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## Neosublime, Reframing the Philosophical

Kathy Varadi

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# NEOSUBLIME, REFRAMING THE PHILOSOPHICAL

by

KATHLEEN VARADI

(Under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

## ABSTRACT

Why have the sunsets and sunrises become so amazingly colorful and awe inspiring recently? Eighteenth century philosophers said such events were examples of the sublime. They defined the sublime as that which is the most absolutely great combined with an underlying element of fear usually caused by the actions of God. This infers that the sublime is something that you can't fully understand or wrap your head around and leaves you speechless and spell bound. Contemporary art critics say that the sublime is no longer applicable to art because it has been overused. I disagree, and in my art, I look for examples of the sublime in present day events. The slow, insidious, imperceptible, disastrous effects of global warming is one example of the contemporary sublime that I call the Neosublime. The brilliantly red sunrises and sunsets are awesomely great but the realization that they are caused by air pollutants brings a fearful reminder of how global warming is destroying the world. Other examples of the Neosublime are the COVID pandemic and worldwide political turmoil. The most frightening part of the Neosublime is that it is the result of the actions of humans and not God. Like global warming my paintings show beautiful sunsets and giant ocean waves from sea level rise, and yet the impending disaster is not readily apparent. So far humans have not responded to the outcries of climate activists and scientists, but perhaps the warnings within my paintings will be a catalyst for action.

INDEX WORDS: Neosublime, Contemporary sublime in art, Philosophical sublime in art, Anthropocene in art, Global warming, Sea level rise, Climate change, Edmund Burke,

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by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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## DEDICATION

To Kim, Thanks for sharing your art and your life with me, IWU.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had the experience of using a familiar word, only to have somebody tell you it meant something else? Maybe this happened in front of a group of people, which then motivated you to do some research?

I became uncomfortably aware of the meaning of the sublime in the context of art and philosophy while presenting one of my paintings in critique. After describing my artwork as sublime, I was asked what that meant. My response was the colloquial definition of sublime, as something peaceful, beautiful, enjoyable, or meditative. What my professors were asking about was how the eighteenth-century philosophers, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke, defined the sublime. These philosophers described the sublime as something absolutely “great”, meaning beyond comparison, and caused by nature or God. Burke added an element of fear, so that the feeling of excitement you feel when looking at something horrible, while being in a safe place, was the sublime. I was fascinated and needed to find out more.

In my research I was surprised to learn that, according to art critic James Elkins, almost everything in the contemporary artworld has been described as sublime. Weary of the descent of the sublime to the commonplace, he argued that the sublime, and especially the postmodern sublime, should be abandoned because it is no longer relevant, coherent, or necessary. He said that sublime should only be used in reference to romantic art. (Elkins 1) I wasn’t convinced this was true and wanted to figure out why I disagreed.

The *Collins English Dictionary* states, “If you describe something as sublime you mean it has a wonderful quality that affects you deeply.” (“Sublime” Collins) That is pretty much what I

originally thought was meant by the sublime. Perhaps it is the colloquial definition of the sublime in the dictionary that Elkins found too trite for contemporary art?

Then came my questions. I wondered, what if the 18<sup>th</sup> century definition of the sublime could be used to describe current events? If it could, which current events? Could contemporary artists represent and use the philosophical idea of the sublime in their work? How could this be done? If it could be done, why should it be done? Could my artwork show that the philosophical sublime of Burke and Kant has relevance and purpose in contemporary art?

In this thesis I will discuss the meaning of the sublime according to Burke and Kant. I will then describe The Neosublime, a word I invented referring to the philosophical sublime that occurs during major global contemporary events. I will describe three examples of the Neosublime with apocalyptic potential and how they can be represented artistically. I will show how artists, who have depicted the sublime in their work, influenced my art of the Neosublime. I will end in describing the relevance and importance of the Neosublime in the contemporary artworld.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SUBLIME

#### Ancient Beginnings

The sublime was first mentioned by an unknown author two thousand years ago in a Roman treatise on literary criticism and rhetoric called *On the Sublime*, (*Peri Hypsious* in Greek). (Longinus) The identity of the author has never been fully established, so they have been named Pseudo-Longinus, after the leading contenders. The author described the sublime as the moral and imaginative power of the writer that pervaded ancient literature and how it could be developed and strengthened. Pseudo-Longinus said that some things are so astonishingly beautiful they will become sublime. This means the beautiful and the sublime are similar and only differ in magnitude. Something intensely beautiful can transcend to the sublime. (Longinus) The notion of the sublime was not seen in any other writings until about 1700 years later.

Eventually *On the Sublime* was rediscovered by poet and critic Nicolas Boileau who translated it into French in 1674. William Smith translated *On the Sublime* into English in 1739 which brought the work back into prominence in Britain and influenced the philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Enlightenment Philosophers

One of the Enlightenment philosophers most smitten by Pseudo-Longinus' concepts of the beautiful and the sublime was Edmund Burke. In his treatise, *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke said the sublime is an artistic effect productive of the strongest emotion that a mind is capable of feeling. (Burke part I sec VII) Unlike Pseudo-Longinus' concept of astonishing beauty becoming sublime, Burke said that the

beautiful and the sublime are not the same. They are very different reactions, that arise from very different kinds of stimuli. The beautiful cannot be the sublime.

Burke explained, the beautiful is that which is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing, whereas the sublime is that which has the power to compel and destroy us. (Burke part III sec XIII-XIV) Beautiful objects are described as smooth, polished, and comparatively small, whereas sublime objects are rugged, great, and vast in their dimensions. Burkes said the other qualities of the sublime included darkness, obscurity, emptiness, solitude, silence, great power, and vastness. When associated with the sublime these qualities are of such magnitude that our ability to comprehend the sublime becomes overwhelmed. Our reactions to these events are so intense they can be described as a kind of pleasurable terror.

The sublime can be mixed with apprehension and fear, which is part of the delight. Or it can produce astonishment, with fear or terror, and that can resemble pain. The sensation of experiencing the sublime can be modified and lessened if one is standing at a safe distance from a dangerous event. You could be standing miles away from an erupting volcano fearful and terrified, unable to take your eyes off the sights and sounds, yet still feel safe. It is the combination of these feelings that produces the sensation of the sublime.

A good example of Burke's description of the sublime is the volcano Hudson River School artist Frederic Edwin Church rendered in his painting *Cotopaxi* in 1862. (Figure 1) The volcano's billowing smoke that traveled across a vast landscape with a fiery sunset was considered so intense it became a metaphor for the ongoing Civil War. Uniquely glorious in this large painting was the yellow-pink light splashing across the dark, jagged cliffs of the foregrounded gorge and waterfall. The strong light/dark contrast also added to the intensity and majesty of the painting.





*Figure 1. Cotopaxi, 1862, Frederic Edwin Church, oil on canvas, 48 x 85 inches.*



*Figure 2. Neosublime 18, Never Used to Be This High, 2022, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.*

My painting of the Neosublime, *Never Used to Be This High*, (Figure 2) depicts a futuristic view of sea level rise in 2050, and was informed by *Cotopaxi's* high contrast values, color choices, and low oblique light traversing the scenes. Both paintings are from an elevated

point of view of looking at a catastrophic natural event from a safe distance and match the qualities of Burke's philosophical sublime.

Like Burke, philosopher Immanuel Kant described beautiful things as small, smooth, and pleasurable rather than abrupt, angular, or sudden. He also agreed that the sublime contains feelings of terror and fear that are greater in their effect on us than the feelings of the beautiful. This is because the sensations of pain and terror are stronger and more intense than pleasure.

Kant discussed his philosophy of aesthetics of the beautiful and sublime in his book, *Critique of Judgement*. Kant described the sublime as that which is "absolutely" great, and beyond all comparison, either dynamically in terms of limitless power or mathematically in terms of limitless magnitude. For Kant the sublime describes natural objects that inspire a kind of awed terror through sheer immensity, and the inability of the intellect to grasp incomprehensible concepts like infinity. (Kant, section I, book II)

The beautiful reminds us that we are part of the world of human experience in a safe and comfortable way. The sublime tells us that we ultimately belong to a different dimension that we can't prove by experience or reason. It is an existence with awe-inspiring delight, that is part of a separate transcendental world, which is our eventual home where we can finally and completely belong.

Kant's first thesis, *Critique of Pure Reason*, describes two worlds. The real world of experience he called the phenomenal. The world beyond the reach of experience he called the noumenal. In this critique Kant describes how we have objective knowledge of the scientific and mathematical world and tells us to have faith in reason because it can reveal the underlying truth of reality. (Kant)

Kant acknowledges that we can't prove the existence of God, soul, or freedom with experience or reason. He says these legitimate thoughts of the nonphysical world need a separate place. In his second thesis, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant discusses good, morality, freedom and explains they are useful because they make sense of the world beyond our comprehension. (Kant)

Kant found that aesthetics, that is, the beautiful and the sublime, could not be examined in the same manner as the physical or the spiritual worlds. For this reason, he wrote his third book, the *Critique of Judgement*, where he describes the unresolvable, in between world of awe-inspiring delight. It is where beauty, sublime, and art reside. (Kant)

### Baroque Artists

The art of the sublime is usually credited to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic painters because they were responding to the provocative writings of Burke and Kant. However, some art historians cite evidence of the sublime in the artwork of 18<sup>th</sup> century artists completed before Burke and Kant's philosophical treatises were available. In her essay, "Longinus and the Baroque Sublime in Britain," Lydia Hamlett states that Pseudo-Longinus had more of an impact on seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century art and art theory than previously thought. Hamlett says 18<sup>th</sup> century artists like Jonathan Richardson did for the visual arts what Pseudo-Longinus had done for rhetoric. (Hamlett, par 11)

Richardson described his portrait paintings as sublime if the sitter's good character successfully influenced the viewer. By describing portrait painting in terms of the sublime Richardson elevated the esteem of portrait painting. (Figure 3) A recent exhibition of

Richardson's self-portraits drawings showed how he confronted his aging face, explored his soul, and sought the sublime with a range of styles and moods. (Crichton-Miller par 6)

It is interesting that 300 years after Richardson referred to portrait artwork as sublime, I described my self-portraits of the stages of grief as an example of a new sublime. My self-portraits in *Neosublime 23, Pandemic Stages of Grief*, (Figure 4) depict the moods that people



Figure 3. *Self-portrait(s)*, 1728-38, Jonathan Richardson, chalk on paper and vellum.

experienced during the quarantine period of the COVID pandemic. Each self-portrait shows an emotional stage (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) in the grief reaction described by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book, *On Death and Dying*. (Kubler-Ross)



*Figure 4. Neosublime 23, Pandemic Stages of Grief, 2020, oil on canvas, collage of 5 paintings, Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, Resolution.*

Another artist who spoke about the sublime in his work well before the Romantics was Italian Baroque painter Salvador Rosa. He was mainly a landscape painter in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who influenced the 18<sup>th</sup> century romantic garden movement. He also painted portraits, allegories, and scenes of witchcraft which revealed his interest in the irrational and less conventional intellectual preoccupations of his age. Rosa had a flamboyant personality which was reflected in



his works showing astonishment, grandeur, savage sublimity, pleasing horror, and terror,



*Figure 5. Rocky Landscape with a Huntsman and Warriors, ca. 1670, Salvador Rosa, oil on canvas, 56 x 76 inches.*

qualities often associated with the romantics. Philosophers and writers often referred to his artworks, and famously, Edmund Burke designated Rosa as The Painter of the Sublime.

Rosa specialized in painting jagged rock formations and stormy skies and his influence has been described in the artworks of subsequent 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> century artists, J.W.M. Turner, Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, and Benjamin West. One example of Rosa's work depicting the sublime is *Rocky Landscape with a Huntsman and Warriors* (Figure 5) with its threatening clouds and soaring cliffs. The works Richardson, Rosa, and other 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century writers and artists suggest a discourse in the sublime well before Burke, Kant, and the Romantic artists.

### Romantic Artists

The Romantic painters of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries responded to the influence of earlier artists and philosophers by painting majestic large format paintings of avalanches, storms, and volcanos to remind viewers of natural powers greater than themselves.



*Figure 6. Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps, 1812, J.M.W. Turner, oil on canvas, 74 x 110 x 7 inches.*

The art of Romantic painter, J.M.W. Turner, has been praised as impressive, terrible, magnificent, and sublime. His painting, *Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (Figure 6), shows the vulnerability of humans when confronted with the power of nature. A curving menacing black storm cloud covers the sky, and a snow-white avalanche cascades down the mountain, positioned to descend on the soldiers below. The swirling oval vortex of wind, rain, and clouds creates a dynamic moving force of power while the dull orange sun attempts to break through the clouds. A twisted composition and sharp contrasting values enhance the terror of the sublime.



Figure 7. *Neosublime 19, Wave Goodbye*, 2022, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

This massive energy of a natural events helped inform my painting *Neosublime 19, Wave Goodbye* (Figure 7). Both paintings have curvilinear lines of action and show the power of nature over vulnerable humans. With tons of energy, the wave looms over a barely visible family taking photos of each other, unaware of what's about to happen. This scene is a metaphor for humans unaware that they are causing their own demise by ignoring global warming. It is ironic that man's quest to tame nature has caused the natural world to become even more powerful. Combustion engines operating on fossil fuels have led to global warming and sea level rise, which in turn have caused more frequent and extremely powerful storms than those produced by nature.





Figure 8. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, Casper D. Friedrich, oil on canvas, 37 x 29 inches.

Romantic artists pondered the plight of humans in the face of rising industrialization in their paintings. “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” (Figure 8) is a hallmark painting of the sublime showing a man standing on a mountain top with his back to the viewer looking out over the fog below. The scene has been described as a man contemplating his life face-to-face with infinity. Alternatively, it depicts the encroachment of industry on nature to the chagrin of the observer. By painting the man’s back to the viewer, Friedrich invites the viewers into the picture plane, and next to the man on the precipice, perhaps asking for assistance.

The solitary figure in Friedrich’s painting informed the way I portrayed the two figures in my painting, *Neosublime I, Humans Everywhere*. (Figure 9) The figures stand with their backs to the viewer as an incoming storm approaches the seashore. One is engaged with the view and the other is dancing oblivious to the threat. They are in a safe place while danger looms in the distance making this scene consistent with Burke’s notion of the sublime. Sinister lines and dark values of the clouds and figures contribute to feeling of the sublime.



Figure 9. *Neosublime 1, Humans Everywhere*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

By placing the figures in the direct line of vision of the artist, this painting also comments on overpopulation. No matter how far you travel into the wilderness, there are humans, or their mementos left behind, like piles of rocks called cairns. As an extreme example of a cairn, land artist Robert Smithson built a gigantic artwork, called *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 10), on the shore of the Great Salt Lake with 10,000 tons of mud, precipitated salt crystals and rocks. It measures 1500 feet long x 15 feet wide)! In the network of the Neosublime, overcrowding, globalization, and global warming, go hand in hand affecting the earth's biosphere.



*Figure 10. Spiral Jetty, (1970). Robert Smithson, 10,000 tons of mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, 1500 feet long x 15 feet wide.*

American writer Henry David Thoreau and Hudson River Valley artist Thomas Cole also commented on the effect of booming industry on the natural environment. They called attention to Manifest Destiny and the Industrial Revolution in their works *Walden, or Life in the Woods* and *The Oxbow*, and *View from Mount Holyoke, North Hampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* (Figure 11).

In *Oxbow*, an incoming dark thundercloud travels along a sinister line of disaster and represents nature's powerful response to civilization of wildlands. A closed umbrella over an artist's easel signals that the artist is present, and points to the land that was appropriated for profit. Cole presents himself as the barely visible artist safely perched on a tree stump at the forest's edge on top of Mt. Holyoke. From that vantage point he observes the dwindling wildlands being devoured by agriculture under the government directive of Manifest Destiny. The barely visible artist in a safe place, terrified by the events playing out below him, represents Burke's concept of the sublime.



Figure 11. *The Oxbow, View from Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts*, 1836, Thomas Cole, oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 76 inches

The voyeuristic act of watching something unimaginable while you're in a safe place is likewise rendered in my painting, *AJ's* (Figure 12). Looking over an estuary from an elevated pier at a local seafood restaurant, the misty atmospheric perspective is reminiscent of *The Oxbow* as well as *Wanderer Above a Sea of Clouds*. As a quiet and contemplative scene looking into infinity, this painting is suggestive of the colloquial meaning of the sublime. However, the boats are docked, and the viewer wonders if this is the calm before a storm, perhaps a hurricane. The distant boat house appears unstable. Does the atmospheric mist represent air pollution? Is the cloudy water full of effluent? As in *Wanderer* and *Oxbow*, the viewer looks at the scene from a high perspective, pondering their plight.



*Figure 12. A.J.'s, 2020, oil on panel, 24 x 30 inches.*

### Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary Artists

The eighteenth-century philosophical sublime of the Enlightenment was described in terms of the actions of God, whereas the modern, postmodern, and contemporary sublime can be described in terms of humans and modernity.

In modern art God and nature were no longer the main representatives of the sublime, though some artists, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, made color field paintings creating quasi-religious feelings. Newman's *Vic Heroicus Sublimis (Man, Heroic and Sublime)* (Figure 13), is so large that when the viewer stands close to it, they experience a reaction like standing close to another person. With a vast red field, broken by five thin vertical stripes, called zips, Newman created a special environment.



Figure 13. *Vic Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51, Barnett Newman, oil on canvas, 95 x 213 inches.

On the other hand, Barnett Newman rejected the European's religious notion of the sublime in his landmark essay, *The Sublime of Now* (Newman 580). This abstract expressionist said that modern art did not have a sublime, but rather self-evident real images understood by anyone, without even knowing the history of art or religion. By trying to make a "cathedral out of man" Newman set a high standard for sublimity that painting could not reach, though others still tried.

Bearing a resemblance to *Vic Heroicus Sublimis*, Rothko's painting *Light Red Over Black* (Figures 14 and 15) contains a unique presence made by combining color, structure, and space. Rothko said the large scale of his canvases was intended to contain and surround the viewer, not to be "grandiose," but to be "intimate and human." (Mark Rothko, nga.gov) The forms within the painting consist of color alone, and their translucency establishes a layered depth that enriches the vertical height of the composition. There are variations in saturation, tone, and hue, that creates a kind of shallow space.





*Figure 14. Light Red Over Black 1957, Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 90 x 60 1 ½ inches.*

In his essay, “Psychosis and the Sublime in American Art: Rothko and Smithson,” Timothy D. Martin found evidence of the Kantian sublime in Mark Rothko’s *Light Red Over Black*. Martin wrote, “The tension between flatness and depth leads to an ambiguous space where shapes cannot be firmly bound, easily located, or securely identified. In one sense Rothko is in the very zone that Kant marked out, where the rational and the imaginary cannot be distinguished.” Martin also says Rothko’s painting goes beyond Kant and into psychoanalysis, establishing a frame not only for sublime aesthetic experience but also for psychotic delusion.



*Figure 15. Light Red Over Black (Detail).*



*Figure 16. Neosublime 6, Ghost Forest, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.*



Though more naturalistic, my painting, *Neosublime 5 Ghost Forest* (Figure 16) has a dominant horizontal line like *Light Red Over Black*. The choices of dark colors, ragged lines, and obscure space convey a subliminal sense of loss and death, with no second chances. This abstract painting shows forests of dead trees in the low country of Georgia often called ghost forests. Rising ground water lacking oxygen covers the roots and drowns the trees. Once you know this, it's hard not to notice the increasing numbers of ghost forests with dread and frustration of not knowing what to do.

In his contemporary essay *Against the Sublime* James Elkins rejected religious and spiritual tones of the sublime saying, "the concept of the sublime, and the postmodern sublime, are over-used tropes in critical writing. They sometimes serve a covert religious purpose, as a way of smuggling theological concepts into secular discourse; and they are stand-ins for notions of epistemological, linguistic, and psychological failures that do not require the specific discourse of the sublime." (Elkins p 1) Despite this criticism, there is still evidence of the sublime in the work of postmodern and contemporary artists.

Early in the twenty first century there was a renewed interest in the sublime by contemporary artists. As part of the project, *The Sublime Object: Nature, Art, and Language, 2007-2010*, a series of conferences, seminars and symposia were held at Tate Britain to investigate the sublime in art from the early seventeenth century to the present day. Instead of rehashing the quasi-spiritual work of JMW Turner and John Constable, the project looked at art and the sublime in relation to contemporary art and global events. For example, Olafur Eliasson created *Weather Project*, (Figure 17) using mono-frequency yellow lights, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminum and scaffolding to transform Tate's massive Turbine Hall into a humongous sunset.



*Figure 17. The Weather Project, Turbine Hall, 2003, Olafur Eliasson, Photo of mono-frequency lights, haze machine, mirror foil, aluminum, scaffolding.*

Lit by a huge yellow-orange pseudo-sun, members of the audience could walk through a surreal space saturated with a foggy mist. Lying down they saw tiny dark figures of themselves reflected on the mirrored ceiling. With grandeur, awe, and human reduction, *The Weather Project* is a contemporary evocation of the sublime. When commenting on his amazing installation Eliasson plays down any spiritual inferences of the sublime. Instead, he purposefully calls attention to the crises of global warming, by combining the seemingly unrelated events of melting Arctic glaciers and migrating refugees.

The color palette of Eliasson's massive installation is replicated daily around the world as the sun rises and sets. This installation informed my multimedia artwork, *Neosublime 12a and Tybee Sunrise 12b*. (Figures 18 and 19)

Sunrises and sunsets have become more brilliantly red because of suspended particulate matter from global warming and air pollution. In *Tybee Sunrise 12a* an extremely large cargo

ship sailing on the bright orange horizon symbolizes the contribution of globalization and commodification to the ecological web of global warming.



Figure 18. Neosublime 12a, Tybee Sunrise, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

In the manner of a manifesto, a text is applied to resemble the scrolling introduction of a *Star Wars* movie. As a nod to future technology the text of my artist's statement is applied using a computerized laser cut stencil. The companion painting of a sunset represents the island before occupation by European forces. Although no evidence of human activity can be seen, the artist



Other twenty and twenty-first century contemporary artists demonstrated a renewed interest in the sublime of Burke and Kant. Damian Hirst suspended a 14-foot-long dead tiger shark in a huge tank filled with blue formaldehyde solution. (Figure 20) When the sculpture was first unveiled in 1991 it shocked and unsettled the public. Hirst described the shark as a "universal trigger," capable of instilling fear in all. (*The Sublime, The Art Story*) Looking into the eye of a dead shark conjures up the idea that we as living beings cannot truly grasp the meaning of death.



*Figure 20. The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991, Damian Hirst, Tiger shark, 5% formaldehyde solution, glass, steel, 84 x 204 x 84 inches*

Hirst was able to present the unrepresentable, recounting Jean-François Lyotard's answer to "What is Postmodernism?" in his book *The Postmodern Condition*. It was in postmodern art that Lyotard revitalized the sublime of Kant. He said postmodern artists present the unrepresentable and they do so without the comfort of using traditional representation. They search for new presentations, not to enjoy them, but to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. Lyotard said that postmodern artists are not governed or judged by preestablished rules. Instead, they are



working without rules to formulate the new rules. (Lyotard, Postmodernism) Looking at Hirst's artwork we experience the sublime described by Kant, because we face something that we do not have the capacity to understand or control.

The physicality of this artwork by Damien Hirst informed my sculpture, *Neosublime 14 Ultimate Sea Level Rise*, (Figure 21 and 22) not only because a ready-made aquarium tank was used, but because depicting the magnitude of sea level rise in terms of its future effect on the American cities also “presents the unrepresentable” of Lyotard.



Figure 21. *Neosublime 14, Ultimate Sea Level Rise*, 2021, glass aquarium, water, rocks, lights, air pump and bubbles, 11 x 17 x 11 inches

This multimedia water sculpture combines the dimensions of time, space, and temperature to show the impact of global sea level rise on U.S. cities. It combines science and art to demonstrate the barely noticeable rise of the sea levels in cities across the United States.

Water, lights, and bubbles are added to a ready-made glass aquarium. Water rise is monitored with gauges applied to three sides of the aquarium. The altitudes of seven U.S. cities on the front, sea level rise on the left side and temperature rise on the right side. The water level rises, colored lights are flashing, and bubbles are bouncing around, but none of this is noticed by the viewers. Since the water level rose slowly, the change was barely perceptible, until it reached the top. At that point the viewers became alarmed, moved around rapidly, and called out to the artist to turn off the water, but it had already overflowed onto the floor. The artwork portrays a metaphor for the slow, insidious rise of the oceans that will eventually be noticed and addressed when it's too late to reverse.



*Figure 22. Neosublime 14, Ultimate Sea Level Rise, 2021, installation photo.*

James Turrell is another contemporary artist interested in how to portray the awesomely great sensations of the sublime. For Turrell, light is a tool for artmaking rather than an

illuminating source. He uses light as his artistic medium to create saturated fields of color that take on a physical presence. In his *Ganzfeld* (Figure 23) series vibrant color fields practically abolish the surrounding architecture and neither the dimensions nor the source of light can be perceived. With the artist's transformed perspective of light, the viewer experiences the sublime. He combines the science of how the human eye and brain perceives light with new age artistic media and techniques.



Figure 23. *Ganzfeld* “Aural”, Jewish Museum, Berlin, 2018, James Turrell, light, dimensions not perceivable, Photo by Florian Holzer

Turrell's artwork informed *Neosublime 8, Divisive*, (Figure 24) in the use of light, sound, and imagery to depict contemporary political chaos. This large multimedia installation was set up in a room lined with reflective solar blankets. Soundtracks, videos, multicolored laser, and strobe lights were used to create the feeling of confusion and disorientation described by the victims of the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capital. Still and video images from the Black Lives



Matter demonstration were also shown to contrast the intents of both demonstrations. One intended to be peaceful and the other violent. This complex multimedia artwork is a demonstration of how xenophobic political chaos is an example of the Neosublime.



*Figure 24. Neosublime 8, Divisive, 2021, installation, colored strobe and laser lights, video, sounds, music, two portraits in acrylic on canvas, reflective solar blankets covering 12 x 12 x 12-foot room. Photo documentation.*

Another contemporary artist who comments on social injustice is Julie Mehretu. In 2017 Julie Mehretu created two massive gestural abstract paintings representing the history of America's westward expansion. Her two very large artworks *HOWL, eon (I and II)* (Figure 25), that appear to be swarming birds, were intended to be political landscapes. Mehretu, an American who was born in Ethiopia, told Art 21, "There is no such thing as just landscape. "The actual landscape is politicized through the events that take place on it." She added, "The abolitionist movement, the Civil War, the move towards emancipation, all these social dynamics

that are a part of that narrative we don't really talk about regarding American landscape painting. And so, what does it mean to paint a landscape and try and be an artist in this political moment?" (Politicized Landscapes, Art 21)



Figure 25. *HOWL eon (I, II)* 2017, Julie Mehretu, ink, acrylic paint, pencil, paper, 27 x 32 feet.

Mehretu's artistic process is as intensive as her work. To create *Howl eon (I, II)*, (Figure 25) Mehretu started by compiling images of landscape paintings of the American West by frontier-seeking artists like Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church. She juxtaposed the images with newspaper photos of recent riots and protests following police shootings of black men, a stark reminder that this American Dream is not equally available to all. Then, she blew up the images so large that they became pixelated beyond recognition and had them printed on canvas by a company in Germany. Back in Harlem, she and her studio team encased the canvases in layer upon layer of clear acrylic "to create the sense that these images were embedded, embodied in the canvas, "By the time they finished the months-long process, the surfaces "were smooth as glass. (Politicized Landscapes, Art 21)

Mehretu represented the sublime in her other extremely large format artworks that commented on the African Diaspora, America's Manifest Destiny and the September 11, 2001, attack on the Twin Towers.

Mehretu's artworks informed my representation of Global Warming in the large format painting *Neosublime 16, Stuck on Highway 80*. (Figure 24). This painting represents elements of rising sea levels, caused by global warming, in monochromatic in shades of gray with peripheral accents of burnt sienna. I used the indirect technique of painting and applied 4 layers of paint to produce an ethereal effect. Both paintings have been abstracted from photos.

*Stuck on Highway 80* (Figure 26) was informed by an aerial photo of flooding of the only road to Tybee Island. After making two copies of the photo, they were placed side by side, and then the copy on the right was flipped horizontally. This merging process resulted in a very interesting midline design. The design looks like an oil spill, or the wake of a large cargo ship, or the markings of an indigenous tribe. All these interpretations speak of humans adversely affecting the environment.

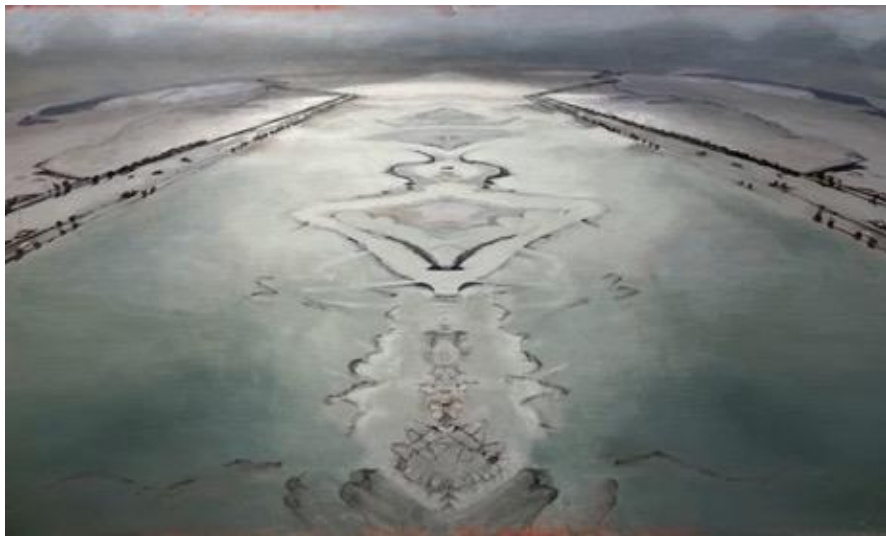


Figure 26. *Neosublime 16, Stuck on Highway 80*, 2022, oil on canvas, 44 x 74 inches.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE NEOSUBLIME

The Neosublime is a contemporary reframing of the philosophical sublime. Whereas the philosophical sublime is a sensation you experience when faced with natural events like earthquakes, volcanoes, and tornados, the Neosublime is a sensation you feel when encountering a profound contemporary event caused by human behavior. The human behavior associated with the Neosublime is not a normal, everyday type of behavior, rather it is behavior that is irresponsible, lacks good will, and has a selfish intent. In this age of nuclear power, global and space communications, and environmental disasters, this kind of human behavior has the potential to destroy all life on earth. Unfortunately, this type of behavior is driven by greed, power, envy, and hatred.

The behavior of prehistoric humans was more likely driven by survival and filling the basic needs of food, shelter, and safety. Working together was more beneficial than internal fighting within their family or tribe. Humans first inhabited the earth 11,600 years ago (c. 9700 BCE) and the geological period from then to now is called the Holocene. Initially the human population was a small group of hunters and gatherers, with a small niche at the top of the food chain. These prehistoric humans lived in balance with the earth's ecosystem, and their behavior had little effect on the earth's environment. The adverse effects of human behavior began in earnest with the advent of the First Industrial Revolution in 1760, fueled by the invention of the steam engine and increased burning of coal for energy. Each of the next three industrial revolutions had more powerful sources of energy, complex technologies, and faster commerce.

One unfortunate by product of the increased growth of industries and populations was the worsening of air, land, and water pollution. These changes continued at a steady pace until the dropping of the first nuclear bomb in 1945. Since then, the rate of industrialization, population growth, and effect of humans on earth has accelerated more than in any other time in human history. Environmental activists have unofficially named this most recent period of the Holocene when humans have most severely affected the earth, the Anthropocene.

Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen first coined the term “Anthropocene” in 2000, by combining the prefix “anthrop” from Greek meaning pertaining to human beings (as opposed to the gods) and “cene” to denote this a recent period (Collins English Dictionary). In 1995 he shared the Nobel Prize for his 1970 work on describing how pollution was destroying of the ozone layer (Britannica).



*Figure 27. Neosublime 21, Waiting, 2022, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.*

The Neosublime is defined by the behavior of humans during the Anthropocene.

*Neosublime 21, Waiting* (figure 27) is a depiction of the feeling of helplessness in the face of impending environmental disaster. The smoke, spewing from nondescript smokestacks, is forcing nature (symbolized by flowers) into exile. The artwork may raise thoughts of Manifest Destiny, global warming, air pollution, and species extinction. The sensation of the Neosublime is enhanced when the viewer realizes that the cluster of smoke clouds resembles a nuclear bomb.

To fully describe the sensation of the sublime, I chose three major contemporary events that have elements of the philosophical sublime. They are events that are absolutely beyond comparison that are caused by human behavior driven by greed, indifference, lust for power and lack of good will. They contain an element of fear or terror, that is combined with astonishment, when observed from a safe space. The three contemporary events that represent the Neosublime are global warming, the COVID pandemic and political chaos.

### Global Warming

My intent in depicting global warming was to render the events that cause it with a hope that viewers would start to take action. To render global warming and its components I initially used the medium that I am most familiar with, oil paint on stretched cotton canvas. The genre I favor is seascapes or landscapes, sometimes with human figures. I typically use large format canvases, complimentary colors, high value contrast, sinister diagonal lines, the golden rectangle, and semiotics. I was often informed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic and Hudson River Valley painters.

Global warming is a vital part of the Neosublime because its actions and effects are absolutely great, beyond comparison, very complicated and beyond human comprehension.

Global warming is caused by a phenomenon called “greenhouse effect when certain atmospheric gases (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) let light in from the sun, but then block the heat from the surface of the earth from escaping back into space. The trapped heat causes the temperature of the earth to rise like the way glass walls of a greenhouse allow light in, but don’t let the heat out.

Global warming and climate change are terms often used interchangeably but are not the same. Global warming is the rising average temperature of the earth and is a subset of climate change. Climate changes also includes extreme weather effects, rising sea levels, shifting wildlife populations and habitats and other events. Scientists tend to use the term climate change. Environmental activists believe climate change doesn’t convey the urgency needed to motivate people to act. They prefer the term global warming because it suggests a more rapid change and people are starting to observe the effects.

Globalization is a contributor to global warming because of the massive amounts of energy required to implement its massive supply chain. Burning fossil fuels makes the electricity to power computers, internet, and monetary systems to support the logistics.

In May 2022 Forbes reported that it is estimated that Bitcoin consumes electricity at an annualized rate of 127 terawatt-hours and that usage exceeds the entire annual electricity consumption of Norway. International commerce, capitalism and globalization are only part of a network that has massively altered the social, economic, and cultural components of life on earth. (Schmidt, Forbes)





Figure 28. *Neosublime 1, Humans Everywhere*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

My first painting depicting global warming, *Neosublime 1, Humans Everywhere* (Figure 9 and 28), is a traditional oil painting of a calm seascape with two figures on the rocky shore, looking out at an approaching storm. Rather than using provocative images, like polar bears dying and becoming extinct because the arctic ice masses are melting, I deliberately chose to render the dangers of global warming in a subtle manner. Unfortunately, the message was too subtle because viewers perceived the painting as a beautiful and missed its content about climate change. In the next painting I added a mysterious abstract component to call attention to its ecological content.





*Figure 29. Neosublime 2, The Monster Beneath, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.*

*Neosublime 2, The Monster Beneath* (Figure 29), is also a landscape painting, but with an interesting abstract component in the bottom half. The title suggests that there is something sinister beneath the surface of the water, but the moored boats on the calm surface belie that interpretation, leaving the view to wonder. The intent of the painting was to call attention to the decrease in quantity and diversity of fish in the deep, cold northern lakes because of rising global temperatures, however the visual message did not seem strong enough.



*Figure 30. Neosublime 3, Wind Power, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.*

In the painting *Neosublime 3, Wind Power* (Figure 30) the tiny turbine windmills on the far-right horizon line are a visual surprise in an otherwise beautiful seascape. The windmills are ghosts of the failed 2012 Cape Wind project in Nantucket Sound. After 16 years of planning and negotiating it failed because the wealthy objected to seeing the windmills in sight of their multi-million-dollar summer homes. However, I came to understand that subtle signifiers on peaceful land and waterscapes didn't convey a message of intensity and urgency. I made the next painting very large, dynamic, and explosive.



*Figure 31. Neosublime 00, How Much is Enough, 2019, oil on panel, 46 x 64 inches.*

*Neosublime 00 How Much is Enough* (Figure 31) is not just an aesthetically pleasing painting of a large ship with multicolored sea crates. Rather it refers to a huge conglomerate of factors that is problematic in trying to solve the effect of globalization on the environment. This painting tells the narrative of how The Port of Savannah handles more than four and a half million sea crates a year. To accommodate this supply chain, highways have been widened and huge, big box distribution centers have been built. Hundreds of miles of 80-foot-tall, long leaf pines have been cut down to make room for this development. No longer with trees to siphon up the water into the air, acres of standing pools of water are left behind, killing plant and animal life. All this contributes to the decline of the United States long leaf pine forest that has decreased by 98 percent since colonial times.



*Figure 32. Neosublime 15, Progress is Our Most Important Product, 2022, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 inches, overlaying painting.*

Although I wanted to render the Neosublime in the 2D medium of oil paint on canvas, I considered using an alternative medium in subsequent artworks make the message of global warming more obvious. *Neosublime 15, Progress is Our Most Important Product* (Figure 32) is composed of two paintings with a performance art portion. One painting is a beautiful portrait of a pine forest at sunset. Actors posing as viewers stepped forward and tore the cover painting off the wall which revealed the second painting, a mural beneath. The mural shows the same forest, except flooded with dead trees, and is now a ghost forest. In the distant a big box store represents commodification and its effects on the environment.





*Figure 33. Neosublime 15, Progress is Our Most Important Product, 2022, Still photo #1 from video of performance portion*

Noteworthy is that the positioning of the actors in a photo (Figure 33) of the performance art portion of *Progress*, looks a lot like the configuration of figures in Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. (Figure 34) Géricault's political painting is about the French government's catastrophic mismanagement of immigrants stranded at sea. These two paintings illustrate how when two Neosublime events are combined, like political chaos and climate change, the adverse outcome is dramatically compounded. The Neosublime is a global web of interwoven events with a potential to drastically affect the world.



Figure 34. *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, Théodore Géricault, oil on canvas, 193 x 282 inches.

In the next artwork I wanted to render the Neosublime using contemporary media, so I combined two paintings with the dimensions of time and space. *Neosublime 9a and Neosublime 9b, Week of Sunrises* (Figure 35 and 36) show that while everyday events consume our lives, global warming and sea level rise are slowly overtaking humanity. Two paintings are placed facing each other on either side of a hallway and each has a movie projected on its surface. Using movies show how the two worlds seem to have parallel existences but in fact intersect and are intimately intertwined with long term effects on each other.

The painting *Neosublime 9a* shows a sunrise over a beach and a boardwalk. In the background a tiny barely visible cargo ship hugs the horizon. A 20-minute movie is projected directly over this painting precisely matching items in the movie with the same items in the painting. The superimposed movie is a compilation of seven consecutive days of sunsets from the same vantage point on a boardwalk. The movie shows the mundane everyday life of people and animals on the beach.



*Figure 35. Neosublime 9a, Week of Sunrises, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 41 x 72 inches.*

The other painting, *Neosublime 9b Week of News*, hangs on the opposite wall of a narrow hallway across from the painting of the beach. This painting zooms in on the side door of a plain brown rural cottage, covered with glowing gold light from the sunrise across the lake. The twenty-minute movie that accompanies this movie contains the news headlines of the same seven days. (Spring break during the COVID, Vaccines become available, Mass shooting at Asian hair salon, Blizzard travel nightmare, Capitol officer assault arrests, FEMA at the border, Cuomo is accused.) This complex multimedia artwork shows events happening at the same time in two separate spaces. Although separated by time and space they are ultimately intertwined in the complex web of earth's physical, biological, environmental, geosocial, and geopolitical ecosystem.



*Figure 36. Neosublime 9b, Week of News, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.*

As noted earlier, the titles of most of my paintings are prefaced by the word “Neosublime” to which a number is added in chronological order. The numbering represents the order in which the paintings were made and do not connote a hierarchical order of importance.

The titles of the paintings were chosen to give the viewer additional information about the meaning, content, and context of the artwork. When the title alone didn’t seem to convey enough information, I sometimes added more info to the gallery tag. For example, the gallery tag for *No End in Sight* states that the artist’s name is “Global Warming” and the medium used to make the artwork included: “carbon emissions, icebergs, glaciers, rising sea levels, droughts”. In this painting the authority and ownership were transferred to global warming, the entity most responsible for no end in sight in reducing the mean global temperature of the earth. This cheeky description provides the viewer with the intent of the artist and content of the painting.





Figure 37. *Neosublime 13, No End in Sight*, 2021, carbon emissions, icebergs, glaciers, rising sea levels, droughts, 30 x 42 inches by artist “Global Warming”.

For added complexity and interest a handwritten quote was applied to the surface of *Neosublime 13, No End in Sight*. (Figure 37) It is a quote from Dada artist George Grosz who said in 1925, “Today’s artist has the choice between technology and class warfare. In both cases they must give up pure art.” This quote adds an element of time to the artwork because these words are still relevant today, almost 100 years later. (Grosz)

I found that the addition of semiosis in the form of text or symbols to the paintings took the artwork to new levels of complexity for the viewer. The viewer engaged with their mind using what Kant called the free play of the faculties.

This type of viewer engagement was previously described in my artwork, *Neosublime 12 Sunrise*, (Figure 17) when the Star Wars marquee presentation of my artist statement was stenciled onto the paintings. Four colors of spray paint on stencil mimicked the colors of the

sunrise reflected onto the beach. (Figure 38) My artist statement stenciled on both the paintings *Neosublime 12, Sunrise* and *Neosublime 12 Sunset* (Figures 17, 38, and 39) says:

*“Why have the sunsets and sunrises become so amazingly colorful and awe inspiring recently? 18th century philosophers said such events were examples of the sublime. They defined the sublime as that which is the most awesomely great combined with an underlying element of fear usually caused by the actions of God. This infers that the sublime is something that you can’t fully understand or wrap your head around and leaves you speechless and spell bound even though you appreciate your mental ability to reason and contemplate the event. Contemporary art critics say that the sublime is no longer applicable to art because it has been overused. I disagree, and in my art, I look for examples of the sublime in present day events. The slow, insidious, imperceptible, disastrous effects of global warming is one example of the contemporary sublime that I call the Neosublime. The brilliantly red sunrises and sunsets are awesomely great but the realization that they are caused by air pollutants brings a fearful reminder of how global warming is destroying the world. Some examples of the Neosublime are the COVID pandemic and worldwide political turmoil. The most frightening part of the Neosublime is that it is the result of the actions of humans and not God. Like global warming my paintings show beautiful sunsets and giant ocean waves from sea level rise, and yet the impending disaster is not readily apparent. Rather than horrific images of doom, the more subtle warnings of my paintings are a catalyst for action.”*

[illegible]

*Figure 39. Neosublime 12b, Tybee Sunrise, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.*

### Political Chaos and Xenophobia

Political chaos caused by racism and xenophobia is an especially poignant subgroup of the Neosublime. My artwork, *Neosublime 4 Trail of Tears* (Figure 40), depicting Lake Winfield Scott in North Georgia was painted in an afternoon of a beautiful autumn. This lake was part of the Creek and Cherokee Nations before they were forced to leave by Gen. Scott during the Trail of Tears campaign in 1838. The loose abstract style represents the loss of nature and the homes of indigenous people. Rather than painting another traditional landscape, I choose to explore and render the components of the political sublime in a visually abstract manner.



Figure 40. *Neosublime 4, Trail of Tears*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inch



To open the viewers' minds to such unseen aspects and questions about the Neosublime, the abstract component in *Trail of Tears* renders the ecological network of a lake, using the in-between aspect of contemporary art that opens the viewer's mind to a free play of ideas. It is a painting that is finished, but isn't finished, it says something, but doesn't say something, so the viewer's mind can enjoy the journey of putting it, whatever that is, together in terms of their own experience. It is an example of the philosophical sublime applied to contemporary art.

In the next painting visual intensity is increased by mixing abstract and representational styles, kaleidoscope illusions, and distorting perspective by compromising the composition of the picture plane. *Neosublime 5 Nod to Kitaj* (Figure 41) is a complex collage of sunrises, sunsets, globalization, and sea level rise. The images of humans interacting with the environment were arranged in a counterclockwise spiral. It was informed by R.B. Kitaj's painting, *If Not, Not*, (Figure 42) that showed a paradise corrupted by the horrors of the Holocaust. Kitaj mixed up foregrounds, midgrounds and backgrounds, ignoring the rules of perspective, to add confusion and intensity to his painting about human atrocities. I borrowed his technique to combine various components of the Neosublime into one painting without the help light, sounds, or other technology. I used oil paint on canvas with as much representational imagery as possible. This painting represents xenophobia and political chaos as well as global warming. This very busy painting provided the viewer with a plethora of information, taking a risk that the content may have been obscured.



Figure 41. *Neosublime 5, Nod to Kitaj*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.



Figure 42. *If Not, Not*, 1975-76. R.B. Kitaj, oil and black chalk on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

As mentioned earlier, the first paintings I made to depict global warming were rendered as beautiful seascapes with a small signifier of the idea. The Wormsloe Plantation, a popular tourist destination in Savannah, was rendered as an example of political chaos as a component of the Neosublime. Wormsloe is a beautiful southern plantation built between 1736 and 1749 with an entrance way lined with majestic live oak trees covered with moss. Until the Emancipation Proclamation it was built and maintained by slaves.

In this painting, *Neosublime 7 Racial Pre-Justice*, (Figure 43) the path to the antebellum home is rendered with extreme converging lines, a visual representation of infinity, and a reminder of the never-ending racial prejudice that has forever divided this country.

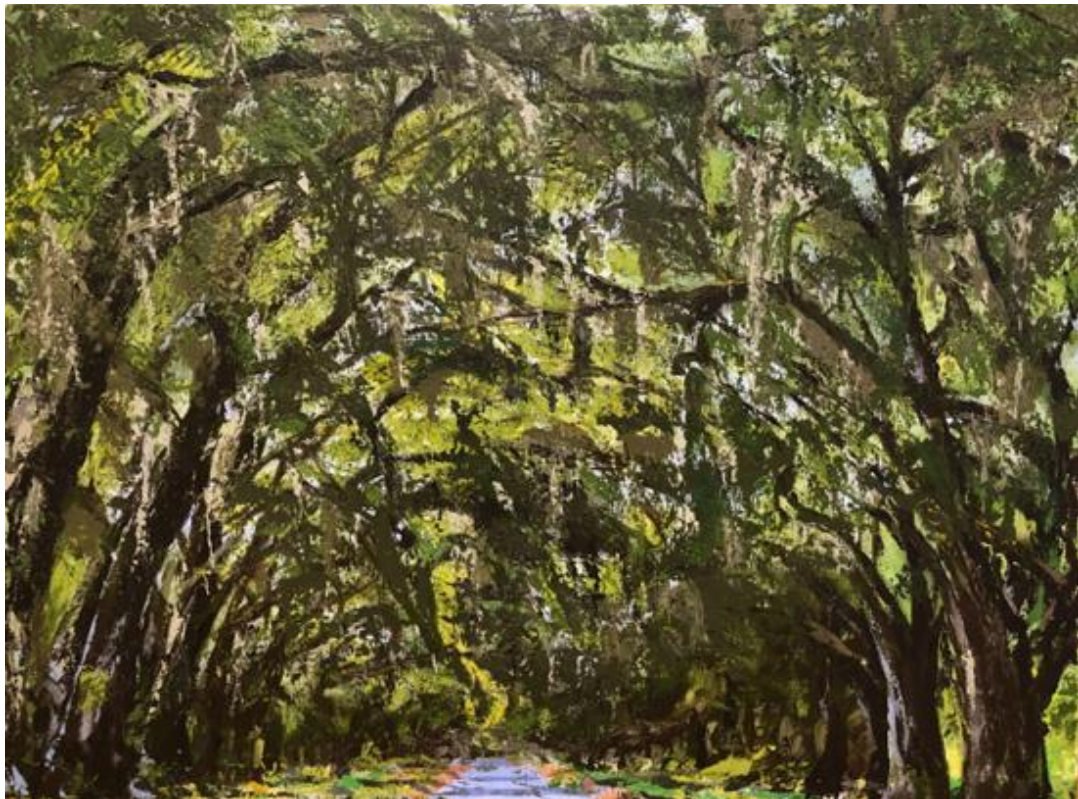


Figure 43. *Neosublime 7, Racial Pre-Justice*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.



Rather than painting the trees with a brush, the trees are rendered using acrylic paint with a palette knife, providing a rich bold texture, temporarily distracting the viewer from the racial signifier hanging in a tree in the lower right foreground. (Figure 44) Viewers reported a jolt of emotion when they spotted the noose. Some were breathless and didn't speak. I was warned not to display this piece because it might provoke a negative experience. I thought that the discussion during critique was provocative, positive, and necessary.



*Figure 44. Detail of Neosublime 7, Racial Prejudice, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, showing signifier.*

The Black Lives Matter demonstration in Washington and the January 6<sup>th</sup> March to the U.S. Capitol are two other examples of the Neosublime resulting from political chaos and racial prejudice. The Black Lives Matter demonstration, in protest of the George Floyd's brutal death,



began orderly and peacefully until the president forcibly drove the demonstrators away so he could have a photo opportunity. The January 6<sup>th</sup> march to the capitol began with violence that was incited by that same president, and eventually led to terror, death, and destruction. There were marked differences in how the police responded to these events. Xenophobia and racial prejudice have plagued the world since the beginnings of the Holocene. Despite repeated admonishments from religious, moral, and ethical leaders these problems persist. The causes and effects of prejudice are beyond comprehension, murder, wars, atrocities, the list goes on. Equally mind boggling is that it persists and is never resolved. Like the signifier it is the unseen, unspoken problem that is never addressed.



*Figure 45. Neosublime 8, Divisive, 2021, installation, colored strobe and laser lights, video, sounds, music, two portraits in acrylic on canvas, reflective solar blankets covering a 12 x 12 x 12 - foot room. Photo documentation.*

*Neosublime 8, Divisive*, (Figure 45, 46, and 47) is a multimedia installation that was informed by the divergent intents of the leaders and participants of the BLM and Capitol 2021 demonstrations. The title speaks to how racial prejudice has divided the United States since 1619. Colored strobe and laser lights, videos, sounds, and music recreated the chaos of the two political events. The monochromatic portraits of Raphael Warnock and Jacob Chansley, in black and white respectively, are centrally placed on easels in the installation and represent the behavior, demeanor, and purpose of the protestors in each demonstration. Their biographies reveal very different backgrounds and aspirations of their lives. Remarkably, major events in each of their lives were one day apart.



*Figure 46. Neosublime 8, Divisive*, 2021, installation, colored strobe and laser lights, video, sounds, music, two portraits in acrylic on canvas, reflective solar blankets covering a 12 x 12 x 12 - foot room. Photo documentation.

Senator Raphael Warnock is the incumbent Democratic senator from Georgia who was elected on January 5, 2021, the day before the insurrection of the capitol. He is also the senior pastor of three Baptist churches including Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He earned a bachelor's degree from Morehouse College in 1991 and a master's degree in divinity, master's degree in philosophy, and Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary.

Jacob Chansley also known as The Q-Shaman, is the spear-carrying Jan. 6 rioter whose horned fur hat, bare chest and face paint made him one of the more recognizable figures in the assault on the Capitol. For these actions he was later sentenced to 41 months in prison. He graduated from Moon Valley High School in Phoenix in 2006 and took voice over and acting classes at Hard Knocks in Phoenix in 2013.



*Figure 47. Neosublime 8, Divisive, 2021, installation, colored strobe and laser lights, video, sounds, music, two portraits in acrylic on canvas, reflective solar blankets covering a 12 x 12 x 12 - foot room. Photo documentation.*

## COVID 19

The COVID Pandemic is another component of the Neosublime because the number of deaths caused by a submicroscopic particle is beyond comprehension. Equally remarkable is the political chaos that surrounded the pandemic that spread disinformation, causing many more people to die unnecessarily. Once again, when two components of the Neosublime converge, the effect is intensified.

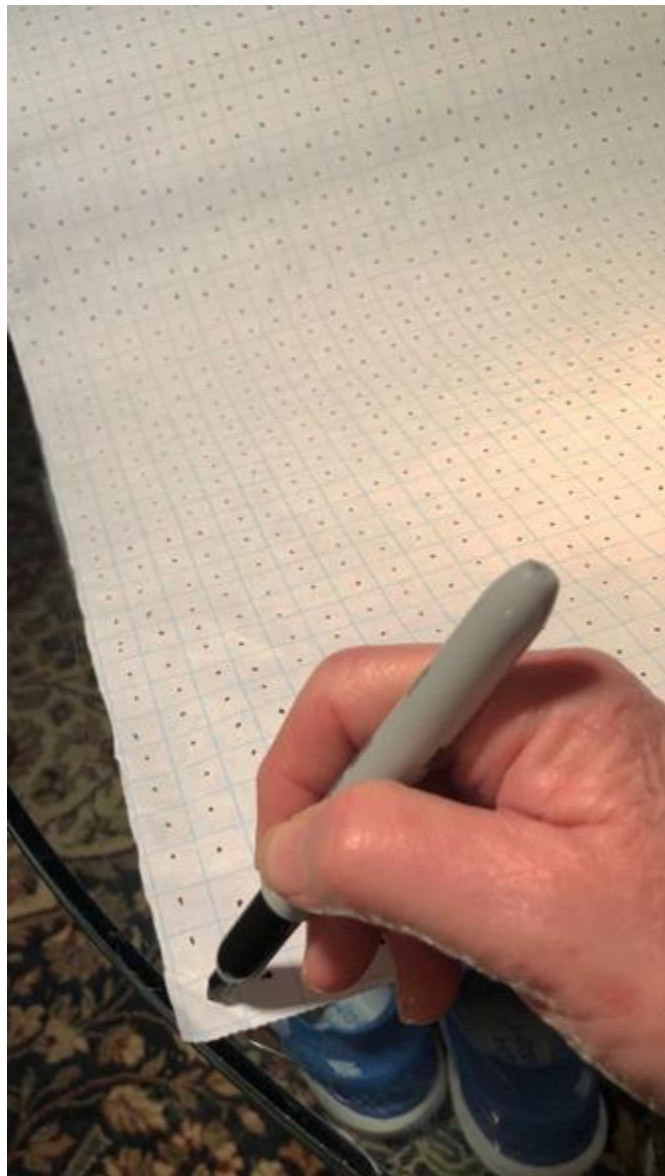
*Neosublime 23, Pandemic Stages of Grief*, (Figure 4) is a painting discussed earlier that showed the five stages of grief that people experienced during the early months of the quarantine. As the pandemic progressed the death toll rose to hundreds of thousands of people and eventually to over a million in the United States alone. The COVID virus was attacking indiscriminately, the vaccine hadn't been invented, no one was immune, and no one was safe. Besides being afraid of contracting the virus, it was difficult to imagine the increasing number of deaths, and the amount of grief and suffering caused by a submicroscopic particle. (100 million viral particles of the coronavirus can fit on a pinhead) I used this information to create a way to express the absolute magnitude of the COVID pandemic. (Walker)

I remember that someone once referred to themselves as a speck in the universe, and that led me to the idea of using a dot to represent each person who had died from COVID. To quantitate the total number of people who had died from COVID, I put the dots on graph paper. I used a black sharpy to make a 2 mm black dot and found a roll of graph paper that was 200 feet long and 34 inches wide. (Each half inch square of the graph paper became a tiny coffin.) One roll holds 325,000 thousand dots. It would take more than three rolls to represent the total deaths in the United States. Taking the individual half inch rows and placing them end to end would make a 7.8-mile-long strip of paper that would take 3 hours to walk. (Going 2.5 miles/hour)



When the first roll of paper was rolled out down the hallway, there was absolute silence and some people shed tears. The critique was transformed into a funeral procession.

I have decided that *Neosublime 10, COVID Death Roll Call* (Figures 48-51) best represents the Neosublime because the performance portion emoted the most emotion from viewers and I still have difficulty comprehending the effect that the pandemic has had on our world.



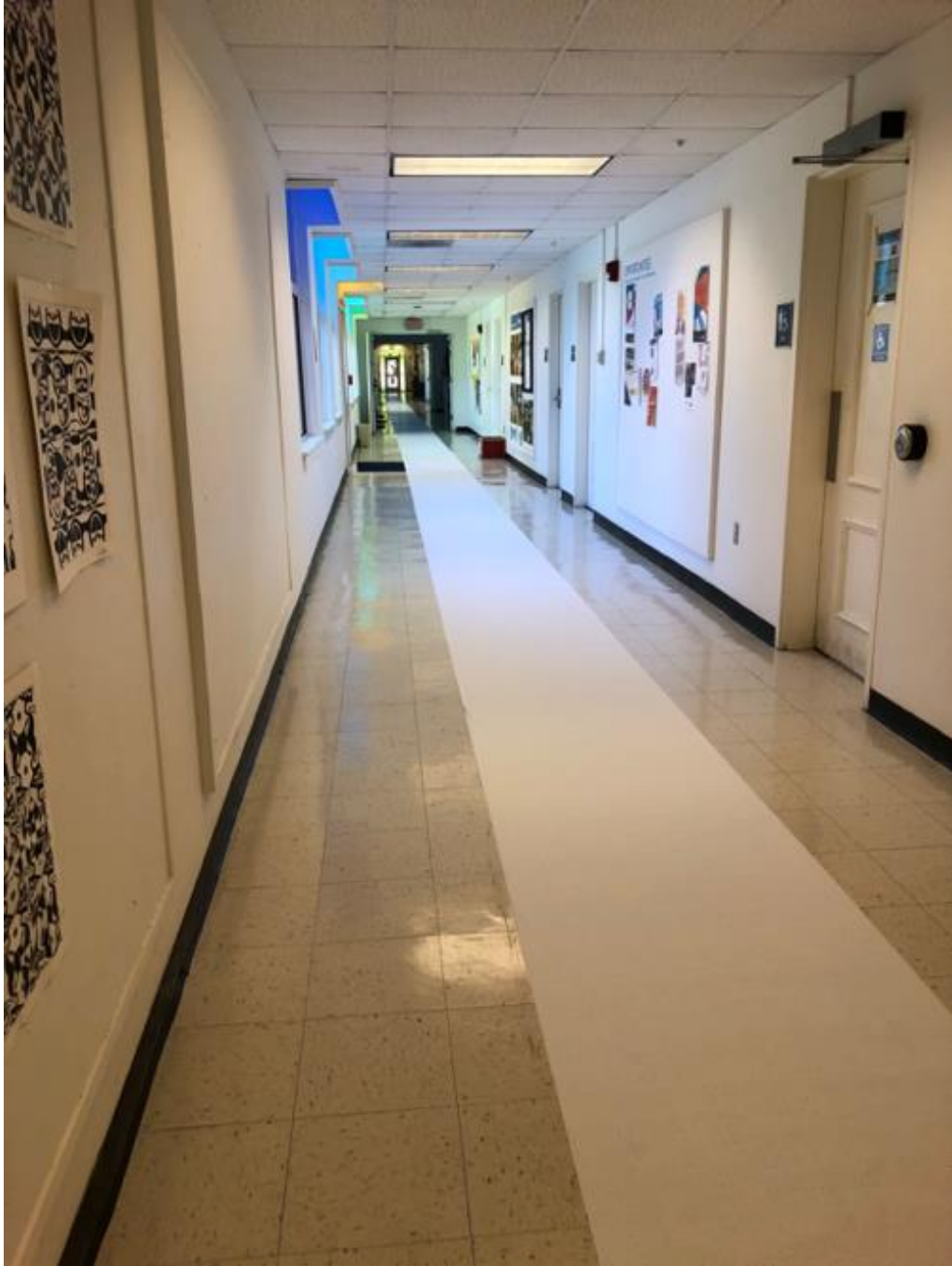
*Figure 48. Neosublime 10, COVID Death Roll Call, 2021, black sharpie pen on graph paper roll, 34 inches x 600 feet (3 rolls of 200 feet each), close-up photo of one roll.*



*Figure 49. Neosublime 10, COVID Death Roll Call, 2021, black sharpy pen on graph paper roll, 34 inches x 600 feet (3 rolls of 200 feet each), performance art portion.*



*Figure 50. Neosublime 10, COVID Death Roll Call, 2021, black sharpie pen on graph paper roll, 34 inches x 600 feet (3 rolls of 200 feet each), one roll in situ.*



*Figure 51. Neosublime 10, COVID Death Roll Call, 2021, black sharpy pen on graph paper roll, 34 inches x 600 feet (3 rolls of 200 feet each).*



## CHAPTER 4

## NEOSUBLIME: THE EXHIBITION

The artworks for my MFA Thesis Exhibition, Kathy Varadi, “Neosublime Reframing the Philosophical” were presented in the Contemporary Gallery at the Betty Foy Sanders Center for Arts and Theatre at Georgia Southern University Statesboro from September 22-28, 2022, with the reception on September 23, 2022. (Figure 52)



*Figure 52. Exhibition Photo 1.*

This exhibition contained 20 artworks consisting of one drawing and 23 paintings made with oil or acrylic paint on stretched canvas. All the paintings are original except three which are prints of paintings that had already been sold. The artworks presented were a sampling of the work I made during my graduate studies at Georgia Southern University from Spring 2019 to

Fall 2022. The size of the gallery precluded including the entire Neosublime series, so those chosen represented the key features of the concept of the Neosublime.



*Figure 53. Exhibition Photo 2.*

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer walks directly into a large and quiet space. Looking around they are aware of being surrounded by paintings on all four walls. Turning to the right they would encounter two pedestals. A photobook containing the entire collection of the artworks of the Neosublime is placed on one. On the other there are exhibition catalogues and a copy of my thesis. (Figure 53)

A visitor to the exhibition could observe the artworks in a random fashion or use the exhibition catalogue as a gallery guide for more information beyond the gallery tags. The photobook and the thesis are available for more detailed information about the content, concept, and context of the art. For example, these provide explanations about how the Neosublime was

informed by the philosophical writings of Edmund Burke, and the contemporary events of global warming, the COVID pandemic, and political chaos.

If the viewer turns to the left, they will see several seascape paintings related to global warming and sea level rise. (Figure 54) The smaller paintings on the left are framed and contain meteorological events, while the larger format seascapes on the right are larger without frames.



*Figure 54. Exhibition Photo 3.*

The formality of the framing gives the paintings a sense of authority and sincerity. The next two paintings are much larger and without the need for frames because their size is implicit to a sense of importance. Continuing along that wall there are two more waterscapes addressing how human activity has burdened the environment.

At this point there is a pause from the theme of global warming and the first painting on the next wall reflects on xenophobia and racial prejudice. It is the same size as the two before to

give the viewer a sense of harmony and continuity. It is different because it shows a plantation with very large live oak trees along the long driveway up to the mansion. (Figures 55, 56)



*Figure 55. Exhibition Photo 4.*

This painting provides a change of topic and environmental location which may pique the viewer's interest. Why is there a wooded scene after so many ocean scenes? What is the connection between paintings about climate change and racial prejudice?



*Figure 56. Exhibition Photo 5.*

The next painting also presents an opportunity for questioning and contemplation by the viewer. The calm subdued colors in This color print shows people looking down at their phones surrounding a young girl looking upward. (Figure 57)



*Figure 57. Exhibition Photo 6*

It is a calm photo in subdued colors of an overcast beach, yet there is an underlying sense of something else going on. Perhaps it refers to what Greta Thunberg says, the impact of global warming will fall on future generations, while the adults are failing to respond to save the world right now.

This placement of the paintings was intended to provoke thoughts and prompt questions from the viewer. For example, the large format centerpiece of the exhibition, *Neosublime 16 Stuck on Highway 80*, (Figure 58) was placed on the wall almost straight ahead as the viewer walked into the gallery.



*Figure 58. Exhibition Photo 7.*

Initially this painting was placed in this section of the wall by itself to call attention to its importance as the most developed artwork. However, I felt that it appeared barren and without

purpose. The addition of two smaller more colorful paintings created a tension between the monochromatic centerpiece and the more chromatic companions. I believe it is this tension that draws the viewer to the artwork. Once the viewer is near, the detail and text on the smaller pieces continues to intrigue the viewer. Some viewers appreciated the balance of the paintings, others thought that the smaller pieces lessened the impact of the middle one and would have liked to see it hung alone. Although it is questionable whether it is the role of an artist to teach and inform, the viewer is given the option to learn more about the content with the addition of my artist statement directly onto the picture plane of the painting.



*Figure 59. Exhibition Photo 8.*

The next wall continues the discussion of global warming and sea level rise using a similar palette as the previous two small paintings. (Figure 59) Frustration erupts with the multimedia forest painting in the middle which departs from the traditional presentation of an oil on canvas painting. A torn canvas almost always evokes more curiosity, questions, and emotions.



There is a stark contrast between the previous paintings and this one disheveled one. Once again, the intent was to produce tension and therefore interest and contemplation.

The exhibition ends with artworks responding to the how the COVID pandemic has emotionally impacted world cultures and societies. A roll of graph paper two hundred feet long with hundreds of thousands of small black dots hangs from the ceiling and flows to the floor. Each black dot represents someone who has died from COVID to symbolize the tremendous personal loss incurred from the pandemic. (Figure 60)



*Figure 60. Exhibition Photo 9.*



*Figure 61. Exhibition Photo 10.*

The other artwork is in response to the emotional effects of the quarantine and the loss of our previous way of life. It consists of a series of self-portraits represent the five stages based on the grief reaction described by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 landmark book “On Death and Dying.” (Figure 61)

The exhibition was set up to provide the viewers with options on how to observe the artworks. A viewer could walk about the gallery freely to observe the paintings or could be guided and informed about the themes with the accompanying exhibition guides.

Overall, the exhibition was intended to be aesthetically pleasing, but more importantly it should be a catalyst for people to act and solve the problems of global warming, pandemics, and political chaos.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The idea of the Neosublime has added a contemporary dimension to the philosophies of the sublime by Burke and Kant. The Neosublime refers to the sensations of pleasure and fear someone experiences when observing present day, earth-shattering global events like global warming, COVID and political chaos. The feeling is intensified by the knowledge that people lacking consciousness and good intent are the cause of these disasters.

Artists, writers, and philosophers have described the sublime throughout history. Their works have informed my ideas and artwork about the Neosublime. I rendered the Neosublime with a wide spectrum of media, techniques, innovations, and experiments. At first, I painted seascapes with oil on canvas then I used acrylic on canvas, then I used representation then abstraction, I enhanced the paintings with text and symbols, created 2D then 3D artwork, used black sharpie on paper, installation art, performance art, movies, music, lights. I discovered that the artwork that best represented the Neosublime were the ones that elicited the strongest emotions. *COVID Death Roll* (Figure 50), *Pre-Justice* (Figure 43) and *Ultimate Sea Level Rise* (Figure 21) are the three artworks that best fit that description.

Twenty first century writers, like object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton, have described other novel notions of the contemporary sublime. In his 2013 book, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton used global warming as a prime example of a hyperobject. He described a hyperobject as an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place. Morton proposed that hyperobjects impact on how we think, how we coexist with one another and with nonhumans, and how we experience our politics, ethics, and art. (Morton)

Contemporary ideas for problem solving like equal participation are needed to find solutions to the complex, intertwined, and weblike dilemmas of the Neosublime. In his article “Design as Participation: You’re Not Stuck in Traffic, You Are Traffic”, Kevin Slavin speaks about the new generation of designers that work with complex adaptive systems in a humbler way than their predecessors. These are designers that do not understand themselves to be the center of the system. Rather, they understand themselves to be participants, shaping the systems that interact with other forces, ideas, events, and other designers. Slavin’s essay speaks of what it means to participate. Rather than placing the human at the center of work, it’s the systems that surround us—these systems we depend on—that appropriately take center stage. This means that artists depicting the Neosublime are participants within the contemporary art world, as it interfaces with the global sectors of politics, economy, and science to solve global warming, xenophobia, and the pandemics. (Slavin)

The philosophical description of the sublime is still relevant and applicable to the contemporary artworld, especially when artists are describing and rendering unimaginable events. Artists frequently respond to global sociological and cultural catastrophes that fit the description of the sublime in their artwork. Historically artists have been called the watchdogs of society, and “canaries in the coal mines”, because they warn communities and societies of impending danger and disasters. The intuitions and sensitivities of artists have long been praised and valued as catalysts for change.



Figure 62. Exhibition poster for *Planet B Climate change and the new sublime*.

Currently there is more evidence that artists are increasingly raising awareness and motivating action against climate change. *Planet B. Climate change and the new sublime* (Figure 62) is an exhibition curated by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud presently on display in Turin, Italy, April-November 2022. The description on the exhibition catalogue indicates that its intent is closely aligned with the premises of the Neosublime.

“Nicolas Bourriaud invites artists from all around the world to question the contemporaneity of the romantic concept of the sublime, at the age of the Anthropocene. By changing our collective relationship with the planet, global warming has transformed the artist's gaze. Today, the Romantic concept of the "sublime", grounded in the connection between humans and nature, takes a new turn: defined as a feeling of "delight tinged with horror" and by the contrast between the individual and immensity, the sublime becomes the aesthetic notion that determines the Anthropocene.” (Bourriaud)



*Figure 63. Neosublime 11, Sea Level Rise, 2021, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.*



*Figure 64. Pharos, 2020, Donald Teskey, 10 Plate carborundum print diptych, 59 x 81 inches.*

Global warming is now part of artistic discourse in the contemporary art world. At Art Basel in Miami Beach this year I saw an artwork that had an eerie resemblance to my oil painting *Neosublime 11 Sea Level Rise* (Figure 63).

*Pharos* by Donald Teskey (Figure 64) is a carborundum print of 25 editions, *Sea Level Rise* is an oil painting. The artist and the representing print shop, Stony Road Print, are from Ireland and I had no knowledge of them before seeing the print. The color, size, image, and content are similar, yet the artists were 4000 miles apart as they created the artworks. Perhaps this is an example of “simultaneous invention”, when people, who are in different locations and never heard of each other, both come up with a new idea independently?

Another possibility is a phenomenon described by Malcolm Maxwell in his 2002 book, *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Maxwell says “The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. (Gladwell) Either way, it was quite a coincidence.



Figure 65. “Global Weirding: Humans Have Caused Chaos on Earth.” Stock image, Newsweek, September 2, 2022.



In the September 2, 2022, Newsweek article, “Global Weirding: Humans Have Caused Chaos on Earth.” Jess Thomson explained why weather records around the world have been broken this summer, “The reason for so many systems being affected to such a degree is that they are intertwined. When one changes due to our actions on the planet, they all do, and they feed into each other in ways that are very difficult to predict.” The stock image used in the article is an artistic rendition of the complex web of climate change. (Figure 65) This timely article echoes the premise and ideas of the Neosublime. (Thomson)

There are signs of change in all sectors of world management including politics. On August 16, 2022, President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (Figure 66) that provides \$369 billion for climate and clean energy provisions and is the most aggressive climate investment ever taken by Congress. (Newburger, cnbc.com) As the facts of global warming have gained credibility with citizens, the politicians in the United States are beginning to respond to the needs of voters. (Davis Vanguard)



*Figure 66.* President Biden signing the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, Photo Credit: Drew Angerer via Getty Images, posted by Ariel Peterson September 01, 2022, in [davisvanguard.org](https://davisvanguard.org).

On a misty beach under an overcast sky a young girl looks up to the sky. (Figure 67)

She, and a dog representing nature, are surrounded, and ignored, by people concentrating on their cell phones. While she flies her kite, she is engaged with her environment, the others look inward and are unaware of their surroundings. This artwork speaks of an uncertain future. While some people are consumed in their personal world, another group, led by young activists like Greta Thunberg, is very engaged with solving the problem of global warming. She, and they, are tired of waiting and are looking upward and onward for answers.



*Figure 67. Neosublime 22, Techno Beach, 2022, photograph print on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.*

I find it ironic that as I write these last hopeful words, on election day November 8, 2022, the votes in America are being cast, disinformation continues, and the war in Ukraine rages on.

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