



The Feminine Sublime

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PASADENA MUSEUM
of CALIFORNIA ART

The Feminine Sublime in Painting

By Constance Mallinson, curator and artist



Yvette Gellis, *Oil, Earth, Fire, Wind and Water*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, graphite, and canvas on canvas; triptych; 83 x 51 1/2 inches each. Courtesy of the artist

The Feminine Sublime presents five Los Angeles painters, Yvette Gellis, Virginia Katz, Merion Estes, Marie Thibeault, and Constance Mallinson, who use the experience of the “sublime” to express the current ecological crisis and promote new possibilities to address and live within our fragile ecosystem. This *eco-sublime* context requires a significant reevaluation of the philosophies, politics, and artistic representations that have influenced attitudes towards nature—and the sublime—for centuries.

The size and medium of these exhibited works mirror historical representations of the sublime as traditionally visualized in large-scale landscape paintings. Within the historical works referenced by this exhibition, the viewer or male subject employs reason to overcome or transcend the terror associated with threatening natural occurrences. Likewise, “feminine wiles” could be willed into submission by intellectual prowess, further undercutting the value of both nature and the female in favor of masculine identity.

“Ultimately, the sublime is an experience looking for a context,”
- Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, 2010.



Marie Thibeault, *Eclipse*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 66 x 60 inches



Merion Estes, *Burchfield's Plea*, 2016. Fabric collage, photo transfers, and acrylic on fabric, 73 1/2 x 83 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of CB1 Gallery

The theory of the sublime has been entrenched in the misogyny of gendered metaphors and rigid dichotomies for centuries. The exhibition's title uses the word "feminine" to indicate a critical position of resistance to a society that creates and enforces hierarchical structures. This "feminine" stance on the male viewpoint, which relies on his superior rational powers to overcome fearful events, grants equal access to the sublime experience for all.

Literary critic and Berkeley Professor of Literature **Barbara Freeman** asserts in her 1995 book, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, that the "feminine sublime" is a nebulous concept which "exceeds the symbolic order of language and culture."¹ However, Mallinson purports the "feminine sublime" is capable of aesthetic representation, and offers alternatives to the traditional sublime relationship between **mankind and nature**. Employing varying states of abstraction and figuration, these artists confront viewers with environmental destruction and immanent collapse. The impermanence of humanity is conjured, opening the viewer to transformation.

In its many iterations, from the time of **Enlightenment to the Postmodern era**, theories of the sublime have played an important role in humankind's assertion of dominance over the natural world. In the face of climate change, however, this conventional mode of thought has become inadequate. *The Feminine Sublime* questions the longstanding framework of the sublime and its many representations that "appear to bespeak and demonstrate mastery over an experience that had seemed overwhelming."² Rejecting paradigms of sovereignty over the environment, the artists attest to a relationship *with* nature; like Donna Haraway's theories of *eco-feminism*, the paintings in *The Feminine Sublime* embrace the radical precarity that comes with immersing oneself in the environment.³

The earliest theory of the sublime was **Longinus's** treatise, from the first century CE, described by Freeman as an "almost Darwinian contest in which the strong flourish and the weak are overcome."⁴ This masculine view was further developed by eighteenth-century **Enlightenment** thinking, which reinforced man's established rational order as superior to the chaos of nature. Philosophers Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke proposed that mankind experienced the sublime when encountering the overwhelming effect of nature; in realizing that the self would not be annihilated, one could experience transcendent pleasure, and subsequently, gain superiority. Kant's privilege of the logical male subject became the norm in Western thought, promoting a gendered fear of the *other*—those oppressed because of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race, class, or politics.

Male narratives of transcendent experiences within the natural environment were symbolic encounters with the maternal body of Mother Nature. Transcendence was achieved by overpowering and subjugating female *otherness* and all categorizations relating to the feminine, thus upholding patriarchal structures.

In contrast to the powerful masculine sublime, the **ideals of beauty** were closely aligned with the feminine. Women, considered too weak and overly emotional, were viewed as unable to encounter the sublime. Instead, an experience of the beautiful could be found in the passive observation of an aesthetically pleasing object. Kant asserted that women were incapable of experiencing transcendence, as too much contemplation would destroy their submissive beauty.⁵ Conceived gender roles such as those espoused by Kant and Burke have asserted masculine privilege throughout history, and **Romantic era** landscape painting secured the established male gaze over environment.

During the Romantic era (late 18th and 19th centuries), English painter J.M.W Turner provided the viewer a safe vantage point from which to look upon turbulent natural phenomena. German painter Caspar David Friedrich portrayed male subjects before a vast and unknown expanse, implying that masculine logic possessed both the ability to perceive the natural threat, as well as the stamina to withstand its violence. In the United States, the **Hudson River School** produced numerous depictions of men observing their surroundings: figures, though dwarfed by the colossal landscape, are self-assured nonetheless, gesturing towards the thundering waterfalls and mountain

peaks before them. They quite literally stand on a precipice, staking their primacy over nature. English critic Roger Fry considered the sublime a battle for possession, underscoring many of the masculine ideals implied by nineteenth-century American landscape painters. As their visions aligned with the Manifest Destiny and similar narratives used to justify colonialism, land theft, and the exploitation of natural resources, paintings produced in the Romantic era played a major role in the growth of capitalism and industrial expansion.

Post-World War II painting was dominated by male Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, with his painterly expressions of Jungian archetypes, and Barnett Newman, with his theoretical writings and expansive paintings concerned with the sublime. Partly as a result of post-war angst, these masters of the abstract sublime sought to connect the modern viewer with feelings of destabilization in pursuit of a universal self-transformation. Unlike the male painters of this period, Helen Frankenthaler used the language of abstraction to represent her memories of the American landscape. She developed a unique staining technique which allowed paint to seep directly into the weave of the canvas, resulting in a visual metaphor for the intimate immersion of the artist and viewer into the landscape, and foreshadowed a feminine perspective of the sublime.

Postmodern theorist **Jean-François Lyotard** posits in his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, that a postmodern painting of the sublime creates an anxiety of inertia—the possibility that observation is devoid of transformation. Instead, he claims that joy is the result of being in the *here and now*. The anticipation of a divine experience has been stripped away. To Lyotard, avant-garde art dealing with the sublime is not concerned with what happens to the subject and therefore lacked the transcendent possibility.

Further challenging the exclusivity of traditional sublimity, **twentieth-century feminism** and Postmodern critical analysis encouraged a more inclusive version of the theory without confining categorizations and limited world views—a sublime that neither possessed nor merged self with the *other* in order to reach transcendence. Many postmodern feminist theorists still ally themselves with Lyotard, believing the notion of an ultimate feminine identity cannot be expressed in language, as the word “feminine” refers to one of two arbitrary categories within the limiting male/female gender binary. In accordance with this concept, the exhibition’s language and theory does not view “the feminine” as a representable totality, but still quantifiable in the context of structurally upheld misogyny.

The five painters in *The Feminine Sublime* ascribe to the postmodern thought that transcendence cannot exist, especially as it relates to natural catastrophes. In a reversal of alienating Kantian separations and Lyotardian dismissiveness of the **material body**, these artists recognize humanity not as disembodied mind, but as material body: all humans are subject to suffering brought on by apocalyptic forces. Be it natural disasters, technological oversaturation, capitalist exploitation of the masses, nuclear apocalypse, or an infinitely intertwined combination of these threats, the viewer is reminded of the impermanent body with which they behold each painting.

Yvette Gellis's **dynamic abstractions** suggest oil spills and emblemize decay of capitalistic economic patterns. Virginia Katz's painterly meditations oscillate between a reference to the microcosm of the human body's interior as seen through a microscope, and the macrocosm of a polluted earth as seen through satellite imagery. Ecological disasters in the form of melting ice caps, forest fires, and destructive tsunamis are vividly and boldly expressed by Merion Estes. Marie Thibeault's imagery situates us at the center of technological waste, the carbon footprint of global shipping, and industrial overbuilding. The intricate, detailed close-ups of proliferating piles of discarded consumer waste in Constance Mallinson's paintings suggest **unrestrained consumption** and its repercussions on the landscape.

With each interpretation of these uncontrollable dystopian landscapes, the artists reclaim the genre of landscape painting. On a formal level, the artworks evoke transformation, transition, and the continuing viability of painting—with its rich history of philosophical engagement and aestheticism, it is capable of provoking change in societal consciousness. Beauty can be enlisted rather than banished in these efforts. And as these particular paintings broach the taboo idea that humans may fail to solve these massive environmental crises, they concurrently conceive a means of symbiosis and survival in the midst of ecological ruin.

The reinvention of the sublime is predicated upon dissolving the borders that separate humans from nature's terrifying powers. *The Feminine Sublime* denies extrication, and symbolically reinserts the body into nature in a display of constant vulnerability and coexistence with environmental disturbances; it embraces intimacy with the *other*, and envisions a future that allows nature to exist in its own right. Rather than disrupt the environment, this exhibition disrupts the controlling male gaze, and instead the redirects the eye toward the intense harm of climate change denial.

Transcendence implies non-involvement. Rather than conform to tradition, the artists prod, question, emote. They speak up. In summoning visions of dystopian instability, the artists of *The Feminine Sublime* embrace "an incalculable *otherness*" that makes the meaning of these visions fluid, open, and ungovernable.⁶ Gellis, Thibeault, Katz, Estes, and Mallinson have challenged the practices of the past by offering highly personal perspectives of the sublime in an attempt to understand the rapidly evolving means of life on our planet. They do not provide solutions nor do they exist in a state of radical uncertainty. Instead, they suggest an intimate engagement between humanity and nature. Thinking with the natural world, rather than against it, is what will allow for unlimited possibilities.

¹ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

⁴ Freeman, 17.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Of The Distinction of the Beautiful and Sublime in the Interrelations of the Two Sexes," in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960).

⁶ Freeman, 11.

