

Mapping the Sublime at the Brand



Liz Miller Kovacs, 2021, Braunkohle Venus, 4-channel video, 4 minutes 22 seconds

Los Angeles-based artists Lawrence Gipe and Beth Davila Waldman organized this survey of a diverse group of 19 artists that challenge our culture's entrenched conceptions regarding landscape, critically re-examining the genre as a mediated view

of nature and a construction of centuries of aesthetic processing, demarcation and colonial expansion. The works persuade the viewer to consider the landscape genre anew, with traditional notions of the Sublime reevaluated to reflect contemporary issues of climate change and the Anthropocene. The artists featured have made compelling cases, over decades of practice and passion, for an issue that needs to be faced with ever-growing urgency. An opening reception will be held on April 23, 2022 at 4:00 p.m. with an artist panel moderated by Shana Nys Dambrot

There is a current revival of the landscape genre that is reflective of postmodern attitudes toward critically examining the hidden motives in cultural productions as well as the urgency of climate change. Like the historical landscape painters, many contemporary artists identify nature as the primary source of the sublime, adhering to the romantic notions of sublimity but with less emphasis on spiritual transcendence and escapist balm and with a greater concern in shaping an evolving experience of sublimity. A photograph of melting oceanic glaciers today has wider implications than does Caspar David Friedrich's nineteenth century painting of craggy ice flows. While both are firmly rooted in sublime ideas of immanent collapse and implications of mortality, a current image of arctic ice adrift alludes to the role of *homo colossus* in hastening extinction while the latter suggests merely what the forces of nature can wreak upon us. The Age of the Anthropocene has greatly broadened the parameters of the sublime experience.

"Ultimately the sublime", Simon Morley writes, "is an experience looking for a context." Many categories of sublimity have emerged: the abstract, technological, industrial, capitalistic, social, natural, territorial sublime to name a few. There are no neutral landscape representations. To suggest that we can "map" what formerly was deemed too vast,

unpresentable and indeterminate or lying beyond our perceptual limits for us to comprehend, seems to directly contradict the original definitions of the term. Rather, this mapping refers to how we will negotiate the wild terrain of climate change and an ungovernable technology. Whereas in previous centuries viewers could theoretically psychologically distance themselves from feelings of self annihilation while confronting a threatening natural spectacle, today humanity is unable to extricate itself physically or mentally from the immanent destruction wrought by global warming. Human hubris and stubborn progressive/utopian narratives still support the belief that technology can save us from climate catastrophe. However, think of the endless loop that has been created when science contributes to overpopulating the planet with life saving drugs and abundant food thus hastening the end of the planet's carrying capacity.

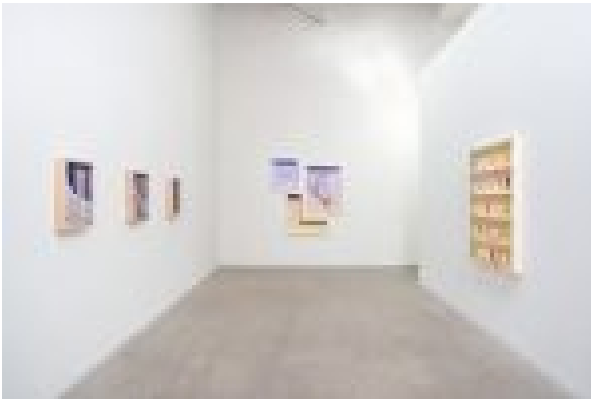
The contemporary landscapists in this exhibition are taking a different tack. They are focusing instead on remaining with these threshold experiences to examine our complicated and conflicted *relationship* to the landscape in contrast to removing our gaze or spectatorship upon terrifying situations.

Boundaries are increasingly dissolved between subject and object, challenging the position of the viewer to become part of a constantly expanding field of engagement. Perhaps it's closer to learning to "think like a mountain" as Aldo Leopold wrote. The approach is less reliant on scientific acumen and more concerned with "staying with the trouble" eco writer Donna Haraway tells us.

The artists in "Mapping the Sublime", then, are working with this acknowledgement of living with extreme precarity unassuaged by comforting thoughts of retreating to one's living room to nourish thoughts of transcendence and transformation. They are bearing witness to a planet that is traumatized—oceans and lands that are poisoned with plastic,

toxins fouling the air, aggressions into crucial biospheres that cannot heal quickly if ever. Their artworks do not shy away from confronting future realities that result from climate change: wars, hyper surveillance, displacements, racial and ethnic tensions, pollution, pandemics, and shortages. Acutely attuned to the fact that we will have to coexist with the results of our behaviors, they are imaginatively mapping the way, often enlisting beauty as an ally. “Art is a thought from the future” eco philosopher Timothy Morton writes, and a critical means for understanding the period he describes as “the beginning after the end”. We have met the sublime and it is us.

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