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Revisiting the 18th Century Sublime in Contemporary Visual Art:

Representations of Icelandic Landscape

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the depiction of the landscape in art in relation to the theory of the sublime, through my own artistic practice, and through the examination of examples from the history of art. The theory of the Sublime is also analysed in the historical context of the 18th century, and discussed in relation to its place, and relevance in contemporary ideas and art production.

The thesis begins by examining Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and using this to explore how artists have responded to the Sublime in their paintings, examining the work of Turner and Caspar David Friedrich for example, as major exponents of the Sublime. I set out to establish whether or not the emotional qualities that the eighteenth-century idea of the Sublime uncovers, can be effectively defined by this term in contemporary painting.

Alongside this, my thesis also deals with my own personal experience of the Sublime, as identified in the glacial landscapes of Iceland. The Sublime is a key influence in my artistic practice.

My paintings might be seen as a direct response to feelings associated with the Sublime experienced in the glacial landscapes of Iceland, and through the process of making them I have attempted to explore and translate my sublime experience.

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Revisiting the 18th Century Sublime in Contemporary Visual Art:

Representations of Icelandic Landscape

This thesis discusses the depiction of landscapes in art in relation to the theory of the sublime, through my own artistic practice, and through the examination of examples from the history of art. The theory of the Sublime is also analysed in the historical context of the 18th century, and discussed in relation to its place, and relevance in contemporary ideas and art production. What is the Sublime? Does the Sublime still exist? If so, has its definitions changed? I aim to explore and answer these questions, establishing where the Sublime stands today and what it now represents.

The thesis begins by examining Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, in order to firstly gain a full understanding of the differences between the Sublime and the Beautiful. I will also be using Burke's Enquiry to explore how artists have responded to the Sublime in their paintings throughout art history, starting by examining the work of Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, as early major exponents of the Sublime. Using Friedrich and the 'Rückenfigur', I will be examining my own experiences with nature whilst also considering the idea of the Tourist Gaze, put forward by John Urry, and how this may influence my perception and overall outcome of experiences of the locations I have visited. I will go on to consider the idea that the Sublime may be gendered, looking back in more detail at Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry where he categorizes and defines the Sublime and the Beautiful into two separate concepts.

The thesis will develop into the discussion of a Contemporary Sublime, where I will be researching significant questions such as - what is the Contemporary Sublime? How has it changed, and why? To aid this discussion I will be referencing other artists from the 20th and 21st Centuries who deal with the Sublime, including Mark Rothko, Doris Salcedo, Ólafur Eliasson,

Francis Alys, Andreas Gursky, Dan Holdsworth and John Akomfrah, as well as using critical writings on the contemporary Sublime by Philip Shaw and Simon Morley. I will be comparing these artists and how their ideas on the sublime differ; looking into the ideas of how conflicts such as war and terrorism are replacing nature as inventors of the Sublime experience, along with outer space; our oceans, technology and man himself. Ultimately, I aim to establish, does the sublime in nature still exist?

Alongside this, the writing examines my own artistic practice over the past 2 years, documenting the entire artistic journey on how and why my paintings are created, right through to the painting styles, techniques and applications I have used and why, and plans for how I will be presenting them in my MA exhibition. I have referenced Burke's Philosophical Enquiry when writing about my own work, and how it relates to and effects my paintings and ideas on the Sublime.

The Sublime according to Edmund Burke

"The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." (Burke, 1757)

This quote by Edmund Burke from Part 2, Section 1 'Of the Passion caused by the Sublime' from his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, has stayed with me since the first time I read it. When I read this, it fills me with imagery of memories of my own firsthand experiences of this feeling, this passion and astonishment. To me it is so powerful and it conjures up so much inspiration; I think it becomes so powerful because I can associate and connect with it on such a personal level. Within this quote, Burke uses the term 'soul' - a noun which refers to the spirit or spiritual part of the person, instead of the physical part; people believe the soul continues to exist in some form after the body has died. (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2017)

The use of the word soul creates a very spiritual feeling, and is something that a lot of people can relate to as many believe it is something we all possess. However, many people do not believe in any sort of spiritual form, or that anything other than the physical body exists; once the human

life ends that is it - no remnant of the body remains. I do believe we all have a soul; I believe that everyone has a powerful entity or energy separate to the physical bodies that is capable of being moved or uplifted and can survive past death. This quote creates imagery of the soul being moved by a powerful force; the soul being 'suspended' due to such a great passion or feeling makes me think it is simply hanging there, unable to move as something is preventing it. For something to just hang or dangle, it is unknown what direction it will take next - up or down, left or right. This unknown in itself can in many instances be unnerving and unwelcomed - once the soul is no longer suspended, it could be pulled higher, having positive connotations of being uplifted, as if entering a type of heaven perhaps. Or if the soul were to drop, this could increase any terror and induce more fear and negative feelings.

For me, this quote has become an underlying constant throughout my overall research; I always find myself going back to this, feeling exactly those words and finding a type of comfort within them; it instantly transports me back to the moments I spent at Jökulsárlón, a glacial lagoon in southern Iceland. This quote can also be applied to the times I am actually creating the paintings, I feel so mesmerised and almost lost in the memory of being at Jökulsárlón; even though I am not there, standing in front of it, my senses are overcome with total astonishment and awe, as if I really was there.

Historical Overview: A definition of the Sublime – What is it and where is it found?

According to Edmund Burke, the sublime is the suspension of the soul in the face of a horror inducing spectacle of nature. Throughout history it has been the expression of the unknowable, and for so long its meaning and definition has been so widely debated. The concept has been tackled by many throughout the centuries, most notably by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The word Sublime derives from two Latin terms; the word *sub* meaning 'up to', 'beneath' or 'below' and the noun *limen* - meaning 'threshold' or 'entry point'. The noun *limen* is also the origin for the word *lintel* which is a horizontal support of timber or stone; a beam that holds up the weight of a wall up above a doorway. (Collins Dictionary Online, 2010) Both these words give a sense of pushing upwards and uplifting; pushing upwards against an overbearing force. While in the present day the word sublime is used in everyday language and could be used to

describe something like the taste of some truly good food, in an artistic sense it has always been used to describe something set up high, raised aloft or elated, and could refer to anything from buildings, nature, people or language. The sublime came to be something of such exalted status that it was beyond any normal experience, beyond the reach of human understanding or comprehension. The word sublime indicates beyond the threshold - or through an entrance or portal perhaps. This act of going further, going beyond, suggests entering the unknown. No one knows what may lie beyond this portal, it could be anything; but art arguably allows us to access this idea of the space beyond through the power of the imagination. The beyond could be anything - and it is up to the artist or visionary to invent exactly what they want it to be; the horrors of untamed, wild nature perhaps, and the tumultuous, pulsating waves in a stormy ocean. Riding and Llewellyn discuss in their essay on British Art and the Sublime that to represent or depict the sublime in the visual arts has become such a challenge - how do we draw or paint an emotion, or a sensation that when experienced, all words fail in describing it? If we cannot find the appropriate words then how does one begin to paint or draw such a sensation or feeling? It is a task artists have been challenging themselves with for decades, and it will likely continue this way.

According to Edmund Burke, nature was the most sublime subject; it is capable of provoking the most powerful sensations within those viewing it, and the landscape can be used as 'a vehicle of terror' (Riding and Llewellyn, 2013) to quote the artist Henry Fuseli, talking of the Neapolitan painter Salvator Rosa and his use of the sublime within the landscape. This quote suggests how nature almost drives such terrors; it holds them, pushes them and moves them forward. It was views like towering mountain ranges, rough and stormy seas, vast oceans, deep valleys and chasms and volcanic eruptions that drew these sublime landscape artists in, much like myself, as they were considered dangerous and life threatening, had they actually been experienced. Within his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke broke the idea of the sublime down into the following 7 different aspects; darkness, obscurity, privation or deprivation, vastness, magnificence, loudness and suddenness. While each of these aspects would represent a serious challenge, and could be of equal discomfort to those experiencing it, Burke did argue that this would still be beneficial as it would lead to a kind of terror that is equally pleasurable and terrifying. This ambivalence between the horror and pleasure is an important part to my own experience of the sublime, and

an important theme in my work. Each of these qualities is enough to draw me in closer, but having the two together captivates me; there is something about the obscurities and dangers that lie within the glacial landscapes that adds depth to this whole scene. Riding and Llewellyn argue in their essay on British Art and the Sublime that for an 18th century viewer to be frightened or terrified by a sublime effect in a work, or indeed the natural landscape, made for a positive overall viewing experience. It is a strange concept, to become terrified or frightened by something and yet still come away feeling enjoyment from it; I believe whether it is from a sublime effect or just simply having a poignant, emotional significance to the viewer, coming away from a piece of art work, literature or music feeling something and having been moved by it in one way or another, is better than to feel nothing at all. It is this concept, to feel the astonishment, terror and awe that something of nature can conjure up inside of the beholder, but then to also to come away with feelings of pleasure and fulfillment, is what I have been striving to represent through my writings and practical works for several years now. It is something that truly fascinates me, to have two very opposing sensations deriving from the same thing.

Romanticism was a movement in art, literature and music, that was popular around the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Romantics became so in awe and inspired by scenes of nature because it offered an escape from the realities of everyday life, and other emerging movements of the time such as the Enlightenment and Rationalism of the 18th Century. Romantics emphasised the personal, the imagination, the emotional and visionary, and the transcendental, through expressive mediums such as art, poetry, literature and music. This could have been a reaction to the ideas of the Enlightenment and Rationalism, as those who preferred these ideals also favoured intellect and reason over the imagination and emotions, and science over religion. The Romantics had a deep appreciation for the beauty of nature, and this was often emphasised in their paintings; they chose emotion over reason, and the power of the human senses over intellect and knowledge. (Encyclopedia Britannica - Romanticism, 2016)

Riding and Llewellyn suggest that over time, artists have not only attempted to address the sublime within their works - to paint the unpaintable and attempt to represent a sensation which words cannot, but rather some attempt to create works that instead leave a sublime effect on the spectator, that the viewers actually experience the sublime just through looking at the work. I have only ever attempted to paint my sublime experiences - whether the viewer experiences this

sublime sensation when viewing my work is incidental, as that is not my objective. I simply paint my sublime experience; it is personal to me, like re-living a memory every time I paint. My work is simply dealing with and responding to what I find to be sublime subject matter. I don't expect the spectator to view my work and feel what I feel when I was standing before Jökulsárlón, - and I wonder if that is because it is being presented before them second-hand. This sublime landscape isn't really before them - it is a painting of a sublime landscape, and I think because they aren't experiencing it in its truest form, they can't really see it how I did, therefore see and feel all its sublime quality. The sublime experience is such a personal one, and I think that when the sublime is addressed through any medium, be it paint, poetry or literature, it loses something through its translation. No matter how much emphasis an artist, including myself, can put on the sublime, it is still a recreation of an experience - it still isn't the real thing. Viewing this experience through a 2D platform like this almost acts like a barrier - perhaps another obstacle that can't quite be avoided when attempting to address the sublime in such a visual manner. Having it on a canvas dramatically reduces the dominating and overwhelming sense of scale, but also the sense of wild, inhospitable nature one feels when really there.

My experience of the landscape; and how this informs my artistic practice

For many years now, my art has always taken direct inspiration from the natural landscape, particularly locations around North America, Iceland and mainland Europe; always somewhere I have felt a strong connection to. The concept of this untouched nature and the escape it offers is just as appealing to me as it was to the Romantics - it offers something that cannot be found anywhere else. Throughout my BA and MA, my work has focused closely on glacial landscapes that I have found this deep connection with. This connection that I refer to is the foundation to all my work and ideas - it is essentially the most important part. It is a process - I will go somewhere and I will develop some sort of fascination, a bond or attachment to the location. I will be taken over with such awe and astonishment, and it will make such an impact it will have a lasting impression on me. I almost feel frozen with shock and awe, but it is a positive feeling of shock rather than negative; a pleasurable one. It takes over me that strongly I feel as if I can't move, or even when I am moving I don't even realise. It was as if time slowed down, or even stopped

momentarily whilst I was there, because I am able to remember what feels like almost every detail. The landscape completely consumed me - I truly felt a part of it, as if it had possessed me. This has happened with a few locations throughout my life so far, in particular the glacial landscapes of Iceland. The feelings I felt when I was there, the experiences I had and how I felt after are a crucial part of the entire process. It is this connection, this possession, that allows me to paint and write of these experiences and see them the way I do.

The lack of human presence in these landscapes is one of the main aspects that pulls me in and instantly captures me. The living conditions in most of Iceland, Alaska and Northern Canada are much more extreme than anywhere else in the world - with freezing temperatures, extreme weather conditions, long hours of darkness in the winter, and being surrounded by the brute forces of nature; volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches. In these parts of the world it is very easy to drive for miles without passing another person. These areas are very sparsely populated, and given their size this initially came as a great surprise to me. For example, just over 300,000 people live in Iceland, and the capital Reykjavik in the south and its surrounding areas are home to two-thirds of the entire population. This suggests to me that the most northern areas of these countries are just simply far too uninhabitable and unfit for human life. That said, there are still small numbers of people that live within these areas and have managed to live alongside nature quite comfortably. On top of its desolation and remoteness, the scale of these locations is immense - they totally engulf you. Their scale adds feelings of awe and terror to this overall experience, as it is so vastly huge you cannot escape it. The scale paired with extreme weather conditions makes these places so entirely hostile to human life, adding this terrifying thought that one may not survive in these places.

Despite all this, I, along with many others, are still so drawn to these places. These landscapes offer an alternative to the busy urban lives most people lead; they offer an escape. For me, it is these very factors that make me want to go there, or learn more, rather than be put off by its dangers. However, with all of these extremes and dangers, also come beauty and calm. There are not many other parts of the world you can discover experiences like the phenomenon known as the Aurora Borealis, or the peaceful tranquility of the midnight sun. Nature in these places is nothing short of breath-taking. These factors give these places a certain mysticism, an air of romance that is unlike anywhere else in the world. Through all the extremities of these places

lies a sense of beauty and calm that I have not found anywhere else in the world. It is both extremes combined that make these places so unique and so powerful. Being able to experience both peace and tranquility, as well awe and power both at the same time, is something truly unique, and something I aim to explore within my work. So far in my practical work I have been exploring this idea of opposites and extremes through the use of paint - particularly focusing on just colours and the different connotations each colour represents. For instance, I am using blues and whites to represent the glacial ice, partly because these are their true colours and also because the colours give a cooling effect; then within the same image I am contrasting these cool blues with warm oranges, yellows or reds, to represent the constant reminder of the volcanic activity that lies just below the surface. The reds and oranges here representing the molten lava, if and when these volcanoes do one day erupt. The contrast of two opposite colours, as well as completely contrasting landscapes all combined into one makes for very interesting ongoing experiments.

The most memorable occasion I felt this sublime experience was standing on the black beaches looking out onto the glacial lagoon that is Jökulsárlón, in the South East of Iceland. This is a key location for me, and is what all of my practical work is centered on; it is the main inspiration behind all of my MA work. This place just stopped me, and took over me. It filled all my senses so strongly that to this day I remember it all still so vividly. Standing at the edge of the lagoon, icebergs and glaciers are literally all that surround you. The lagoon is full of icebergs that have broken off from the edge of the Vatnajökull glacier - the largest ice-field in Europe - blue and white ice is all you can see for miles. Even in the middle of August with blue skies and sunshine, there was a distinct chill in the air. I remember breathing in the freshest, coolest air, and it wasn't long before my nose and my whole face was red with cold. Despite being such a popular tourist spot, I was so in awe of this place, somehow the sounds of people were drowned out and all I could hear was peaceful silence, interrupted only by the sounds of seabirds and the occasional thunderous crash of huge chunks of ice breaking off the icebergs and into the water.

It is these vivid memories and feelings that I have been trying to interpret onto canvas for the last couple of years. I think about Jökulsárlón almost every day, and I can only put that down to the power and control it had over me, and yet how peaceful and comfortable I felt whilst I was there. I feel that the medium of paint can help me to interpret and express the sublimity of Jökulsárlón

in a completely different way to that of words and literature. Due to the excellent memory I have of this place, I can use it as a way of informing my artistic practice; at any point I can just recall a memory of Jökulsárlón for a moment and I can instantly begin to paint, write or draw as if I am right there in front of it. I have always had an exceptional memory of most things, and this can be used to my advantage in many ways – like using it as a visual guide when I want to explore this place through paint on canvas.

Personal Experience and the effect of The Tourist Gaze

My own experiences play a big part in not only my paintings, but how I interpret them and the landscapes they originate from. I have been fortunate enough to travel to many different places and view different scenes and landscapes, and because of this I often find myself comparing them to one another. Two years ago, I re-visited the Grand Canyon, one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and one of the most popular natural locations among tourists in the world. I had visited several times as a child, however I was probably too young to appreciate where I was. Upon arriving at the Canyon, it took a while for its scale to sink in. It was somehow different to what I remembered as a child, but I couldn't place why. What made the view so much more spectacular for me was that we were also watching a storm sweep over the canyon, going further off in to the distance. I saw several forks of lightning and heard the distant rumble of thunder, as the storm pushed further away. I remember feeling so excited and thrilled by this, and feeling so stunned by the canyons overall view and size. However, the barriers (while of course were needed for reasons of obvious safety) and sheer number of people, were a distraction in a way. I felt I couldn't just stand in peace and take it all in - due to the large volume of people I felt I was constantly moving, walking round the perimeters of the viewpoint, not having more than a few seconds in one spot before having to move on in order to allow others to stand and look for just a few seconds, almost like clockwork. This spoilt it for me, as I didn't have the freedom to move around and be alone with no distractions; therefore, the overall experience here was the opposite to what would normally attract me to such remote places. Even though it is so remote, its popularity among tourists almost make it just like the busy urban locations these people have tried to escape from. Much like the sociologist John Urry says in his book entitled 'The Tourist Gaze' – the Grand Canyon is 'famous for being famous.' (Urry 2002, p.12) It is something we all know about, and therefore a place we all hope to see one day. Typically,

tourists will have a set of expectations of a place while in search for an ‘authentic’ experience, which John Urry describes as the ‘tourist gaze’, much like the people around me at the Grand Canyon. It is interesting how everyone was there all in search of the same ‘authentic’ experience, but in a way, all ruining it for one another. Tourists will gaze upon a place because something intrigues them about it - ‘places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation’. (Urry 2002, p. 3)

The next viewpoint I approached offered a walk down a long path off into the canyon, and while I didn’t go all the way to the end, I found this walk much more peaceful and enjoyable than the viewpoint prior to it. I found that having the freedom to walk about made me feel more connected to the canyon, and I saw more of it this way. There were no distractions. However, something was still missing that I felt so strongly at Jökulsárlón. On my journey home I began to contemplate this, and weigh up the qualities of each place and how each one made me feel. In all, I came away feeling that while the Grand Canyon truly is spectacular, for me, Jökulsárlón was on another level of greatness. It truly is a place I feel is incomparable to almost anywhere I’ve been before. While the two are poles apart in the sense of climate/geology/appearance, I felt I could compare them based on the fact they are simply places of pure nature.

The overwhelming sense of human presence at the Grand Canyon made such a difference to how I was able to view it all. I couldn’t relax - I couldn’t seem to find a peaceful moment to take it all in, whereas at Jökulsárlón, I felt the complete opposite. I felt I was in total awe of my surroundings there, I felt like I was part of it, and it was part of me. This feeling lacked at the Grand Canyon; while I did experience moments of power, beauty and brilliance, I never felt the sublime feeling I experienced whilst at Jökulsárlón. This again makes me think how other people perceive and view these places - the Grand Canyon is one of the most popular natural wonders of the world - but why? In a way, I struggle to comprehend how it could be so popular when I know Jökulsárlón exists and think of the experience I had there. However, everyone has a different ideal of greatness, and what may create an overwhelming experience of the sublime for me, may not for someone else; everyone’s own personal experiences make us view things the way we do.

I believe that because I had visited the Grand Canyon before I already had a vague perception on what it would be like once I revisited. However, I had never in my life seen anything like the

glacial lagoon of Jökulsárlón. I have seen incredible glaciers and mountains many times across North America, and as a child walked on the Colombia Icefield in Alberta, Canada. However due to my age, I don't feel I could truly comprehend and take in the greatness of where I was and what I was doing. I had never in my adult life been so up close and personal to somewhere like this - a scene that you only ever see in films or on news reports about climate change. This type of location is so inaccessible and so untouchable, somewhere that is shown regularly on news reports and in the media as being so vulnerable and fragile due to global warming. Standing before the vastness of ice, it felt like I was somewhere within the extremities of the Arctic, a place so out of reach and also so vulnerable. A place I never thought I would experience. John Urry also goes on to suggest that 'satisfaction stems from anticipation' (Urry 2002, p. 13) that we as humans are, in reality, seeking out these pleasurable moments that we have already experienced in our imaginations. However, due to the realities rarely ever fulfilling these 'perfect' imagined experiences we are often left disillusioned and left longing for the next. (Urry, J. 2002) In this instance, myself, along with all the other 'tourists' at the Grand Canyon had most likely already imagined that moment; we had all heard of it, all seen images and known of its 'status' we had all imagined at one point in time just what it may be like. For myself, Urry's concept certainly rings true, as it didn't quite hold up to my expectations. As for Jökulsárlón however, I had only been shown some images and told about this place from my Dad - I had heard of this place but I hadn't yet 'imagined' myself there. This perhaps played a key role in my reaction when I did finally go there - the shock and element of surprise was genuine, I didn't have any 'perfect idea' to live up to in my head - it didn't have the status surrounding it like the Grand Canyon, but the effects afterwards were so much greater.

Having this untouchable, inaccessible quality makes these places so much more appealing and fascinating. Growing up, seeing places similar to this in the news being so affected by climate change, it was quite a surreal yet special moment to actually stand there and be a part of something that is so rapidly changing, and one day in my lifetime may well have disappeared altogether. I feel lucky that I have been able to see something so special, something that is so quickly changing and disappearing due to global warming. It is this vulnerability that Jokulsarlon and other glacial landscapes possess that attracts me so much. On the surface they appear so powerful; so intimidating, colossal, even deadly. Just a deep, wide mass of thick snow and ice,

hundreds of metres - often miles thick and wide in places. The ice is often thousands of years old; so dense and impenetrable, built up over tens of thousands of years, with newer ice and snow layering on top, becoming even more solid and compressed. In this state, the glacial ice is deadly and inhospitable.

However, while these magnificent structures appear so dominating and dangerous, they are in the same breath, so incredibly vulnerable and fragile. I find it fascinating how something so great, so powerful and seemingly so anchored and permanent, is actually always moving and changing. Due to the threats of global warming, glaciers across the globe are melting - some at an alarming rate, others at a much slower pace. I find this quality adds to their mysticism and magnificence, as something so powerful is in a constant state of change. It is hard to believe that when looking at something of such magnitude and power, it is actually the whole time under the control of something much more powerful than itself – the powers of man, and his actions resulting in global warming. That to me is quite an incredible yet terrifying concept to comprehend, that there are forces in this world that can control something as powerful and destructive as glaciers, yet is also entirely hidden. I often wonder what the Romantics and theorists like Edmund Burke would make of this thought, the power, size and dominance of the glaciers, but in the same instance their fragility and vulnerability. I personally believe it adds to their sublimity - their dominating size and dangers adds to their terrifying state even more, while their fragility adds a kind of mysticism; it suddenly becomes something more emotional, more melancholy.

The term nature refers to the phenomena of the physical world; this includes animals, plants and the landscape, along with other features and products of the earth – however not including humans or any human creations, that is, anything man has made himself. The term also refers to the physical force that causes and regulates the phenomena of the world; so not only the phenomena of the physical world and everything in it, but the forces that make it and can keep it the way it is or change it entirely. This ‘force’ is often referred to as Mother Nature. (Oxford Dictionary Online, 2017)

One important observation I made between the Grand Canyon and Iceland was that I found Iceland to be so purely natural – I feel I viewed nature in its truest, untouched form there; there was nothing but pure landscape and the natural hidden forces, or ‘mother nature’ controlling it

all. Of course, the Grand Canyon is largely untouched but I still felt such a strong sense of human presence there. Even without all the people there, the barriers, fences and signs all pointed to human life. Iceland felt freer; more wild and undisturbed than most other locations, and I believe this was due to the lack of signs of human life; fences, signs and just people in general - everything that the Grand Canyon did have. These barriers and fences are intended for human safety, to protect us from falling and at the same time putting us at ease and helping us to feel safer. At Jökulsárlón however, there are none. This creates so much more freedom, allowing the viewers to engage with the landscape on a much deeper level, to get closer to it - mentally and physically. There are no barriers in place here partly due to the fact it is on a much smaller scale than the Grand Canyon, and with so many less people visiting. However, despite the lack of barriers and protection, I didn't feel particularly unsafe there at all. I was aware of the dangers, and they were on my mind whilst I was there, but never to the point that it made me feel unsafe. Being able to take in the view and overall experience without obvious signs of human disturbance helped make this such a wonderful experience for me. I could look around for as far as I could see and see nothing but nature, totally unspoilt by human life. No ugly fences or barriers dividing me and this natural beauty - it was right there in front of me, with nothing between us.

The Sublime in 19th Century Paintings

A common characteristic among paintings of the Romantics in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries was the representation of man's struggle against the powers of nature, and man's place within nature. Common traits and iconography seen amongst this genre included solitary figures set in a great and vast landscape, gazing longingly at what lies before them. Another was Vanitas motifs such old ruins and dead trees that symbolised the transience and finite nature of life. The Romantics held a strong belief in the human senses and emotions and favoured these over reason and intellect, therefore the senses and emotions were heavily relied upon when painting scenes of nature; sights, sounds and smells all played a very important part when the artist was taking in their surroundings. (Romanticism in Art, 2016) Much like myself when I am painting scenes of Jökulsárlón - I remember the sights, smells and sounds of the place so vividly, I always rely on

these when re-creating it through paint.

Perhaps the most iconic artist of the German Romantic movement was Caspar David Friedrich, whose primary interest as an artist was man's contemplation of nature. Friedrich is best known for his excellent depiction of landscapes, where he also demonstrated his devotion to religion and a higher power. It was instilled in Friedrich from a young age to appreciate nature, but also the ability to see God within it; the two came together to form the foundations of Friedrich's art. Like many other Romantic artists, Friedrich grew up in a time where there was a growing disillusionment of an over-materialistic society, and so he took to nature where he could explore and further his spirituality through the forms of art. (Caspar David Friedrich - Artble)

A particular motif featured among the Romantics was 'The Rückenfigur' - literally translated, means 'back figure' in German, and is often used to describe figures that are viewed from behind. This was most commonly associated with Friedrich, who regularly cast this figure among his paintings. In the painting *'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog'*, (see figure 1 right) from 1818, this figure is placed right in the center of the



composition, looking down and around at the mountainous landscape that surrounds him. He is placed there to invite the viewer to place themselves where this figure is standing; to imagine themselves looking around at the landscape, experiencing all the nature that surrounds them. We are able to experience the view from the Rückenfigur's perspective. As a viewer, we are unable to see his facial expressions, however we instantly assume he is feeling a sensation of awe and overwhelm, and we instantly mimic this and feel what he feels - we look out at the panorama before him and instantly feel a sense of awe that he would likely be feeling. (Palmer, 2011)

While it is not the true definition of the Rückenfigur, in a sense, I felt as though all the other people surrounding me at the Grand Canyon were the Rückenfigur's like in Friedrich's paintings - many of them with their backs to me, looking out at what was before us. I couldn't see their reactions or facial expressions, but I could more or less assume what it would be – wonder, amazement and appreciation. These people may well have been standing before the canyon experiencing exactly what I felt at Jökulsárlón, while others may have been doing what I was doing, appreciating the beauty but trying to find this sense of awe and sublimity that the canyon promises, but unable to find it. Perhaps, like me, they were unable to because of the huge volume of people - all trying to capture this same thing. It is a strange thing to think, that everyone is

there all searching for the same thing, however it is everyone spoiling this experience for each other. It was almost like the nature had been tamed because of the large volume of people there, it wasn't nature anymore because of how many people



were there and the evidence of human life was so prominent. All the people there almost acting like a second or third barrier, behind the actual physical barrier put in place by the National Park Service.

The Romantics often featured figures within their work, some in the form of the Rückenfigur, others just depicted most likely deliberately as very small figures against the vast greatness of the landscape. One example is that of Turner's painting *'Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps'* (see figure 2 above) painted in 1812. In this composition, one can just about work out the small figures in the foreground just off to the left, being totally dwarfed by the overwhelming scale of

the landscape and being almost completely engulfed in an ominous looking stormy, dark cloud. The figures look minute in comparison to the vastness of the landscape that surrounds them - the figures even appear to be crouching down or bending over, as if cowering in fear from the approaching storm. This suggests the terror that one may have experienced when exposed to this kind of raw nature - it suggests that nature is so much greater and that man is so tiny and powerless in comparison to the wonders of nature. This painting is reminiscent of the opening scene to Werner Herzog's 1972 film 'Aguirre, the Wrath of God' in which the Spanish conquistadors are only just visible as they descend the mountain face in search of El Dorado. The nature totally engulfs the men - they are not conquerors of nature; they are those conquered by nature. (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972)

However, I sense now in a more recent, contemporary sense that the tables are turning and these roles are completely reversing, as instead of man being so powerless to the strengths and forces of nature, I feel it is now the other way around. Global warming is proof that due to the actions of mankind over the years, we are slowly destroying these powerful natural wonders. Rather than these wonders having the control and power of us, we have power over them. Without even intending to, mankind is destroying these places, suggesting to me that the powers and strengths of man are actually so much stronger than we may realise.

It is evident to me in paintings such as *Hannibal and his Army* and *Wanderer Above the Sea* that in the 19th century man's relationship with nature was vastly different to what we have now. The way man is depicted alongside nature - deep within it, small in comparison or in a contemplative stance, suggests he respects it; is intimidated by it or in complete awe. This could also reflect the awe and respect the artists themselves hold for nature, only it is portrayed through the characters within the paintings. Turner has painted *Hannibal and his army* using a much darker palette - the mountains look ominous and daunting, invoking the idea that certainly the figures set within the landscape, but perhaps also Turner himself, feels scared or intimidated by the dominance and powers of nature within the painting and the real world. The way in which the clouds almost bleed in to the storm above them gives them the sense they are growing and building upwards; as if they have a life of their own, like they are an evil spirit that has been summoned or conjured up and they are slowly but surely rising up.

'The Slave Ship' (see fig. 3 on the following page) painted by Turner in 1840, depicts a scene very much in keeping with the Romantics style - a scene of a violent, stormy sea with an enormous, glowing orange sunset bleeding into the vast, open sky above. The masts of a ship can be seen just off to the left of the center of the



image, pointing directly upwards, towards a very gloomy looking storm. Miniature figures slowly start to emerge towards the foreground; they are bodies floating in the water, the chains attached to their limbs suggest they are slaves and have likely been thrown overboard from the ship. Gulls can be seen flying directly above the bodies, suggesting they will soon be preparing to feast upon them - even a few sea-creatures and fish can be seen surrounding the slaves in the water, adding an even more grimacing and terrifying thought to this already macabre image.

Originally titled '*Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on*', Turner was originally inspired to paint this gruesome scene after he read the book 'The Abolition of The Slave Trade' by Thomas Clarkson. The book characterises an incident that happened in the early 1780s, when Slavery was still legal in Great Britain. A ship filled with slaves was travelling in the Atlantic, likely to be taking West African slaves across to the New World. Many of the slaves onboard were either ill or close to death, however if they died on board then the captain could not collect insurance money. It is likely if he lost them at sea he could collect money for lost cargo - so in order to collect this insurance money he threw the slaves overboard. Perhaps Turner felt so shocked and horrified by this event, he felt the need to describe its impact on him through paint. (British Romanticism: The Slave Ship, 2007)

The viewer is immediately drawn to the glowing, deep orange sun right in the center of the image, followed by a violent, stormy sea off to the left - the two main indicators that a typhoon is

on its way. While the image is titled 'The Slave Ship' the focus is drawn mostly to the nature that surrounds it; it is indeed a landscape painting that focuses on the powers of nature and the weather, while everything that represents man is merely a tiny speck, a blur of colour or the numerous scratches of the ships masts, shrouded in mist and cloud. Even the bodies of the slaves themselves are just shapes and blurred colours set within the more vibrant and detailed colours of the sea. The ship itself is pushed off to the back, as if it loses its importance to the greatness and power of the sea and the sky. Every part of this image suggests nature's greatness over man. The sun and sea are painted with much more detail than any other part of the composition; they appear to be the main focal points of the image due to their rich colour and detail. Turner alludes to the true terrors and dangers of nature here by referencing the growing storm and approaching typhoon - what must be a terrifying ordeal for the men aboard the ship; man's struggle against nature is made completely clear - a strong reminder of the concept of the sublime. (British Romanticism - The Slave Ship, 2007)

There are several indicators within the painting that a typhoon is on its way; the burning orange sun followed by a dark storm, the violent sea and crashing waves; most obviously however the last part of the original title 'Typhoon Coming On'. When Turner exhibited '*The Slave Ship*' at the Royal Academy in 1840, he placed next to it an extract from an unpublished poem of his entitled 'Fallacies of Hope'. One line of the poem reads 'Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds Declare the Typhon's coming. (MFA Boston - Slave Ship, 2017) Here Turner personifies the nature in the painting by giving it a human quality - describing it as being angry. This to me creates an image of anger in the sky, perhaps of an angry, screaming face of a god-like being living among the clouds, or some sort of Greek or Norse God perhaps. Upon researching the history and origins of the word Typhon, I discovered that Typhon, or Typhoeus, was the son of Gaea and Tartarus, and was considered to be the mightiest and deadliest monster in Greek mythology. Typhon was a fire breathing dragon with 100 heads, and after being defeated by Zeus in battle, was buried under Mount Etna; being the cause of all volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. (Greek Mythology, Typhoeus, 2017) This is reminiscent of the legends Werner Herzog uncovers while in Vanuatu for his film 'Into the Inferno' – for it is believed by the people there that their ancestors live under the volcanoes; anyone who dies there will go to the volcano, and the volcano then becomes their home – suggesting their spirits live on through the

volcano as if it were a kind of memorial. (*Into the Inferno*, 2016)

Similarly, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, storms are used as a way of foreshadowing the terrible events that will soon be taking place in the life of the main character, Victor Frankenstein. The first, most important storm is when Victor witnesses a tree being struck by lightning, which he watches progress with 'curiosity and delight' (Shelley, 1992) - suggesting his awe and astonishment to the nature he is seeing before him. This storm is significant because upon witnessing it, Victor takes to his studies, diving into Science and Chemistry; which ultimately lead on to his creation of the monster. (Cecilia, 2015) It is as if the creature has come to life because of this storm; as if the terrible storm gave it life. In fact, the entire novel can be considered sublime, as not only is the sublime in nature a strong theme throughout, but Victor's very own creation is nothing short of awe-inspiring - a monster he created becomes an intelligent, living being, something so terrible to even look at. This idea in itself incites inspiration and terror; here the monster is the embodiment of the sublime. Not only this, but Mary Shelley considers the novel itself her own creation; her monster. The novel allows the reader to encounter first hand, this sublime experience; despite all the horrific events that take place along the way, we still somehow can't wait to get to the end, we are drawn to it in awe and wonder. (Deibler, 2015)

It seems both Turner and Shelley have used powerful storms in their work to represent the birth of a monster; the monster in Turner's painting being the personified nature in the form of the typhoon, gaining strength and power around the Slave Ship. Rather than depicting the horrific story of man throwing slaves overboard the ship, it seems Turner is instead dealing with the Wrath of God; the hot boiling colours of the sun, mixed with the turbulent, bloody waters of the ocean heaving in the storm - this is an intense depiction of the anger and disapproval of God. (Whitman, 2011) The disapproval perhaps at man and the way he has acted - the captain of the ship playing God with the lives of the innocent Slaves. While only a legend from ancient Greek mythology, this is very significant as it links directly back to my main body of work - as the volcanoes lying dormant beneath the glaciers of Iceland would be controlled by Typhon. This painting also makes a strong reference to the powers man-kind does hold - the powers of one man over another. This is evident in the small but very apparent details of the men's bodies in the water, having been thrown overboard by those on the ship. This was a reference to a real

event that occurred just years earlier, and it shows the true horrors that man is capable of. To treat another human so poorly, as if their life equals less than yours, is the darkest horror of man. The men on the ship showed their greed and selfishness for money ranked high above the anything else, including another man's life. It is this greed and selfishness that is still very much alive inside man today; however, I believe it has become even stronger, as we are now dominating and owning what once owned us. Nature and the elements dominated and owned everything - man respected its power and brilliance. Now, it is man-kind that dominates nature. We no longer respect nature the way in which we did centuries ago, looking up to it with awe and brilliance - now, to many, I think it is simply just 'there'. Sadly, I think many people don't even have any sort of relationship with nature at all now. In the 21st Century we are so consumed with the latest technologies and conveniences, we have little time or interest for the outdoor world. Alongside this, man has found ways of living that sadly have terrible repercussions on the natural world; the industrial activities that we have become so dependent on have dramatically raised the levels of carbon dioxide within our atmosphere, thus resulting in an overall increase in the temperature of our planet over the last 50 years. (Nasa: Climate Change Vital Signs, 2017)

Slowly but surely, man is destroying our planet. Something which was once viewed by man as so entirely powerful, so great, is now completely changed forever by something as small as man. Something that once owned us, we now own. We are now being born in to this world where everything is being made easier and more convenient for us, at the expense of our planet - all our actions are having such a negative impact and sadly, we have very little care or motivation to do much about it. It is this loss of interest over the years, the dependency on modern living and all our industrial activities, that has resulted in the near loss of the Sublime in general, I believe. The difference in attitudes towards nature from the 18th and 19th Centuries compared to now, is entirely different. Man-kind once walked through a valley of green, rolling hills or peered up at rugged, snow-capped mountains, and was taken over with awe and sheer brilliance. Now I think it takes an awful lot to provoke those thoughts inside someone. Perhaps this is because we are so used to seeing or hearing about such places – like John Urry's tourist gaze - we see images in everyday life or they are in films, we know they exist and therefore the element of shock or surprise is no longer there. They are so much more accessible now than they were back in the

18th and 19th Centuries; we simply hop on a plane or get in a car. We are used to it - they are just 'there'. Similarly, with Climate Change, we hear and see about it every day, maybe we are just too used to it. Perhaps this is now bordering on ignorance, maybe we have become too used to them, both the idea of nature and its vulnerability. Man has just become stuck in its ways and become too ignorant to what is around us to invoke any sort of feeling or change.

Gender and the Sublime

While Burke made some truly significant contributions to the discourse on the Sublime, it is important to remember the period and context under which he wrote – this was a time where his writings on the subject had very little to be compared to, and if it had, it would have only been from another males' perspective. Burke states the differences between the Sublime and the Beautiful, and separates the two completely; the Sublime is associated with such conventionally masculine qualities such as power, size, majesty, awe and chaos, while the Beautiful holds the conventional feminine traits of delicacy, softness, smallness and timidity. Humanities inability to visibly see or grasp the whole of something instills terror, and fills us with the sense of the sublime; while Beauty on the other hand is entirely visible, nothing is missing and we can grasp the whole of it. (Avalos, 2018) Burke writes that “the beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity” and “it is the flowery species...”, “so remarkable for its weakness and momentary duration, that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty, and elegance” – Beauty is inseparable from weakness, as if inferior to the masculine power of the Sublime. (Freeman, 1995)

Burke associates the Sublime with “the authority of the father” suggesting awe-inspiring, perhaps divine, God-like qualities. (Avalos, 2018) It could be said that Burke has assigned the feminine to the ‘lesser’ category of Beauty, lesser when compared to the power and awe-inspiring traits of the Sublime. It is unclear whether or not Burke is suggesting that only a male can perceive or experience the sublime, because he shares its masculine traits, and that a woman cannot. If this were the case, I would have to disagree, as I am female and have experienced the Sublime. (Freeman, 1995)

My Artistic Practice – with examples, and how it relates to the idea of the Sublime

My practical work is a process that begins at any specific location I feel a strong connection too. This connection normally becomes immediately apparent - the example I will use here is Jökulsárlón, as that is where much of my practical work is based. I felt so overwhelmed whilst there, words failed me and I simply didn't want to leave; I was in total awe at what was before me. Photography is a huge part in my process, I use it to collect references and evidence I can refer back to. Photographs of the landscape as a whole are always collected; however, I will also usually take close up studies of certain colours, formations or patterns to help me later when I am building up my painting.

While photographs are a great source of reference, I have found my method of working over the last couple of years has changed significantly, and now I rely much more heavily upon memory. With some places this may be slightly harder - perhaps because I felt I came to know Jökulsárlón very well I find it much easier to remember. Considering I only spent a couple of days there, I still remember every aspect of it so vividly; the smells, the sounds, all the things that cannot be captured in a photograph. I can only put this down to the overwhelming experience I had there, and because of this, I am able to use these excellent memories as a reference when painting. My experience at Jökulsárlón is so heavily ingrained into my mind that I can call upon it at any point in time and see it in my head, as if pulling up an old photo stored in a file on a computer. I use this ability when painting; sometimes I may have an idea of what I want to paint, but if not all I do is pull up this memory and the whole experience and place is being played over in my mind. This then inspires me and within moments I will have an idea on what I am painting. It is as if I am being transported back to the place every time I go in to this memory, I lose touch with my surroundings and go back into this world of ice and glaciers. In a way, it is almost like I am painting from life or 'en plein air' as whilst I am painting, I really do see this view before my eyes, and feel all those emotions I felt when I was there. Obviously, this isn't the case, and I am really just sitting in a studio somewhere, but my memory of this experience is so vivid it feels so real.

Because of this process, I rarely look at photos when painting now, which is entirely different to what I was doing 3+ years ago. I feel as though I know the place so well, I can just rely on

memory. I also feel that using this process allows for more freedom and imagination, as just painting from a photograph would ultimately just give me a painting of the photo, and that is not what I am trying to create. I want to add feeling, emotion and sensation into my painting, something which I don't feel is captured in a photograph. Allowing myself to just use the power of my memory also allows for my imagination to play a part. It helps that the environment I am dealing with is so abstract and in a constant state of change, as it allows me to alter the way in which I want a particular ice berg positioned, for example.

This brings in another method I have often used, if ever I felt unsure of myself or uninspired for whatever reason. The 'blotting technique' or 'blot drawings' was a method created by the 18th Century artist Alexander Cozens, in which the artist effectively invents his own landscape by dropping a series of ink blots on to paper, allowing chance to play a role in what this landscape will ultimately become. This technique was created by the 1750s and it is likely it was first developed by Cozens as a teaching aid to liberate the minds of his students and to encourage them to think more imaginatively. (Tate - Alexander Cozens, 2017) These accidental marks and shapes could then be connected however the artist envisioned, and from there sketches and further paintings could develop. I have used this technique many times, and found it not only helpful but also very liberating, to be able to dream up my own landscapes and have the freedom to use nothing but my imagination. I have made many watercolour sketches using this method, and some eventually turned into more substantial paintings on canvas. Before discovering this method, I often felt trapped within the photograph, but upon trying this I found it so much more liberating to be able to add shapes or take them away, or indeed to invent the whole landscape from scratch if I wanted to.

Ultimately this method paved the way in how my work would become a lot less of referring to photographs, and a lot more of relying on my own memory and experiences, it helped me to make my work even more personal than it already was. To sit and explore my memory of somewhere was something I hadn't explored fully before, but I very quickly became fond of it. It becomes an experience of reflection; reflecting on my own subjectivity and my own experiences, and relying solely on these versus the objectivity of my photographs. When I think of this place I really feel I am there; that what I'm really seeing is the glacial lagoon at Jökulsárlón. But I am not just seeing it, I re-live every aspect of it and my senses are filled as if I was truly there. To

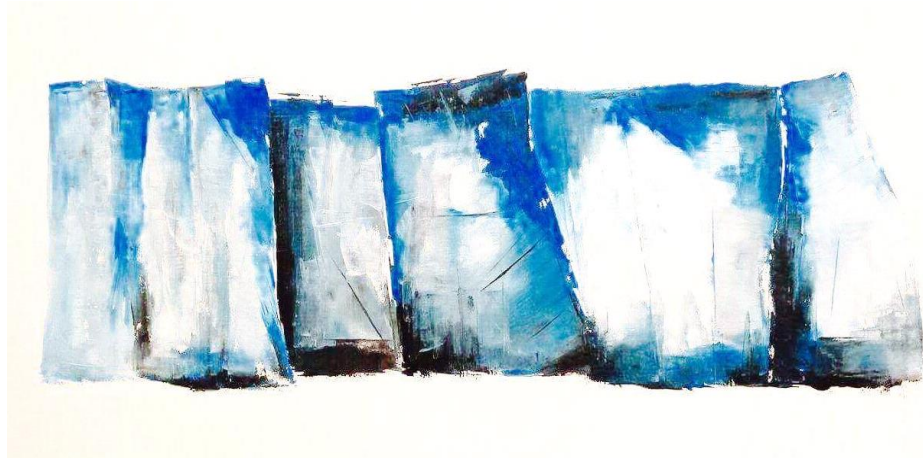
produce these paintings, I almost transport myself back there in my mind and re-live it all over again.

Unless the spectator has been to this location, then I think it is unlikely they will see what I see when I see my painting, or feel what I feel. Given that some of my later paintings have become much more abstract, it is likely the viewer will only see a blue shape with black and white blurs on it. However, what I see when I view these paintings is the complete opposite - I see the whole landscape; I see huge icebergs in front of me. So, the viewing experience for the spectator and myself as the artist here is very different - but I think without knowing the story of what it is or the location to it, this is bound to happen. I like this unknown quality - the viewer may well see it and just see messy, angular floating shapes - but there is so much more behind it. Much like the landscape itself - the spectator may just see blue icebergs against snowy mountains; but it is so much more than that. The idea of the unknown is a central theme throughout all my research, and having it in my paintings and how they are perceived makes it even more significant.

Jökulsárlón II (see figure 4, below) is the second in a series of two paintings I did during the 3rd year of my BA, and was part of my exhibition in the final year show. It differs hugely from some of the work I produced for the second year of my MA- '*Ísblár*' (fig. 5 on the following page) and *Jökulsárlón II* are vastly different in appearance, yet have all the same emotions and experiences behind them. By the time I had created *Ísblár*, I was much more accustomed to using my memory as inspiration and feel as though it is a second nature to me now, whereas *Jökulsárlón II* was painted with the help of some photographic references.



My MA work has developed in to a much simpler block or shape of cool colour - blues and whites, suspended on the canvas, with nothing but white space in the



background. This is quite the contrast to my earlier works - I was known for filling the entire canvas with a very traditional landscape type setting - a background, middle and foreground. During my MA I felt the need to develop my work further and tried to push myself out of this comfort zone of horizontals and landscapes. While there is so much less to the overall image, I believe *Ísblár* does something that *Jökulsárlón II* does not; it portrays the message of vulnerability and fragility so much more. Without the mountains and glaciers in the background anchoring it all down, the iceberg form has the freedom to move about on the canvas. While it obviously doesn't, I still feel having nothing pinning it down eludes to its fragile state so much more than if it were anchored down by everything else in the background. Much like in real life, when you look at the glacier, its size and dominance is the first thing you see - it is huge, and doesn't seem to be moving or changing at all. However, when you see all the icebergs and flowing water, then you realise how it is all constantly melting and changing. Having just the iceberg form on its own against the white of the canvas shows its simplicity, suggesting less is more. By having it alone on the canvas makes it more vulnerable - a message which I am trying to convey.

Jökulsárlón II appears larger in a sense because there are other elements in the image that can be compared against each other, helping the viewer to understand the scale a little more. While *Ísblár* on the other hand, has nothing to be compared to, I still see the forms on a larger scale. The blocks of ice are so tightly placed together, and the way they are angled I feel creates a sense of tension between them, like they are being pushed up and against each other creating a rift of tension, an upwards pushing force, making them appear larger than they are. To have some sort

of scale and largeness is important here, and appropriate also when considering the sublime. 'Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime' (Burke, 1757) Burke writes in his *Enquiry* on the quality of vastness, suggesting the larger something is in its dimensions, the greater, more sublime it is.

Unlike the paintings I have researched by Turner and Friedrich, my paintings differ in the sense there are no people present in mine. Again, having them present may aid the spectator in having something to compare the wild and untamed nature to. For as long as I can remember, I have never added any reference to people within my work, it has always been just about the landscape. It never came into question whether or not I would add people in order to have something to compare the nature to - I've never felt the need to. While the use of human life may have helped Turner in conveying the sublime in nature in his paintings, my aim is not to provoke the sublime sensation in my viewers. I am simply painting my sublime experience; if the viewers do not see the sublime here, that is their own interpretation. But I still consider my work to be sublime because that is the experience I am dealing with and portraying in the painting.

Terror, fear and the Sublime

The qualities of terror and danger were key components to the sublime, as Burke writes in his *Philosophical Enquiry*: 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.' (Burke, 1757) This suggests that fear is the strongest of all the passions, and is so severe and strong it is capable of robbing the mind of all reason or thought when it is in this state of fear. During the time this treatise was written, in the late 1750s, the dangers and horrors of nature that caused such a feeling would have been disasters such as avalanches, storms, earthquakes and volcanoes. To this day, we as a human race are shocked by them and fear such atrocities, however I think given we have more understanding of them and due to their frequencies, we are certainly more accustomed to them now than we would have been in the 18th Century.

The destructive powers of these natural disasters attract me to this landscape; it is a place of such power, wonder, and awe, and yet within a second, it can all be wiped away and take thousands

more years to rebuild itself. I find myself drawn to its fragility, the fact that on the surface it appears so rugged and powerful. These landscapes are so vast and inhospitable, yet in the blink of an eye, all of this can be lost. This idea almost makes the landscapes seem more precious, that their vulnerability makes you want to hold on to them, to experience it a little while longer, because who knows when it will disappear?

The location of Jökulsárlón within the Vatnajökull glacier, lies on top of some active volcanoes; the large volumes of ice that create the Vatnajökull glacier completely conceal the volcanoes, and unless you know the geography of this area, you would have no idea they were there.

Beneath the Vatnajökull glacier lies the Bárðarbunga volcano, which is the one of the largest in the country, and Grímsvötn which is the most active. Standing at Jökulsárlón, or in other areas around the Vatnajökull glacier looking up, I felt overwhelmed by its size, yet in complete awe and fascination at the secret power it holds beneath the ice, knowing that at any moment there could be an earthquake, which could cause many of the active volcanoes here to erupt, completely destroying everything in its path, including me. In a very strange way, that thought excited me; it instantly made the whole place so much more fascinating and exciting. It is perhaps a similar reason that attracts film directors like Werner Herzog to such places, for his 2016 documentary *'Into the Inferno'* explores man's relationship with these violent wonders, a topic with which he has long been fascinated with.

Within this documentary one particular scene stood out to me – the team travel to Iceland and are exploring the South West region of the country that was home to the catastrophic Laki eruption of 1783, an eruption that lasted 8 months and to this date is the second largest volcanic eruption in the last 1,000 years. (Castella, 2010) According to Herzog in his usual voice-over “this entire landscape exploded into flames as far as the eye could see, from horizon to horizon” all the while the camera pans across a black and grey volcanic landscape, illuminated with the glowing yellow green of the grass that now grows there. His choice of words conjures up the most terrifying images, for the landscape we are seeing is so vast and now very green, the thought of the whole thing exploding into flames is quite incomprehensible. Volcanologist and co-director Clive Oppenheimer then goes on to add that had we been there at the time, we would have witnessed “fire fountains” and “jets of fire rising a kilometer and a half into the air.” (*Into the Inferno*, 2016) This further adds to this apocalyptic vision; as if something out of a modern sci-fi movie,

like hell on earth. These details help me to gain a more vivid image of what this part of Iceland would have once looked like; somewhere I stood so close to.

Herzog goes on to explain how such events influenced the myths and sagas of Icelanders and how it became such an integral part of their culture. The Royal Code, or Codex Regius is an Icelandic text that essentially defines the spirit of the people; it is the very soul of the country. In the opening passage there is an apocalyptic vision of the end of the pagan gods, which seems to describe a huge volcanic event. “Neath the sea the land sinketh, the sun dimmeth, from the heavens fall the fair, bright stars; gusheth forth steam and gutting fire to very heaven soar the hurtling flames. The fates I fathom, yet farther I see; of the mighty gods the engulfing doom. Comes the dark some dragon flying, Nithhogg, upwards from the Nitha Fells. He bears his pinions as the plains he o’erflies, naked corpses; now he will sink.” (*Into the Inferno*, 2016)

Herzog quotes this text over footage of red hot lava spewing from the earth; smoke billowing and rivers of lava pulsating and bursting along the mountain sides. It is fascinating to hear an actual quote from these times telling the story of this immense eruption in their own words; the land appears to be sinking, the sun has dimmed from the ash cloud plunging their world into darkness. This description gives an even more sublime feel to what would already be a very sublime moment; ‘the engulfing doom’ suggests an evil force encircling them, and with references to the heavens and the gods it gives a religious, other-worldly sense to it, and nod to higher powers that control such events. The description given of the eruption is like a message from the beyond, and reinforces that the sublime experiences were brought about by nature and felt by the Icelanders over 200 years ago. However, with Herzog and Oppenheimer standing on the very land this took place, equally as fascinated as I am in the country’s geography, it also reminds viewers that the Sublime experience is still very much present and still alive now. In every community visited throughout this documentary, the citizens live alongside volcanoes and appear to have a great respect for them, suggesting the fear they hold toward them. It is these people who are still very much under the control of nature. I think this reverence and respect is an essential part of the Sublime experience – for how can one experience something so great when they do not see it as something so great to start with? (*Into the Inferno*, 2016)

Throughout my MA work I have been referencing these natural terrors and dangers such as volcanoes within my work, not only because of their place within the sublime, but also because

of their huge contradiction with my main subject matter. My focus has been on glacial landscapes; the glacial lagoon of Jökulsárlón, icebergs, the glacial meltwater - all made up of cool colours such as blues, whites and greys. Everything about these images leaves a cooling feeling in the viewer. However, the thought that underneath these glaciers lie active volcanoes is quite incomprehensible. The thought filled my head with contrasting imagery of opposite colours and terrain. I began by experimenting with using both opposite colours within the same image - I found blues and oranges worked very well - due to being complementary colours on the colour wheel, perhaps. (Morton, 2017) I was very surprised and pleased with my outcomes, and '*Rauður Jökull*' figure 6. below) is an example of how successful I think this was.

MA Exhibition Works

Unlike *Ísblár*, *Rauður Jökul* features deep red, abstracted lines and shapes along the base of the structure and a few red marks up into the body of the form. The red here represents the volcanic activity beneath this mass of ice - a reminder to us that it is still very much there, just hidden. I decided to use red here in place of orange because of its various connotations towards danger, energy and power, but also because overall it worked better aesthetically. I purposely made the red so bold and obvious, and I think it conveys the message so much more. It also serves as a direct link to the idea of the sublime in the times of Burke and Turner; the dangers and horrors it posed were the truest, most extreme qualities of the sublime. Having a stark, blood red instantly makes you think of such horrors associated with the sublime. In some sections I have painted the red over a very dark phthalo blue, or black; I think this layered effect of having the red over such a dark colour

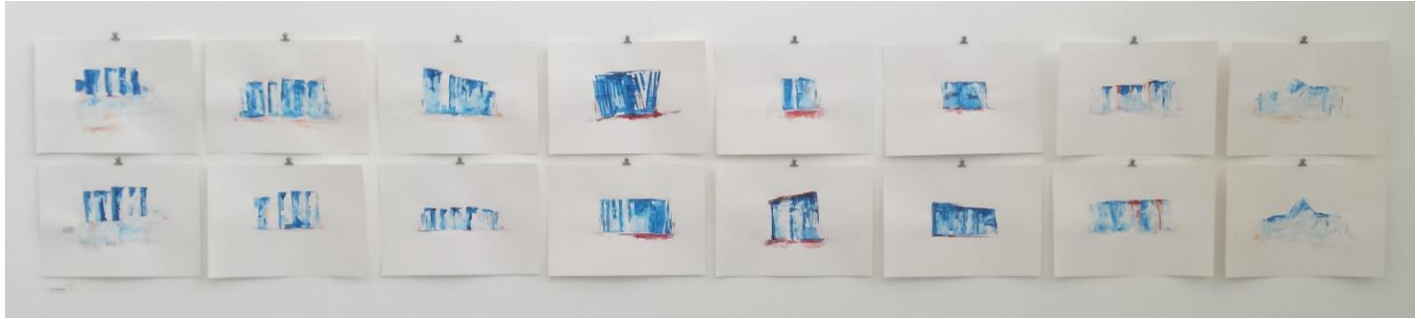
makes it stand out so much more – when looking at this image my eyes are drawn to this red area, and I have been told by my



peers that they have noticed the same effect. It is almost like the way in which we as humans are drawn to the dangers and horrors of nature that I have been researching so far; much like the way I felt drawn in to these landscape in the first place – their hidden dangers and terrors were not enough to put me off, instead they captured my attention even more.

Much like in *Ísblár*, the blocks of ice in *Rauður Jökul* are built up, giving the effect, they are pushing upwards and into each other, creating a sort of tension. I have been able to create this effect with the use of a large palette knife – a tool I have used for painting for several years now. It has helped me to create different angles of the paint – using the narrow, sharper edge to create my signature angled lines over the top as I am nearly finished, but also using the flat surface to create different angled blocks of paint, and push them around in different directions. The red abstracted lines have also been applied using the sharper edges of the palette knife, but in some areas I have dragged the paint down in a sort of pulling, sweeping motion, to give the appearance of the red moving, slipping or melting. It has been suggested to me that this vivid red is reminiscent of blood, and its downward motions hint at the blood dripping. Dripping blood is perhaps one of the most gruesome and terrifying images – it instantly makes us think of murders or massacres, or even perhaps vampires. Massacres and murders are two of the most inhumane, horrifying acts any human could commit – yet serve as perfect examples of the darkness within man, that despite how bad it is, many people still do it. The image of dripping blood is perhaps a classic image of what may represent this darkness of man – and to have it in my painting serves as a reminder of the horrors man really is capable of. While my work does not deal with dark acts such as the murder, it does acknowledge the horrors of man's destruction of the earth, which some could argue is in fact a similar act.

Rauður Jökul will be hung on the wall in the gallery as an un-stretched canvas, using just bulldog clips to hold it in place. I have decided to keep this method of hanging for all of my work in the exhibition, not only so it is all kept consistent, but also because I don't want any of it anchored down or trapped underneath anything; I want it to have the freedom of openness and movement, much like in its original state within the landscape. I am trying to convey the message that these immense structures are always moving and changing, and so I want this to also be translated in the physicality of the canvas itself, not just in the subject matter. The edges of the canvas are kept raw, uneven and frayed; I want them this way because it reinforces my idea of their



freedom, and lack of human intervention. The frayed, jagged edges are reminiscent of the jagged, sharp edges of ice at Jökulsárlón. I want to convey the message of constant movement and fragility of these tremendously powerful and dominating wonders, and I feel having the canvas straight or pinned down on to a stretcher will only control it and anchor it down more. Having it open and free to hang allows for it to move, exactly as the glacial ice would in nature.

Ís Hraun (see figure 7, above) translates to ‘Ice Lava’ and is the name of a series of 16 A2 size paper paintings. Each image is painted in the same way and is a fairly quick process, where I lay out a few blobs of acrylic paint somewhere in the centre of the paper, pour on a few drops of water, then using the palette knife I drag the paint down the paper. The paint bleeds into the water creating a blurred, watercolour effect in the places where they connect. They are very simple to create and only take a matter of minutes; contrasting to my larger pieces which take up to a day. The technique derived from Cozens’ blotting method, which I have experimented with many times throughout this degree; the process of inventing my own landscape or structure was the sole intention, however to create these I altered the process slightly to what suited me. In keeping with my theme of the fragility and freedom of movement of the bergs, I have kept the structures to the centre of the page, leaving nothing but white space around it. While these paper paintings are on a much smaller scale to my other pieces, the concept and ideas are exactly the same. However, the paper series alludes even more so to the fragility of the icebergs, as having them downsized even smaller and on an even thinner surface suggests even more to their exposure to global warming.

Ís Hraun works as a series; in a way it is like a recreation of Jökulsárlón, as all you can see before you are icebergs, all of different shapes and sizes. And that is exactly what *Ís Hraun* is – a mass of different icebergs, all different colours, shapes and sizes, all alongside each other as if still in the lagoon. I didn’t spend too much time deciding their placement or what order they

would be in, I simply grouped them into ones that were similar in terms of structure or shape, and left it at that. I didn't want to spend too much thought on this; they didn't take long to create and chance played a big part – in terms of the water bleeding with the paint and taking its own course, and so I didn't want to overthink their arrangement too much. As with *Rauður Jökul*, I have continued using the red streaks throughout this series also; again, suggesting to the dangers that lie just beneath these ice structures. In some the red is very dark, in others it is a slightly brighter shade of red, and in some I have mixed red with orange. Here I was just experimenting with different shades of reds to create a variety, as I have also varied the shades of blue I have used, along with the addition of a little, or no white.

Essentially, *Ís Hraun* and *Rauður Jökul* are dealing with the same subject matter, they are just portrayed on different sized mediums and are done using a slightly different method. *Ís Hraun* has the addition of water and much less paint, due to its size. I did try using water on the larger canvases like *Rauður Jökul*, however it just didn't give the same effect – due to the thickness of the canvas and having it primed, the surface wasn't right for it to mix with the paint in the same way as on paper. I like how they are both so different in appearance, yet are both dealing with the same ideas and messages – dealing with the sublime in the glacial landscapes and the dangers and vulnerability to them. Much like with *Rauður Jökul*, all 16 pieces that make up *Ís Hraun* will be individually hung using just one small bulldog clip and a nail into the wall.

The Sublime Now

A lot of what caused the sublime sensation in the spectator during the 18th Century were events we now know so much more about; this was a key element of the sublime experience, the shock or suddenness - 'In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it.' (Burke, 1757) Burke writes that anything so sudden forces us to be on guard, it grabs our attention and alerts us; it shocks us. However, if we were transitioned into it, built up or eased into it, it would have a different effect. I think this is true of what we experience now with natural disasters as I have previously mentioned. While they are still devastating and chaotic, in most cases we are on guard and ready to be prepared as we have detected that this activity is due. This can't be true of all cases;

however, I still believe we are more prepared due to there being so many horrific events and disasters across the world for so long - both natural and man-made, we have grown used to it, we aren't as shocked by it anymore.

It is reasons like this why I believe the sublime in nature has declined so rapidly since the 18th Century; simply because the way humans view nature has changed. Of course, some reasons simply cannot be avoided, we have learnt so much about tectonic plates and seismic activity that we can do our best to monitor these areas and ultimately help save lives should anything happen. Similarly, with events like storms, floods and hurricanes, we grow accustomed to them; while there is still such a tremendous amount of destruction, we do our best to build our homes and buildings in a certain way to avoid too much death or damage. We have learnt from nature, and have grown to live alongside it. I think much of the world's population has just become too dependent on the world moving forward - new inventions to make life easier, everything that is manmade. We are losing touch with all the nature that surrounds us.

Man-made Terrors and the Sublime

The Sublime seems to be a topic that even now, 260 or so years after Edmund Burke first theorized his ideas on the subject, artists are still attempting to engage with the concept and approach its challenges. As discussed, Burke proposed the Sublime to be something that lifts and astonishes us - an experience or passion most often found within nature that leaves the viewer in total awe and astonishment, yet with a degree of terror or horror. The terror that is felt is what sets this experience apart from the beautiful - "terror is in all cases whatsoever . . . the ruling principle of the sublime" (Burke, 1757) here Burke emphasizes the importance of terror within the sublime, and how it is the strongest, most powerful emotion behind it. Following on from Burke's treatise on the subject, artists began the challenge of interpreting this idea visually - most notably using nature as its source, as I have previously discussed. However, moving towards the 20th Century, artists looked towards other 'man-made' themes as creators of the sublime, stepping away from nature and finding the sublime in events such as war and terrorism. To refer to the quote just mentioned - where better to find terror than in the horrors of war? This kind of subject matter provided artists with an abundance of imagery of waste, ruin and darkness; all

pointing towards the horrors that make the sublime. (Riding, and Llewellyn, 2013)

The art critic Robert Rosenblum once said that while in “the Romantic era, the sublimities of nature gave proof of the divine” whereas in the mid-twentieth century “such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone.” (Shaw, 2013). This suggests that while artists once looked to nature as the ‘inventor’ of the sublime, artists are now able to create such an experience by relying on their own feelings and emotions. Barnett Newman was an American Abstract painter and art theorist, who was seen as one of the major figures in American Abstract Expressionism and one of the first colour field painters. Newman was very much concerned with the present moment and the act of creation itself, suggesting that this is where the Sublime can be found, rather than in nature. His vast works are at first glance, deceptively simple – consisting of large, asymmetrical blocks of colour that are divided by thin lines, later known as ‘zips’. The colours have subtle variations in tone and intensity, mesmerising the viewer as it dwarfs over them. His intention is to “reassert... man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions” (Shaw 2006, p. 121) perhaps suggesting that we need to shift our focus on the origins of the sublime, turning away from nature and towards ourselves; human emotions and capabilities.

Of the artist, Philip Shaw writes in his book on the Sublime “The sublime emerges in Newman only as an instant of creative intensity, derived not from God, nature, or indeed from mind, but rather from the event of artistic creation. The sense of the beyond, that is, is nothing other than an effect of oil on canvas.” (Shaw 2006, p. 7) Here, Shaw suggests that any sense of the unknown or the further – the ‘beyond’ that the viewer may be transported to after viewing a Newman painting, is purely from the effects of the painting itself. Newman does not hint at any higher powers within his work, like the way in which perhaps Turner or Friedrich hinted towards nature or a divine power – Newman uses the act of creation itself and what it produces to transcend the viewer into this sublime state.

Mark Rothko was another of the early colour-field painters, and friend of Barnett Newman. He insisted that his work was an attempt to express ‘basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom’ (Shaw, 2013). While nature may be the most obvious theme among my own work, I too am concerned with expressing such powerful feelings – awe, overwhelm, or how the nature

itself has conjured up that feeling, rather than the emotion on its own. Rothko famously said that his paintings should be viewed from a distance of 18 inches – perhaps to dominate the viewers field of vision and completely overwhelm them, resulting in them overcome with a feeling of contemplation and transcendence. (MoMA: Sublime and Spiritual.)

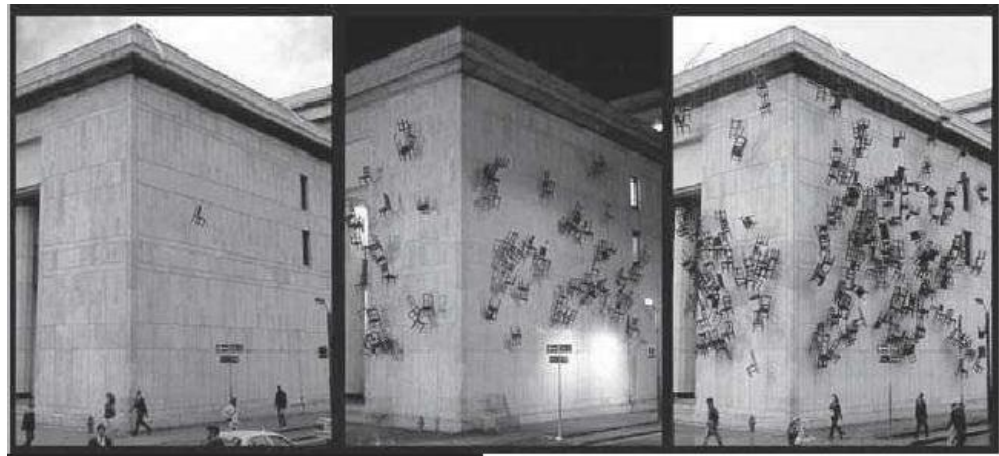
In Rothko's *Untitled 1969*, (see figure 8, right) from his series of *Black and Grey* paintings, the canvas is divided into two more or less equal blocks of colour – the top half is a dark, murky brownish black colour, while the bottom half is a brownish grey-white. Where these two colours meet, I instantly see a horizon line – I see myself



as the viewer looking out as if this painting is a portal into outer space, the greyish mass beneath my feet could be the moon, and the dark ceiling above is the depths of the unknown. For me, this painting conjures up emotions of terror and doom – just what is beyond me? While the use of colour and form (or lack of) are vastly different, both Rothko and I are attempting to paint these emotions – Rothko through expressive colour fields and myself through expressive shapes and forms representing nature. Rothko however, like Newman, is concerned with finding the sublime through the act of creation and colour; standing within 18 inches of this painting that measures approximately 1.73 by 1.23 meters – (Tate: Mark Rothko Untitled) I can already assume I would feel totally dwarfed by it and overwhelmed. In this style of colour field painting, it is intended that both the vast sizes, colours and lack of form work together to create this sublime feeling; “the large blocks of colour.... draw the eye into the canvas, to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between object and subject” (Shaw 2006, p. 121) Philip Shaw here writes of the effects of Barnett Newman's' work, however I use it here to describe the effects of Rothko's, as I believe it to be just as applicable. It is as if this struggle is intended to create a blurring or warping effect, perhaps to confuse the viewer, almost like an illusion.

Moving into the 21st Century, it is apparent that the inspirations behind the sublime have moved on from the idea of finding the sublime within the act of creation itself, or within nature. Not only has the inspirations behind the sublime changed, but so has the means in which artists represent their works. Installations are becoming an increasingly popular way of exhibiting works - perhaps more interactive but not always as long lasting. In complete contrast to the other paintings I have discussed so far, the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo had clusters of wooden chairs descend in a disorderly manner, off the roof of the Palacio de Justicia in Bogotá in an installation entitled *Noviembre 6 y 7* (see figure 9 below). This was an unannounced installation, that completely surprised passers-by, on a day of special significance; November 6th, 2002 was when the first chair descended, and a total of 280 chairs descended over a span of 2 days. The piece referred to an event that took place 17 years earlier, where an M-19 guerilla commando

attacked the Palace of Justice in Bogotá', taking 200 people hostage. As a result, around 115 people - members of the Supreme Court,



civilians and the M-19 commandos were killed. (Yepes)

This installation could be considered an example of the contemporary sublime - not only dealing with a more modern inspiration of the sublime, i.e. acts of war or extreme violence in place of nature, but also the art is exhibited in a much more modern way, in that of an installation. While the content and subject matter differs greatly to my own work, it could be argued that this installation is an example of the sublime in contemporary art. The artist is dealing with a horrific event instigated by man; mans want for control and ownership lead to acts of such terror and violence. This immediately reminds me of the control and greed of mankind that has led to the drastic state of climate change we now face today. While they are two entirely different acts, they both show the sad, destructive truths of the nature of mankind. Man has shown himself to be

more than capable of perpetrating more violence against nature than before.

'Ice Watch Paris' was an installation created by the Icelandic artist Ólafur Elíasson, where 12 huge blocks of ice



were arranged in a clock-like formation at the Place du Pantheon in Paris, in December of 2015. (see figures 10 above and 11 below) Each block of free-floating ice had originated from a fjord near Nuuk in Greenland – a country where around 80% of its surface is covered by ice. (Greenland Travel) The installation was appropriately placed at the Place du Panthéon – a very notable and busy public place, during the cities' week-long United Nations Climate Change Conference, running from 3rd – 12th December 2015. (Ice Watch Paris, 2015)

The ideas behind this installation was so members of the public could get up close and personal to something that is so exposed to climate change; they can walk freely around the icebergs, touching, feeling and even tasting them – and most importantly, watching them melt against the clock before their very eyes. To further convey this sense of time and urgency, the circle of icebergs is set out in a clock-like formation with a circumference of around 20 meters. While the icebergs themselves create such an interesting and visually appealing aesthetic, they come together in this particular location and at this exact time, to function as the key element in a message of awareness of



climate change. For the observers, being able to get in to contact with these immense ice forms gives them the chance to see and feel their power and strength; how solid they are, and yet at the same time, seeing and feeling them melt. (Jones, 2015) This is arguably one of the best ways to learn and understand – to be in contact, to feel and see; not to just hear or read about it. While our mediums of choice differ greatly, the ideas behind my paintings strongly resonate with those of Eliasson; taking something of such great strength and power and showing its vulnerability and demise - and for the same purpose too; to educate and inform others on the effects of climate change.

Ólafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* also came to symbolise and memorialise something other than the melting ice of our ice sheets. Only weeks prior to the arrival of the ice in freezer containers on a ship travelling from Greenland, terrorism struck the city of Paris, in the events that unfolded at the concert being held at the Bataclan theatre, along with several other shootings around the city. Described as “an act of war” by then French President François Hollande, the Islamic State (IS) militant group were behind the attacks that left 130 dead and hundreds more wounded. (BBC News, 2015) Gunmen and suicide bombers almost simultaneously raided a concert hall, restaurants and a major stadium, leaving the city of Paris in a state of shock. Considering this, it was left uncertain as to whether Eliasson's installation would go ahead. However, it did, and once constructed it ended up not just becoming a memorial to the Arctic, as was its intention; but also to Paris. According to Eliasson “The ice we are going to put in Paris is a tenth of what melts in a single second in the Greenland Summer.” Displaying it in this way is a way of making the data real and emotionally potent – yet it is also a way of memorialising it, paying homage to it. (Jones, 2015) Displaying it here so soon after these tragic events is almost a way of uniting the two – these silent and sombre blocks of ice could resonate with the numbed feelings of this wounded city. However, I believe the ice could also provide a few moments of peace and contemplation amongst all the chaos. Its natural beauty has a peaceful and calming poetic quality to it; it allows for the wilds of nature and its raw beauty to come in to the city temporarily, allowing for a place of reflection, space and healing. It almost provides an escape, but without having to go anywhere, as the people of Paris now have such wild nature just outside their window.

'Ice Watch Paris' could be defined as the contemporary sublime – Eliasson's initial ideas and

reasons behind this installation resonate strongly with my own and certainly fit the ideals of what I would describe to be the traditional, Burkean sublime, for he is dealing with arguably the most sublime subject, pure nature. However, events beyond Eliassons control have also given this installation more depth and meaning; the ice now stands to represent the survival of culture – by being presented in such a public way and in such a significant area of the city.

These horrific acts that took place in Paris are the human, ‘man-made’ terrors we are now dealing with, and what many modern artists now look to as the source for the sublime. Such violent acts leave the rest of man-kind in a state of shock, as it is a situation far beyond something that we can comprehend. These events are something we cannot quite grasp – something Edmund Burke believed to be a quality of the sublime. Similar to Doris Salcedos installation response to the Palace of Justice siege in Bogotá, yet another contemporary artist is dealing with the sublime caused by man-kind rather than nature. It is as if human-kind is now usurping the role of nature, or of a divine power.

The terror attacks in Paris – in particular the attack on the Bataclan theatre – was strikingly similar to that of the attack on a Moscow Theatre in October of 2002, during a performance of a Russian romantic musical ‘Nord Ost’. Whilst members of the cast, dressed in military uniform, sang and danced on stage, a man appeared from the wings – also dressed in military uniform, and opened fire. At first the audience thought this was part of the performance, but was only the beginning of what would be a 57-hour ordeal. They would be taken hostage and some would not make it out alive. The brutality of the Chechen War for independence had hit the heart of

Moscow, and were the main focus of a series of paintings by artist John Keane. His paintings (see figures 12 right and 13 following page) focus on the fear of the hostages in the audience, but also with the female suicide bombers who Keane believes can be seen as victims as well as perpetrators.



(Keane, 2006)

His powerful paintings depict figures in the theatre – both victims and perpetrators, with slogans or sayings displayed across the bottom, reminiscent to me of the media and newspaper cut outs. The event is similar in brutality, and



name, to the Bataclan – but also in so many other ways. It shows that we are still fighting this war on terror, the events took place 15 years apart, yet not much has changed. Much like with Eliassons' Ice Watch, the definitions of the Sublime according to Edmund Burke could be applied to Keane's paintings – however I do not agree that they are sublime, as I believe the Sublime to be something that overwhelms and shocks but also uplifts in a positive way, something that this type of subject matter does not do.

While nature has taken a back seat to more violent themes of war and terrorism as inventors of the sublime in the 21st century, it does still play a key role among many artists. To 'overwhelm' the audience appears to be the key component in producing a sublime piece of work – and

Belgian born artist

Francis Alÿs is no exception. Famous for employing a vast range of media to explore tensions in politics and everyday life in Mexico where he now resides, perhaps one of his most sublime pieces of work is the video 'Tornado 2000-2010'.

(See figure 14 right) The



video is made up of footage gathered over a decade of Alÿs running into the eye of tornadoes in the Mexican countryside. (Tate: Tornado, 2010) For Alÿs, the dust storm suggests the imminent collapse of political order – however, it could also suggest that he is no longer able to combat the chaos he encounters. As Alÿs approaches the eye of the storms you hear his footsteps fade as the sound of the wind picks up, as does Alÿs’ breathlessness. In some scenes the tornado engulfs the camera, resulting in a few moments of nothingness, just a black-brown blur. This suspense captures the viewers; it is dealing with the idea of the unknown, for in that moment we do not know what has become of Alÿs. The footage itself is chaotic and intense; it is overwhelming – bordering on the sublime. The subject matter and act itself could be considered sublime, too, for Alÿs here is dealing with nature at its truest form – he is not just painting it or photographing it, he is immersing himself in it; being engulfed by its winds and elements – much like the men in Turners *Hannibal and his Army*, although here Alÿs is running into the storm, while they cower from it. Some could argue that this suggests in contemporary times we do not fear nature – for Alÿs here is running straight into it; I disagree, however, as it remains obvious Alÿs is struggling and that it is not a pleasant ordeal. He may not fear it to the extent of those depicted in *Hannibal and his Army*, but he still demonstrates the idea that nature can overwhelm us and exhaust us, as the storms he encounters are visibly and audibly powerful; they appear dangerous and to an extent, terrifying – it totally overwhelms both Alÿs and the viewer.

Much like Francis Alÿs, German photographer Andreas Gursky works with nature and how it affects human life within his photographs. The idea of the unknown is a major component of the sublime, and despite having so much more intelligence on many elements of the natural world, earthquakes and volcanoes for example, there is still a lot we do not know. Our oceans, along with outer space, are perhaps the purest and most remote nature that exists, and something we know very little about. The photos ‘*Ocean VI*’ and ‘*Bangkok I*’ (see figures 15 and 16 on the following page) by the German photographer Andreas Gursky, suggest a strong emphasis on the unknown; a feeling of negativity and vastness, an insidious feeling of despair. The blackness of the ocean completely dominates the earth-coloured terrain that represents land and human life, echoing the 18th Century vision the nature dominates all. While I have researched the idea of mans greed and want to control, perhaps these images are a hint at the opposite; that while man’s actions have led to the destruction of so much nature, the size of the oceans here suggest it is still

very much alive, and there is still so much to discover. The images are taken from so high above the earth it almost makes it harder for the viewer to connect it – we are so far from the land we can't engage with it. Seeing these images, one can't help but wonder how they were taken – they were originally satellite photos in which Gursky has essentially photoshopped, however it is hard not to imagine a man behind a camera in the sky; perhaps Gursky himself, as we know him to be the 'artist'. He is always above the scene – as if like some sort of God in the sky, looking down on these oceans, never falling from his perch. (Kuspit, 2011)

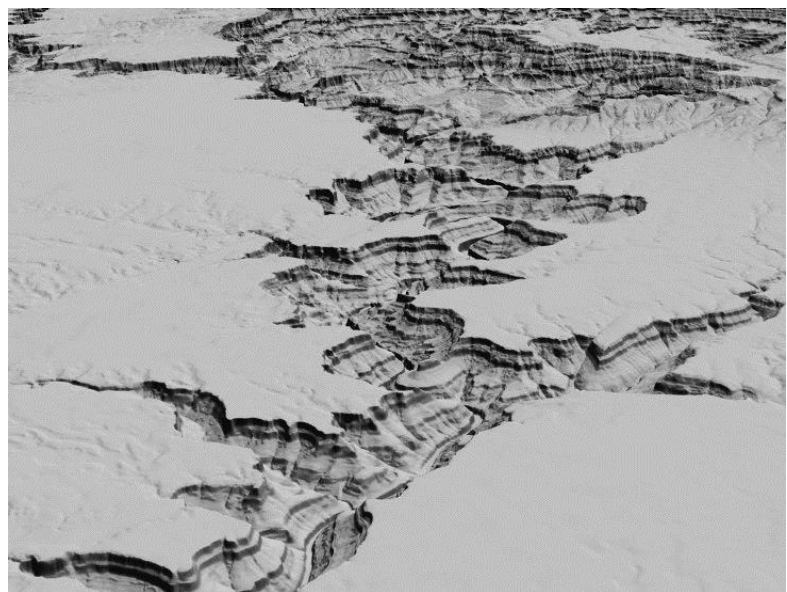


'Bangkok 1' (below-right) is reminiscent of a Rothko or Newman painting – the narrow strip of land just left of the centre is just like the vertical 'zips' seen within their work. The photographs have an abstract quality to them, as if their titles didn't give them away, the viewer may perhaps stop for a moment and wonder what it is meant to represent – as viewers still do today with Rothko and Newman paintings. The limitlessness and enormity of the oceans are perfectly represented in these images, the huge dark expanse of ocean overwhelms the viewer, again, much like Rothko's work, which was intended to be seen up close by the viewer so as to purposely overwhelm them. Looking into the blackness of the water in these images is like looking into an abyss – as if alluding to how polluted these oceans have become, perhaps irreversibly. There is no suggesting of any new life here, just nothingness.



While the oceans are the main focus of these series of images, they also quietly represent man-kinds advances in technology, as well as the unknowns of outer space – two other inventors of a more contemporary sublime. Outer space has fascinated man-kind for thousands of years, and while we may now know more than ever, there is still so much more to discover. Gursky’s images remind us that space exists, as we were able to get the image from so high up in the first place – but what is behind the satellite recording the images? This unknown fascinates us, yet terrifies us at the same time, as so little is known it borders being dangerous. Space and the universe has intrigued both artists and poets alike for centuries – this is made clear in a poem by John Hughes from 1720, in a line that reads “Here, let me, thy companion, stray, From orb to orb, and now behold Unnumber’d suns, all seas of molten gold; And trace each comet’s wandering way”. (Hughes, 1720 cited in Janowitz, 2010) Likening the sun and other planets or stars to ‘molten gold’ suggests an image of richness, but also of a greater power or deity; as if it is all so precious and beautiful it is likened to a highly sought-after metal. Space and the ‘cosmic sublime’ is perhaps open to further discussion – while I have touched on it lightly, a more in-depth discussion would be needed to analyse and explore the topic fully. While it is appropriate to reference it regarding its relevance to the sublime, I will be doing only that, as I believe it is a topic that can be saved for perhaps future research and discussion. (Janowitz, A. 2010)

In keeping with the styles and topics of the contemporary sublime, perhaps Dan Holdsworth would be a great example to discuss. For his 2012 work ‘*Transmission*’ (see figure 17 below) he created digital virtual models, or relief maps of American landscapes using data obtained from radar scans from the U.S Geological Survey. He appropriated some of the data that was collected and with the help of a university geologist, created computer models of the land. A software program was then used to remove everything but the basic



contours of the earth; so any prominent buildings, malls, houses etc disappeared – although the occasional trace of a road or building did sometimes remain. He was then able to navigate through these 3D worlds that had been created – peering down into a volcano or meandering through a canyon corridor.

Emma Lewis, who wrote an essay on *Transmission* writes “Looking at the world as though from space, *Transmission* evokes a sense of capturing something that has never been seen before; something especially powerful as these landscapes have been so visually reproduced throughout history as to become embedded in the popular conscience.” (Little, 2013) The prints almost resemble Gursky’s appropriated satellite photos of the oceans seen from space – the idea that Holdsworth, like Gursky, is looking down at the earth from above. The suggestion of space brings forth the idea of the cosmic sublime and the dangers and wonders of the unknown – yet the fact that these images have been created using data recordings and technology on a computer with a software programme is perhaps just as awe-inspiring as the real thing. Holdsworth has effectively created exact replicas of natural landmarks and put them to paper – all while seated at a computer. This is the opposite of Turner, who painted meticulously, over and over to create the sublime within a painting – or Alÿs, who physically exhausts and overwhelms himself and the viewer by running into Tornado storms – Holdsworth is accessing and creating the sublime by interpreting collected data through a programme and onto paper. As I have lightly touched on previously, the capabilities of modern technologies are bordering incomprehensible – it is simply astonishing what we can now do with a computer or a mobile device. It seems that not only are we finding the sublime within technology, but we are also using technology to find it or represent it, just like how Holdsworth has created his prints.

The last contemporary piece of work I will be discussing, and perhaps the most similar to my work in terms of theme, is that of John Akomfrah’s video montage, *Purple* (see figure 18 on following page). This multi-channel video installation is made up of archival footage collected from various sources, including his own archives, depicting shots of landscapes that have been affected by global warming, running against juxtaposing shots of industrial-age mass employment and machines, running right through to the digital revolution, showing suggestions of biotech research and artificial intelligence. Like all of Akomfrah’s work, the installation is immersive and totally overwhelming; any viewer must surrender to its sensory overload. His

own footage used
here was shot
over 10 years and
across 10
different
countries;
Greenland, Skye,
Alaska and the



volcanic Marquesas islands of the South Pacific are just a few of the locations visited, to gather footage that shows the true effects of global warming. Through this work, Akomfrah is reflecting ideas such as the memory of ice, the ‘plastic ocean’, global warming and animal extinctions. (Barbican; John Akomfrah 2017) Even the name of the installation points to death and demise; the colour purple in many African countries symbolises death or mourning - creating an even stronger emphasis on the death of our planet. (John Akomfrah: Purple by WinkBall Video, 2017)

Purple was projected onto 6 separate screens, each around 3 meters wide and showing different footage. (Barbican; John Akomfrah 2017) In a similar way to Francis Alÿs, Akomfrah is using video to completely overwhelm the viewer; the screens are so large and almost wrap around the viewer, immersing them and closing them in – making them feel part of the footage – perhaps as a way of subtly reminding them that they are also responsible for this damage. When I see and read about *Purple*, I instantly see Akomfrah dealing with the sublime in nature – however, like Dan Holdsworth, he is also working with a contemporary sublime, as the means in which he captures his footage and presents his work relies on technology and digital aids. Akomfrah’s work is very much about dealing with the sublime in nature, but also exposing its vulnerabilities and weaknesses, exactly like my own work does. The only difference between Akomfrah and I is our artistic platform – Akomfrah perhaps choosing to deepen this connection to the sublime by choosing a format that strongly supports the sublime in a contemporary sense, and one that totally engulfs and overwhelms the viewer, in order to provide them with a sublime experience too.

Conclusion

Through my research it is evident that artists of the Romantic era looked to nature as the main inspiration or inventor of the sublime; its strength and powers were seemingly unmatched. However, the most significant change over the last two and a half centuries since Burke's treatise on the subject seems to be how the powers of nature have indeed been matched, and it is none other than man himself who has taken over and often completely overruled the strengths of nature. Two and half centuries ago, man-kind stood in complete awe at the fury and dominance of nature taking control - man feared it. The terror and awe that nature could inspire inside of us was incomprehensible - now, it is man himself who we fear. It is man himself and his devastating actions that conjures up fear and terror inside other humans. It acts like the Palace of Justice Siege represented in Salcedo's installation and the attacks on Paris and Moscow that represent just a few examples of artists' responses to the sublime caused by man.

While Burke theorized that terror was the main component in the sublime, and while this seems to be the main component behind a more contemporary sublime, I personally feel the sublime within nature left the spectator with an overall more positive experience, one that enabled the viewer to come away with something, one that left the viewer feeling more connected to nature perhaps; whereas I feel our source for the sublime on its journey into the 21st century has turned to more of a negative one. We are now filled with the horrors and devastation of terrorism and wars, than with the awe and wonder of a surrounding natural force much greater than ourselves. I find that quite a sad thought, that what was once deemed so powerful and inspirational has now been replaced by none other than the downfalls of man. That being said, I do believe man-kind has created the most powerful and awe-inspiring technologies and inventions – capable of accessing or creating the sublime, as suggested by Dan Holdsworth and Andreas Gursky. While some may argue it perhaps differs to the Kantian or Burkean Sublime, or may not fit the Sublime ideals at all, I disagree. I see that the artists are dealing with sublime content or subject matter, much like myself – it is just being presented or captured in a different way to that of Turner. Gursky and Holdsworth are in a sense, dealing with more than one type of sublime – both work with nature, but also technology; the newer, contemporary inventor of the sublime.

It could be argued that perhaps the contemporary sublime is not really the sublime at all, for the

terms that define it have altered to fit around what now provides us with that same experience. The Burkean sublime called for something that astonishes us – something that excites us yet terrifies us and suspends our souls. The sublime is the quality of greatness – it uplifts, and I struggle to comprehend just how one might come away from such negative acts of terror or horror with any sort of positive feeling. While these acts do terrify us, they in no way promote any form of excitement within us or awe. We have no admiration for these people or respect for their actions, yet we do perhaps fear them. While we are not filled with any form of awe or excitement, I think it is likely these perpetrators are, for what other reason would they do it? I think that is a significant difference between the Romantic and Contemporary Sublime, that the definitions and terms have changed over time to fit the more modern inventors of the sublime, and in doing so, have lost some of the original ideals. The horrors of war and terrorism cannot surely be compared with the terrors of nature, and yet that is what we are now looking toward as inspiration behind the sublime.

Unlike some other contemporary artists, I still look for the sublime in nature; like Burke, I believe nature to be the most sublime subject. Having travelled and seen much of the world from a young age, and being encouraged to explore my creativity through the forms of photography and art, the two went hand in hand. I have always been artistic and creative, and from as long as I can remember, my art has been based on these locations I felt connections with. Art and photography have helped me to connect with nature and to find this sublime experience.

Sadly, the shock element and suddenness that Burke suggests is a key component of the sublime, is slowly being eradicated, for we now see and hear so much of the natural world, it is nothing new to us, which is a great contrast to when Burke first wrote his *Enquiry*, as hardly anything was known, which aided in the element of shock. I believe the sublime is still very much alive within nature, however I think it is us as a human race and our outlook on nature that has changed, which is why it is so hard to find. The sublime is still there, but rather than lying dormant in nature, it could be argued that the sublime is the whole time, within ourselves, and is a quality that perhaps we as humans conjure up inside.

This leads me to a close, as the research I have compiled and the analysis I have constructed of sublime paintings has provided me with a much greater understanding of exactly what the

sublime is, and the terms that set it apart from the concept of beauty. An in-depth study of Burke's *Enquiry* has helped me to better understand the idea of the sublime and its definitions, while the cross-examination of important paintings from the Romantic period by notable artists like Turner have given me the opportunity to actually see these definitions of the sublime come to life through paint, and see how they work together to create an overall sublime piece of art. Therefore, I have been able to establish that the sublime is indeed gendered – that through writers like Burke, it has been given a masculine form and that beauty has been assigned a feminine form.

To understand the sublime and how it works in the visual arts throughout history has helped me to analyse my own work in a sublime sense, but it has also helped me to determine where exactly the sublime stands today in the visual arts. Through exploring its roots and developments throughout the course of art history, to analysing more contemporary pieces of art that also deal with the concept of the sublime and comparing its differences – I have been able to answer my proposed research question, confirming that the sublime does still exist, and has indeed changed its course over the centuries. Its definitions and terms have altered over time, but only as we as humans have developed and grown – as we have learnt more about nature, the once primary inventor of the sublime, our views and feelings towards it have changed accordingly. With our new-found knowledge and better understanding of the natural world, results in the demise of the unknown; the element of shock or suddenness has faded now we have the means to know, predict and learn so much more. There are, however, some contemporary artists who still respond to the sublime within nature – Francis Alÿs, John Akomfrah and Dan Holdsworth to name a few – confirming that the sublime in nature does still exist. In light of this, man has looked to new ways to conjure up the sublime, in areas that I believe are much darker, more terrifying and therefore are overall much more cynical, leaving a lasting negative impact rather than an uplifting or awe-inspiring one. While these new vehicles of terror may promote a darker, more terrifying sensation in the spectator, I somehow cannot find myself feeling any sort of wonder, awe or reverence for any such acts of terror in the same way Turner and Burke found in nature. The powers of nature were respected and revered; feared perhaps, but also respected as they were deemed so much greater. While we may fear such atrocities like terror, war and the unknowns of space and our oceans, we certainly do not look to them with high importance or

respect.

While I have established the journey of the sublime into its place in the 21st Century, I have come to my own conclusion that this is not the sublime I am dealing with; I do not work with the horrors of war or conflicts and a sublime that may be found in this – I still find nature to be the truest, most sublime subject, and that will remain for the time being, my source of inspiration. The topic of the sublime in a contemporary sense intrigues me, and it is something I will continue to explore with my own artistic practices and research for some time to come. While I will continue to paint the sublime in nature, I openly explore the potential for it to be found elsewhere.

List of Illustrations

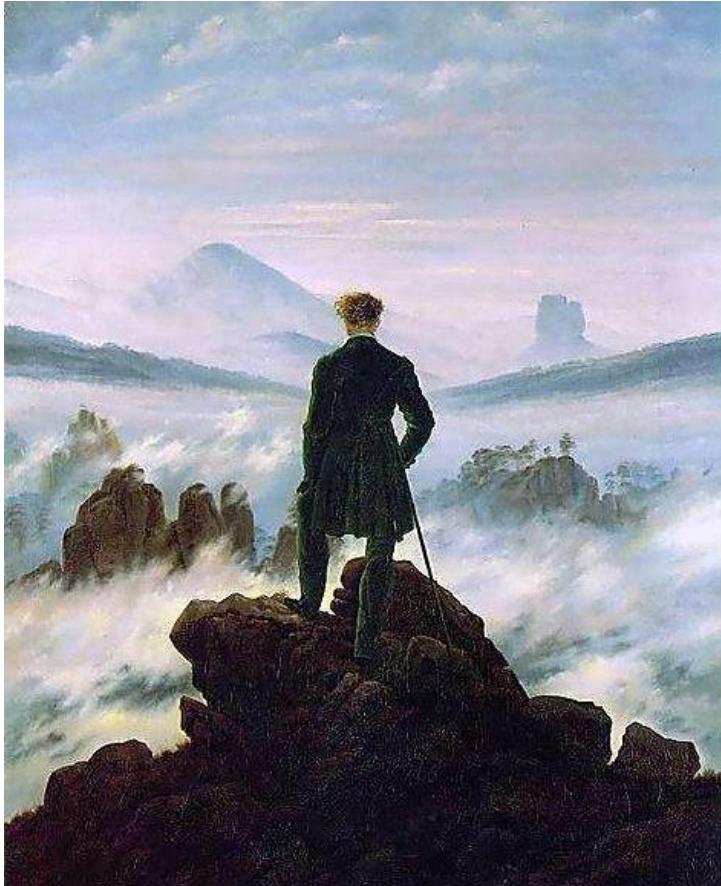


Figure 1:

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,
painted by Caspar David Friedrich in
1818.



Figure. 2

*Hannibal and his Army
Crossing the Alps*,
painted by J.M.W Turner
and first exhibited in
1812

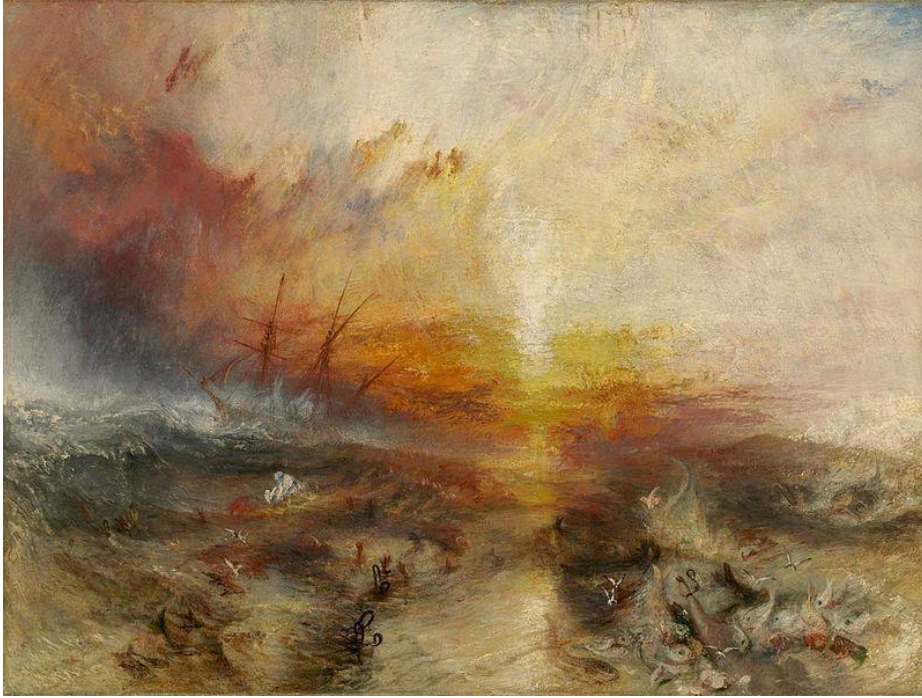


Figure 3:

The Slave Ship, or Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On, painted by J.M.W Turner, first exhibited in 1840



Figure 4:

Jökulsárlón II, painted by Samantha Bale in 2015

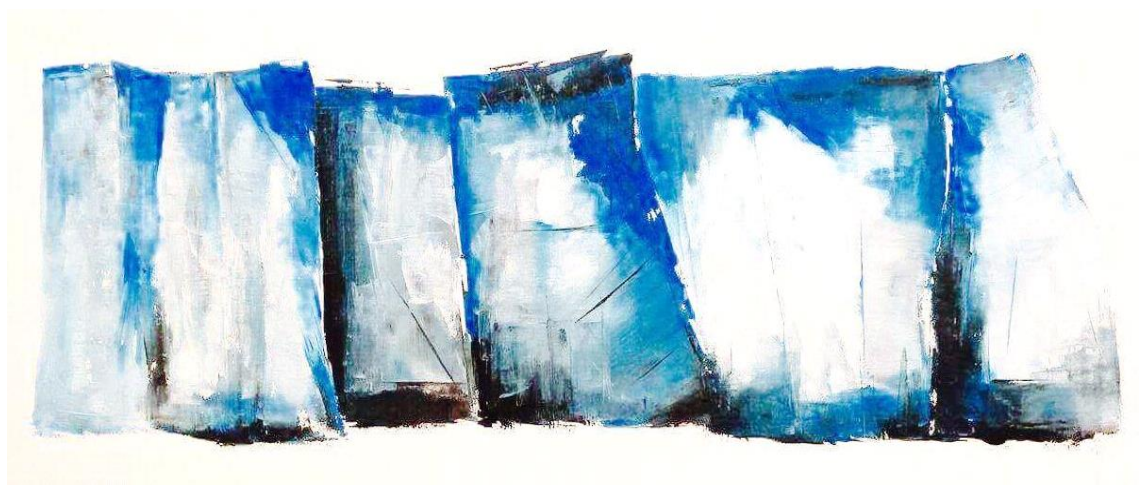


Figure 5:

Ísblár painted by Samantha Bale in 2017



Figure 6:

Rauður Jökul painted by Samantha Bale in 2017



Figure 7:

Ís Hraun Paper Series, painted by Samantha Bale in 2017



Figure 8:

Untitled 1969 by Mark Rothko, painted in 1969

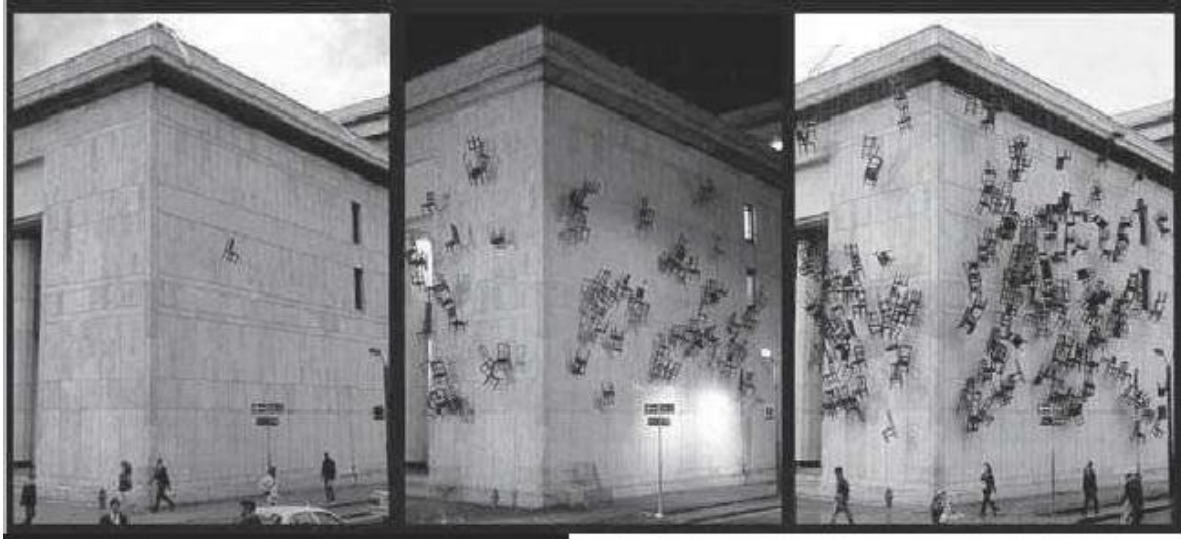


Figure 9:

Noviembre 6 y 7 an installation by Doris Salcedo in 2002



Figure 10:

'Ice Watch' an installation by Ólafur Eliasson from 2015



Figure 11:

'Ice Watch' a second image of the installation by Ólafur Eliasson from 2015



Figure 12:

Untitled (Terrorist) 1 – painted in 2004



Figure 13:

Untitled (I remember those girls faces) painted by John Keane 2004/2005



Figure 14:

Still images from video installation *'Tornado 2000-2010'* by Francis Alÿs shown in 2010



Figure 15:
Ocean VI by Andreas Gursky (2009-2010)



Figure 16:
Bangkok I by Andreas Gursky (2011)

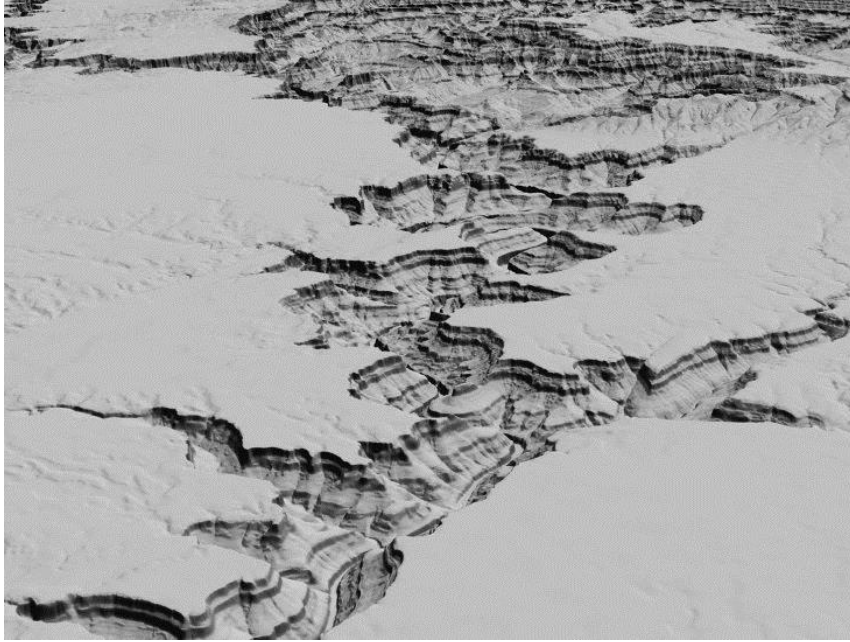


Figure 17:

Digital image of The Grand Canyon from exhibition *Transmissions*

By Dan Holdsworth
exhibited in 2012



Figure 18:

Still image of video montage *Purple* by John Akomfrah, shown 2017-early 2018

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