SOUVENIR: CAPTURING THE ESSENCE AND EXPERIENCE OF PLACE

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ

MASTER OF FINE ARTS THESIS-SPRING 2014
Table of Contents

Souvenir: Capturing the Essence and Experience of Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Essence of Experience</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Making</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Relevance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Souvenir</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Conclusion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition Announcement Card</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFA Thesis Exhibition Images</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Essence of Experience

“How expressively and powerfully does the history of mountains speak to mankind, how sublimely it represents to mankind the divine essence in direct relationship to god, in that it seems all at once to deny every transitory vanity of earthly existence.” —Carl Gustav Carus

How does an artist communicate the ineffable? Is it possible to convey experiences within particular locations that are beyond sensible comprehension? The inability to fully comprehend such sensational experiences results in a lack, a lack of ability to express through language encounters of wonder, fright or awe. Edmund Burke in his treatise on aesthetics, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, defines this pleasurable terror as an encounter with the sublime. In 1763, Immanuel Kant furthered Burke’s inquiry into the sublime with his text, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime. In this work, Kant identified three types of sublime: terrifying sublime, the noble, and the splendid. The terrifying sublime incorporates pain and fear, while the noble awakens “the feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature,” and lastly the splendid considers objects that share attributes of both the beautiful and the sublime. Artists such as the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, the contemporary photographer Edward Burtynsky, the alchemic sculptor

1 Carus, Carl Gustav. 9 Letters on Landscape Painting. (California: Getty Research Institute, 2002).


4 Ibid.
Spencer Finch, and jewelry artist Robert Smit have sought to evoke and respond to these encounters that are inexpressible through language.

How is an artist able to portray the sensation experienced when facing the sublime in the grand, banal, everyday, sensational and artificial sites of our human experience? Is it possible to capture the essence of sublime encounters in objects of adornment just as that which has been attempted by painters, photographers and sculptors of our art historical past? I position myself along this line of artists seeking to elicit the sublime. Through the creation of objects for the body, a site of experience in itself, I attempt to relate the ineffable and communicate a part of these universal human experiences.

The Making

“A landscape painter should possess various sorts of knowledge. It is not enough for him to understand perspective, architecture, and the anatomy of men and animals; he must also have some insight into botany and mineralogy, that he may know how to express properly the characteristics of trees, plants and the character of the different sorts of mountains.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

My work is in part a response to specific sites which relate to Edmund Burke’s seven aspects of the sublime: darkness, obscurity, privation, vastness, magnificence, loudness and suddenness. I choose sites that communicate the relationship between humanity and nature, be it benevolent, savage or the two in union. My research consists

---


of documentation of my experiences with places. By collecting physical samples, taking photographs and sketching, recording sounds and scents of the location of interest I gather materials to construct an experience of a particular location. Depending on the site, I find as much geological, botanical, geographical and historical information as necessary in order to better communicate the evolution of the particular site to its present state. Through numerous visits with a location and close inspection of the research collected, I attempt to break down the site to better understand, capture and express the essence of the particular environment.

I use a broad range of materials in the creation of my work, from silver, steel and various types of wood, to paint, felt, rubber and wax. I seek materials that convey the sensory observations chronicled in my encounters with the site. By using felt to communicate the misty spray of a waterfall over a cliff edge and adding string to highlight the glimmer of the sun across the water, or sewing rubber together to emulate koi fish scales I, just as the Impressionist painter Claude Monet\(^7\) and others before me, obsessively render my experience.

Through a more intimate study in the environments I choose to impart to the world, one might expect a more refined representation of the site, however this close investigation results in more abstracted and mannered forms. Trying to understand the essential qualities of a particular rock formation of a location requires further investigation into the geomorphology of that landscape, resulting in the breakdown of the original rock into a multifaceted, abstract form. In the process I become a geographer and

mapmaker. I explore, investigate, record, interpret and abstract, creating my own signs and symbols leaving them to be deciphered by the viewer/wearer.

Visualizing my experience begins with constructing the work at my bench. I approach each component of the work carefully, making choices based on my research, attempting not to let it overwhelm. I make formal design decisions to achieve and uneasy balance of rhythm and contrast, keeping in mind my reaction to Burke. By juxtaposing different elements, I am able to create compositions that provide the sort of positive and negative pleasure that evokes the sublime experience, the work is beautiful yet ugly, fragile although sturdy, distinct and mysterious. Through the format of jewelry I am allow the wearer to physically experience my interpretation of the sublime, creating a transportable, relational understanding of it.

**Historical Relevance**

“A painting by Caspar David Friedrich is not a thing of the past. What is past is only the set of circumstances that allowed it to be painted: specific ideologies, for example. Beyond that, if it is any ‘good’, it concerns us - transcending ideology - as art that we consider worth the trouble of defending (perceiving, showing, making). It is therefore quite possible to paint like Caspar David Friedrich ‘today’.” —Gerhard Richter⁸

In 1824, Caspar David Friedrich completed his painting titled *Sea of Ice*, depicting a frozen scene in a polar sea. The viewer is confronted by a large mass of ice protruding from the depths of the chilly ocean at the center of the composition. The green-

---

ish-yellow light reflects off the giant slabs of ice surrounding the tail end of a sinking ship. In the distance one can see larger formations of glacial ice mirroring the larger conglomerations in the center of the work. This painting, like others of the Romantic period, is at once magnificent, dark, and terrifying at the same time, all particular features that embody the sublime according to Burke.

Nearly 175 years later, the artist Edward Burtynsky photographed an otherworldly experience in a northern landscape. In work from his *Tailings* series, Burtynsky presents viewers with stark landscapes of contrasting vivid color, shaped by nickel and uranium mining in Ontario, Canada. By “..juxtaposing pulsating orange against a glossy black background, he extracts spectacular images from a landscape that many might consider unphotogenic. The startling colors are those we see when lava flows from an erupting volcano, which is perhaps why we immediately associate this image with natural disaster.” Scale is essential to his photographs in relating the impressive beauty and intimidatingly powerful river of red streaming through a dark terrain. Not unlike Friedrich’s painting of a shipwreck in the Arctic, Burtynsky relates a ineffable religious experience, whereby the viewer is confronted with their own mortality and is transported into a seemingly inconceivable encounter with the divine.

In a piece titled *Flood* from 2010, I (just as Friedrich and Burtynsky before me) attempt to relate the inexpressible. In this piece I present the dramatic encounter of losing a home to the rising tides of a flood. A swirling Charybdis of deconstructed architectural forms and found detritus describes a catastrophic event that transformed the identity of this particular place from childhood.

---

In moving forward with my work I look towards artists such as Spencer Finch who conjures up the sublime experience through experiential methods. In 2007, Finch created *Two Hours, Two Minutes, Two Seconds* (*Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007*).\(^{10}\) In this work, “Finch uses a digital anemometer and weathervane to precisely measure the speed and direction of wind blowing across Walden Pond over a period of two hours, two minutes and two seconds. With this sculpture the artist re-created the changing breeze he had experienced on the pond’s shore with a semi-circle of forty-four fans controlled by a computer dimming system. The duration of the wind cycle is a reference to Thoreau’s stay at the pond, which lasted two years, two months and two days.”\(^{11}\) Additionally, Finch uses light to capture part of his experience. In *Sunset* (*South Texas, 6/21/03*), “the artist measured the exact color and intensity of the sunset on June 21, 2003. The following month, Finch reproduced, with carefully calibrated precision, the exact quality of the original light, using five rows of fluorescent lamps fitted with strips of brilliantly colored gels. He arranged the fixtures in the center of the wall in a forty-foot-long band reminiscent of the horizon.”\(^{12}\) Finch is an alchemist, making the intangible, tangible by transforming wind produced by everyday, white, plastic fans to the zephyr on Walden Pond or by capturing the ephemeral sunset of a particular evening and bringing it indoors through fluorescent lights mounted on gallery walls. Finch’s ability to effectively relate subjective experiences, these ineffable observations, isolating a moment in time related through light and air, moves the viewer to experience the sublime.


\(^{11}\) Ibid.,

\(^{12}\) Ibid.,
Like Finch, my recent work, *Awosting Falls — Minnewaska*, not only conveys an encounter with a site visually, but also endeavors to encapsulate the location by providing the viewer with additional sensory information. In the work, the abstracted forms embodying a waterfall are supplemented by scented wax that smells of the forest floor in an attempt to capture a transitory impression of place. The aromatic experience conveys my own subjective perception of an environment in the mountains of Upstate New York.

In addition to painters, photographers and sculptors, art jewelers have also become entangled with the indescribable. Robert Smit has provided considerable inspiration through his abstracted drawings and gold works. In his series *Madonna delle Dolomiti*, Smit creates work in response to a woman’s voice, heard singing on his car radio. Lisebeth den Besten in her article in *Metalsmith* titled ‘Robert Smit: Craving the essential,’ quotes Smit: “This is what it’s all about. This is the way I want to create art… I want to design jewelry that shares the same incomprehensible brilliance that partakes of the same ineffable clarity. This brilliance, this clarity, is the essence of all art to me.”

In Smit’s necklace, *Cwrt from Bryn-Dafydd* 2004, the viewer is presented with a golden pendant to gaze upon. Two rectangles of abraded gold abut one another while hazy squares of brightly colored paint dance about the surface. Down the center of each rectangle are a series of alternating, riveted, square and circular pieces of gold. The

---


14 Ibid., 26-33.

creation of this work came out of a series of drawings and photographs done years earlier while on a hiking trip at this location.\textsuperscript{16} Den Besten states that, “Cwrt was a metaphor for a desired place, full of expectations and fantasies. The self-enforced assignment was not just to visit Cwrt but to approach it step by step from different directions.”\textsuperscript{17} Smit’s methodological approach to his work by visiting sites, sketching, photographing and finally constructing compositions is akin to my own. Additionally, I align myself with Smit's interest in encapsulating an ineffable experience through the format of jewelry.

**The Souvenir**

From pilgrimage badges of our historical past to the current custom of collecting magnets, key chains, or shot glasses, the human impulse to capture memories and embed experience in objects is universal. Susan Stewart in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* identifies souvenir objects as markers of a lived, ‘authentic’ experience.\textsuperscript{18} According to Stewart, we desire these objects as a means for storytelling, as tangible representations of experiences that are no longer within reach.\textsuperscript{19} Additionally, the souvenir “…represents not only the lived experience of its maker, but the “secondhand” experience of its possessor/owner.”\textsuperscript{20} As we travel

\hspace{1cm}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., \textsuperscript{17} den Besten, Liesbeth. *On Jewellery : A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery.* (Stuttgart : Arnoldsche ; Woodbridge : ACC Distribution [distributor], 2011).


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
around the globe, we collect objects not only to remind us of the locations we have been, but we also desire the souvenir to represent something indescribable within us and to present something to the world about us. Veni, vidi, vici. We are drawn to picturesque locations, those with historical significance or anomaly, locations in which we often encounter the sublime. By their nature, or perhaps their relative inconvenience, these sites undoubtedly become tourist destinations. Destinations, to which I am lured, just as any other, to marvel at the location’s beauty, history, or peculiarity. In my work, I point to the things that regularly go unnoticed at these, and less notable sites. Perhaps a waterfall has been transformed, made grander and more alluring, enticing visitors to the location, holding them a bit longer and calling them to return.

In Conclusion

I am an artist, jeweler, and mapmaker of sorts. I craft three-dimensional, representations of particular locations using signs and symbols of my own design. I develop these abstract symbols from the information I gather at each location I investigate. I am drawn to sites that are often alluring in their majesty, yet I become marveled by what goes unnoticed, the residue of a peculiar interaction between humanity and the natural world. I encapsulate these moments into jewelry that functions as a souvenir or aide-mémoire, allowing the wearer to physically experience my interpretation of the sublime, creating a transportable, relational understanding of it.

21 Latin phrase meaning “I came, I saw, I conquered.”
Works Cited


MICHAEL OWEN O’NEILL  Master of Fine Arts  New Paltz NY  210.473.5318  michaelowenoneill.com

Kai Pond - Metropolitan Museum of Art  Brooch, 2014. silver, enamel, steel, copper, rubber, nylon, paint  4 1/4” x 3 1/4” x 2”
Installation of work in the Alice and Horace Chandler Gallery at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Fine Art, May 2014