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The sublime: water, flux & duality

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Department of Creative Arts
The Sublime: Water, Flux & Duality.
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"This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the award of the Degree of MCA – R of the University of Wollongong"
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#### **ABSTRACT**

In 2007 the Tate Gallery, UK, initiated a collaborative research project in response to the commemoration of Edmund Burke's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful (1756)*. The Tate website states that the purpose of the Tate project was to examine whether 'the sublime' continues to be a 'legitimate and potent concept in the contemporary world' (Riding et al. 2010). The project focussed on four key areas: the landscape sublime; the sublime in crisis; the Anglo-American sublime; and the ecological sublime. Continuing until 2010, the project has generated diverse discussion and investigation within a broad range of disciplines, effectively reopening the discussion within the context of contemporary visual art.

My research considers the continuing relevance of the arguments of Burke and Immanuel Kant, and how Jean-Francois Lyotard has reconfigured the debate about the sublime to have contemporary resonance. Further, I navigate psychological spaces, poetic structures and visual art references to consider what links can be drawn between water, flux, duality and the sublime in relation to my own art practice.

My paintings access the concerns of Burke, Kant and Lyotard by exploring spaces of uncertainty and anxiety, the limitless potential of imagination, the existential blankness of 'nothingness', and the problematic of presenting the 'unpresentable'. The predominantly small scale of my painting practice is deliberate and functions as a threshold for a potential immensity. By engaging the possibility of a limitless imagination, the work invites the viewer to an experience of immersion and a poetic encounter with a watery otherness: liquid, solid or vapour.

Drawing on the key debates of the Tate project, both the paintings and research seek to explore and engage in the dialectics of the sublime in relation to water. The purpose of my investigation is to generate discussion, invite reflection and extend the debate on this topic within contemporary contexts.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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#### CHAPTER 1 – THE SUBLIME: past & present contexts.

This thesis tracks and investigates some of the notions surrounding the many applications of the term 'sublime', both past and present, and positions these debates in relation to my own practice. Both this thesis and my art practice explore links between ideas about water, flux and duality in relation to the sublime. This research is primarily interested in the correspondence between subjectivity and objectivity. It locates the sublime in the liminal and shifting space between objective reality and subjective feelings. This entails considering not only the dialectic inherent in notions of the sublime but also the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful, as meanings associated with both terms have shifted considerably since the eighteenth century.

According to Shaw (2006 p.13), collaborator of the Tate project, the first known study on the sublime was attributed to Longinus in the first century for On the Sublime and is derived from the Latin sublimus - looking up from; lofty elevated. The origins of the term were primarily concerned with literary contexts and great writing but also aesthetics and noble human endeavour. However, the everyday sense of the term which can be characterised as grandeur, vastness, wonder incomprehensibility and the power to cause intense pleasure, a pleasure with transcendent qualities (Kant 1764: 2003 pp.48-50), can be tracked back to the eighteenth century. In 1756, the Irish political theorist, Edmund Burke argued in his treatise A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful that the sublime is both an objective reality and an emotional experience (Burke 1756: 2008 p.124). However, in 1764, his contemporary, German philosopher Immanuel Kant, also an authority on the topic, published Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime. Kant considered the sublime to be predominantly a subjective experience (Kant 1764: 2003). Significantly, Burke attributes terror as the ruling principle of the sublime and argues that it affects the strongest of human emotions: self-preservation and fear of death.

'No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimension or not; for it is impossible to look on

anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous.' (Burke 1756: 2008 p.53)

Burke's interpretation organised around the central principle of terror is the key distinction from Kant's interpretation. The sublime was a fashionable topic of the eighteenth century and resonated with the gothic sensibilities of the era. Burke directly cites terror in reference to the ocean (Burke 1756: 2008 p.53); vast, deep, unpredictable, capable of destruction and a key symbol of the sublime. This is commonly associated with the Romantic imagery of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W.Turner whose works represented 'key symbolic tropes of the sublime' (Nainby 2009 p.1). Art historian, Kenneth Clarke argues that in the eighteenth century the Romantic response to the 'goddess of Nature' was starting to be acknowledged in its dual capacities, and represented as either violently destructive by artists Turner and Gericault and the poet Byron, or tranquilly pastoral by artist Constable and the poet Wordsworth (Clarke 1973 p.265). These representations of the sublime included the vast Alps, the depths of an abyss, and the turbulence of a violent unleashed Nature, particularly the ocean. The ocean is established as key symbol of the sublime in literature, history and the visual arts.

This duality underpinned another significant distinction, for both Kant and Burke, between the sublime and the beautiful. Burke argued that whilst sometimes united, ultimately the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime was founded on different ruling principles; beauty being founded on pleasure and the sublime being founded on pain (Burke 1756: 2008 p.36). Both Kant and Burke, in the context of the late eighteenth century, offer a very gendered perspective, further assigning explicitly gendered distinctions (Kant 1764: 2003 pp.76-96) or alluding to this through culturally gendered roles (Burke 1756: 2008 pp.135-143). Both suggest that the beautiful pertains to the feminine principle. The feminine is associated with pleasure, light, surface, frivolity, and the small in scale, in contrast to the masculine and sublime qualities of horror, pain, darkness, depth, nobility, and the immense (Burke 1756; 2008 pp.100-105). Critically - gendered stereotypes aside - it is the explicit and implied superiority of the sublime that is extremely problematic, making gender a central component and distinction of the contemporary debate.

Another distinction between Burke and Kant, is Kant's insistence upon reason over emotion which also reflected the broader cultural concerns of the era (Kant 1764: 2003). Distinguished from Burke's emotional emphasis, this places the rational at

the core of Kant's observation, and his interpretation of the sublime is contingent on the relationship between perceptual and imaginative excess, and rational containment. My interpretation is that Kant's moral insistence emphasises transcendence over Burkian intensity. Whilst eighteenth century theorists continued to seek objective qualities in Nature - the Alps and ocean storms - to define the sublime, Kant's argument relies increasingly on the subjective responses to sublimity, culminating in his explanation of the sublime as purely subjective. Kant argues that all our understanding begins on a sensory level then proceeds to understanding and ends with reason.

To summarise, in contrast to Kant, Burke's sublime was less about wonder and transcendence and more about the gothic and intensity. Burke's sublime is directly linked to the fear experienced by the proximity to death, either real or perceived. When the proximity of danger is removed it is described as a 'delightful terror' (Burke 1756: 2008 p.122), which is a particularly gothic sensibility. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude, that the genre of horror, prevalent in both eighteenth century and contemporary culture is accessing elements of a Burkian sublime.

Recognised as key texts on the discussion of the Sublime, Burke and Kant's analysis have acquired posthumous momentum, and have been reconfigured by contemporary debate and art practice. The topic has experienced a revival at other historical junctures, which has contributed to the analysis of Burke and Kant.

Notably in the 1950's, following the Second World War, the paintings of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, which amongst other pertinent concerns of the topic and era, explored the sublime with a Kantian emphasis through an 'evocation of spatial immensity' (Morley 2010 p.13). Later in the 1980's, the influential writing of prominent French theorist/philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, offers yet another perspective through the lens of postmodernity, addressing in particular, the problematic of presenting the 'unpresentable' (Lyotard 1982: 2010). Most recently, it has been argued that the 'spectacle and terror' of 9/11 has acquired contemporary resonance of a Burkian nature, emphasising notions of the sublime in current debate (Battersby 2007 p.3: Shaw 2006 p.128).

It was the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Burke's treatise that initiated the Tate's collaborative research project and reignited the discussion. The purpose of this project was to examine whether the sublime continues to be a 'legitimate and potent concept in the contemporary world' (Riding et al. 2010). The project has

generated diverse discussion and investigation from a broad range of disciplines including the visual arts, resulting in a book edited by Simon Morley (2010) *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art,* which is based on the premise that in the pluralistic environment of contemporary art, the institutions and productions of visual culture are no longer fixed in traditional aesthetics but around ideas and themes Morley's selections shed light on a complex topic by presenting seven key categories of the contemporary sublime: *The Unpresentable, Transcendence, Nature, Technology, Terror, The Uncanny and Altered States.* These represent the key areas of current debate and underpin the structure of my investigation.

Whilst not offering a central argument, all contributions affirm the relevance and purpose of the Tate's inquiry, as the response has reopened intense debate about what significance the term might now have for contemporary culture, particularly in regard to the *politics* of the sublime. These investigations of the contemporary sublime retain many of the eighteenth century ideas of 'astonishment', 'wonder' and 'awe' and particularly the sensibilities of 'shock and horror', but reject the grand narratives and the gender politics. The previously mentioned politics of gender are especially problematic, as traditionally the sublime has been presented as a masculine conception (Burke 1756: 2008: Kant 1764: 2003), where the entire premise of the sublime has acquired meaning through its relationship to the beautiful - the feminine 'other'. Notions of beauty have also been reassessed and supplanted by ideas of glamour and androgyny (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999), repositioning the sublime significantly.

Many of the essays build on the problematic of the contemporary sublime previously addressed by prominent French theorist/philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard in the 1980's/1990's, who argues that the sublime 'disrupts' from the every day. Lyotard's experience of the sublime is 'the experience of a discontinuity in experience, the experience of the 'here' and 'now' (Gilbert- Rolfe 1999 p.52) and owes much to Barnett Newman's 1948 essay *The Sublime Is Now* (Morley 2010 pp 25-26). Renee van der Vall suggests in her essay (1994) *Silent Visions: Lyotard on the Sublime* that what Lyotard may have meant by this, is that the here and now, whilst seemingly a most commonplace experience is in fact most uncommon in that 'we do not know about 'now' because we think of what is to come – of the next ten minutes – in terms of what has been' (van der Vall 1994 p.69). Therefore, van der Vall suggests that Lyotard's theory questions time sequence itself and the continuity that links one event to another. In the formulation of Lyotard, 'the sublime is not the

presentation of the unpresentable, but the presentation of the fact that the unpresentable exists' (Freeman 1995 p.65 pp 64-66). It is further argued by van der Vall, that Burkian 'terror' is still very much a component of the contemporary sublime, and is directly linked to Lyotard's explanation, because both interpretations of the sublime are connected with terror, the fear that there will be 'no more happenings' (van der Vall 1994 p.71). Also, that ' the sublime feeling is the feeling, not of what happens, but that anything happens at all. It is the old philosophical wonder that there is 'something' rather than 'nothing' (van der Vall 1994 p.71)'.

Painter, writer, and university lecturer Jeremy Gilbert- Rolfe is a significant voice in the reconfiguration of the contemporary sublime. He proposes that the contemporary sublime, predominantly encountered through a digital experience, and therefore, mediated through a flat, smooth, surface, is the new technological sublime. Gilbert-Rolfe argues that it is both glamorous and androgynous and further replaces Kant's morality with glamour - a beauty that he describes as not passive, and therefore not complying with traditional notions of femininity (Gilbert- Rolfe 1999 p.7). Gilbert-Rolfe describes this technological sublime as a hybrid sublime of Burke, Kant, and Lyotard, due to the infinite, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable potential of the Internet. The homogenised 'postmodern blank, question mark or grey blur' (Mc Evilley 2001 p.79 pp 57-83) of the screen interface underpins a key distinction of the contemporary experience of the sublime. Digital manipulation now facilitates the experience of spectacle to be entirely achieved through special effects, offering what may be argued as a simulation of the sublime. The technological has arguably superseded what used to be encountered predominantly in a Kantian 'Nature', now primarily experienced as a mediated, 'domesticated' Nature that is experienced through a plasma screen, viewed globally and compressing time. However, recent, frequent and extremely destructive natural disasters have resulted in what the Tate project has identified as the 'Ecological Sublime'. This directly relates to the sublime as it reinforces the fragility and uncertainty, not only of our existence, but our reliance on technology which requires energy and has humanity poised on the brink of ecological disaster. Therefore, the arguments of Kant still persist in overwhelming wonder, immensity and an unpredictable nature on the edge of extinction.

So what persists of Burke? Predominantly, it is his existential interpretation that the sublime is poised somewhere on the precipice of imminent or inevitable death.

Contemporary and controversial artist Damien Hirst's ironic, life size, diamond skull,

'For the Love of God' (2007), the centrepiece for his show *Beyond Belief,* is the costliest artwork ever to be created (O'Hagan 2006). Hirst's formaldehyde sharks, and obsession with butterflies, all allude to the fleeting and fragile moment of life in contrast to the eternity of death and support the persistence and central position - albeit a reconfiguration - of a Burkian sublime in contemporary art (Brooks 1994 pp.55-67). Whilst Hirst's gothic shock/horror sensibility may not be to the taste of many, its commercial value cannot be ignored.

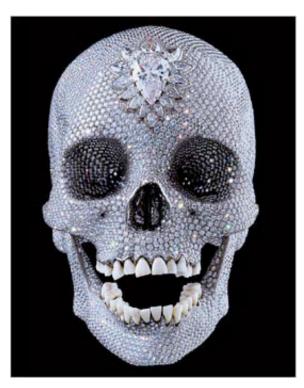


Fig. 1: Hirst (2007) For The Love of God, platinum, diamonds and human teeth.

Vijay Mishra notes in his essay 'The Gothic Sublime' (1994 pp.151-156), that a key problematic of analysing the sublime is the 'single-effect theory' delivered by the adjective/term preceding the noun. For example, this would include topics of specific focus such as the 'American Sublime' (Bloom 1976), the 'Abstract Sublime' (Rosenblum 1961 pp.108-112), the 'Morbid Sublime' (Haden-Guest 2001 p. 50), the 'Technological Sublime' (Beckley 2001), the 'Feminine Sublime' (Freeman 1995) and so on. However, to do so is to frame the sublime, which paradoxically fails to address the point that the very essence of the 'sublime' is that it cannot be contained. Thus, how to present the 'unpresentable' is inherently one of the complexities of this topic and is a specific focus of Lyotard's investigation.

#### CHAPTER 2 – WATER (FLUX) & TERROR (ANXIETY)

Water, particularly the ocean - but also ice and clouds/mist - has a traditional affinity to notions of the sublime. This chapter investigates links between water, terror and the sublime from literature, visual arts and popular culture ranging from the eighteenth century to contemporary examples. Water can exist in 3 states: fluid, solid and vapour and this transformative aspect resonates with the ambiguity and formlessness associated with notions of the sublime.

As a concept with literary origins, the links between water and the sublime are reflected in the sublime's dominant position in literature. Poets including Coleridge, Poe, Whitman and Baudelaire amongst others have historically established this association between the ocean and the sublime. The oceanic 'images' created in the imagination have been prolifically represented in the visual arts by artists such as Turner, Friedrich, and Gericault. Turner was reputedly roped to the mainmast of a sailing vessel so he could truly experience the ferocity of the stormy sea (Haden-Guest 2001 p.50, pp 49-56). Further, maritime expeditions of global exploration and war reinforced cultural links between water and heroic feats.

The ocean resonates with the Burkian sublime because it includes an overwhelming 'principle of uncertainty' (Mafe 2011 p.48) and anxiety. Despite the overarching order of the ebb and flow of tidal rhythms, the ocean is subject to an unpredictability and force that affirms the chaotic and uncharted territories of reality. The chaotic flux of the ocean surface is potentially as terrifying as the subterranean unknown depths. Although there are cultural, social and economical relationships between humans and the ocean that support our survival, the ocean, either fluid, frozen or vapour, is a vast space - physical and psychological - capable of inciting 'terror', awe and potential death.

Edgar Allan Poe's book, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), is the tale of a fateful maritime expedition into the (then) unknown Arctic regions. It charts the drama of a series of terrifying encounters with death including storms, cannibalism and shipwreck. This narrative of epic and heroic feats, conquering an unchartered 'Nature' is a structure perceived from a feminist perspective of the sublime (Freeman 1995 p.65) to have a masculine narrative. Of particular interest is how Poe is so skilfully able to navigate what French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard describes as 'the boundary between dream and objective thought, in that dim region

where dream feeds upon real forms and colours and from which conversely, aesthetic reality derives its oneiric atmosphere' (Bachelard 1970 p.101). Poe, well known for his affinity with water, the abyss and death, explores both the 'dark, deep and silent' dimension of water as well as the 'ungovernable' flux of water in what may be interpreted as a 'Gothic' subterranean sublime (Mishra 1994 pp.151-156). In describing a ship of 4000 tonnes poised on the crest of a wave in a 'supernatural' sea he writes, For a moment of intense terror she paused upon the giddy pinnacle, as if in contemplation of her own sublimity, then trembled and tottered, and – came down' (Poe 1838: 1998, p.183). This powerful image is a metaphor for 'uncontrollable chaos' that contributes to cultural anxiety in relation to the ocean, and the 'unknown' and isolated space it represents. Significant to concerns about the dualities of the sublime, it is the *surface* of the water that is affected by flux. The ocean depths are, at least metaphorically, dark, still and silent spaces, more akin to the human subconscious.

This polar/oceanic sublime still persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 'heroic vastness' of Antarctica is melting rapidly. Previously, it was the unknown and inhospitable conditions related to its exploration that contributed to polar anxiety, however, now it is the consequences of its inevitable disappearance that is creating global anxiety. This key investigation of the Tate project is referred to as the 'Ecological Sublime' (Riding et al. 2010).

Painted in the cultural context of the exploration of uncharted territory of the nineteenth century, Caspar Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* (1825) underpins anxiety around both the unknown and ice. This polar image of a shipwreck, emphasises the extreme isolation in relation to the vastness of the elements, and establishes a visual connection with both Poe's poetic account of ice and maritime exploration and notions of the sublime

Contemporary painter and university lecturer, Fiona Dobrijevich, explores these concerns in her paper, 'Ice & Anxiety; The Contemporary Sublime' (2008) in which she explores our cultural relations with ice. Dobrijevich charts the trajectory of the sublime, examining the anxiety of eighteenth century polar exploration in Friedrich's Sea of Ice (1825) through to recent apocalyptic blockbuster films such as The Day After Tomorrow (2010). Dobrijevich outlines contemporary polar anxieties by addressing both the ecological and technological sublime, which she argues are encountered through the technological interface of a plasma screen. Audiences are

manipulated to respond with terror to the dramatic special effects of digital media, paradoxically 'domesticating' the spectacle of a 'vengeful nature'.



Fig. 2: Friedrich (1823-5) Sea of Ice (Polar Sea), oil on canvas.

Poe's account of explorers encounters with the ocean have resonance with contemporary British artist, Tacita Dean, who represents a persistent interest in oceanic narratives concerning both terror and the exploration of new frontiers. Dean's work The Roaring Forties (1997) presented by the Turner Prize, Tate Gallery, UK, evokes the aesthetic of black and white cinema (Delaney 2002) through the use of chalk, resulting in a series of chalkboard drawings to construct an epic sea narrative. This series is a part of a larger project known as Disappearance at Sea, and was inspired by the mysterious disappearance of yachtsman Donald Crowhurst in 1969, who was participating in The Sunday Times Golden Globe Race (Delaney 2002). Dean writes in her essay (1997: 2010 pp.122-122) about another disappearance at sea, of the Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader who was making an artwork; a trilogy called *In Search of the Miraculous*. She writes, that 'he believed that setting sail alone in a small boat, surrendering himself up to the forces of the sea, was the highest form of pilgrimage. The sea was the last free place on earth' (Dean 1997: 2010 p.122). Ader set sail in 1975 from Cape Cod, USA to Falmouth, UK in a thirteen foot a boat called Ocean Wave, with a camera and a tape recorder and died making a work of art (Dean 1997: 2010 p.122).



Fig. 3: Dean (1997) Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days, installation: chalk on blackboard.

In this essay, Dean acknowledges Ader's perception of the sea as a limitless space, a symbol of freedom, a seductively mesmerising and fatal entity and Ader's willing submission to risk his life for a sublime experience and to push himself to his mortal limit to do so.

An ongoing trope in popular culture, terror and anxiety around the ocean is exemplified in Steven Spielberg's (1975) film 'Jaws'. Significant for manipulating a generation into Burkian anxiety/terror around the ocean, the film's tagline, 'Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water' (Kuehn 2004) has become a highly parodied quote in popular culture and evokes our deepest anxieties about what lurks beneath the surface.

In the collective cultural imagination, past and present, the ocean continues to evoke the sublime, both in the Kantian sense of *incomprehensibility, vastness, wonder* and *nature*, but especially in a Burkian sense of *terror*. This experience of terror is not only the potential unpredictable, tumultuous spectacle of the surface, but also the subterranean gothic horror of the dark, invisible depth experienced as both a subjective and objective sublimity.

#### CHAPTER 3 - WATER & DUALITY: dialectics of the sublime

Research methodologies in the creative arts, particularly practices that emerge from an imaginative origin, are well suited to Bachelard's thorough but poetic expression. He argues that the imagination requires a constant dialectic of ideas, for instance intimacy and immensity (Bachelard 1942: 1983 p.23). Like Kant, Bachelard suggests that the immensity of our imaginations is relative to an individual's capacity to dream and create 'images'. Navigating psychological spaces and using visual art references, the purpose of this chapter is to establish links between the poetic dualities of the substance water in relation to dualities of the sublime. Significantly this analysis of the *surface* of water is in contrast to Poe, whose affinity for water is predominantly a fascination with the deep, dark, still ocean water of the abyss; dense and salty water; a water of substance and depth that embodies the melancholy of fully comprehending the inevitability of death. In this chapter I propose that water embodies the dialectic of surface/depth and subjectivity/objectivity inherent in concepts of the sublime.

One of the particular qualities of water is its reflective capacity. Caravaggio's painting *Narcissus* (c.1597-1599) is an image embedded in our cultural memory representing the myth, which exemplifies the dialectic of 'Self' and 'Other' through the reflective surface of water.



Fig. 4: Caravaggio (c.1597 -1599) Narcissus, oil on canvas.

In the case of Narcissus, it is specifically the Self and the projected Self of a united masculine and feminine principle, Echo, that emphasises the dialectic of both seeing and revealing oneself and is related to the psychology of narcissism (Bachelard 1942: 1983 p.20). Narcissus is also a myth about beauty, Lacanian 'otherness' and death by drowning.

In the dialectic of the sublime and the beautiful, which engages both aesthetic and psychological concerns of objectivity and subjectivity, I would suggest this myth is extremely pertinent to the concerns of contemporary culture and concerns of the sublime, and has been reworked by a number of artists. As previously suggested, the notion of the 'surface' has links to the feminine principle. In the exhibition (2001) Beauty's Nothing at Fahey/Klein Gallery LA, London based Israeli photographer, Nadav Kander, reworks Carravaggio's image using model Erin O'Connor.



Fig. 5: Kander (2001) Erin O'Connor (After Caravaggio), photograph.

By changing the medium to photography and replacing the male Narcissus for a female, celebrity, fashion model, Kandar comments on the extreme narcissism of contemporary culture, with its blurred boundaries (public/private, gender) and quest for eternal youth and beauty. Further, Kandar's image is relevant to the topic of the contemporary sublime as it supports Gilbert-Rolfe's (1999) argument of links between beauty, glamour and the smooth homogenised surface of the digital photograph/screen image.

Significantly, it is specifically *still* water that is necessary for a clear, unbroken reflection on the surface - not the flux of the ocean surface but - the fresh water of a lake or substantial pool of water. Reflection is something that is held upon the *surface*, and in the absence of a human subject will reflect an infinite cosmos (Bachelard 1942: 1983 p.57). This cosmos also contains water, with only the 'skin' of the atmosphere to protect us from the vast, dark unknown - the infinite, 'absolute night' (Bowles 1949: 2010 p.99).

Pertinent to the dialectic of 'Self' and 'Other' and the myth of Narcissus, is psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory on 'The Mirror Stage.' This formulates an account of how human subjectivity is based on the split experienced by an infant on first encountering its own reflection, from whence, it is subsequently forced to exchange its sense of wholeness for a compromised relationship with the desire of the 'Other' (Shaw 2006 p.123). Lacan argues that during the mirror-stage (6-18 months old), we cannot both 'see', as a subjective experience, and 'be seen' as an object (Shaw 2006 p.123). For Lacan, the ideal 'I' is not attainable, and he agues that self-identity is an illusion. He suggests this split of consciousness continues to haunt the individual throughout their life and his therapeutic practice is centred on the patient coming to terms with this duality.

Olaf Nicolai, an artist of East German origin, considers this duality in his self-portrait *Portrait of the Artist as Weeping Narcissus* (2000). The cast sculpture has tears falling into a pool of water, breaking the system of self-referentiality (Frike 2001) and disrupting the continuity of the flat surface.



Fig. 6: Nicolai (2000) Portrait of the Artist as Weeping Narcissus, installation.

This highlights links between water, identification and death to the concepts of the sublime, which Harold Bloom argues is inherently a split in subjectivity and objectivity (1976: 2001 p.39). This dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity, or Self and Other, underpins Bloom's analysis of the sublime, in his distinction between the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's interpretation of the sublime in *The Abyss and I* and the poet Walt Whitman's The Abyss of My Self (Bloom 1976: 2001 p.39). Bloom describes both poems as the 'American Sublime', which he attributes to the paradox of repression and freedom. Repression is the psychological term, first explored by Freud and later Lacan, referring to the suppressed subconscious desires of the subject, resulting in the previously mentioned notions of a split 'Self'. Bloom asserts that the difference between the American Sublime and a British or Continental model is 'not by a greater or lesser degree of positivity or negativity, but by a greater acceptance or affirmation of discontinuities in the 'Self' (Bloom 1976: 2001 p.31). The poems of Walt Whitman, which Bloom writes about in relation to the sublime, are profoundly melancholic, frequently referencing the ocean, and allude to an isolated and solitary existence, and his suicide on the beach. Solitude has a particular affinity with the sublime and is also attributed to the masculine (Kant 1764: 2003). This is noted specifically in regard to artist Barnett Newman one hundred years later, who deeply suspicious of the communal desired solitude (Ratcliff 1991: 2001 p.231). This is in contrast to the 'social' feminine (Kant 1764: 2003).

Historically, death by drowning, particularly suicide, has been established in the cultural psyche as a narrative of the Victorian/fin de siècle feminine fate: fall, decline and death (Curnow 2003: Gates 1988: Nicoletti 2004 p.9). Paintings such as Ophelia (Shakespeare/ Millais), The Lady of Shallot (Tennyson/Waterhouse), Found Drowned (Hood/Watts) and The Bridge of Sighs (Hood/Gustav Dore) support this literary and visual myth. Thomas Hood's poem, Bridge of Sighs further suggests that female sexuality is sublimated (Gay 1992)) and the souls of these women are redeemed by a watery death (Nicoletti 2004 p9). It is a mythology beloved and perpetuated in the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who revelled in an exalted melancholy, and imagery of the passive, doomed, forsaken and 'fallen' woman (Poulson 1999 p.195) and romanticised the tragic. This genre could be interpreted as an example of Mishra's Morbid/Gothic Sublime and combines the dual anxieties of sex and death. The theme was very popular in the era of Victorian Britain, a time where death was a frequent occurrence and grief was openly acknowledged, even celebrated (Poulson 1999 p.194) and sexuality was repressed. The associations between female melancholia, weeping of salty tears and water are clear. Poe wrote

in the *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), 'that the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world' (Poulson 1999 p190). Masculine artistic inspiration (Rossetti, Hunt, Poe) was frequently derived from this morbid topic, which represented females as not only dead, but completely passive. Whilst the topic was a manifestation of a pathological state it was not out of context to the social and artistic context, although there are overtones of more sinister subtexts (Poulson 1999 pp.190-191). Millais' *Ophelia* is the most frequently purchased postcard in the Tate Gallery bookshop (Curnow et al 2003) suggesting this topic of female drowning continues to resonate with contemporary audiences and artists exploring the sublime.



Fig. 7: Millais (1851-2) Ophelia, oil on canvas.

Recently, the worlds of high fashion and fine art collide on this theme in another of Kander's photographs exploring melancholy, beauty and the sublime. Kander's exhibition at the Lowry, London (2004), again uses the famous model Erin O'Connor, this time to reinterpret Millais' *Ophelia*. These examples support the premise and assertion of Gilbert-Rolfe's book *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, that glamour - more sexual/erotic and dangerous than beauty - and the contemporary sublime are inextricably entwined (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999 pp 87-97).



Fig. 9: Kander (2004) Erin O'Connor (After Millais), photograph.

Further supporting a contemporary sensibility for a gothic aesthetic, Foltyn presents an argument for a current resurgence of the Morbid Sublime in the world of high fashion in her journal article (2010) 'To Die For: Skull Style and Corpse Chic in Fashion Design'. This article presents high fashion's *haute couture* taste for the gothic - particularly amongst the Rock and Roll elite - and features the celebrity model, Lily Cole, photographed by Terry Richardson for the Pirelli Calendar in a reconstruction of Millais' *Ophelia*.



Fig. 8: Richardson (2010) Lily Cole as Ophelia, photograph.

The dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful continues. The feminist perspective of the sublime in the contemporary debate is particularly pertinent in regard to scale, texture and passivity. The contemporary sublime frequently accessed through a plasma screen or photographic image, is neither vast nor rugged, and therefore disrupts the traditional stereotypes (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999). The concept of the sublime is no longer able to exist purely as a romanticised, poetic or transcendental notion, because it has been politicised and the traditional

understanding of the sublime exposed as a masculine epic narrative, which has excluded women (Freeman 1995).

However, when viewed through the poetic lens of Bachelard, the differences between the immense and the miniature are less irreconcilably contrasted, by scale, texture or gender. Bachelard considers the work of poet Baudelaire, to build his argument (Bachelard 1958: 1994 p.192). Baudelaire's poem *Correspondences* (Baudelaire 1857: 1995 p.5) from his collection of poems *Fleurs du Mal*, links the immensities of the imagination, with the immensities of the cosmos, emphasising the dialectics of inside/outside. Bachelard also states that, 'Psychologically speaking, it is in reverie that we are free beings' (Bachelard 1960: 2010 p.101).

The human subject, composed of approximately 70% water, when immersed in water, has only our skin separating us from merging. Thus, in the poetic imagination, water establishes a spatial dialectic of surface/depth, vast/miniature, internal and external. Psychologically, the sublime further establishes dialectics of the social/anti-social and subjectivity and objectivity. This dialectical tension, a core component of the Romantic sublime, is the inevitable movement of seeking 'resolution of an infinite contradiction' (McEvilley 2001 p.60) and was Schelling's, albeit Romantic, definition of a great artwork differing from contemporary interpretations based on Lyotard that the sublime occurs in 'blandness' – a hybrid of Burkian terror – and anxiety of 'no more happenings'.

# CHAPTER 4 – PAINTING, TECHNOLOGY & THE SUBLIME: a critical reflection on my practice.

Bachelard posits the notion of childhood reverie as the most potent point of our ability to access the internal immensity of our imagination – 'and that is why childhood is at the origin of the greatest landscapes. Our childhood solitudes have given us the primitive immensities' (Bachelard 1960: 2010 p.102).



Fig. 10: Hulbert (2011) Submerged, oil on canvas.

I enjoyed a freedom in my childhood in the 1960's -1970's, inconceivable today, around Sydney harbour and the northern beaches. This involved spending a substantial amount of time in, on, or under water. At this time, I experienced an encounter with death when I reportedly drowned and was revived by a stranger. Despite no conscious memory of this incident my memories are of playing at 'pretending' to be dead, whilst experiencing the sensation of floating downwards, submerged, still and silent, until my lungs were bursting. An important aspect of this body of work is concerned with evoking those memories and feelings of water - 'the perfumes, colours, sounds' (Baudelaire 1857:1995 p.5) - a time of dreaming, wonder and freedom, but also potential danger. These childhood encounters have profoundly impacted on my sensibilities and relationship with the ocean and the alleged drowning incident has stimulated an interest in the topic of drowning as a female narrative.

In this respect, my paintings are a synthesis of sensory and visual memory, of both place and imagination. These early memories of freedom are starkly contrasted to an adolescence spent in Japan and later England. The stark geographical contrast, the coldness, moodiness and muted light of the English landscape affected me profoundly. The damp, greyness and medieval architecture awakened an interest in Romanticism, rebellion and the gothic, as did the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century of which I was an avid reader. My personal history, marked by frequent relocations, has created a sense of dislocation and displacement, experienced as a fragmented sense of self, resulting in paradoxical needs of both stability and constant change. This experience of dislocation is explored through my work as a striving for a reconciliation of opposites. This state, I acknowledge as an illusion - or at least a fleeting moment - in a world of flux. In addition, psychological and aesthetic tension, is constructed and explored by maintaining a balance between order and chaos which seeks a unified whole. As previously mentioned, this dialectical tension is a core component of the Romantic Sublime. However, I am uneasy about my work being positioned purely in a Romantic context as it necessarily navigates the concerns of a postmodern world. The pluralism of the contemporary world has liberated the modern subject from the tyranny of one encompassing discourse and my work is free to explore the multiple meanings in the term 'sublime'.

One of the major expressions of the sublime for the 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic artists' was the painting of landscapes (Rosenblum 1961: 2010 p.108) and the paintings of Whistler and Turner, have undoubtedly been an influence on me. Another artistic influence is from later in the 1950's, when Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman explored their own ideas about the 'Abstract Sublime' (Rosenblum 1961: 2010 pp.108-112) that alluded to landscape by their immensity. Rothko employed abstraction, size and colour to signify the 'unpresentable', vastness and intensity of sublime. Infinity is a continuing and prominent aspect of both the Kantian sublime and Lyotard's interpretation. My work, often interpreted by the viewer as landscape, is primarily attempting to convey atmosphere and mood and explores many devices used to signify the 'unpresentable': ambiguity, colour, movement, tension, texture through the layering and removal of paint. The small scale of the work is a direct and intentional reference to the potential immensity (Douglas 2010) of the imagination as well as the experience of the painting event.

My paintings have not yet completely abandoned, arguably the most potent and poetic signifier of the sublime - the ocean. The paintings slip between attempts to represent the 'unpresentable' - the feeling, mood and sound of water, and the more figurative depictions of the flux of the surface. Sometimes exploring beauty and surface, sometimes the dark and menacing depths, and sometimes negotiating the tension of beauty and menace united. The surface is also associated for me with deafening noise whilst the depth resonates with silence, solitude and a profound sense of 'being'. Ultimately, my paintings seek to create both an 'affective' response and an emotional resonance in the viewer through colour, brushstroke, and tension.



Fig. 11: Hulbert (2011) Here & Now, oil on canvas.

A continuing concern of my practice plays with the ambiguity of a subjective and objective perception. The work lies uncertainly on the precipice of reality collapsing into abstraction; conscious intention slipping into subconscious action where substances interact with each other creating chance events. The work is a hybrid of past and present influences, using the familiar tropes of the sublime and the conceptual intention of 'anything can happen' in the painting medium. The interplay between order and chaos explores the uncertainty of paint and the poetic qualities of water. The ambiguity of the work positions the viewer in a liminal place - an uncertainty that returns to the condition underpinning the sublime.

As a painter, in an image-saturated world, a significant point of consideration is the position of painting in relation to that of photography/digital media in the current debate. The viscosity of paint is in direct opposition, in many ways, to one of the central contemporary debates on the sublime – the technological Sublime.



Fig. 12: Hulbert (2011) Flux II, oil on canvas.

Painting arguably withdrew from its task of representation in the twentieth century, when technological progress advanced the position of film and photography (Schwabsky 2008 p.8). Traditionally, photography was expected to portray some sort of 'truth' for which painting could only provide an interpretation. However, digital photography has collapsed absolute notions of truth adhered to in modernism and arguably the function, thereby blurring the boundaries for both painting and photography. This has ironically lead photography towards the same end point as painting: relieved of its duty to represent truth. Beckley and Gilbert-Rolfe both argue, devoid of Baudrillard doom, that the contemporary sublime is predominantly experienced through some kind of digital encounter. Many artists address the theme of the sublime, explicitly or implicitly, through film and digital media, for instance, Bill Viola (transcendence), Bill Henson (unknown/darkness/thresholds), Simone Douglas (immensity), Rosemary Lang (terror/freedom), and Andreas Gursky (blandness/immensity) amongst others.

The 'death of painting' has been debated at regular junctures, since minimalist art in the 1960's. Yet still painting persists. Contemporary painters on the topic are harder to track than artists using digital media or installation. However, those that are, including Louise Hearman (terror), Ben Quilty (death/rebellion), Luc Tuymans (terror), Marlene Dumas (abject) and Gerhard Richter (nature), are nonetheless, finding contemporary ways of representing the sublime. Painter, Gerhard Richter, has spent his career exploring the dialogue between painting and photography in a more extreme way by using one medium to critique the other. Recently contemporary painter Tim Maguire has explored this crossover in his very 'painterly' video of *Bondi: Light and Water* (2010). Paint - a potentially tactile surface, with smell and texture quite unlike the smoothness of a screen-based/digital image - is subject to the unpredictability of substances and environments and can be likened to alchemy (Elkins 2000 p.9).

Gilbert-Rolfe, a painter himself, suggests that the paradox of painting, an art of images, is 'how to live as a 'thing' in a world that has ceased to be a world of things and has become itself a world of images' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999 p.123). A painting is always also an object, and as such, the viewing of them will usually give some clue as to the making of them (Gilbert- Rolfe 1999 p.104). This is not so with a photograph or the increasingly homogenised surface of the contemporary experience mediated through a screen or photographic image. Lyotard's 'no more happenings', is what has been termed 'blankness' - a grey blur. Painting potentially threatens to disrupt this – but could also mimic this as Richter discovered.

Marlene Dumas states that 'the content of a painting cannot be separated from the feel of the surface' (Dumas 1993 p.95). In my own work, this is most relevant during the process when the different mediums, solvent, varnish and floating debris of the studio environment enables particular textures, although I do not deliberately use impasto techniques. By using paint, an arguably dead/resurrected art practice, I am commenting on the continually potentially extinct position of painting in contemporary art, and further positioning it on an uncertain precipice. By affirming the immediacy of the painting experience – the painting becomes an event, that leads to more events, if only to use up the paint on the palette.

Creativity/painting is for me, a sublimation of anxiety and self-sabotaging tendencies; a sublime act because it is a life-affirming action and an expression of subconscious residue. Painting is generally a cathartic and transformative, albeit

temporary, experience. This aspect of my work relates to the notions of transcendence addressed in Morley's book, which invites discussion from artists such as Bill Viola, Yves Klein and Anish Kapoor.





Fig.13: Hulbert (2010) (detail) Metamorphosis, oil on canvas.

Fig.14: Hulbert (2011) Untitled, oil on linen on board.

My work reflects both principles of anxiety and duality. The first mark holds the anxiety and anticipation of the 'unknown' – the uncertainty of any preconceived form and the duality of an objective and subjective representation. Each painting is approached with the belief that anything could happen - failure subjective and/or objective - is a perpetual possibility. It is an act of courage, of 'falling in'. The only certainty is that something will come from nothing and that some metamorphosis will occur. Each painting offers a threshold ('lintel') to a new state of perception. The painting process is an intensely focused experience engaging in the 'here and now'. The conceptual intention of my work explores the existential and philosophical possibility of 'something' rather than 'nothing'. The work attempts to create an aesthetic and psychological tension using the control and accident of paint.

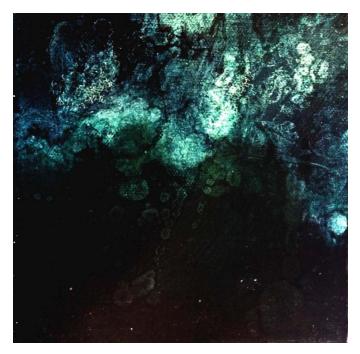


Fig.15: Hulbert (2011) Submerged II, oil on canvas.

Representation collapses, slipping into abstraction and ambiguity, establishing a continual play between the known and unknown. I build layers of paint through numerous glazes that often conceal the original brushmarks. The random and radical removal of paint, at which point I risk losing a painting, requires courage. Like Newman's 'zip' paintings, the use of solvent in the drip/bubble motif, returns the surface back to reveal the beginning. It is a process of concealing and revealing.

Both my research and practice address the contemporary sublime by either, explicitly or implicitly, exploring terror, the uncanny, transcendence, nature, technology and the 'unpresentable' and reference and the key concerns of the Tate project. My work addresses the concerns of Burkian anxiety, Kantian wonder/immensity and Lyotard's 'happenings'. The fragile and liminal space poised, between worlds and times, reality and imagination, is where my exploration of the sublime is positioned.

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