

## THE APPRECIATION OF THE REAL

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### Life as a journey

Water has played a crucial role in the work of Andrea Hamilton, whether as a backdrop to the narrative or the main focus of her body of work. Perhaps water has even been the vehicle for her work, as the best way to consider the *oeuvre* of Andrea Hamilton is to think of it as voyage, an adventure story, a tale of obstacles, encounters and wonders. This journey is, of course, not yet at its end. Indeed, just the opposite.

One of the most famous and influential voyages in literature is Homer's *Odyssey*. This epic poem opens in the middle of the story and the expedition is recounted in the *in medias res* (in the midst of things) narrative technique. Flashbacks, conveniently placed storytellers and other devices are used to fill in the gaps of earlier events. This literary and artistic technique has been employed by many novelists and artists such as William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf and Andy Warhol to name a few, and is a standard element of *film noir*.

Like the water for Hamilton, this story leads us to two different ideas or patterns around the body of work of this artist, these are, the creation of a project *in medias res* and the notion of *voyage*. I like to think of Andrea Hamilton's *modus operandi* as akin to this form of narration, this way of creating a project, which directly recalls a human memory, a memory that collapses time, a memory understood

as a non-linear narrative, a memory that condenses its spatial forms and its premonitory structures.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past two decades Hamilton has gathered together twenty years of analogue and digital imagery in several archives organised chronologically: an astonishing family album –worthy of mention and of another essay– merged with thousands of images of seascapes, land scenes and water works from around the world, from Alaska to South America, and from Iceland to Africa. This archive is full of document, but also abstraction, reality and metaphor and it certainly works as a creative turning point for the artist.

The second idea pointed out by Homer's inspirational verse refers to the notion of *journey*. Having examined the artist's archive on several occasions, what I glimpsed from the experience of looking at two decades of the artist's life and recurrent trips between the UK and the US (among other escapades) is that her ethnographic approach to her subjects of interest, based on observation and desire to know, poses important questions full of curiosity about human influence on the natural world. In this regard, Andrea Hamilton could be described as a traveller, a sort of anthropologist understood as Joseph Kosuth described in his article 'The Artist as Anthropologist' in which he explained:

'For the artist, obtaining cultural fluency is a dialectical process which, simply put, consists of attempting to affect the culture while he (or she) is simultaneously learning from and seeking the acceptance of the same culture which is affecting him (or her).'<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, seeing is learning, and hence sharing.

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## Reveries of the timeless sea

‘You can’t date the sea. It’s timeless.’<sup>3</sup>

On this particular occasion, Hamilton presents two bodies of water-based work. The first one is called *Tidal Resonance* and is metaphorically compared by the artist to a very short form of Japanese poetry called ‘haiku’ – previously called ‘hokku’ –, a seventeen-syllable poem often represented by the juxtaposition of two described images or ideas and a cutting word between them. The second one is *Luminous Icescapes* and it is composed by a series of photographs presented as a sequence of precious gemstones.

*The rough sea,  
Extending toward Sado Isle,  
The Milky Way.*

In 1689 the author of this poem, Matsue Bashō, one of the most renowned writers in the Japanese Edo period, started a long (and also ethnographic) trip full of inquisitiveness to the Pacific coast in which he ended up admiring the scenic beauty of Mutsushima and the island of Sado, and writing one of his most celebrated short pieces. In Western society J. D. Salinger, whose verses were published in 1953 by *The New Yorker* magazine, popularized haiku poems. Nowadays, even *The New York Times* shares this serendipitous poetry.

The strong presence of the sea in Japanese culture, especially in the haiku poems of Bashō, appealed to Andrea Hamilton who developed a series of seascapes in Florida, following the echoes of these lines and their power to evoke images, provoke impressions, memories or traces in the spectator’s minds. The cultural importance which the sea has had in our history – both in Western and Non-western societies – and in our imagination, covers a wide spectrum of possibilities. The ocean is the territory of the sublime, the mysterious and the unknown. And, judging by recent events, this remains true even after the appearance of satellite geo-positioning devices and the broadening of the imagination through literature and art.<sup>4</sup>

Japanese tradition and landscape have also inspired other creators such as, for instance, English artist Hamish Fulton or Canadian-American painter Agnes Martin. Fulton’s artistic practice starts by making an actual delineated walk in a particular location and then by producing artworks that refer to it. For Fulton this experience

of the landscape is about engagement, where the rhythm of the walk meets the land. It could be considered as a form of meditation transformed into art. His photographs with text don’t document an action or an encounter the way photography documented early Performance and Body Art from the 1960s and 1970s, or the way photography was used to record Land Art or Earthworks such as Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or Richard Long’s *A Line Made by Walking* (1967); on the contrary his photo-texts invite the viewer to surpass the document, suggesting an idea of the felt incident. The walking artist provides basic information on the duration, location and conditions of these walks to Haiku-like passages from his diaries.

On the other hand, Agnes Martin’s paintings, akin to Andrea Hamilton’s photographs in this idea of interpreting the poems delicately and visually, are intimate abstract representations of ‘what is known forever in the mind’ and not ‘about what is seen.’<sup>5</sup> Even though she considered herself an abstract expressionist, her style was eventually defined by an emphasis upon lines, grids and fields of pale washed colours. For this reason – apart from the obvious lack of figurative references in her paintings – Martin’s *oeuvre* was hung in several exhibitions along with other works by minimal artists such as Sol LeWitt or Donald Judd. This idea of writing without letters, or writing with colour and form, can be observed in canvases such as *Untitled* (1959) or *Gratitude* (2011).

This mode of submerged haiku-esque narrative operates as well in Andrea Hamilton’s *Tidal Resonance*, composed of a series of photographs shot in Vero Beach that depict the movements of water and waves. These photographs of the ocean cannot help but suggest Sigmund Freud’s *oceanic feeling* of limitlessness, the sensation of an indissoluble bond, as of being connected with the external world in its integral form.<sup>6</sup>

The immensity of the sea is framed in these pages, some of them intimate and quietly represented, and some others furious and blurred; some of them full of colours, some others with a pale washed tone. The horizon plays the role of the haiku’s cutting word between two images; occasionally depicted closer to the *Great Wave Off* of Kanagawa, intermittently akin to a Sugimoto’s time-lapse. The horizon divides, breaks and cracks the scene in two with a delimited line, as if it were the stripe made by Fulton in one of his maps, or the bar painted by Martin in one of her canvases. Yet, more than once this line disappears and a feeling of loss prevails due to the lack of reference.

In the second body of work developed in Iceland and Alaska, Hamilton depicts a different scene of tension, which has its own

kind of pictorial energy. *Luminous Icescapes* opens up another pictorial possibility at the same time that emphasises the complex issue of climate change.

There is a new growing ethical consciousness within the arts relating to a series of art practices that implies a greater receptivity for the environment we live in. Instead of bringing a dozen pieces of blue-tinged ice into the art space like Olafur Eliasson did in his immersive and criticized installation *Your Waste of Time* at MoMA PS1 in New York last year, Hamilton did not interfere with the habitat. On the contrary the artist depicted a sequence of crystalline structures, ‘the solitaire jewels of nature that we need to preserve in order to safeguard Arctic environment for the future.’<sup>7</sup>

*Tidal Resonance* and *Luminous Icescapes* are a multi-layered palette of complex feelings and emotions. They range from mysterious, cautious, secretive and brave representations of the water and the ice, to empowered, serene, elegant or relieved depictions of waves and sparkles. Perhaps these bodies of work can be interpreted as a portrait of the artist, always fleeting, in continuous movement. At some level, this notion would follow the idea described by Sally Mann in which she assumed that ‘every image is in some way a “portrait”, not in the way that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and draws (this is the semantic and etymological sense of the word), in that it extracts something, an intimacy, a force.’<sup>8</sup> In other words, these seascapes and icescapes metaphorically associated with poetry and ecology reveal the artist’s perception of her *leitmotiv*, the water, and ultimately her own impression capable of concealing hidden worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> In *One Way Street*, Susan Sontag’s introduction describes the role of memory, time and space in Benjamin’s writings and explains how the author could write about himself more directly when he started from memories. Walter Benjamin et al., *One Way Street*, London: Verso Classics, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kosuth, ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’ (1975), *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Stephen Johnstone, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Royoux, Jean-Christophe, *Cosmograms of the Present Tense*, In Tacita Dean, *Tacita Dean*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> On March 8, 2014 a Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 went missing less than an hour after takeoff. The largest search and rescue effort in history is still failing to locate the plane. None of the photographed objects by various countries’ satellites has been confirmed as belonging to the missing aircraft. A few months later it is still a mystery.

<sup>5</sup> An interview with Agnes Martin by Chuck Smith and Sono Kuwayama at her studio in Taos in November 1997. See: <http://vimeo.com/7127385>, (last accessed on 15 August 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, New York and London: Norton, 1961, pp. 11-21.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrea Hamilton Online: <http://www.andreahamilton.com/Luminous-Icescapes-2013-14>, (last accessed on 15 August 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Joseph J. Tanke and Colin McQuillan, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Image - the Distinct*, in *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2012, p. 505.