

Polar Nights

O L I V I A P E T R I D E S

IN SEARCH OF THE SUBLIME

Awe in the presence of nature is one of the oldest inspirations for artists, from prehistoric cave dwellers to current inhabitants of our high-tech driven world. A sense of wonder and curiosity are key components of the artistic experience, and it's always been hard for artists to measure up to the extraordinary intricacies and variety inherent in the natural world. Our relationship to nature is fast changing as so much of the world is mediated by technology which filters our experience through TV, cameras, film, and digital media.

Olivia Petrides' large multi-paneled drawings are in some sense a throwback to the Romantic sensibility that thrived in large-scale 19th century paintings of nature by such artists as Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt and J.M.W. Turner. These artists hoped to induce the experience of awe and majesty of nature when encountering their huge paintings that were generally realistic — and often even tried to hide brushwork and evidence of their very artifice. (This painterly sense of spectacle even inspired novel forms of presentation, cycloramas or large circular buildings housing mammoth panoramic paintings of nature or battles, this well over a hundred years before IMAX, 70mm, or 3-D film currently trying to rouse armchair spectators out of their lairs.)

Petrides has traveled to remote corners of the world — Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands — in order to experience and observe rather extreme natural phenomena such as glaciers, volcanoes, geysers, caves and Aurora Borealis. The key words are *experience* and *observe*. Whereas the Romantic 19th century painters may have endeavored to reproduce or illustrate, Petrides attempts to transcend mimicking the external particularities by creating a parallel experience for the viewer. The viewer of *Polar Nights I & II* is immediately struck by their scale and intensity. The experience of immensity of space that serves as nature's background for the phenomenon is reversed by the swirling energy of the phenomenon filling up the pictorial plane, a dense wall of mark-making and process that wavers between abstraction and keen observation of many natural processes, not just solar or fluid energy, but accretion and erosion.

The artist creates these large pieces by spilling, pouring, or even dripping black ink onto white paper whose shapes inspire a dense series of gestural swirls made with a variety of brushes and handmade calligraphic tools, and then works back over these with white gouache. In contrast to the Romantic landscape painters, process is at the forefront, and sections reveal Abstract Expressionist technique in the physicality of this mode that expresses the variety of the artist's motions and materials as well as their very limits. Layering and texture are key components, and color is reduced to the oppositional quality of black and white with the exception of hints of coincidental oxidation of black ink to an iridescent orange/brown, ironically mimicking the color present in the original experience. In addition to the physical layering, there are many layers of ideas implicit in these pieces such as the dialectic between control vs. accident; the flatness of both the 2-D picture plane and the actual experience vs. the depth of the original experience; and natural processes actually utilized in the work contrasting with those evident in the original phenomenon. Petrides has sought to bring us a taste for the sublime in these lovely equivalents of her experiences with nature. Hopefully they inspire us to slow down and join her. — *Lanny Silverman*

Lanny Silverman is an independent curator whose most recent project was to serve as an interviewer for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. He was Curator of Exhibitions at the Chicago Cultural Center from 1990 to 2012.