

Thoughts on Landscapes In Nature and Industry

DOUGLAS HALL



from the videotape
Storm and Stress



New Mexico Storm
(1 panel of a 5 panel work) 59"x73" oil on canvas
Diane Andrews Hall, 1985-86

I am currently involved in production on a new work, which will have two versions, one for the CAT Fund and the other a large installation which incorporates images from the tape with sculptural elements which extend ideas contained in the tapes. The title of this work, both the multi-channel installation and the single channel tape is *Storm and Stress*, a title borrowed from pre-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* of early 19th century Germany. The title is important and has a double meaning. First, there is a stated relationship to the aesthetics of the irrational contained in the ideas of *Sturm und Drang*. I use the title to imply an historicism and to take part in the rationalism/irrationalism debate which has appeared in intellectual history from the Middle Ages to the present. Secondly, the two words, **storm** and **stress**, accurately describe the tone and content of the work in a literal sense, since the tape deals with storms of various types (the ecstatic landscape) and, simultaneously, with technologies which either harness this kind of power (hydro-electric plants, steel foundries, for example) or which attempt to mimic it for purposes of reasearch (wind tunnels and tesla coils, etc.). In the finished work, the interconnection between the architecture and landscapes of the two domains, natural and industrial, suggest complex contradictions, conjunc-

tions, and analogies between the two. The idea of this work is not to take a moral or self-righteous position emphasizing the nature/industry dichotomy; it is, rather, to present the images and to suggest relationships between them which are historical, emotional/metaphorical, and structural/formal.

Jules Backus, the photographer for this project, and I have been filming storms throughout the United States: our footage includes dramatic sequences from electrical storms in New Mexico and Oklahoma, forest fires in the Sierra, wind and waves on the Bering Sea. Certainly within the history of painting and, more recently, of photography, there are instances where artists have gone out into the landscape or onto the oceans to experience and capture dramatic light and weather. This obsession with the tumultuous in landscape is central to the work of many 19th century painters; Turner in England and Thomas Moran and Frederick Church in the United States are just a few. What is being described here is, of course, the Romantic spirit, which has been aligned with the fevered landscape. In other words with the Sublime as it is evidenced in nature. The idea of the Sublime (which has, by the way, not been given much attention in the art world since the 50's) gained importance during the 18th and 19th centuries through the philosophical writings of Kant and, later, in the aesthetics of Edmund Burke and others. This concept which had so much to do with defining the aesthetics of the Romantic period has a long history stretching back to Longinus, the Platonic philosopher of the third century A.D.; but it was in the mid 19th century that it became most clearly manifest.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.¹

At this point it makes sense to apply the brakes so that I can waggle a warning finger at Romanticism. Without equivocation I believe that Romantic meanderings, if left unchecked, are a dangerous path to wander, filled with the most unctuous connotations associated with the worst aspects of post-modernism and, even worse, they are smuggly reminiscent of the rebirth of dangerously reactionary states of mind which have, historically, gone hand in hand with facism. One need only look at the destruction of the avant-garde in Hitler Germany and the emergence of National Socialist genre painting, or look at the Social Realism of the Soviet Union to know that Romanticism with its yearnings for nostalgia, a mean deceit, is a dangerous aesthetic to be flirting with.

Having cleared the air of that disagreeable bit of business, I would say that as a contemporary artist I do not stand alone in my growing interest in landscape and, since these attitudes have emerged from the ashes of the once proud avant-garde, they are tempered and shaped by the present and, as a result, are neither deceitful nor reactionary. This rediscovery of the landscape can be found in the work of numerous artists, many of whom have arrived there from extremely different routes and who may represent opposing positions on the aesthetic mobius strip. It can be seen in the tumultuous seascapes of Diane Andrews Hall's large triptychs or in Joan Jonas' recent performance, *Volcano Saga*, which utilizes in projected video and slides the mysterious scenery of Iceland as metaphors for her personal narrative and as a chthonic backdrop to Nordic myth; and, again in painting, in the recent work of Christopher Brown and Robin Winters. The list is long and varied. The point isn't that there are strong formal similarities between this work (which there are not) nor that they all share interest in the sublime (which, clearly, they do not); but they are all alike — and I include myself in this — in that they are attracted to the landscape because it is there that one finds images of strong emotional content and, at the same time (and I think that this is very important) images which are outside the self, that are both externalized and expressionistic without being solipsistic. To this extent, the "new" interest in the landscape is a movement away from figurative work and towards abstraction. I admit that, for painting at any rate, there is a sense of *deja vu* in all of this. One can easily imagine a new generation of artists rediscovering the aesthetics of Rothko and Still, painters who combined the 19th century notions of the sublime with the modernist demand for abstraction. One can only hope that history need not be so cruel as to repeat itself to that extent; in fact, that new abstraction will demand new content. In video, of course, the situation is different since its history is short and, at this juncture anyway, it is incapable of repeating itself. It is true, however, that the long tapes of the artist alone with the camera in the studio are a thing of the past and that one of the avenues that the artists have taken to free themselves and the viewer from this endless narcissism has been landscape.²

Up to this point I have been discussing the tape, *Storm and Stress*, in terms of its broader historical issues. I would like, now, to discuss its history in microcosm, that is in terms of my own past work, and, in the process, to touch on the metaphorical and emotional aspects of images. As one part of me revels in the awe that one feels when in the presence of violent weather and technology — this is the Wagnerian side which I try to keep in abeyance since the dangerous romantic lurks here — the other is more distanced and is fascinated by the language of images; their sign system. I am attracted, in other words, to the powerful image not simply on a visceral level (the aesthetic experience transmitted through the



Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator installation view
Whitney Museum 1984
photograph by Peter Aaron Esto

bowels) but, more importantly, I am curious about the nature of these images; the means by which they're transmitted and, once received, by their ability to affect. After all, it doesn't take Roland Barthe to tell us that a painting of a tidal wave or that a videotape of a tornado are not those things at all, but are abstract facsimiles (pictures) which we allow to stand for a physical reality (the actual wave or funnel cloud) and, through some mysterious associative process, to elicit particular ideas or emotional states. There is a long history of interest in "power images" which pervades my work and which can be traced from the videotape, *The Eternal Frame* (T.R.Uthco and Ant Farm, 1975) which deals with the idea of the "image president" as mediated through a reenactment of the assassination of JFK; to *The Speech* (video tape, 1980) which is about the posturing and signifiers of political speech making; and, more recently, to *These Are The Rules* from the longer work *Songs of the 80's* (1983, videotape) which again depicts a type, in this case the demagogue. These concerns are not limited to tapes but can be found in installations and drawings as well. What I believe is significantly different in the new work, however, is that there is a move away from the self as a vehicle of expression and from the idea of human gesture as content. The result of all this is that there is a concomitant movement toward abstraction and, perhaps, toward a more universal language of images.



from the videotape
Songs of the 80's
 photograph by Michael Darowski

Storm and Stress connects to my past work in its concern with the “pictures” of power but the difference lies in what is being pictured. Now power is being shown as natural and industrial and no longer as political and didactic. Since these images are, in all cases, mediated, the concern is not so much with the things themselves (although the physicality – the notion that these things actually do exist in the same world that we populate – is not denied) but more with the *idea* of the dramatic landscape and its relation to the industrial landscape and to the *idea* that one can use them to elicit particular internal, largely emotional, states. I have, in this sense, substituted the snapping flag of *Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator* (installation at the Visual Studies Workshop; 1983 and The Whitney Museum, 1984) with the tumultuous landscape and the aggressive technology of *Storm and Stress*. In all these cases I am understanding how images stand for things and how the internal language of ideas and emotions are triggered by pictures of things that are external to us. I am, of course, talking both about images as phenomenon (physically being close to a tornado, for example, and the means by which that actual experience translates) and images as language (how the idea of the tornado as seen through the matrixed screen of the television elicits and stands for certain emotional states). I guess I’m circling back on myself when I say that violent landscapes and extreme forms of technology, on the one hand, and political spectacle (the screaming despot, the snapping flag) on the other, rely on similar image systems and that part of the reason that they function as they do (sharing a coding and decoding method) can be found in the aesthetics of the sublime.

The Sublime? A paramount consideration in my studies and work from my earliest student days. In essence, it is most elusive of capture or definition—only surely found least in the lives and works of those who babble of it most. The dictator types have made a cliché of “sublime” concepts throughout the centuries to impress and subjugate the ignorant and desperate.³

—Clyfford Still

Finally, I would like to say something about the more formal elements of *Storm and Stress*, which are based on a series of analogies drawn first, and most importantly, from the physical relationship that exists between storms and technologies that either harness or create energy and, secondly, on the purely structural similarities between the two (such as the horizontality of running water versus the verticality of rising steam). I need say nothing more about the second instance other than to point out that comparisons can be made between two dissimilar (or similar) phenomena based solely on visual or structural grounds. In the first instance, however, formal relations are established not according to how something looks but are based on what it is that it does. This is an old game that we play all the time: fire to fire; water to fire; dynamic to quiet, etc., etc. “Paper wraps rock; scissors cut paper; rock breaks scissors. . .”

In *Storm and Stress*, storms are viewed as machines which, instead of being powered by fossil fuels, are motivated by heat and ice.

Man has constructed a thing-nature. The painter makes one see the entrails of this thing: stochastic bundles, dualism of sources, winking fires, its material entrails, which are the very womb of the world, sun, rain, ice, clouds, and showers. Heaven, sea, earth, and thunder are the interior of a boiler which bakes the material world. At random.⁴

Technology is seen as a kind of zoo for natural phenomena, where the forces of nature are caged and controlled. The tape focuses as much on the cages as on the beasts themselves. Industry objectifies that which is subliminal in nature by creating machines which echo the natural world and, more specifically, which reflect ourselves. They are our extensions into space and, like a mirror, cast back our own image and our attitudes to the world around us. The idea of machine as man or as beast exists in the modernist technologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries where the creatures breathe and cough and belch, filling the air with their

foul excretions. These are monstrous mechanical devices based on the human form. The machines of the late 20th century, however, the "post-modernist" era reflect not our mechanical natures but our neurological. They work in silence and are not glorious to view, existing in the pristine formicaed enclave. The sublime machine of the past has been replaced by the subliminal machine of the future.

Finally, the rain stopped and a warm sun ate through the clouds. Everyone in the neighborhood came out and stood in front of their houses. Steam rose up off the pavement, thick and heavy, almost like smoke. The buildings. The people. The cars parked in the driveways were all like apparitions. Not made of real stuff at all. Like a dream, really.⁵

Footnotes

- (1) Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 39
- (2) Conversation with Diane Andrews Hall.
- (3) Kynaston McShine ed., *The Natural Paradise, Painting in America 1800-1950*, p. 123
- (4) Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, p. 60
- (5) Doug Hall, text from the performance, "Songs of the 80's," 1980.

Bibliography

- Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. James T. Boulton ed., University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
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