

Heather Stivison Artist Statement

My work is a contemporary approach to the enduring artistic concepts of transcendence and the sublime. Over the years, sublime art has taken many forms, but overwhelming and often contradictory emotions remain at its essence. Unlike historical painters of the sublime, I do not find the sublime in sensations of “man against nature” or in heroic sensations of conquering mountaintops or wild seas. I find the very concept of conquering nature implies destruction of our precious environment. My interpretation of the sublime is not physical domination, but of finding the mental expansiveness to be at one with nature; of the inner strength to coexist with perils, terror, and rapture, rather than exerting supremacy over them. The sublime is found in our minds’ ability for abstract thought, contemplation, and unexplainable dreaming. The sublime is truly about the human brain when, absent of task-oriented thoughts, it engages in its incredible capacity to feel deeply, to uncover vast new concepts, sensuality, and creative imaginings.

Living in a seacoast town, I frequently look out at the ever-changing, immense, and powerful ocean and am reminded of my own physical insignificance. Looking overhead at what seems to be an endless sky, but is only an infinitesimal part of the incomprehensible universe, transports me. The forms I paint are often derived from my responses to water, clouds, and constellations. But I do not recreate or illustrate these places. Instead, I paint the unseen. Using semi-transparent paint in amorphous layers of color I invite the eye to travel around and through the paint, to encourage contemplation and provoke inner questions. I create abstract and sometimes unsettling kinds of depth and space, spurring sensations of weightlessness, waking dreams, unknowable spaces, and mysteries of the Cosmos. I paint hazy half-remembered feelings of being startled awake, sometimes recalling terror and horror of tumbling down into a deep unknown abyss—like Alice through the looking glass. Other paintings recall opening my eyes while still feeling the vague euphoria of flying freely above the world.

There is an ebb and flow in my process. I begin by rapidly applying subtle color variations of paint, responding to the paint itself more than rigidly adhering to my preconceived plan. I pour translucent washes, smear thicker layers of viscose paint, scrape lines into the surface, and dab and poke at the surface with rags. When I finally pause, I realize my hands are covered with colors, my palette is a mess, rags and paper towels litter the surfaces where opened tubes and jars of paint are scattered in chaos. This is when I need to sit with the work. To be with it, live with it, to listen to what it is saying. Often, my anxiety from staring at the canvas brings on dreaded feelings of apprehension and suspense of “what now?” These moments alternate with exhilarating feelings of anticipation of something wonderful yet to come. Such intense contradictory feelings are the very hallmarks of the sublime. And so, I often *experience* my subject while painting it. The process of alternating furiously painting and quietly “listening” continues until the work feels done. Or at least until I feel I can let go of the work. Often, I wonder if a work is ever truly complete.