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CONTEMPORARY ART & DESIGN



Pasadena Museum of California Art: The Feminine Sublime January 21–June 3, 2018

 [Molly Enholm April 23, 2018](#)

The Romantic notion of the sublime continues to haunt our consciousness, often accompanied by a healthy dose of critique. The concept, most famously articulated in the influential writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, posits, in a simplified version, that a form might either delight the eye (the beautiful) or overwhelm the viewer through scale, power and grandeur (the sublime). In *The Feminine Sublime*, currently on view at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, five Los Angeles-based painters further explore this legacy in response to contemporary conditions. That these artists happen to be female, dealing with notions typically ascribed to their male counterparts, offers another layer to excavate.

In a book with which the exhibition shares its name, literary critic Barbara Claire Freeman exposes the gendered oppositions providing the foundation of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*. She writes, "The sublime amalgamates such conventionally masculine qualities as power, size, ambition, awe, and majesty; the beautiful collects the equally conventional feminine traits of softness, smallness, weakness, docility, delicacy, and timidity." Where Freeman primarily critiques literature, the current exhibition at PMCA, curated by artist and participant Constance Mallinson, offers a powerful challenge to Burke's gendered investigation through the visual arts, in the form of landscape painting. While each artist offers an individual point of entry, collectively, Merion Estes, Yvette Gellis, Virginia Katz, Marie Thibeault and Mallinson effectively deconstruct Burke's presuppositions.



Today, the sublime of the natural world is often countered by the sublime of the industrial. No longer a construct of the mind, as Kant might have it, a more physical intrusion is exemplified in the heaps of leftover candy-colored packaging and forgotten toys Mallinson strews among the fallen leaves of her autumnal landscape painted with painstaking precision. The panoramic view puts forth empirical evidence of contemporary consumption gone feral, as unyielding in its monstrous appetite as Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children*, while suggesting a conclusion similar to the great Titan's fate. Across the gallery, a trio of abstractions by Thibeault also takes on the impact of unfettered consumerism. The imagery, conjuring notions of a horizon obscured through layers of brightly colored geometric forms and roughly hewn outlines, is based on the artist's views of the Port of Long Beach with its seemingly endless parade of container ships coming to harbor.

The sublime is never static, but remains in a state of eternal evolution. Estes, known for exquisitely layering collage and paint on found printed fabrics, conjures destructive forces in *Burchfield's Plea* as a wildfire destroys what appears to have once been an imaginative landscape of the earlier American visionary artist. Estes counters this image of elemental force with her second work, depicting melting ice caps rendered beneath a foreboding blood-red sky—a cautionary tale with global impact. Gellis also negotiates this territory, rejecting the associations of a pristine wilderness in her contemporary abstractions. The single painting on view is actually a fusion of two works, the first made in response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, which she later sliced and mounted onto a second canvas. The fractured amalgamation of the two works echoes the discord within both the ecological and the political landscape, suggesting that the sublime is not limited to the natural world.

Against these variegated paintings Katz's nearly monochromatic works offer a meditative counterpoint. A large-scale triptych, *Land-Into the Abyss*, evokes views of preserved cross sections, macroscopic slides, of the oceanic abyssal zone as aquamarines morph into deep azurite blues, occasionally interrupted with mineral hues of copper and ochre. Nearby, the sole sculptural work in the exhibition lacks the luscious hues found in *the Abyss*, purposely removed by the artist to invoke a sense of loss. Wavelike forms constructed of warm gray slabs of pigment populated with semiprecious stones conjure notions of the recent landscapes and the avalanche of debris left in their wake. If the Kantian secret to conquering the sublime is through conceptualizing the source of our dread, these semiprecious stones offer glimmers of hope,

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