

Visual Arts

Landscapes After Ruskin, Grey Art Gallery, New York – ‘distressingly enchanting’

Romantics once gloried in nature’s terrors — now artists seek the sublime in the clash between humans and nature



'Velimir Chlebnikov. Time, Measure of the World' by Anselm Kiefer (2004) © Jeffrey Nintzel
Ariella Budick 3 HOURS AGO

When 19th-century painters such as [JMW Turner](#) wanted to grapple with the sublime — which they did with obsessive regularity — they turned to nature’s terrors. Art offered Alpine storms, raging whitecaps, floods and earthquakes, all of which viewers could observe in the comfort of the gallery. Just as horror films stoke fear and also provide solace (that can’t happen to me!), the artistic sublime provoked a frisson of vicarious suffering.

Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime , a distressingly enchanting exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery in New York, updates the notion of fearsome nature. Now it’s human encroachments that threaten water, sky and land, while artists record the conflict with apprehension and dread. The Romantics could still choose to see people as cowering victims of God’s wrath, meted out in acts of impersonal violence. Contemporary artists have no such illusions. They see calamity as the wages of human arrogance.

The photographer Joel Sternfeld curated the show, and he is surely attuned to its undertone of irony: the contents come from the collection of Andrew Hall, a trader who made much of his fortune in the oil market. The juxtaposition of business-as-usual and total collapse animates Sternfeld’s most famous photo, which unfortunately doesn’t appear here. In it, a suburban California house perches over an abyss freshly gouged by a flash flood. Sternfeld depicts the aftermath of a sublime moment, when a glorious deluge has inflicted biblical punishment. It also describes what happens when we build in vulnerable areas: nature slaps back.

Sternfeld's bleak humour infuses his 16-minute video "London Bridge", which he shot at a Depression-era reservoir on the California-Arizona border. At one end of the artificial Lake Havasu, a stone bridge — erected in London in 1830, then dismantled and transported to its new home in 1967 — crosses a man-made canal. Sternfeld lingers on a gondolier in Venetian get-up singing "O sole mio" (a Neapolitan tune) as he plies these desert waters, trawling for passengers among the tipsy, jiggling holidaymakers. The video essay on a day in the life of an ersatz paradise examines fakery so extreme and multi-layered that it's practically authentic. The camera takes it all in: the garbage, the port-a-potties, the great dam, and the torn scraps of European civilisation.



Still from the film 'London Bridge' by Joel Sternfeld (2016) © Hall Collection/Joel Sternfeld

In observing without cleaning up what he sees, Sternfeld follows the example of his hero, the 19th-century English critic [John Ruskin](#), who admonished artists to “go to nature in all singleness of heart . . . rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing”. Yet in his early years, Ruskin did edit modern manufacturing out of those exhortations. That took some doing: the rise of landscape painting corresponds to a moment when the pastoral could no longer be taken for granted. In France, the Barbizon painters retreated to the woods to immortalise a countryside succumbing to industry. Jean-François Millet's peasants and Rosa Bonheur's cows memorialised lifestyles and traditions whose impending disappearance rendered them suddenly precious.

Like Turner thrilling to a lethal shipwreck, these

A few years later, Impressionism chronicled a countryside streaked with trains, roads and factories; it was only at the end of his life that Monet managed to leave Paris's sooty air and obsess over his water lilies at Giverny. American Impressionists offered up

artists find wonder in an epochal clash

a sun-flecked world far removed from the steaming railroad, the exploited miner, or any of modernity's vulgar traumas. Instead, ladies in white lolled contentedly in bowers. The genre turned away from a

blasted and compromised countryside, toward a vanishing idyll, the garden in the rear-view mirror. With all that history perched on his shoulders, Sternfeld has mounted an exhibition that is nuanced rather than panicked. Yes, there are intimations of apocalypse. Serban Savu's modern Adam and Eve bathe in polluted waters beneath smog-streaked skies. An oil platform interjects itself across Jane and Louise Wilson's ocean vista. Ai Weiwei sculpts an oil slick out of gleaming black porcelain. But *Landscapes after Ruskin* is not really about environmental collapse; rather, it meanders around the ways we cohabit with nature and try to bend it to our will.

The results can be weirdly seductive. In Naoya Hatakeyama's photograph "Atmos", magenta-tinted steam billows from a French foundry. It's as if two different visual eras have fused: above, the effervescent clouds of Childe Hassam, below, Charles Sheeler's Herculean machines. Huge, vaguely animate hardware also reaches into the dark sky of Thomas Ruff's "Nacht 10 III" (1992), which he shot on a bleak Düsseldorf rooftop during the first Gulf war. Although he was photographing one of the world's most peaceful corners, Ruff used a night-vision lens to mimic CNN's greenish panoramas of Baghdad under bombardment.



'Atmos' by Naoya Hatakeyama (2003) © Taka Ishii Gallery



'Nacht 10 III' by Thomas Ruff (1992) © Artists Rights Society, New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

If Hatakeyama and Ruff amp up the drama of pollution, Christoph Draeger turns real, instantaneous devastation into an aesthetic project. His aerial view of Florida after Hurricane Andrew (2000) lays out an almost Chuck Close-like grid of destruction: squares of rubble facing on to straight roads that have turned into canals. It belongs to a series called *The Most Beautiful Disasters in the World*, which he prints on to giant jigsaw puzzles. One person's tragedy can be another's pastime.

Despite its academic-sounding title, *Landscapes After Ruskin* is not didactic or ideological, or strenuously anti-urban. Rather, like Turner thrilling to a lethal shipwreck, these artists find wonder in an epochal, possibly cataclysmic clash. The photograph that best distils the show's sensibility is Florian Maier-Aichen's 2002 night view of Los Angeles from atop Mount Wilson. Black rock rises in the foreground; in the distance, black ocean meets black sky; and in between a spangled layer of megalopolis is crowned by a ribbon of luminescent cloud. LA looks fragile, even ephemeral. That's what makes the view sublime: piercing beauty intimates inconceivable violence to come.

Until July 7, [Grey Art Gallery.nyu.edu](http://GreyArtGallery.nyu.edu)

Follow [@FTLifeArts](https://twitter.com/FTLifeArts) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to [FT Life](https://www.youtube.com/FTLife) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos