

REDEFINING THE SUBLIME

MAN VS. NATURE AT HALL ART

For Victorian critic John Ruskin, the “sublime” described an aesthetic experience of awe and magnificence accompanied by subjective and even violent emotion. Guest curator Joel Sternfeld, a photographer and videographer teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, re-visits this concept in “Landscapes After Ruskin,” selecting from over 6,000 works of post-World War II art in the collections of the Hall family and Hall Art Foundation. Quaintly staged in the buildings of a former Vermont dairy farm, the exhibition asks whether we can ever separate the human mark from nature. Its imagery challenges us to recognize a world outside that increasingly fails us as we fail it.

Sternfeld favors digital and photographic imagery, painting, and drawing, with a smattering of sculptures, installations, and videos. Familiar German names – Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Thomas Ruff – fill the group of 52 artists, along with numerous other internationally recognized, mostly male artists – Ai Weiwei, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Neil Jenney, David Wojnarowicz, Robert Overby – and other rising stars.

Throughout the show, the mood tends toward the subdued and flat; even the brighter images exude undertones of alienation, violence, and prophecy. Nature is a wan player when not a grim and angry backdrop. Its vast expanses, diversity of forms and power are undercut by triviality, ennui and impotence. The more mirthless works exude disappointment in the diminishment of nature’s glow; the more hopeful act out resistance to its loss of dignity.

Sternfeld’s own 17-minute video, “London Bridge,” pits fantasy against authenticity, romantic longing against doubt. His crooning Venetian gondol-

ier, who plies vacationing couples over Arizona’s man-made Lake Havasu and under the incongruous shadow of London Bridge, both charms and puzzles us. Shall we take him for an actual Venetian guide, an actor or a shaman? Are we being bamboozled by the manipulated grandeur of mountains, desert and the landmark bridge over a dammed-up river, or does it still count as aesthetic experience?

Not all guiding hands are to be trusted, and the appearance of peacefulness may be easily disrupted. Under the starry grey sky of Norbert Schwonkowski’s oil painting, “Hohe Tannen,” a jet’s headlight beams a confident path through a fog. The light bounces just as cheerfully back from the illuminated treetops jutting up ahead, on a level with the jet’s descending belly. In Christoph Draeger’s aerial photographs of houses

destroyed by “Hurricane Andrew,” and the 1988 wreck of “Pan Am 103” in a field near Lockerbie, Scotland, disaster becomes spectacle. Draeger further perverts the horror by printing his images on giant jigsaw puzzles.

To some artists, the substitution of paved roadways for the Earth’s gentle surfaces radiates a strange attraction and sometimes a mesmerizing symmetry. The fine TV-screen lines of Christiane Baumgartner’s woodcut, “Lisbon 1,” reveal the classical perspective of a multi-lane highway as viewed from an overpass above the highway median. An iridescent “x”-shaped tile from sculptor Mary Corse’s “Black Earth Series” – literally hard, flat and black as asphalt – hangs high on a wall like a tilted cross. The light it exhales derives from recycled glass shards fused into the glaze.

HALL ART FOUNDATION
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THROUGH
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Joel Sternfeld, *London Bridge*, 2016 (still), HD film, edition of 5 with 2 artist’s proofs, duration: 16 minutes, 44 seconds. (Courtesy the Artist and Luhring Augustine © Joel Sternfeld.)



Landscapes After Ruskin:
Redefining the Sublime
(installation view), Hall Art
Foundation, Reading, Vermont.
(Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel).



Jane and Louise Wilson,
*Platform I, Gorilla VI - A
Free and Anonymous
Monument*, 2003, C-type
print on aluminium in
Perspex, 72" x 72" x 1". ©
Jane and Louise Wilson).



Ai Weiwei, China's irrepressible critic, commissioned "Oil Spills," a floor installation of platter-size black porcelain "droplets," from a factory of artisans in Jingdezhen, an ancient center of porcelain production near China's fine kaolin deposits. Spread over a farmhouse floor, the shiny globs address the folly of our own industrial befoulment as well as China's, while noting the limits of the Earth's bounty and resilience in the race to exhaust fossil energy sources. "Bowery Slate," another floor-scape by British sculptor Richard Long, is a rectangle composed of hundreds of closely packed, four-inch-high slate blocks. Despite its minimalist elegance, it brings forth a chuckle. The stones, originally quarried in Cornwall, England, have been carried "like coals to Newcastle" to be reinstalled just miles from one of Vermont's major slate-producing regions.

Humble paper rises to Ruskin's full requisite of awe and emotion in Raymond Pettibon's "No Title (Wave Group)." The corner installation of ink-and-watercolor drawings dwarfs the viewer with its slashes of ultramarine, Prussian blue, teal and black. Though the impact would be greater without the heavy museum frames, one feels as much at the mercy of its linear velocity as the miniscule surfer fleeing the

towering crests. In "The River that Flows Both Ways," a more peaceful water lends its hues and wrinkles to Spencer Finch's handmade sheets of paper infused with pigments and textures redolent of the Hudson. "Die Etsch," a watercolor by Anselm Kiefer, impresses us with the grandeur of another muddy river exiting the gateway to the Austrian Alps. But the red flashes in the ice-blue sky also recall the terror of the Allied air bombardment in World War II as German soldiers retreated through Italy's Brenner Pass.

Perhaps we feel the greatest ambivalence in images of serenity and visual charm, such as Naoya Hatakeyama's lambda print, "Atmos," a steel mill belching pink clouds into a luscious, late-afternoon sky. The vivid auras of Eberhard Havekost's sky-scapes, "The End B12," churn the stomach when we discover their source is media images of sunsets merged with atomic blasts. A final vertigo transports us in a six-foot C-print by Jane and Louise Wilson of a corner of an oilrig platform cantilevered out to sea. A girder like a dancer's leg pierces the shimmering

sky, weighted below by a shadow that reaches into the barely ruffled distance – infinite and empty.

Elizabeth Michelman



Christina Beecher, Adam Bullock, James Cole,
Randa Dubnick, Alison Horvitz, Susan Leskin

July 1 – July 31, 2016

OPENING RECEPTION:
July 1, 6–8 pm

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