiii) Odell goes on to discuss *'untrained attention as being less able to access our own human experience.'* (119) Creating art is a way of spending time looking closely at nature and sensing a more meaningful and fascinating realm of life. Creating art can be an extension of that understanding.

The material world could be defined as our time here, on earth, in our bodies, from birth to death. Within this time limited space, I am seeking moments, or hints of more, something more spiritual, or elevated, or connected to the 'oneness of the universe.' This is not a new pursuit for artists. It is a search that, altered by the context of the times, has traveled different paths and assumed a variety of forms. Many artists that I feel connected to were inspired by Theosophy or Transcendentalism in the United States. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman inspired a new perspective. Kandinsky, O'keeffe and Carr are artists I knew before making this connection. I learned about Pelton, Dove and others later. These beliefs manifested in their work through abstractions, geocentric forms, or within natural landscape paintings and creations. The more I research the context behind these paintings the more I found they all have a

connection to the 'spiritual.' About these artists, Charles Caffin wrote: *'with the idealists in landscape, a new motive is at work. It is to address themselves, not to that faculty in man of getting to the bottom of things, but to his consciousness of the mystery all about him - the indefinable, impenetrable, limitlessness of spirit.'* (22)

I have come to believe that it becomes more and more difficult to find natural moments of the sublime, as our lives become more and more digital. The digital component of our culture has become so ingrained in our everyday lives we do not always recognize the infiltration. This permeation of digital culture comes in the form of Gmail offering us automatic responses to emails that are uncannily exact, both tempting and provoking us and let the artificial intelligence communicate for us. Digital culture comes to us on our screens and determines how we receive the news, buy books, shampoo, batteries, even food as well as maintain professional and social relationships. They provide time saving 'short cuts' which in turn, reinforce our desire to be more productive and less personal. The current barrage of media demanding our attention and mind space, often occurring largely unquestioned, has had a profound influence on our social and cultural constructs and requires a closer examination. We often operate from a position in which we do not question this new social media tool of our lives, or the values and needs it creates and the resulting repercussions. I strongly feel that we must recognize and question this consumer and material oriented life, and then seek more meaningful ways to engage with people, communities, and the natural world. Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, said that a troubled mind comes from unnecessary mental baggage in the form of runaway desires, ambition, ego and fear. In a society where consumerism is so imbedded in our economy, we are, without question, attempting to fulfill these fundamental human needs and desires.

CONTENT

My work is a document of my search for the sublime, and my honest sharing of the superficial and consumer oriented world I have found myself caught up within. Often technology can connect us with others in a deep way, while nature may in fact play a

superficial part in our lives. My work started based firmly in nature, and considering energies that we might not be able to see or sense. As the artwork began to incorporate more elements of the digital world I was forced to recognize its scope within of my current life. The prints reflect this middle ground - the mix of both natural and digital and the continued search for the sublime.

EVOLUTION, WORK AND METHODOLOGY

The journey of creating started with oil paintings, then became more focused within the realm of printmaking. There has been some experimentation with mixed media, and attempts to bring these media together, with some success. My decisions about media, process and visual representation were influenced by both parameters of a gallery show and a desire to incorporate an experience of the forms and materials themselves. This ultimately resulted in the installation Sand and Stones, and the Lightbox. Sand and Stones being just the material - directly speaking for itself. The Lightbox being the furthest away - an advertisement of the allure of both the digital and natural.

The work is about seeking time in nature and an understanding of ourselves from time in nature. An artist who does this well is the poet Mary Oliver. She is an American poet with a simple, direct use of language that elevates the ordinary to the extraordinary, and brings to light the wonders of the world around her, connecting the human condition to this way of experiencing the world. Mary Oliver speaks of specific places, trails, and times of year. This resonates with me as I spend time watching the seasons unfold and the leaves change. This writing brings me back to the experience I would like to have in the world. I would like my paintings and prints to feel like her poems - simple, nature-forward, and meaningful on both a personal and universal level.

PAINTING

The journey of creating began with oil paintings. I wanted to combine a sense of realism with something magical or just beyond what can visually perceived. Each painting is a landscape sometimes incorporating the manmade - a road and buildings, contrasted with natural items floating in a circle above them in the sky. I was creating

these paintings to remind myself of my search and reverence for mysteries. These forms reference wanderings through nature: rocks from Lake Ontario, the sandbar Willow from Durand beach, the Alder's catkin, found on a walk in my neighborhood. Small pieces of driftwood softened by time in Lake Ontario and then found on the shore. Strawberries from Bauman's Farm in Webster. They also speak to bioregionalism - which is a way of defining a region based on the natural contours of the land versus the unnatural lines that divide countries or counties. By looking closely and learning about the place where I am living and the other living things occupying this place, I am gaining appreciation of materials and scale of the natural world. Rachel Carson captured this in her writing, as *"Individual elements are lost to view, only to reappear again and again in different incarnations in a kind of material immortality. Kindred forces to those which, in some period inconceivably remote, gave birth to that primeval bit of protoplasm tossing on the ancient seas continue their mighty and incomprehensible work. Against this cosmic background the life span of a particular plant or animal appears, not as a drama complete in itself, but only as a brief interlude in a panorama of endless change."* **(11)** I wonder about the origins of forms and when they first appeared. The answers add scale and depth to my understanding of this earth and my small place within it. Taking the time to paint these inanimate objects from the natural world reminds me of their importance, and the sublime lessons they impart. The artwork of Mary Iverson brings together the natural world and the man made with detailed realistic oil paintings of mountains (often her home state of Washington) and huge cargo ships and containers interspersed and floating throughout with a grid work of lines. Her work is a direct response to her love of nature and concern for the impact of man and consumerism. Although my paintings or prints do not bring together these items figuratively, conceptually there is a connection. As I develop my own way to respond to the human impact on the natural world I admire her work for both technique and subject matter.



Elevate, 18" x 26" Oil on canvas 2019



Catkins, 18" x 24" Oil on panel 2020



West, 18" x 24" oil on canvas 2020



Intersection, 30" x 42", Oil on Canvas 2020

PRINTMAKING

Mono printing and screen printing techniques layer together within the printmaking work. The prints are created through the use of an intuitive process with a mix of action and reflection repeated over time. With the printmaking work, the elements relating to the reality of my digital life took precedence. Elements of unseen forces - radio waves, thermodynamic diagrams of air, along with the natural items - rocks, leaves, strawberries - began to intertwine with elements from the digital realm - gmail automatic responses, news feeds, advertisements and promotions. Formally, these elements come together and interact to create abstracted landscapes interspersed with text and symbols. I have found this analogue means of layering and creating a tangible record of these forces and energies valuable for a number of reasons. Most notably, they bring these digital symbols, AI responses, and screenshots, that often 'exist' only briefly in our digital landscape, into the material world where they will become a document of those moments in time. The digital experience is removed from time and without us realizing it, removes us from time. I have spent hours on my phone, without even realizing how much time has passed - that is a scary thought. The digital realm even becomes a space or place where we exist. Using the printmaking process to bring these elements and ideas into a new visual landscape references both the digital environment as well as my search for something with a deeper meaning.

Technology is not all bad - there are many amazing things it can bring us - and may itself induce a sense of the Technological Sublime (**Nye, 1995**) which has been the subject of the work of many artists, philosophers and ongoing discussion. The digital landscape we are exposed to attempts to fulfill our human needs, but we must pay close attention to how much time we are spending 'digitally' and what impact this has on us mentally and physically. There is an ambiguity to the prints that mirrors the current world we live in, as we disconnect more from nature while becoming increasingly involved with the digital. In this process we may find something elusively missing while being simultaneously enchanted with the potential of our desires being fulfilled with what we can buy. This interplay of nurture and desire can be found in the printmaking of Ryan McGuinness, who in a manner that is similar to my own, uses

graphic elements that draw from our current visual culture. McGuinness uses existing and invented corporate logos, that emerge from and reference contemporary consumer culture. McGuinness is a prolific artist whose work seems to be instantly recognizable even when fresh. His work incorporates a broad diversity of forms from scissors to babies to deer to safety pins: alone, stacked, spun out into mandala shapes and layered at different scales. Although my work is visually dissimilar, I admire and I am inspired by his bold graphic nature and technicolor palette.

Each printmaking composition has a strong sense of movement - of overall energy that animates the elements within it, while also referencing the idea of unseen energies and forces that are yet undiscovered. Elements from the natural and digital landscape come together and interact - creating the sublime awareness of something new.



Energy (series of 5), 22" x 30"
mixed media mono print print on
Stonehenge

INSTALLATION SAND AND STONES and LIGHTBOX

Once I started thinking about the natural objects **representing themselves** I was inspired to pursue a new installation. I had originally been inspired by my interactions with actual objects that I encountered on my walks around Lake Ontario and I wanted to bring this communion into the exhibit itself. I set up the sand and rocks in the studio space, inviting people to sit, touch and interact with the material themselves. There is something quiet and out of the ordinary about the work, despite the objects just sitting there being ordinary. People made many suggestions - put lights under the pedestal, add this or that. It was actually hard to just let the natural materials be themselves, which I discovered after spending time with them in a gallery-like setting. This installation is a direct response to the time I have spent sitting in the sand at the lake, watching the clouds move and waves come into the shore. These experiences drew me to the larger scale of movement and cyclic changes in nature. Time can be seen passing in the clouds, the daily differences of the waves on the lake, or for the perspective of the larger scale changes that have resulted in the formation of the Great Lakes or Devonian Age fossils in the rocks that are present there. The opposite of this experience is found in the Lightbox - that allure of the screen that pulls us in, promising to fulfill our needs and desires.



Sand and Stones Installation on 36" x 36" pedestal



Lightbox, digital image 14" x 18"

CONCLUSION

This thesis work began with a personal exploration of the sublime - starting with time in nature and looking closely at the world around me. As I began to examine the digital culture that many of us are swept into; often without realizing, this became a prominent concept of the work. Philosophical questions about technology have evolved over the centuries, and continues to be subject matter within the visual arts. I have broadened my understanding through research into the Technological Sublime, and artists' work, however for me, it always comes back to time in nature. Philosophers have tried to define and understand the sublime from the Greeks to Kant to Wordsworth. Edmund Burke wrote, over two hundred years ago on the sublime, seeking a scientific explanation to understand its power. He concludes that a feeling of terror is a large feeling that leads to a feeling of the sublime. Although this does not resonate with me immediately it has been an interesting perspective to consider. To understand this feeling, defined as sublime, has been a worthwhile endeavor. Attempting to manifest these thoughts and ideas visually has proven to be difficult, but a journey I hope to continue and expand on through visual artworks.

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