

STRANGE SEAS

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The close observation of landscape has since time immemorial provided philosophers, poets and artists with a subject through which to meditate upon the relationship of humanity to the world it inhabits. In the vastness of nature men and women have long sought what Wordsworth termed the ‘tranquillity’ necessary to ‘recollect emotions’ and thereby give coherent expression to the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’¹ Nature provides us with the measure against which to gauge the consciousness of our feelings towards ourselves and others, the scale onto which we pitch the notes of our fleeting existence.

The primary aspect of nature’s immensity is its apparent timelessness. When, in ‘Dover Beach’, Matthew Arnold perceives the ‘eternal note of sadness’ in the mantra of the English Channel’s returning tide and speculates that ‘Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Ægean’², he establishes a link across time and cultures through the contemplation of the sea. That transcendence of time and place is evident, too, in the near abstract seascape photographs collected together in Andrea Hamilton’s *Water Works*. Nature is presented to us here as that which endures, a tie to the past and the future.

Our ancient understanding of nature as constant and, though cyclical in tides and seasons, unvarying has in the past thirty years been undermined by our recognition of the havoc that human industry has wrought upon the climate. The apparently ageless Romanticism of these awe-inspiring photographs, then, is tempered by our contemporary awareness that the sea, though to the eye unchanging

over the course of centuries, is shifting as a consequence of man-made climate change. Sea levels are rising to threaten settlements occupied by millions of people across the world and images of an unsettled ocean remind us that, even in these days of remarkable technological development, nature retains the capacity to destroy.

The frightening, ungovernable power of the ocean and the composed security of ice provides this exhibition with an aesthetic tension that reflects the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The former quality is in Kant’s formulation ‘connected with the form of the object’³, and therefore perceptible only in that which is coherently and intelligibly organised (and thus reassuring). The closely and predictably patterned perfection of ice formations corresponds ideally to that criterion. The sea, by contrast, is characterised by its boundlessness, and inspires in us the awareness of a force both indifferent to humanity and capable of overpowering it. In the combination of pleasure and fear this spectacle excites can be found the fullest experience of the sublime.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these portraits of the Atlantic Ocean against photographs of ice formations in Alaska and Iceland establishes a neat allegory for the processes that threaten the world in which we live. The serene prettiness of light refracted through ice gives way to walls of water advancing upon the shore, the austerity of the images’ composition (the plane typically divided into three sections by the dividing lines of wave and horizon) a reflection of the inhumane power at work.

Narrative allusions to the state of our planet are nonetheless secondary in these extraordinary photographs to Hamilton’s ability to capture the tension, splendour and drama of water in its natural states. The dynamic, climactic composition of these breaking seas, with their deep colours and richly textured passages, counterpoints the icescapes’ economy of light and line. In combination, these

elemental images suggest movement and stillness, noise against silence, delight cut with fear.

The effect is in some cases redolent of Turner's turbulent seas or Friedrich's mist-obscured mountains in the sense that the human figure, and by extension the figurative style, is dwarfed by a power that can only be expressed in prototypical abstraction. These images take that impulse further, with the absence of any fixed reference points making it difficult for the observer to triangulate scale (how different these photographs would feel if they contained a body, a ship, their taker's cast shadow). We are set adrift into these extra-terrestrial vistas, not knowing in some cases whether the jewels of ice that loom above us are boulders or pebbles, whether the waves that break are ripples or roar.

The sense of self-abandonment is liberating, calling to mind Byron's 'pleasure in the pathless woods [...] rapture on the lonely shore.'⁴ That sensation we might equate to Wordsworth's aforementioned tranquillity, the state of being he associates with poetic creation. By these means Andrea Hamilton's extraordinary photographs remind us that, even and perhaps especially in this Anthropocene⁵ era, nature is the force against which humanity is defined. By observing it, by engaging with it, even by surrendering to it, we gain for ourselves a greater understanding of what it means to be alive in the world.

¹ William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: With a Few Other Poems*, London: Penguin Classics, 2006.

² Arnold Matthew, 'Dover Beach', *New Poems*, London: HardPress Publishing, 2013.

³ Immanuel Kant, 'Second Book: Analytic of the Sublime', *The Critique of Judgement*, Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008.

⁴ Lord Byron, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', Canto 4.

⁵ Eugene F. Stoermer identified the Anthropocene as the geological era in which we now live, defined by humanity's influence upon the Earth's ecosystems. The phrase, meaning 'the new human era', has recently become popular among ecologists eager to formally recognize the wide-ranging effects of agriculture, urbanization and industrialization upon nature.