

## *To Stand Astonished*

How does one stand  
To behold the sublime

In the opening lines of Wallace Stevens' *The American Sublime* the poet asks how we make ourselves available to an experience of nature that overpowers us without dominion, which astonishes us out of complacency. For Stevens, the modern encounter with nature is rocked by mockery of the transcendent quality of the world, trivialized now as "One grows used to the weather / The landscape and that." (14-15)

Our modern relationship with the 19th century conception of the sublime—our fearful delight of being overwhelmed by the vast, ineffable world—has lost some currency. Perhaps we have become so inured to the extraordinary that its encounter no longer solicits wonder. Perhaps we no longer feel the pleasure in uncertainty but instead concern ourselves with reasonable questions of cause and effect: who has been here before, what have we done to this place, how can I record this moment for posterity? Nature's grandeur is familiar now, anesthetized in reproduction and managed as a resource and entertainment. A question then is how do we stand in awe beyond the reasonable and beautiful, beyond thoughts of capturing and measuring that very experience that sets us outside our skin?

These are questions that I feel that Olivia Petrides investigates in her work. She has a history of removing herself to faraway places to observe a litany of phenomena—icebergs and glaciers, the walls of caves, geyser, volcanoes, and the Aurora Borealis. What motivates this journey is Ms. Petrides' finely honed sense of the pulse

of nature. Petrides finds her inspiration in the shifting light and contours of the natural world, reassembling her subject, as in her paintings of icebergs and glaciers in the Arctic Circle, into studies of luminous translucency. Her Aurora—complex marks of jostling, flashing radiance—no more record appearance than encode their equivalence as a process of abstraction. Petrides' paintings are, as she says, her negotiation of a respectful relationship to the natural world. Her relationship is, I think, a distanced one, born of a keen eye for nuanced, rhythmical patterns and a quiet observation free of exclamation.

What must it have been like to stand in the Arctic Circle and observe these mutable phenomena? I have watched the Aurora Borealis in upstate Minnesota on evenings when the solar storms were strong enough to extend their radiance south. The entire sky flashed with pulses of white light while my companions and I lay speechless, staring up into a late summer night. Words leave first. Emotions subside into an expansive awareness. I cannot imagine how I would paint it! In the history of painting, few have attempted to record the northern lights. Frederick Church's *Aurora Borealis* from 1865 is quite literal—the abandoned, ice-locked ship, the immense inhospitable expanse of ice and the radiant arcs of Northern Lights, suspiciously like a halo. The image is heroic and mythic.

Unlike Church's painting, Petrides does not determine meaning. Her images do not anchor us to time or place or human activity; only an occasional glimpse of stars compasses us skyward. In spirit, her work is closer to the painter Charles Burchfield's glyph-like marks denoting the sound and pulsation of the natural world. Petrides describes less of what was seen as to what was present—tumultuous brilliance from palatable emptiness.

And the sublime comes down  
To the spirit itself,  
The spirit and space,  
The empty spirit  
In vacant space (16-21)

Petrides supplants the representational mode of nature with gesture and patterns bounded only by the paper, and counseled by a balance between compositional integrity and gestural abandon. Her Auroras are psychic spaces where we stand astonished before an emotive, expressive quality of immanence that releases us from reason's constraints.

*Doug Stapleton*

ASSOCIATE CURATOR OF ART  
ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM  
CHICAGO GALLERY  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS