

ART REVIEW

Impressive show navigates landscape and the sublime



JOEL STERNFELD/LUHRING AUGUSTINE

Joel Sternfeld's video "London Bridge" is part of "Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime."

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READING, Vt. — Our language is littered with words crying out to be rescued from dilution through overuse (by art critics, among others). One of them is “sublime.” Once denoting psychic disintegration in the face of unimaginable extremes, “sublime” is used more often today to describe delicious and dainty cupcakes.

The word's debasement runs parallel to our world's. Inaccessible, mist-shredding peaks that once thrilled the soul are now routinely scaled by massively insured retirees, rescue helicopters hovering at the ready. So great is the quantity of human waste they leave

behind that Everest itself, highest and mightiest of mountains, was last year described as “a fecal time bomb.”

“Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime” is a group show at the Hall Art Foundation (which is open Wednesdays and weekends by appointment) that in some ways tracks this debasement. Featuring works by Ai Weiwei, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Raymond Pettibon, Carla Klein, and 46 others (just 11 of them women), it was selected by the acclaimed photographer Joel Sternfeld from the Hall and Hall Art Foundation collections.

The work, in various media, spreads out across four buildings. It’s an impressive show. It puts us in the hands of real artists (not “theme illustrators”) navigating subtle and shifting perspectives on the contemporary sublime.

In fact, the show’s thematic slipperiness distantly echoes the thinking of [John Ruskin](#), the great 19th-century art critic, social reformer, and aesthete cited in its title. Ruskin’s ideas about the sublime shifted significantly over the course of his lifetime. Where once he had argued that the sublime and the beautiful were on the same spectrum, distinguished only by degree, he later claimed, as had earlier thinkers, that they belonged to separate categories.

Included in the exhibit are images of nature in its many different moods, but also of construction cranes, crashed airliners, oil spills, apartment blocks, parking lots, multi-lane highways, and other markers of our crowded, wrung-out, post-industrial reality.

A hilarious short video by Sternfeld presents footage of a tacky tourist lake in Arizona. The lake is traversed by a man (evidently on somebody’s payroll, but God knows whose) singing arias from a Venetian-style gondola, while drunk college kids in bikinis and board shorts twerk to music pumped from speakers on their beached pleasure craft.

The pleasantly laid-back film, titled “London Bridge,” describes a kind of postmodern sublime, whereby travesties of so-called “authentic” experience so thicken the atmosphere that no idea of authenticity remains even to be ironized. The best (or at least, the most novelistic) moment comes when our hero, the gondolier, goes ashore to pay a visit to a portable toilet.

Ai Weiwei's "Oil Spills" is a series of black glossy ceramic discs resembling crude oil spills arranged on the floor. The medium, porcelain, is accorded high prestige in the artist's native China. It was once exported all over the world, just as oil is exported globally today. Ai's conceptual metaphor feels slightly stretched. But while we're operating in a realm beyond irony, it feels relevant to note that Andrew Hall, whose money is behind the Hall Art Foundation, is a very prominent oil trader.

Katherine Bradford's deliberately crude "Beautiful Lake" shows six naked figures in an indeterminate landscape. Four of them are urinating into the same puddle of water near the center of the composition. No interpretation is necessary.

Elsewhere, we register shifts in artists' thinking by comparing radically different treatments of the same subject over time. A classic, mid-19th-century painting of a crashing wave by realist pioneer Gustave Courbet, for instance, is updated by contemporary realist Eric Fischl.



HALL ART FOUNDATION © ERIC FISCHL

Eric Fischl's "Scenes from Late Paradise: Stupidity."

Fischl's "Scenes From Late Paradise: Stupidity" shows a middle-age schlub walking along a beach, apparently oblivious to a bad turn in the weather. Just as the mood in the Courbet is shaped by man's absence, the mood in the Fischl is inflected by this particular

man's blithe demeanor as he wanders out of the frame, leaving behind him a cheap-looking body board.

Waves are also the subject of Pettibon's "No Title (Wave Group)," a corner arrangement of lively illustrations of tumultuous surf in watercolor and ink, with words attached. "And once ridden, the crowds came in droves" is scrawled beneath one image of a surfer catching a giant breaker.

Although they can be devastatingly sardonic, the works selected by Sternfeld do not specifically mock the category of the sublime. Rather, they acknowledge a whole new conception of it.

The new, 21st-century sublime is just as fraught with terror and psychic destabilization as the earlier version. But it is keyed less to the destructive power of nature operating of its own accord than to the destruction wrought by humans on and through nature.

This new sensibility feeds into many images that blur the line between the natural and the artificial, emphasizing the volatile relationship between the two.

Carla Klein, for instance, has a terrific, large painting of an overcast, moisture-laden landscape seen from behind the windshield of a car on a curving highway. The image registers the grand sweep of nature, but also the speed of the car, shafts of light reflecting off the glass, and the all-round transience of the view.

For Klein, as for many other artists in the show, any attempt to draw a distinction between nature and human actions within nature is naive and doomed to failure. But it probably always has been.

LANDSCAPES AFTER RUSKIN: REDEFINING THE SUBLIME

At Hall Art Foundation, 551 Route 106, Reading, Vt. Through Nov. 27. 802-952-1056, www.hallartfoundation.org (open weekends and Wednesdays by appointment)

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