

OBJECTIVE ALLUSIONS AND SUBJECTIVE REALITIES PLACE IN THE WORK OF ANDREA HAMILTON

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‘The breaking of a wave cannot explain the whole sea.’
Vladimir Nabakov

The sea is a vast, ultimately unknowable entity. Its surface, rather than inviting revelation, often acts as a further boundary to its unfathomable depths. For Herman Melville, who, as a sailor, traversed the world's oceans from 1839 to 1844, the sea was an augur of a ‘hidden soul’ beneath ‘sweet mystery’. Likewise, for Joseph Conrad, who had a 19-year career as a sailor, the ‘sea never changes and its works, for all the talk of men, are wrapped in mystery’. This provocative unknowability has inspired much by way of literature and visual representation, with one of the key works of 19th century photography, *The Great Wave, Sète*, produced by Gustave Le Gray in 1857, becoming a seminal image in the development of photographic technique and history. Considered by many to be the most important French photographer of the 19th century, Le Gray produced an entire series of seascapes, of which *The Great Wave, Sète* remains the most famous. Looking at it now, it appears disconcertingly brooding and crepuscular, as if photographed at night. The motion of the waves also appears ethereal against an almost too bright sunlight. But the intention is there: Le Gray has given us an image of a wave in full motion, about to collapse in on itself and resume another course.

To freeze a wave in a period when such images needed exposure times measured in seconds was quite a feat, and Le Gray's works are still held aloft today as heralding a new age of technical achievement in photography. The image, however, is a composite, which opens up a number of further conundrums in this work. Le Gray used two negatives to produce this image, complementing the sea with a skyscape from another negative. In adapting this approach, he set up an ongoing creative tension in photography: the composite, artful image, being a subjective rather than objective form of

representation, reveals how the eye sees nature, not a camera. There is clearly something of the sea's unknowability, alongside a clear ambition to give a subjective, personalised view of the sea, in Andrea Hamilton's seascapes. There is also, as there was in Le Gray's work, an attempt to freeze or arrest an image that gives rise to an uncanny air of both subjective observation – Hamilton chose the place, timing, and setting for the images we see before us – and objective realism. Hamilton's photographs are, after all, verifiable images of waves. And yet something else is happening here. If we consider the uncanny as an image or event that requires us to rethink how we look at or understand something, there is a sense that Hamilton's petrified waves reveal both an emerging, nascent formation – the wave – alongside a highly personalised historical document of that wave's passing. Time past and future collide here to generate a specific account of a transient event that alerts us to the sea beyond, in all its speculative unknowability. The breaking of a wave, as Nabakov wryly noted, cannot explain the whole sea, and Hamilton's photographs would appear to revel in this knowledge.

One of the seminal ironies of photography's emergence is that it was initially considered a threat to the historical claim of verisimilitude implicit in painting. Painters depicted the world and painting was a window onto it. With the advent of photography from the early 1830s onwards, this historical claim was under threat inasmuch as photography gave an apparently more objective image of the world. Rather than see this in defeatist terms, artists took it as their cue to stop trying to paint objectively and mannerist realism gave way to impressionism, with some artists, Degas and Manet included, making copious use of photographs to develop the radical nature of their work. Hamilton's images also straddle this reciprocal interconnectedness: on one level they are photographs, obviously, but on another they aspire to a painterly quality; they are objective images and, yet, entirely subjective in their focus. Photography here, in a reversal of historical fortunes, aspires to the condition of painting and yet presents itself as a precarious record of an actual, albeit transient if not fugitive, moment in time.

There are other contexts to be considered here, too numerous to recount in full, that would include mention of the legacy of conceptualism as a key element in these works. Hamilton's photographs not only display a degree of compulsion (they are shot from the same location over a period of a year), they are also a rational, almost scientific, take on the romantic appeal associated with the sea. Looking at them as a complete series recalls Sol LeWitt's *Sunrise and Sunset at Praiano*, 1980, in which the artist methodically photographed the sea and sky over the Tyrrhenian sea, off Praiano, on the Amalfi coast. Again, this compulsion to photograph and capture a moment resonates with the inclination to reveal and yet occlude the reality of the sea at one and the same moment, a feature of Hamilton's work that produces a productive tension throughout this series. This 'freezing' of time, the suspension of a moment, also lies at the heart of Hiroshi Sugimoto's seascape series, produced from the 1980s onwards. Utilising an old-fashioned, large-format camera, Sugimoto would make exposures of varying duration until all we are left with is a horizon line of light and dark regardless of where the image was taken.

How do you freeze a moment that is already frozen? In Hamilton's seascapes, movement is everything. In her icescapes, however, we see a primordial frozen, almost fossilized, landscape that is frozen yet again in a photographic image. And yet another anxiety emerges here: the ice floes and icebergs we see before us are in a process of dissipation, melting in an unrelentingly warming sea. Again, Hamilton, like Le Gray and others before her, has revealed something of nature through the camera lens, focusing our attention not on the stillness of these images but the underlying movement. Historical precedents abound here, and we could observe Caspar David Friedrich's take on the sublime in paintings such as *The Monk by the Sea*, 1810, and the monumental fractured icescapes of *The Sea of Ice*, 1823-24. There is nevertheless a further ecological, if not practical, element to Hamilton's icescapes that attenuates the allusive nature of Friedrich's paintings: every attempt to represent this frozen landscape is yet another poignant record of its passing.

At the outset, we noted that Hamilton's systematic, compulsive attempt to freeze the waves in her seascapes, renders them all the more metaphysically allusive, subjective, and painterly. In representing the frozen Arctic tundra of Iceland, we also see movement, but of a particularly insidious kind, the sort that could herald the rising of sea levels worldwide and a series of environmental catastrophes. The sea, to gloss Melville, may be indeed a sweet mystery, but it may also reveal its mutinous depths to us in the foreseeable future and, eventually, encroach and submerge the very landscapes we see in these images.