

Making Sense: from the Sublime to the Meticulous

Making Sense Catalogue Essay, September 2011.

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It's hard to imagine a more opportune moment for 'making sense' of environmental issues, which clearly present us all – scientists and non-scientists alike – with a huge challenge. In this regard, Debbie Symons and Jasmine Targett's works bridge a crucial gap, presenting complex, disturbing data in lucid, evocative, even surprisingly beautiful form.

Human beings have always tried to tame and exploit nature, but typically, in the past, with some sense of awe. Traditional belief in the spiritual power of the land may underpin later responses like the Enlightenment 'Sublime,' or Marcus Clarke's famous 19th-century lines on the gloomy and mysterious grandeur of the Australian landscape.ⁱ

For Kant, contemplating fashionable aesthetic categories in 1764, the Sublime involved 'the feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature.'ⁱⁱ But, post 1945, and especially post 2001, the idea of the Sublime may seem fatally flawed, perhaps even totalitarian, with terms like 'Shock and Awe' now coopted by the U.S. military.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet there still seems to be scope for a contemporary Sublime, for instance in the work of Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who explores environmental and scientific issues, often on a massive scale, as in *The Weather Project* (2003).^{iv}

In 'Making Sense' (a title borrowed from Eliasson), Symons and Targett also address large issues, and grapple with science, in considerable detail, but on an intimate scale, implying a 21st-century Sublime with subtler, darker tones. Antarctica, from all accounts (unfortunately I can't speak from first-hand experience), is a majestic place, exemplifying that combination of awe-inspiring beauty, fear and melancholy that made up the Enlightenment Sublime, and still capable of astonishing contemporary visitors. However – as both Symons and Targett demonstrate – it's also a fragile ecosystem showing obvious and increasing signs of damage, as temperatures rise, the ice melts, and species disappear at an alarming rate.

Faced with such destruction, it may seem impossible not to succumb to despair – or at least *melancholy* – that richer, more energetic concept central to Kant's idea of the Sublime.^v But these artists suggest another, more productive approach. For, in a final paradox, the works in this exhibition also project considerable beauty – in the vivid colours of Targett's glowing temperature maps, for example, or Symons's delicate delineation of species' decay and death. It may remain debateable whether these responses constitute a transcendent Kantian gesture, bitter-sweet mourning for what's already irrevocably lost, or a vital redemptive act.

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22 July 2011

NOTES

ⁱ For a lively recent discussion of Clarke's comments, see John McDonald, *Art of Australia, vol.1: Exploration to Federation*, Sydney: Macmillan, 2008, pp.150-52.

ⁱⁱ Immanuel Kant, 'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime' [1764], in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Patrick Frierson & Paul Guyer, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, London & New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 205; see also Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to September 11*, Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

^{iv} In a recent interview, Eliasson, while voicing considerable mistrust of the idea, continued: '...I like to think of the sublime as something which does not exclude the context. If suddenly the world appeared as a construction and therefore changeable – that would in my view be subliminal' (as quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, 'Nature as Culture: Olafur Eliasson and the idea of a contemporary sublime,' *Art & Australia* 47.3, Autumn 2010, p.405).

^v For melancholy, see Kant's 'Observations...', *op.cit.*, pp.25ff.; the classic text is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (first published in 1621); see also Jacky Bowring, *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2008; Eric G.Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2008, esp.pp.69ff. ('Generative Melancholia'); and Shirley Law, "'Spirited Sadness" and the Gothic in *Jane Eyre*,' forthcoming in *Screen Education* [Australia], vol.63 (2011).