

Awful Grandeur

*... therefore my winged song thanks  
The man who distinguished cloud from cloud.*

J. W. von Goethe, 1820<sup>1</sup>

Why is it that experiences are etched in memory only through partial traces? The tune of a song, touch of a hand, the warmth of the sun or blueness of the sky – such are the residues that mark significant events. The mind cooperates with the sensate body to filter and store only the strongest impressions, registering sensations such as beauty or surprise.

This phenomenon has never been lost on artists, particularly painters of the landscape. Early depictions of newly colonised lands envisioned frontier territories as untouched and verdant, sublime nature awaiting inhabitation and cultivation. Paintings contributing to the forging of a national and cultural identity in the nineteenth century relied on a pictorial language that survives to the present day. The turbulence of Turner-esque storms invoked by Thomas Cole or Albert Bierstadt to inform the 'Awful Grandeur' of America, project the establishment and values of Empire as clearly as the sweeping terra nullius of Eugene von Gerard or heavenly light aglow in the skies of the 'father of Australian landscape painting', Louis Buvelot.<sup>2</sup>

The magnificence accompanied by a strong emotion, even terror, which these artists masterfully implied, and which was described by Edmund Burke as the 'sublime', is a fitting precedent for Catherine Woo's recent works.<sup>3</sup> Like weather patterns, the images suggest a range of conditions from delightful, sunny skies to the threat of smothering clouds. They invite viewers to enact pictorial shifts – to see the splendour of both macro and micro worlds or the sensations of looking down upon the earth as well as views skyward.

Images in *Blue Sky Project* are produced under conditions reminiscent of a controlled experiment. Combining elemental materials such as silicon carbide, black sand, calcium carbonate and pigment, works not only enact the growth or processes of nature but also convey the changing and transient beauty of our environment.

Woo's art incorporates an additional dimension, one similarly common to Burke's sublime. It contains a confrontation, inviting the imagination to perceive what is nebulous, immense and beyond description, including metaphorical meanings as well as historical associations.

These skies denote a darkness that threatens beauty. Contrasting black holes or voids penetrating the blue create a tension, conjuring the potential of sublime horror, as well as immensity. This visual trigger sends a psychological pulse warning of the danger of human conceit. As heirs to presumptions granting rights to own land and bend nature to human will, *Blue Sky Project* offers a salutary reminder of the delicate and ephemeral qualities of the earth and its atmosphere, and the risk it runs of becoming a ghost, visibly only in the art of the past.

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#### NOTES

1. From J. W. van Goethe, 'Atmosphere', cited in Kurt Badt, *John Constable's Clouds*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1950, p. 13.

2. A title attributed to Buvelot by Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin.

3. Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757.