Equilibrium of the sublime

Benjamin Bloch

The University of Montana
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The Equilibrium of the Sublime

by

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In my work I am attempting to forge a connection between what we "see" in the physical reality of our external world and what lies "unseen" within its immaterial, metaphysical nature. To this end, I combine the conventions of abstract painting with certain representational cues of landscape in order to shape space in lucid, tense arrangements of color, form, line, contrast, and texture. I am interested in the tension that results from this mixture because of the way in which it presents viewers with the issue of visual dissonance.

It is my belief that in order for an artwork to elevate viewers, it must excite not only pleasure but also displeasure, and that the experience of looking should bring delight by means of challenge. As metaphors for a matrix of dialectical tensions - between the beautiful and the ugly, the intelligible and the obscure, the exterior and the interior - these works confront viewers with a certain problematical attractiveness. It is my hope that in engaging with these works one is called upon to reconcile, consciously or unconsciously, the tensions between such metaphorical dualities into a personal and sensual experience of meaning. For example, the kinetic balance between the austere rigidity of mechanical structures with the fluidity of organic shapes - analogous to relationships between opacity and transparency, warm and cool, dark and light - may evoke in viewers an awareness of the oppositional composition of human nature that makes us whole. By the same reasoning, I have chosen to call the smaller drawings hanging in the hall "causeways," a word I use to represent a series of isolated, dynamic events in space that capture the momentary threshold between stasis and change.

The paintings in particular exist for me as unique ontological worlds - self-contained spaces produced by a singular imagination - distinguished by the aura of the handmade, the original. In the quiet revelation of marks and strokes that were ultimately obscured but not fully effaced, they bear evidence of the process of their own making - the ghostly traces of thought and impulse sacrificed for the sake of aesthetic unity, thus confirming the internal workings of what is for me the creative process.
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The formal and ideological processes I used to make these paintings and drawings also act as metaphors for the aforementioned matrix of dialectical tensions. In a broad sense, every means through which I attempt to create a
visual metaphor aims at expressing the idea that wholeness is achieved by rendering visually unexpected, dynamic balances between opposing formal and/or conceptual elements. However this is achieved in the image, the sensation of "wholeness" that viewers may feel is highly variable. Thick, frothy white paint next to bold blackened, dense Sharpie lines may provoke ideas about heaven and hell for one viewer, and the conscious vs. the unconscious for another. But in either case, the mind recognizes the meeting of harmonically different elements; the difference relates, and there is caused an oddly pleasing dissonance that can only come close to an ultimately impossible state of completion. For my own purposes in creating the works, I have found the dialectical concepts proposed in philosophical discussions about the sublime to be a compelling formula for working with "wholeness" in aesthetics. The realm of the sublime raises the same questions that I want to raise in my images. It forces us to confront the inherent problem of existence—of life as we know it, the same way I want to confront viewers by problematizing preconceived notions of beauty which are taken for granted. As Edmund Burke wrote in reference to "The Sublime and Beautiful Compared,"
They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions. In the infinite variety of natural combinations we must expect to find the qualities of things the most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object.¹

This notion relates directly to the problematical attractiveness that I spoke of in my introduction. That life relates to death is related to how the presence of something ugly can elevate the beauty of an object by making it "whole."

I work with the image itself and with the essential qualities of my materials to emphasize these tense thresholds in numerous ways. First, and most simply, there is the relationship between the two dimensional object of the painting - the picture plane - and the illusion of space created by the image rendered on the plane. I consciously arrange the architecture of illusion in paintings so that viewers may become aware of an unavoidable flux between sensing depth in space and sensing the image as a flat, fixed object. The reduction of forms to their more essential qualities helps in achieving this effect, because elemental shapes successfully produce a

¹ Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,"
sense of ambiguity between micro and macro-cosmic masses. For example, the rigid geometric shapes on the peripheries of the composition in "No Title #3" give the impression of being simultaneously parallel to the land: positioned in space but looking down, as if from an airplane, at a flat, impenetrable surface. I intend for them to resemble the way man-maintained land appears from the window of an airplane. Roads and waterways cut straight through divisions; pools, stadiums, tennis courts, racetracks, farm fields all appear in sensually pleasing geometric order/relationships when viewed from a high, omniscient perspective. At the same time, "No Title #3" gives viewers a sense of standing perpendicular to the earth itself; the blue mass in the lower left quadrant, while it relates angularly to the other shapes in the painting (preserving the unity of the piece), gives the distinct impression of being upright against the ground. Visual cues commonly found in traditional landscape such as size and positional perspective, variance in color brilliance, and the horizon line all signal the outward depth of space. In my opinion, this dynamic positioning of two spatial dimensions relates to an inherent tension in the experience of human perception, simultaneously conscious and unconscious,

balanced between one's experience of existence in an eternity/infinity of space and an existence at a single point in time which appears to move in a linear fashion through stacked layers of two-dimensional planes.

Another means by which I try to give shape to these dialectical metaphors is through the opposition between dark, opaque foreground objects and a lighter transparent background. In “No Title #5,” the background is rendered as shallow and nearly transparent through thin layers of paint, while the objects in the foreground are thick, dark, organic shapes applied with bold, substantial strokes. The painting maintains a pleasing unity. In this painting I constructed the lighter areas more geometrically, with tighter shared edges - a puzzle-like construction - with most of the approaching forms placed at the corners of the painting’s lower right quadrant. The positioning of the objects in this way forms a loose square that, because of it’s geometric nature, contrasts visibly with the organic qualities of the individual shapes at its angles. The placement of forms in “No Title # 5 on Canvas” also establishes a dynamic swing between sensations of intense proximity and great distance. The three dark lines in the upper left help establish profound depth in contrast with
the more superficial nearness of the large abstract mark in
the middle bottom center.

Often I construct this puzzle-like background by
inventing whole shapes that morph the elements of both
angular and soft-edged/organic forms. One half of a form
may take on the characteristics of a square or a hexagon
while the other half appears ovular, circular, or tubular.
The eye follows the edge of an organic segment of a shape
until it arrives at an angular segment and becomes
surprised—hopefully satisfied—by a jarring yet oddly
harmonious shift. In “Three Stripes” I use these elements
both in the make-up of the ground, as with the rectangle
housed in the white field in the upper right corner of the
painting, the light s-like shape in the middle left side,
and in the tree-like figure on the left, which is rendered
with something close to a triangle turned upside down and
perched at an uneasy angle. In addition, the vertical
cylinders placed in the painting at different heights and
widths help create space, but also exhibit an inherent
tension. The cylinder exemplifies the success of this
fusion because, in profile, a cylinder is at once straight
and angular, while in volume round and soft-edged. I
believe that this reflects a tension between sublime
displeasure - the “denial of the self and self-enjoyment”
symbolized by inorganic abstraction, austere mechanicalness - and a struggle to pleasurably affirm the integrity of the self and the corporeal body represented by more sensuous forms and marks.²

As a means of thematizing this struggle between denial and plenitude, removal and addition, I began using the varying effects of water - thinning, removing, moving, and bleeding paint on the surface. I wipe, I spray, I wait for partial dryness and spray, I wipe immediately, I drip, I throw, I spray color from ten feet away in a straight stream, I slap water against the canvas with a brush, and much more. These different actions produce effects that reference the essential qualities of water: erosion, flood, mist, drizzle, the shedding of layers, the slow dry. In using water as a means of media manipulation, I found that I could bring added complexity to large fields that were sometimes too monotonous in tone and therefore lacked depth.

Additionally, I use the temperature and quality of color to create a tension between warm and cool moments in a painting, although - as with all sense of balance in painting - I try not to accent it too strongly. My paintings are usually either predominantly warm or

predominantly cool, but I often deliberately place a bold element of color that opposes or creates a dynamic harmony with the rest of the painting’s surface. In “Water Haiku,” the bright orange area in the upper right pulses against the cooler surrounding shapes as well as catches the other places on the surface where related dashes, specks, marks of bright colors exist. In “No Title # 5” I have tried to create a similar effect by disbursing small bright bursts of crimson and orange warmth amidst the more muted light greens and blues that make up the backdrop of the painting.

In “No Title # 5” I make use of variations in density, brilliance and saturation of color in order to create an effect of visual contrast. However, I sometimes sacrifice sharply contrasting relationships in favor of stressing motion or gravity. For example, in “No Title # 1 on Paper,” the barrel-shaped mark in the center of the painting gives the sensation of something caught in mid-fall, rolling or tumbling through the air, which interacts well with the more static quality of the rust-colored protrusion in the upper half of the painting. The light gray, somewhat somber tones in both the background and foreground are intended to evoke a sense of nature’s unsympathetic environment.
It has always been important to me for there to be a sense of motion in my paintings, the powerful tension that emerges when motion is present in the insulated space between the four sides of the painting as a static object. This produces a sense of contrast between the form of the painting as something fixed in time and space, and the action of the surface event. There is, in addition, a transference that occurs between the confidence and velocity of the painter’s arm, and the feeling that viewers will get from seeing the evidence of that action; in recognizing this, viewers may experience a sense of themselves as confident and grounded in their spectatorship, as well as spontaneous in their aesthetic response. They will be more compelled to understand how the painting achieves this feeling in them, and they will therefore remain more engaged with the image.

All becoming, Paul Klee says, is based on movement. The scene of action, he says, is time, with movement the one and only character.

A certain fire of becoming flares up; it is conducted through the hand, flows to the picture surface and there bursts into a spark, closing the circle whence it came; back into the eye and farther (back to the same center of movement, of volition, of the idea)... In the work of art ways are laid out for the beholder’s eye which gropes like a grazing beast (in music, as everyone knows, there are channels leading to the ear—in drama we have both varieties).
pictorial work springs from movement, it is itself fixated movement, and it is apprehended by movement (eye muscles).³

Further, a sense of motion - when rendered intensely - can reflect an awesome sublimity in nature. This was the primary impetus for my earlier paintings of the uninhabited landscape, which tended to portray forces of nature - wind, water, fire, snow - in action as potentially destructive elements which have catastrophic, as well as creative, potential. Kant described the sublime as that which is sensed beyond the realm of reason, by the soul, and which makes one obliquely aware of the fragility and mystery of existence. The sublime inspires a spiritual, religious sensation, and challenges us to believe that there must be a reason - i.e. God - why something outside of us causes something inside of us to exist. Kant said that to look up at the stars at night was sublime insofar as it made one experience their "smallness" in the face of the universe.⁴

Kant's contemporary Fredric Schiller argued that recognition of the sublime occurred as a result of humanity's inherent equilibrium between sensuousness and rationality. Humans, he said, are independent and free insofar as they can manipulate their environment by

³ Ibid, p. 190.
building shelters, making technology, solving any number of complex problems in the name of comfort and survival; however, humans are never truly independent from nature because it may at any time prove itself to be more powerful than the human intellect. Therefore, whenever the fact of our helpless sensuousness - our existence as beings that are ultimately subject to the will of nature - is brought to our attention, consciously or unconsciously, we are experiencing the sublime. According to Edmund Burke and Schiller alike, the sublime is associated with an aesthetic experience brought about by an awareness of the destructive forces of nature, terror, pain, death - all things which are the result of the ultimate human subjection to nature. Burke makes clear that the magnitude of intensity when experiencing the sublime is far greater than that of experiencing the merely beautiful, with all of its procreative and decorative pleasures.

One of the conditions of having a sublime experience is that the viewer be in a position of safety when he/she witnesses some aspect of dark or destructive nature; hence, a person who witnesses an avalanche, tornado, or wildfire from a safe distance has a sublime experience. Similarly, standing in front of a painting which evokes a sense of

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nature's awesome and/or deathly power - whether depicted through the sense of wild darkness in the image itself, or through the application of materials and/or marks that subvert the tamer, more decorative elements of beauty - can provide for a sublime aesthetic experience. I feel that in order for a painting to be balanced, it should contain some essential reminder that our humanity is indeed subject to the capriciousness of nature above and beyond our cultural reliance on rationality, intellectuality, and science as comforting proofs of our independence from nature. Beauty and spiritual health lie equally if not more powerfully in death as they do in life.

That the work of art not only pleases but "elevates" us, clearly includes the fact that it excites not only pleasure but also displeasure. This is not just occasionally so, as with the explicit presentation of the sublime in art, in great tragedy for instance. No, the true work of art does not blend neatly into the context of life as mere decoration, but stands out in its own right, and hence always presents itself as something of a provocation. It does not merely please, it almost forces us to dwell upon it, issuing the challenge "to let it please us."^5

The "causeway" drawings reflect this same sense of provocative equilibrium in that the roughness of the works themselves - the rough edges of the paper, the lack of flatness created by the absorption of water - combine with

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the imperfect yet humanist quality of the hand-made frames, to make something which subtly undermines (and yet ultimately amplifies) the presumed aesthetic beauty of the all-white mat and frame. The struggle for perfection makes clear its consistent elusiveness; the object wants to be something that it can’t, and in my mind the aesthetic force of these pieces is enhanced by their own reconciliation of imperfection. If the rough drawings were in absolutely pristine frames, the power of these pieces would be reduced; the contrast would be too obvious. Paper and frame would be two separate halves that could never make a whole. In addition, by using baser materials in the drawings, such as crayons, sharpies, water markers, corrective pens, highlighters, etc., I believe that the contrast between what is sought after and what actually is is further increased. The fact that generally degraded materials appear harmonically within the framing of an object that aspires to high art heightens the potential for increased meaning, as elements of terror added to the merely beautiful make way for the “terrific.”

Another way that I illustrate this dynamic of elevation and confrontation is to work with the size of shapes — similarly to the way I use color — to create compositional relationships that have unexpected and
dynamic balance. In creating a composition of positive and negative shapes in space, I constantly ask myself if there is enough variation in size. "No Title # 3 on Canvas," for example, is organized around one large, stable, centrally located field of subtly varied pink-gray; I placed smaller shapes around this field in an attempt to create a sensation of impending pressure and penetration. I have, however, allowed elements on the periphery of the large field to subtly violate the space in some way without ever completely shattering its integrity. Consequently, a viewer's eye may wander into the complicated environs of the image, all the while aware that it can return to the empty center for respite; the large center field provides a refuge from an exterior chaos or confusion. This idea, and the abstract rendering of it in an image, relates to Worringer's description of the art of the East, which he claims is dominated by an immense need for tranquility. The happiness these people sought 'did not consist in the possibility of projecting themselves into the things of the outer world, of enjoying themselves in them, but in the possibility of taking the individual thing of the external world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalizing it by approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, of finding a point of tranquility and a refuge from appearances.'

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6 Read, p. 149.
The central location of this space, and the use of it as a rest stop for the eye, creates a useful metaphor for the idea of staying inside the painting as a viewer, of being able to dwell in its space, of moving out towards more particularity of form but only for as long as it takes to be agitated back into the internal simplicity of the painting. Finally, an awareness of the simultaneous visual representation of some confusion equalized with some simplicity is satisfying in the same dialectical terms as I have been discussing throughout.

In nearly all of my paintings, I attempt to make visible this notion of essential simultaneity. I employ a variance of mark size, shape size, color, texture, application speed and method to render tense and complex harmonies/relationships of surface events that are visible all at once, simultaneously, and which provide a metaphor for the simultaneous nature of events as they occur linearly and spatially throughout "real" time. "Push, Drop, Slide, Swim" is a simple example of this effect at work visually. The title of this piece speaks to this idea of many different things happening at once, in one cordoned symbolic space, exciting the eye with a multiplicity of color contrasts and densities, the light splat and falling fragments, zig-zaggy lines, bold edges and soft
transitions, charcoal and paint. The experience of life, whether one is aware of it or not, works this same way. Disparate elements discover a harmony in the image similar to that of the balance between pleasure and terror in the experience of sublimity. As I write the thermostat kicks on, the sky grows darker by the nanosecond, the faucet drips in the bathroom, children laugh outside, skin cells are born, cars gas by, moths flutter instinctively at the light source.

Finally, in the process of making a painting from beginning to end, I attempt to provoke metaphors for an inherent tension between the final, edited “whole” of a painting and the existing evidence of the temporal, mental process that documents the history of a creation. The struggle of the work of the mind to make what Robert Motherwell calls a product of “ethical consciousness” is similar to what Richard Diebenkorn described as “rightness”: “One’s sense of rightness involves absolutely the whole person and hopefully others in some basic sense. What is important for artistic communication is this basic part, but if the artist doesn’t make his work right he has no idea what he has left out.” Deibenkorn wanted painting to be difficult and arduous, full of obstacles (as long as
they didn’t overwhelm) because this was what allowed for the revisionist process of making things right. For Deibenkorn, “making actually meant correcting. He would deliberately do things wrong at first in order to set them right. But anything done at first was bound to be dissatisfying because what was unaltered was unexamined.”

As a result, each painting becomes the visual story of its making. All the traces of decisions made in the “journey” towards the end of a painting are visibly simultaneously. Much the same way that a variance of marks makes a metaphor for the simultaneity of events across a single moment in time, evidence of an endless search, brought to its best—though inevitably imperfect—conclusion makes another meaningful metaphor for human thought and existence. As Wallace Stevens said,

It is as if the painter carried on with himself a continual argument as to whether what delights us in the exercise of the mind is what we produce or whether it is the exercise of a power of the mind.” Nothing would ever be finished unless the former argument was heeded. To disregard the latter argument, though, would mean to make revision a means merely of finishing, turning its difficulties into difficulties merely of craft.

In these ways and more, Deibenkorn’s paintings have influenced me. As I progress, I feel more and more

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8 Ibid, p.87.
impelled to make work which contains the right amount of revision, and have recently produced pieces that “end up” with an overall transparent quality that allows viewers’ eyes to move back through the picture plane and see partialities of the previously un-right and revised images. “Blue, Red, Yellow” and “No Title # 1 on Paper” are good recent examples. The singular yet fleeting moments of a “whole” present make clear their attachment to all moments past and all moments to come. Whatever unity a painting may have when it is “finished” attempts to make a metaphor for this unification of history with the present and the future, the same way life leads into death. All of these ideas are related to humanity’s inability to know what “the end” is actually like, and to be alerted to this fact in a painting provokes a recognition of the sublime. “The final closing of a work will only come when its temporality collapses in a present that fulfills that very nostalgia for immediacy with which it began. Thus Deibenkorn said, ‘I can never accomplish what I want, only what I would have wanted had I thought of it beforehand.’”¹⁰

Because of the fact that only the creator of a particular work may judge it to be right or correct, I refer to my own paintings as “ontological worlds” or

⁹ Ibid, p.87.
"ontological spaces/places." They are ontological in the sense that they are entirely unique objects/images that affirm the existence of my thought, my metaphysical existence, my will to create things which hopefully reflect my own wholeness (or my own psychological wish to be whole). I am pleased by the aura they possess as original objects produced by one psyche, one hand. Albert Hofstadter's conception of what we mean by a work of art qua being true is that "truth in art is sui generis." The artistic symbol, he argues, is an ontological symbol. By this expression is meant a symbol which is essentially what it intends. "The work of art is, as such, the entity that it intends. In this, it is unlike the symbol that occurs isolatedly in the context of truth of statement alone. A statement is not identical with what it intends."  

When a dynamic equilibrium is achieved in a painting - between good and evil, man and woman, subject and object, eternity and the fleeting moment - the experience of life, and the object of art, make visible the threshold between stability and instability, comfort and agitation, action and thought, intuition and instinct, form and content, perception and conception: the point at which electricity

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10 Ibid, p.113.
sparks but doesn't short. This dynamic state, while potentially unnerving, is the only means through which resolution gains definition, and through which subsequent growth may be achieved. Once this dynamism becomes static, the process begins again, repeating itself forever and ever.
Works Cited


Schiller, Friedrich. “Of the Sublime: Toward the further elaboration of some Kantian Ideas” (1856).
Appendix I
Water Haiku
Blue, Red, Yellow

No Title #4 on Canvas
No Title #5 on Canvas

Three Stripes