

## THE FUGITIVE AND ETERNAL

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### Luminous Icescapes

A boulder of intense cobalt-turquoise sits in a landscape of dark glossy sand; to its right another boulder less vivid in its refracted colour; above them a low grey-violet sky; beyond a body of water. The myriad faceted surfaces of these crystalline structures along with their glowing luminescence lend them an uncanny, supernatural presence: beneath the sober sky they seem to emanate light, as if the icebergs – for that is what they are – rather than a distant sun had illuminated the scene. The dips, depressions and sparkling peaks of the boulders mirror the froth of the surf beyond, yet in their fragility – brittle and bright – they seem to be of a different element, a natural gem or the work of some perversely talented Bohemian glassmaker.

The photographs of Andrea Hamilton's *Luminous Icescapes* series possess a vitreous quality that goes beyond the inherent glassiness of ice, speaking of the alchemical nature of the frosty terrain she surveys. Here, in a study of light and of form, Hamilton has created images that are wet, reflective and faceted, that hover between representation and abstraction, between land and sea, and between solid and liquid. Sky, rock, shingle and earth fade into one another, a vista of desaturated greys punctuated by gleaming crystalline structures. Like glass, these images embody a simultaneous beauty, danger, and fragility.

Like the medium of photography itself, ice has the ability to capture a moment in time, a wave suspended in its arcuate passage, ephemeral forms of froth and bubbles acquiring an apparent permanency. To capture a moment is also to transform it, to radically alter its material nature, and in this way, *Luminous Icescapes* is a body of work that not only contemplates unique, breathtakingly beautiful, frightening and alien landscapes, but also engages profoundly with photography as an artistic practice.

In her seminal text *On Photography* Susan Sontag explores the notion of the photographic image as an emotive encounter:

‘Photographs – especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie.’<sup>1</sup>

This idea of artistic appreciation as reverie has antecedents in Romanticism and in the notion of the sublime, most notably developed and codified by Emmanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*<sup>2</sup> of 1790. The work of nineteenth century artists including Constable, Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, which emphasised the wildness and beauty of nature, was at least in part a reaction to the encroaching industrialisation and urbanisation of Europe, that is, a reaction to the loss of wilderness. And for Sontag, writing in the 1970s, this sense of the fugitive, of the continual upheaval and flux of late modernity, and perhaps most significantly of loss, is felt even more strongly:

‘The beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists.’<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the conscious application of beauty and of its emotive power can be considered a critical act. Hamilton's work gestures to light, surface and reflection but also to depth. Notions of preciousness permeate the images of *Luminous Icescapes* in which ice is transfigured into jewels and cut crystal, but we are also aware that these icy structures exist beyond their photographic representations. For all their monumentality they are vulnerable and contingent, caught in a moment of melting, fracturing, depleting, returning to the ocean perhaps to be reborn. By emphasising the luminescence and miraculousness of the ice, alongside its fragility, Hamilton speaks of contemporary anxieties surrounding our changing natural world: how much do we value the frozen environments that bore these sparkling, unownable, impermanent jewels that she describes as ‘the Arctic's solitaire diamonds’?

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## Tidal Resonance

The sky in the distance is a sheet of light grey-blue, fading subtly from a darker and more intense colour where it touches the water, to a lighter warmer hue as it ascends. Beneath this wash of sky the sea sparkles in bands of turquoise and cerulean then fades to relative calm, white and grey reflections and patches of a neutral orange-pink that quieten the gorgeousness of the vivid hues at the horizon. In the foreground, a thick black line is crosshatched with white and blue: the swollen incoming wave cast into shadow by the sun's low light. Curving up towards us, the sweeping lines of texture of the wave's crest describe its alternating concave and convex surface, and cause us to anticipate a splash or crash of water that our logical minds know will never come.

In addition to representing the sea, Andrea Hamilton's photographs in her *Tidal Resonance* series are, of necessity, also an exploration of light and – perhaps strangely for a static medium – of time and movement. Hamilton's sea, whether illuminated in a translucent viridian-green, agitated to a soapy opaque lather of white, or sparkling in a tint of opalescent grey, is defined by its motion, its currents and tides and by the reflection of the ambient light, the sky and clouds that surround it. As Charles Trenet put it:

*'La mer, Qu'on voit danser, Le long des golfes clairs, A des reflets d'argent, Des reflets changeants, Sous la pluie.'*  
(‘The sea that we see dancing along the clear bay has silver shimmers, changing beneath the rain.’<sup>4</sup>)

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre claire*) of 1981 emphasises photography's links to concepts of *the moment* and *the encounter*. Barthes' text, steeped in grief at the death of his mother, is methodologically undermined by its inability to move beyond the author's subjectivity, his longing to recapture and experience that which is lost. Nevertheless, *Camera Lucida* is revelatory in its evocation of the (quasi-mystical) power of the photographic image, its evanescence and immediacy, and its ability to evoke profound emotional responses:

‘I had identified truth and reality in a unique emotion, in which I henceforth placed the nature – the genius – of Photography.’<sup>5</sup>

‘the Photograph [...] is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of sprouting silver grains.’<sup>6</sup>

Like Barthes' ‘sprouting silver grains’ Hamilton is frequently drawn to subject matter that is fleeting, ephemeral, and in flux. In her *Tidal Resonance* series what resonates is the capture of a moment: the crest of a wave at the point of caving in on itself, the inexorable rolling movement of the sea stilled, its spray forever hanging, like finely netted lace suspended before the horizon. This freezing of a moment of animation unites the *Luminous Icescapes* and *Tidal Resonance* bodies of work as much as their aquatic and pelagic themes. But along with this engagement with the transitory, fugitive and protean, apparently antithetical notions of the infinite and archetypal also characterise Hamilton's practice.

The ocean, whether calm or enraged, is a quintessential object of contemplation, forever changing but simultaneously eternal and demiurgic. In its mode of contemplation Hamilton's practice mirrors the work of Tacita Dean, an artist whose arresting images, often employing natural themes, compel not through the literalness of their representation, but through their ability to embody ideas of encounter, history, time and memory in the natural forms she evokes.

The recurrent motif of the sea has served in Dean's work as a repository of narratives from which concepts of exploration and myth frequently emerge. In Dean's 2001 film *The Green Ray* the artist's spoken narration tells the story of the enigmatic phenomenon from which the piece takes its title:

‘When the sun sets into a clear crisp horizon, and when there is no land in front of you for a few hundred miles, and no distant moisture that could become – at the final moment – a back-lit cloud that obscures the opportunity, you stand a very good chance of seeing the green ray. The last ray of the dying sun to refract and bend behind the horizon is the green ray, which is just slower than the red or the yellow ray. Sailors see them more than the rest of us and they have come to signify, for some, the harbinger of great change or fortune in their lives.’<sup>7</sup>

The film's unwavering focus on the horizon lends it a meditative quality: the yellow orb of the sun disappearing beyond the curvature of the earth's surface as the planet spins its predetermined course. At the end, just as the sun descends beneath the horizon far out at sea, we see – or believe we do – the elusive green ray, a momentary flash.

Sontag writes that through over-exposure we can become inured to naturally beautiful or spectacular phenomena ‘The image-surfeited are likely to find sunsets corny; they now look, alas, too much like photographs.’<sup>8</sup> It is certainly true that excessive repetition risks depleting the power of an image: the impressionist paintings that were once rejected from the appalled Paris Salon are now printed onto coasters and chocolate boxes. And I have found my own

experience mediated by popular images: on a July holiday in Paris a friend and I went down to the right-bank of the Seine, where a temporary bandstand had been set up and musicians were playing. The sun began to set behind the Île de la Cité, turquoise, cyan and magenta, Notre Dame was bathed in a vivid pink, the sky was ablaze: 'It's like a cheap postcard' we said, but it was still wonderful, all the cynicism in the world could not have prevented it from being so.

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### The fugitive and eternal

For artists like Hamilton and Dean an inherent challenge of their respective practices is to help us to see the familiar afresh, and in doing so, to reacquaint us with the strangeness, magic and wonder of the natural world. For Dean this is achieved through an intense engagement in medium and in notions of memory and history. In *The Green Ray* the artist transforms an archetypal image, the sun setting over a calm sea, by exploiting the time-based and narrative possibilities of film. We, the audience, fix intently on the horizon hoping to see a flash of colour, reliving the artist's experience in real time.

Hamilton brings an abstracting, transformative eye to her *Luminous Icescapes* and *Tidal Resonance* series: both the familiar and the unknown become mysterious, fascinating and exquisite. Hamilton achieves this sense of defamiliarisation – even disorientation – through her use of intense chromatic effects and by pushing at the boundaries of representation. Sea and ice become reflective or translucent coloured surfaces, gestural marks, textures and studies in tonal variation. In *Tidal Resonance* Hamilton's framing technique prevents us from viewing the images as conventional seascapes. Rather, we focus on the materiality – if that word can be used for so mercurial a substance as seawater – of the ocean. Glassy sheets, veils of spray and churning, soapy froth construct their own metaphors before our eyes, the stable, horizontal composition of the photographs acting as a counterpoint to the dynamism of the waves. Sea and sky become abstract bands of texture and colour.

Hamilton's sea and icescapes are, then, simultaneously representational and non-representational, natural and constructed, and in this way she refers not only to Romanticism, in her wild and sublime landscapes, but also to nineteenth and twentieth century Modernisms. Despite the machine-aesthetic geometry of much early twentieth century

abstract modernist art, its roots – and the roots of abstraction more generally – lie very much in the evocation of the natural world. Painters such as Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, and George-Pierre Seurat sought to communicate the *impression* of colour, tone, and light in their paintings – often landscapes – rather than to produce illusionistic images. Viewing late impressionist and post-impressionist paintings it is easy to see how the origins of full abstraction lay in Monet's fogs of pure colour-tone, and in Cézanne's sequences of flattened planes. While Modernism's 'painting of modern life' and its later abstract turn may seem in sharp contrast to Romanticism's retreat into a heroic past, the two are closer than one might expect. And just as the proto-impressionist, romantic Turner straddled these two worlds so too does Hamilton, her engagement in light, movement and flux allied to eternal themes.

Early twentieth century abstraction maintained a connection not only to the pastoral, natural and elemental, but also to a persistent vein of mystical and spiritual thought. As Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc in their 1912 introduction to *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* stridently declare:

'We are standing at the threshold of one of the greatest epochs mankind has ever experienced, the epoch of great spirituality [...] Art, literature, even 'exact' science are in various stages of change in this 'new' era; they will be overcome by it.'<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Kazimir Malevich's pamphlet of 1920, *Suprematism 34 Drawings*, provides an illustrated treatise through which the compositional and philosophical principles of his artistic *constructions* are explained. Malevich, in his somewhat cryptic prose, connects his non-objective art not only to technological advancement, but also to more mystical, elemental notions: cosmic harmony and synthesis with nature.

'A metal bar is a fusion of all elements, like the earth, and carries within itself a life of perfections, so that every suprematist body constructed will be incorporated into a natural organisation and form a new satellite: all that is necessary is to discover the inter-relationship between two bodies soaring in space. The earth and the moon.'<sup>10</sup>

A connection to the natural world is one of the most persistent continuities in the history of art, but in each era, with its attendant creative and philosophical movements and perspectives, the mode and meaning of this connection changes. Romanticism and Modernism are, in their contrasting ways, reactions to the energy, dynamism, chaos and destruction of Modernity. And both of these intellectual tendencies – the humanism and wonder of Romanticism, and the optimism and formal rigour of Modernism – continue to

resonate today in a world that is transforming itself, particularly at the level of ecology, more quickly than ever.

Dreamlike, ghostly, haunting and beautiful, Hamilton's *Luminous Icescapes* and *Tidal Resonance* series originate in lived experience, in the artist's desire to communicate an impression, a feeling, an emotion of a land or seascape. By emphasizing chromatic and textural nuance Hamilton's work allows space for interpretation, contemplation and metaphor: her close observation of light and surface, along with the crystalline colours she employs, lending her images a faceted complexity. Hamilton transports us to ambiguous landscapes of the mind, and while her photography is sometimes disorientating – like the fractured surfaces of the ice she documents – they are never alienating, possessing a humanistic warmth that belies their icy surfaces. The photographs of *Luminous Icescapes* and *Tidal Resonance* provide us with magical spaces of imagination and possibility. These carefully constructed, poised and composed images speak of the world we inhabit, its fragility, and its fleeting moments of transcendent beauty. In this, Hamilton's work is distinctly contemporary, documenting a changing world in real time, but it simultaneously addresses a very human desire for the boundless, immutable and transcendent. In nature we look to the sublime and in it – when we are very lucky – we come across a new internal landscape of the mind, a glimpse at the eternal.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On photography*. 1st edn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*. Trans. Meredith, J. 1st edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, op. cit.m p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Trenet and Léo Chauliac, *La Mer* [Recording], 1946.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Howard, R. 1st edn. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p.77.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p.93.

<sup>7</sup> Tacita Dean, *The Green Ray* [Film], 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, 'Der Blaue Reiter Almanach'. In Alex Danchev, (ed.). *100 Artists' Manifestos*. London: Penguin Classics, 2011, pp. 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism, 34 Drawings*. [Facsimile]. Trans. Lieven, A. Forest Row, East Sussex, England: Artists Bookworks, 1920, p. 1.