

# Terror and the Sublime

## Art in an Age of Anxiety

November 20, 2009 - February 27, 2010



George Barrett, Aideen Barry, James Barry, William Bradford, Cecily Brennan, Edmund Burke, Oliver Comerford, Gary Coyle, Francis Danby, Michelle Deignan, Willie Doherty, Jonathan Fisher, Mary FitzGerald, Samuel Forde, James Forrester, David Godbold, Andreas Gursky, Clare Langan, Robert Longo, Fergus Martin, Eoin Mc Hugh, Theresa Nanigian, Paul Nugent, James Arthur O'Connor, Hughie O'Donoghue, George Petrie, Thomas Roberts, Nigel Rolfe, Thomas Ruff, Jim Sanborn, Seán Shanahan, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Paul Winstanley.

Inspired by the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke, first published in 1757 in an essay entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* this exhibition brings together works of art that reflect, consciously or unconsciously, changes in society and ways of thinking that have resulted from political upheavals and advances in technology.

Eighteenth-century paintings are juxtaposed with contemporary sculptures and video installations, providing a window into the creative imagination of artists. Separated by three centuries, the works are shown to have a common meaning - the vulnerability of human beings in the face of nature, and the psychological measures employed to come to terms with this.

Prognostications of doom and gloom are nothing new. Over each generation the world has been promised fates far worse, over the centuries. Terror and the Sublime therefore is a curiously optimistic exhibition, highlighting not the obstacles and disasters facing humanity, but rather the capacity of people to survive adversity.

### **Sturm und Drang - Storms and Lightning**

The destructive power of storms, earthquakes and of volcanic eruptions often served in the eighteenth century to frame representations of Biblical and apocalyptic events. Thunderstorms and lightening, and night scenes, feature in the work of eighteenth century artists Samuel Forde and James Forrester as well as the early nineteenth-century artists Francis Danby and James Arthur O'Connor.

In contemporary art, something of that same dread of nature's destructive power is expressed in Jim Sanborn's *Critical Assembly*, a reconstruction of the laboratories at Los Alamos, where the original atomic bomb was built in the 1940's. This meditation by Sanborn on the beauty and destructive power of nuclear energy brings together the uncertainties and fears of both the Romantic era and the Modern Age.

### **The Theory of the Sublime**

The theory of the sublime stretches back through centuries of art history and philosophy. First mentioned (as least in surviving sources) in the first century AD, by the Roman

author Longinus, it was popularised in the seventeenth century by writers such as John Dennis, many of whom used it almost as a scientific term, to describe their state of mind when encountering the grandeur and elemental forces of nature.

Eighteenth-century philosophers in Ireland such as George Berkeley and Edmund Burke questioned the established, and often complacent, views of the way in which the world was ordered. Much of their philosophical thinking revolved around questions of self, and the way in which the individual encountered and interacted with the world. Burke was also concerned with questions relating to society, and how people ordered their existence.

Published in 1756, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, attempted to outline a new set of pictorial conventions to guide painters. In his essay, Burke also examined the moral and social forces that motivate people, and much of his discourse focuses on the divide between the individual and society. In contemporary art, such questions of identity are still a potent driving force.

### **Fear and Uncertainty**

Political and social movements are inevitably reflected in the art of their time as with contemporary art, often reflecting a sense of fear and uncertainty.

The grandeur and vision of the 18th century artist Samuel Forde (lower gallery) is reflected in the contemporary painting *Flanders with a Narrow Sea* by Hughie O'Donoghue (upper gallery), which offers meditations on issues of human conflict and mortality being both commemorative and elegiac.

The beauty and terror inherent in unleashing the power of the atom can also be seen in a series of large graphite drawings by Robert Longo, depicting the mushroom clouds of nuclear explosions. Longo's drawing *Untitled (Zeus)* is both terrifying and seductive.

In Willie Doherty's photograph *At the Border II* (low visibility), echoes of the Troubles that wracked Northern Ireland for the last quarter of the twentieth century continue to resonate. While William Bradford's painting of Arctic ice represents a coalescing of Burke's theory of the sublime with the nineteenth-century political theory of Manifest Destiny.

**Terror and the Sublime is shown on the ground floor, first floor gallery and second floor galleries.**

**\* We offer free guided tours of this exhibition every Thursday evening at 6:30 pm and every Saturday at 2:30pm. Meeting point is outside the gallery bookshop.**

**\*\* For Schools and Community Group guided tours and workshops please check the website [www.crawfordartgallery.ie](http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie) or contact the Education Office: 021 4907857**

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue €15 (€10 concessions) available at the bookshop.

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