Courbet’s Tent/ Summer 2014/

Louise Wallace: Picturing The Maternal Through The Sublime- A Visual Project

‘Texts describing a “philosophy of maternity” are very few and far between...A minority proportion of thinkers (have) promoted the need for feminism to now embrace issues of motherhood, with a novel discourse that would enable mothers to be represented.’

(Sylvie Gambaudo, 2012)

‘It is my conviction that another account of the sublime lies hidden within and is repressed by metaphysical theories of sublimity, and that the story of this other sublime has yet to be written.’

(Barbara Claire Freeman, 1995)
The category of the sublime continues to hold relevancy within contemporary visual culture. The Tate research project *The Sublime Object: Nature, Art and Language* concluded in 2011 with a survey published in 2013, *The Art of the Sublime*. iii Christine Riding and Nigel Llewellyn tie the 300 year history of the category to Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) describing the sublime moment as

‘the sudden transformative view; a sensation that is beyond expression and which impairs the intellectual faculties; the idea that contemplation of the sublime transports the spectator; and, the association of the themes of grandeur and elevation.’ iv

They add that, even at its inception, the category had ‘many shades of meaning’ v which continue to be contested in current visual discourses. Julian Bell notes a resurgence in sublime debates from the 1990s onwards stating that ‘references to it have come from so many angles that it is in danger of losing any coherent meaning’.vi Yet it is precisely this state of meaning-in-flux that interests me.

The question is whether the categorical instability of the sublime can offer a way of articulating maternal experience. Patricia Yaeger warns that ‘the sublime constitutes a tradition that has not only been forbidden to women but is inimical to their needs’ vii but simultaneously acknowledges its potential ‘as a mode allowing for trespass and appropriation of forbidden and illicit forces...a genre permitting the exploration of alternative modes of female experience’.viii

Yaeger has argued that the labouring maternal body is

‘at the very heart of Edmund Burke’s sublime, with its emphasis on terror, obscurity, power, privation, vastness, difficulty, darkness, suddenness, intermitting rhythms, and the terrible voices of bodies in pain’.ix

I would like to move away from the corollary problem of biological essentialism to consider the broader experience of motherhood after birth. My visual project aims to read the maternal through a sublime which has been destabilized by the introduction of deviant or illicit forces: abjection, excess and laughter. These modes may be aligned with the feminine but they do not represent it in any essentialist way, nor are they exclusive to the feminine/mothering experience.

Morton Paley’s survey of the sublime centres on painting from the late 18th century to the mid 19th century and notes the recurrence of ‘landscape, natural catastrophes and “Gothic” supernatural subjects’.x He identifies a sub-category, the apocalyptic sublime which describes ‘a divinely sent, universal catastrophe, employing by necessity the most powerful natural forces’xii. Key examples of the apocalyptic sublime are built upon fictions such as the Deluge.xii My own practice is built upon a fiction. I imagined a woman who builds a breeding machine from domestic detritus. She hides the machine at the bottom of the garden amongst the brambles and weeds. After a while, children begin to grow but they are somehow ‘wrong’. The breeding machine also acts to animate the children’s toys which become sentient, capable of experiencing pain or even death.
My fiction is antithetical to stories of the apocalyptic sublime because it is secular and deals with domestic drama, elements which Paley expressly excludes from his categorization. Perhaps the inversion of the catastrophic in my ‘mother’s story’ might better be described as a new sub-category: the cataclysmic sublime – a violent upheaval within an intimate setting that brings about fundamental change. The various characters (rogue mother, irregular children, animated toys) exist outside the symbolic order and so are deviant. They are expressions of abjection, excess and laughter.

The excess contained within my story may framed by Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject as that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ \textsuperscript{xiii} and gives the example:

‘a wound with blood and pus, or the sticky, acrid smell of sweat, or decay... Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.’ \textsuperscript{xiv}

I am interested in applying Kristeva’s conceptualization to the landscape. I paint claustrophobic brambles, dank holes. This is a different sort of terror than that which is associated with hypsos in the traditional sublime. Kristeva roots abjection ‘in the cathexis of maternal function – mother, woman, reproduction’. \textsuperscript{xv}

The painting First Breeding Machine (fig. 2) and its suggestive reproductive function is thus intrinsically abject and its effluence merges with the abject landscape. There is leakage and discharge in the recurring painted motifs.

\textsuperscript{fig. 2 First Breeding Machine (2014) oil on canvas 63 x 53 cm}
across other paintings: frog spawn in *Dead Piglet* (fig. 1) and giant spermatozoa in *Minnie Takes a Tumble* (fig. 5).

This depiction of a porous landscape with a porous presence/being cannot be accommodated by the historical sublime. It constitutes an excess where the sublime ‘achieves supremacy over an excess that resists its powers’. xvi In the canonical theories of Longinus, Burke and Kant the sublime event culminates in the blockage of the self as an act of self-preservation or domination. The subject encounters overwhelming excess and seeks to contain it. Feminist theorists have argued that the sublime canon has operated to ‘exclude an otherness that, almost without exception, has been gendered as feminine...through recourse to metaphors of sexual difference’. xvii Those metaphors were generated by the notion of spectatorship that defined the poetic language of the historical sublime. Yet, as Barbara Claire Freeman notes

> ‘The internal contradiction so central to the history of the sublime is that its theorists regularly claim for the spectator a state of detachment that, were it to exist, would nullify the very features of rapture, merger and identification that characterize and define the sublime’\(^{xviii}\)

My work attempts to represent that rapture, merger and identification through the characterization of a porous self/porous landscape. Across my paintings the various painted fluids can find a way into the body just as bodily fluids leak out into the environment.

The tension inherent in this threat of sublimation or penetration is released through laughter. The protrusions in *First Breeding Machine* are ridiculous and carnivalesque, ‘a corporeal semiotic celebrating the grotesque, excessive body and the orifices and protuberances of the “lower bodily stratum”’. xix Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory xx begins with the carnival event where social order is abandoned and transgressive energies are directed at dominant ideologies. Laughter is an important element of the carnivalesque, particularly where high culture is levelled through association with the profane. As Robert Stam explains it

> ‘In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded – the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory – takes the centre in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body – hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation – becomes a positively corrosive force and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts’\(^{x\text{xi}}\)
fig. 3 The Breeders 1 and 3 (2014) collage series 21 x 15 cm
My ‘mother’s story’ matches Bakhtin’s definition of social subversion as ‘the world turned upside down’. The mother has relinquished direct agency over the act of reproduction and her machine also eliminates the need for a father. The creatures in the collage series The Breeders (fig. 3) present the viewer with a carnivalesque oxymoron: parentless offspring. They are unnatural, cartoonish. There are more protuberances in Nose Bush (fig. 4) where a crop of Mickey Mouse noses are growing amongst the foliage. The breeding machine has gone awry once more. It is a laughable premise. The kitsch associated with a child’s bedroom has levelled the privileged status of the painted moment.

fig. 4 Nose Bush (2014) oil on canvas 63 x 53 cm

There is also comedy in the depiction of Dead Piglet (fig. 1). Another carnivalesque image, it takes a moment of high culture (Manet’s Dead Toreador) and parodies it using a stuffed toy (Piglet from ‘Winnie the Pooh’). The toy is presented to the viewer as a corpse, the most abject of all motifs, described by Kristeva as ‘death infecting life’. Horror and laughter can co-exist in this moment where ‘abjection and the carnivalesque are two sides of the same coin’. Piglet’s dead body – eyes rolling backwards, lolling limbs – is uncanny, the familiar made unfamiliar, das unheimlich.
The landscape for me remains compelling even when it seems artificial, reminiscent of movie sets for children’s films such as ‘The Wizard of Oz’ or ‘Charlie and the Chocolate Factory’. The flattened space in Minnie Takes a Tumble is similarly stagey and airless. Rather than the epic contained within the historical sublime this is instead a sublime built upon claustrophobia. Julian Bell defines the sublime in contemporary art as possessing a sense of ‘showmanship … a great and daunting, continually unfolding otherness’ xxv using the work of Richard Serra and Anish Kapoor as examples. This vaunting scale lies at the heart of what Bonnie Mann describes as ‘the paradox of space’ within traditional sublime readings:

‘The boundary between inside and outside that is so important to (the sublime) subject is also unimaginably flexible…The resolution, or better said, repression of this spatial paradox rests on a deeply gendered structure of spatial relations’.xxvi
The sublime paintings of the 18th and 19th century described the panoramas of the Grand Tour encountered by the white, bourgeois male artist. Artistic inspiration could only be gained outside the home; the sublime did not include the domestic. In painting the undergrowth at the bottom of the garden I am addressing the historical gendering of space through the ‘epic of nature’; I am resituating the sublime moment within the commonplace and homely. The toys tie the scene to the domestic interior. This inversion of sublime scale is linked to what Yaeger describes as ‘the sublime of nearness…the pre-oedipal desire for closeness or nearness with the other that the conventional sublime tries to repress’.

I am aware that my visual practice is dependent upon a fictional account of the maternal. Possibly this is because any attempt to articulate the embodied truth of maternal experience lies beyond language and representation. Kristeva argues that the maternal is more accurately identified with the semiotic chora and its jouissance, a pre-Oedipal excess which exists outside symbolic structures. In this sense the mother’s story cannot be spoken, cannot be represented. It is truly sublime. Yet I am compelled, as an artist and mother, to find a ‘novel discourse’ to represent motherhood. Perhaps it occurs in-between the binaries which variously describe that which the historical sublime includes and excludes: hypsos/intimacy, wilderness/home; extraordinary/ordinary; exalted/banal. The chaotic motility arising from this destabilizing of the sublime offers me a way of picturing the maternal.

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Footnotes

5 ibid
8 ibid p.199
11 Ibid p. 8
12 c.f. Nicholas Poussin's Winter or The Flood (1660-1664) which became known as The Deluge
14 Ibid
15 Ibid
16 Op cit. at ii
17 Ibid p.3 - 4
18 Ibid p.5
19 Stam, Robert Subversive Pleasures; Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (1989) p.93
21 Ibid p.86
22 Ibid
23 Ibid
24 Op. cit. at xii
26 Op cit. at iii
28 Op cit. at iv, p.204
29 Op cit. at i