

THE SUBLIMINAL SUBLIME
The Paintings of Sande Sisneros

The various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or to pain.—Immanuel Kant

Kant was not the first person to write about the sublime; nor was his work the most well known. That accolade was reserved for Englishman Edward Burke and his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which was written a decade earlier and at some remove from Kant's native Germany in both language and tone. In fact, it is safe to assume that Kant's early musings on the power of emotions (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, 1764) might have remained forgotten in obscurity, overshadowed by the popularity of his three-part *Critique*, if it had not been for Sigmund Freud, another German speaking thinker who followed 150 years later. Like Kant, Freud questioned the assumption that emotional responses emanate from outside the body. He argued that feelings of enjoyment and pain are not located in the external thing. The Sublime does not reside in nature, nor in the educated mind. It is not the sun rising over the mountains, nor a sheer drop in a canyon that grabs our breath. Our *response* to nature is what overwhelms us. It is Man herself that is sublime.

At first glance, Sande Sisneros's large scale and often disturbing oil paintings seem to adhere to the romantic notions that informed Burke's philosophical concept. A disordered and irrational nature covers the surfaces of her paintings with an overwhelming presence. Clouds rolling in from a distance grab our attention and draw us into the works. Our eyes rove over the crusted surface of the earth, a representation of nature in her finest glory. But it is not the cinematic splendor of the skies or the unique patterns of nature that seep under our skin. It is the seemingly inverted cycles of normal life and nature that quickly enter our consciousness. Life appears to leak from the human figures into the cultural objects that litter the ominous landscape; the figures are stiff and half-conscious, while the man-made objects—an ice cube tray, a wedding dress, a wooden merry-go-round horse—appear to be alive. These objects are amplified, no doubt, by the intricate pods and plants in their shadows; ruptured and spent, they look like they have just come to rest after spending the day impregnating the earth. The disturbing and unsettling feelings that emerge from this unnatural nourishment are intensified by the deep blue that dominates the artist's palette. This is not the blue of nature, nor even of Picasso's melancholy, but the blue of venous blood as it appears to the eye through opaque layers of skin. The emotions of these mysterious tableaux lie below the surface of understanding. What they have to tell us is subliminal in the true meaning of the word—below the threshold of consciousness and thus never known.

It is impossible to find a coherent story in these paintings. They are not narratives but a type of poetry before words; psychic assemblages that are part dream, part memory and part fantasy. As viewers we become witnesses to a deep old secret that, paradoxically, can never be revealed to us. We feel we have arrived too early (before the secret is disclosed) or too late (after the event that created the secret) and we attempt to allay this dis-ease by examining the incidentals in the painting, which are prevalent within the

artist's Flemish-type attention to detail, like a detective scouring a crime scene for clues. Ultimately though, these tightly woven fragments are more a ruse than a secret code. Like the fetish, the secrets are written on the surface for all to see but the precise meaning is only known by the fetishist.

Sisneros takes us on a psychic journey that offers no specific destination. It is, after all, an exploration that, by definition, is not even knowable to the artist. But at the same time, she offers us a language to think through experience. Even in this post-Freudian time, it is still a fundamental belief that forgotten memories are retrieved through the use of free association and the latent ideas found in dreams and fantasy. Like Kant, who felt the sublime was located in an uncomfortable feeling that hits you unexpectedly and makes you conscious of one's destination here on earth, Sisneros's paintings set us into a free-fall that leaves us with a layered representation of the self; not just the artist's but the viewer's as well. Without the neat boundaries of a narrative, her dream-like fragments unleash a string of associations that double back and repeat themselves within the painting and its audience. In an experience likened to goose bumps, we are reminded that there is always something there, right below the surface, that threatens to reveal something about ourselves to the world, and sometimes even to ourselves.

© Lise Patt, 2012