

# **MAPPING THE SUBLIME: REFRAMING LANDSCAPE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**



Curated by Lawrence Gipe and Beth Davila Waldman

**APRIL 2 - JUNE 11, 2022**

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**AMIR ZAKI**

## MAPPING THE SUBLIME

by Constance Mallinson

Concepts of the sublime gained importance in the eighteenth century as Romanticism aroused a passionate contemplation of nature as landscape artists grappled with their subjects. Articulated primarily by Edmund Burke (1729-1797), the sublime experience was animated in the presence of dramatic snowcapped mountains, thundering waterfalls, stormy seas, bottomless abysses, or the limitless starry heavens with terror, shock and awe being the "ruling principle of the sublime." Any delight in these natural wonders soon metamorphosized into horrified feelings of destabilization or even dissolution in the viewer. According to Burke, an essentially controlled encounter with the uncontrollable, resulting in a standing on an existential brink and then a pulling away, had the power to ennoble, strengthen and ultimately transform the self. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) similarly observed that nature's grandeur and boundlessness exceeds our human imagination to control or comprehend it. Because the sublime encounter caused an awareness of excess, we could then transform this recognition of our limitations and insufficiencies positively into enhanced reasoning powers. For numerous landscapists of the time, the sublime perspective often entailed religious or spiritual renewal.

Equally important to understanding this phenomenon is reckoning with the sublime's constant companion, landscape painting and photography. Landscape imagery in all its forms from the mythical, documentary, to the symbolic has historically been used, sometimes nefariously, as an agent of social, economic, artistic and political change, with the ideologies and operative powers embedded in landscape rarely discussed. For example, landscape painting in the nineteenth century was closely allied with promoting Manifest Destiny in the United States and colonial expansion by both European and American interests. Magisterial scenes of glistening flowing waters, fertile valleys, and mineral rich mountain ranges rendered in lush seductive detail by painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran enticed settlers with their promises of plentitude and freedom. The railroads could push west with popular support, plunder

resources and decimate native populations. This alignment of artists and industry helped facilitate the Age of Exuberance and continued until the country was fully settled, and artists were swayed by the Modernist project of defining a different intention for art in the late nineteenth century.

The current revival of the landscape genre as an important area of artistic exploration 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, unrepresentable 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

AMIR ZAKI



*Concrete Vessel 55, 2020, photograph, 60" x 75"*

## AMIR ZAKI

Amir Zaki (born 1974, Beaumont, California) is an American artist based in Southern California. He is best known for "hybridized" photographs using digital and analog technologies that explore the rhetoric of authenticity, vocabulary of documentary, and acts of looking and constructing images. His work often focuses on the iconography and landscape of Southern California, simultaneously celebrating the banal and vernacular and subverting its related mythology. Zaki has exhibited nationally and internationally, and been featured in shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Orange County Museum of Art (California Biennial, 2006), California Museum of Photography, and San Jose Museum of Art. His work is held in the public collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Hammer Museum, New Museum, and Whitney Museum, among many, and appears in the anthologies Vitamin Ph (2006), Photography is Magic (by Charlotte Cotton, 2015) and Both Sides of Sunset: Photographing Los Angeles (2015).







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