



Art in an age of **anxiety**

The Crawford Art Gallery's exhibition based on the Burkean notion of the Sublime provides an exhilarating assault on the senses, writes **Tom Dunne**



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Our is indeed an 'Age of Anxiety'. In addition to the horrors of war and of economic collapse, which characterised the decades after World War I – the period to which historians have normally applied the term – we live in an age of global warming and global terrorism, our anxieties ratcheted up on an hourly basis by hyperactive global media. The exhibition in the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork which explores a range of artistic responses to such fears from the late 18th century to the present, is therefore, a timely one. In earlier centuries, art had confronted anxiety mainly through religious explanation and sublimation. In a more secular and philosophic age artists did so more by interiorising fear and understanding it as basic to our sensory experience of the world. A key concept in this process was that of the 'Sublime' which explored the experience of fear in aesthetic terms, and formed a core element of Romanticism. The imaginative and bold decision by curator Peter Murray to show contemporary examples of "Terror and Sublime" as a continuum with artistic responses to anxiety from the late 18th century makes this an important exhibition. It reflects the Crawford Gallery's unique remit to promote understanding and appreciation of both contemporary art and that of the past three centuries.

The starting point of the exhibition is a first edition of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which remains an engaging and relevant attempt to understand how we experience reality through our senses, being, as the Preface puts it, 'A diligent examination of our passions in our own breasts. This examination is conducted through the polarities of 'the Beautiful' (that which conveys and promotes pleasure, calm, contemplation) and 'the Sublime', which it defines thus:

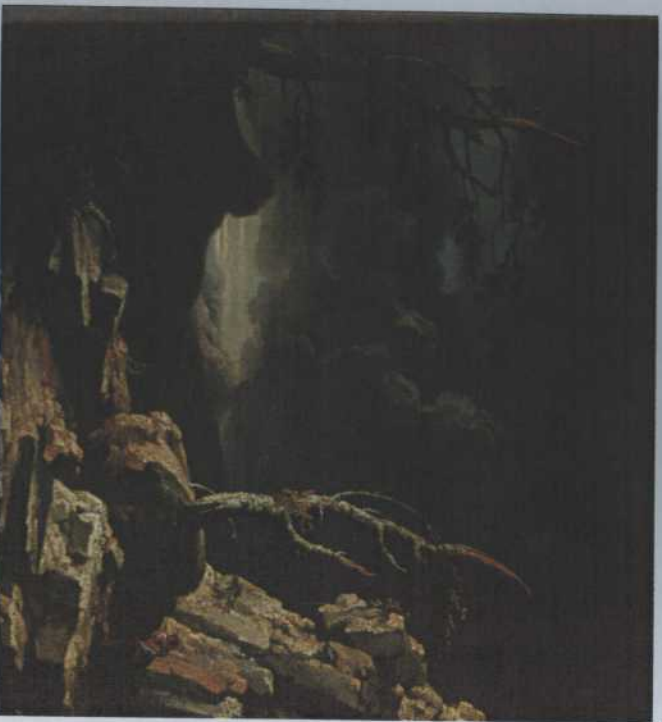
¹ ROBERT LONGO b. 1953 *UNTITLED (ZEUS)*
2008 charcoal on mounted paper
177 x 223.5cm Courtesy of the artist and
Metro Pictures Gallery, New York

² JIM SANBORN b. 1945 *CRITICAL ASSEMBLY*
2003 mixed media variable Courtesy of the
Artist





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'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling.'

Burke himself thought that literature could communicate such feelings better than art, and it is difficult to establish much direct influence of his ideas on the artists of his day. An important exception to this was the art of his protégé James Barry, who made the heroic bearing of pain a major motif of his history paintings. However, in the wonderful double portrait of himself and Burke, 'in the character of Ulysses and a companion fleeing from the cave of Polyphemus' – the jewel of the Crawford Gallery's own collection – Barry shows an unheroic, psychological response to fear, especially in the beads of sweat on his forehead (Fig 9). While he was wedded to Neoclassical ideals, Barry's self-portraits, especially later in his career, have important elements of the valorisation of the suffering artist that characterised the Romantic

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age. An example of how that age transformed history painting's approach to the sublime can be seen in the dramatic *Fall of the Red Angels* (1828) by Samuel Forde, who died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-three before he could finish it.

Landscape painting of the 18th century often gestured towards the sublime, as Burke understood it, but it rarely rose above the tamer 'picturesque' (by which landscape was experienced not as it was, but in terms of the art of the great 17th-century masters). This can be seen even in the art of Burke's friend, George Barret, whose well-known series on Powerscourt Waterfall, for example, feature fashionable tourists whose relaxed poses rob the scene of any sense of terror or awe. However, he had started out with the ambition 'to exhibit the sublime parts of nature', and his early *Stormy Landscape* (1760) is a rare example of the Burkean sublime in Irish landscape art (Fig 5). The market instead favoured 'beautiful' landscapes in the manner of Claude Lorrain, and, of course, these can also be seen as a different kind of response to the anxieties of the propertied classes. This was evident, for example in the luminous demesne paintings of Thomas Roberts (1748-77), but there

3 NIGEL ROLFE, b. 1950 *DUST BREEDING* 2007 (still) video recorded on DVD, 5 mins variable Courtesy of the Arts and Green on Red Gallery, Dublin

4 JAMES ARTHUR O'CONNOR, c. 1792-1841 *A VIEW OF THE DEVIL'S BLEW* oil on canvas 63x76cm Photo ©The National Gallery of Ireland

5 GEORGE BARRET, c.1730-1784 *A STORMY LANDSCAPE* 1780 oil on canvas 53x67.5cm Photo ©The National Gallery of Ireland

6 THERESA NANNIGAN b. 1961 *CRONE FOREST* 2009 (lambd print diamond mounted edition 1/4 122x122cm Collection Wicklow County Council



7 WILLIAM BRADFORD
1823-1892) THE
MIDNIGHT SUN ON
MELVILLE SOUND, 1876
oil on canvas 56x71cm
Photo ©The National
Gallery of Ireland

8 AIDEEN BARRY (b.
1979) WEAPONS OF MASS
CONSUMPTION: FLAT
BOTTOM SPRAY GRENADE
Serial number
SG08/2#021 2008
polished aluminium
219cm diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

9 JAMES BARRY (1741-
1804) PORTRAITS OF
BURKE AND BARRY IN
THE CHARACTERS OF
LUXURIES AND A
COMPANION, c. 1776 oil
on canvas 127x101cm
Collection Crawford Art
Gallery, Cork

10 DAVID GOODBOLD
b. 1961) YET IN SO
MANY WAYS IT HAD BEEN
A GOOD DAY 2008 acrylic
polymer on canvas
175x250cm Courtesy of
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

11 OLIVER COMERGORD
b. 1967) I CAN SEE YOUR
HOUSE FROM HERE IV
2008 oil on canvas over
board 122x183cm
Collection, Richard Lyons

frightfully threatening, or to Casper David Friedrich's psychologically charged dead seas, low horizons and blasted oaks. Again, the Irish painters who came closest operated outside of Ireland, James Arthur O'Connor (1792-1841) painted mainly conventional, often hackneyed Claudian landscapes for most of his career in England, but his work took on a darker tone in his final decade. Three of his most romantic paintings from this period will feature at the Crawford (Fig 4), as will two by his friend, the more commercially successful Francis Danby (1793-1861). His Turner-like *Sunset at Sea after a Storm* (1824) made his early reputation in London, but it was his powerful and controversial *Opening of the Sixth Seal* (1828), National Gallery of Ireland, that brought romantic sensationalist history painting to a new level. This apocalyptic vision of the Day of Judgement toured widely in America as well as England, and is the Irish terror painting. Unfortunately it was not available for the Crawford exhibition and this aspect of Danby is represented instead by The

were elements of the sublime in his storm paintings, one of which will be featured in the Crawford exhibition. Significantly, the Irish landscape artist who best captured Burke's ideal of the sublime was based in Italy, James Forrester (c.1730-176) combined elements of the 17th-century terror landscapes of Salvator Rosa and Poussin in *Figures by a Torrent in a Stormy Wooded Landscape*, while his *Landscape with Monks by Lake Nemi*, reflects the literary fashion for the Gothic, which was to be a key artistic response to anxiety during the long Romantic era.

It can be argued that in art, as in



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literature, a
full-blown Irish Romanticism

did not develop until the end of the 19th century. Certainly there are few, if any, Irish equivalents to Turner's depictions of Alpine scenery as

Deluge (1840), while his eerie *Calypso's Vision* (1843) has echoes of Friedrich, and of the Norwegian scenery that was a major influence on Danby's later work. Of related interest is a work by American Luminist painter, William Bradford (1823-92), one of the Hudson River School (Fig 7), best known for his Arctic scenes.

The Romantic sense of apocalyptic change and danger is thus well captured in this exhibition by the large canvases of Forde and Danby.

These are also religious images, based on biblical episodes. In the contemporary world the threat of nuclear apocalypse, under which the human race has lived for sixty years is a matter of grim reality rather than of allegory. It is represented in the Crawford exhibition by two contrasting exhibits. Robert Longo's strangely beautiful charcoal drawings of the mushroom clouds of a nuclear bomb explosion evoke the familiar black and white newspaper images (Fig 1). Jim Sanborn's acclaimed installation *Critical Assembly* (Fig 2) by contrast, seems at first sight to be an innocuous ensemble of electronic equipment and laboratory furniture, but is, in fact, a powerful evocation of the banality of evil. Its elements all came from the Los Alamos laboratory where the atom bomb was developed in 1945, their very ordinariness a chillingly compelling contrast to the drama and colour of the Romantic

images. This is the heart of the exhibition, and its initial inspiration, according to its curator.

If, as Theodor Adorno claimed, poetry was impossible after Auschwitz, the Romantic sublime should not have survived Hiroshima, but this exhibition has many contemporary echoes of early 19th-century attempts to depict alienation and anxiety, although the work of Friedrich, in particular, seems a greater influence than the Irish art of that period. This can be seen in two contrasting seascape photographs: Gary Coyle's threatening sea and sky, taken while swimming in Dublin's Forty Foot, and Hiroshi Sugimoto's calmer but stranger slate grey sea separated from a grey sky by a horizon that divides the image in two. Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) is evoked more directly in Paul Winstanley's painting *Two Figures on the Shore* (2009) while Friedrich's blasted trees and bleak environments inform Theresa Nanigan's *Come Forst* (Fig. 6), which also features a dwarfed human figure. There are other unsettling, romantic-inflected landscapes by Oliver Comerford and David Godbold (Figs 11 & 10), while there is a sense of menace in Wille Doherty's *At the Border II* (low visibility). An example of Hughie O'Donoghue's use of photographs and documents in his modern take on history painting can be seen in *Flanders and the Narrow Seas*, which evokes the fallen of World War II. The possible concealment of terrorist threats in everyday objects and the ubiquity of military culture are explored in Aileen Barry's *Weapons of Mass Consumption* (Fig. 8).

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The Crawford Gallery exhibition will also feature three exceptional video installations that vividly capture the psychological dimensions of terror and the sublime as described by Burke and incorporated in much of Barry's work. In *Dust Breeding* (2007), Nigel Rolfe (Fig. 3) subjects himself to a nightmarish envelopment in white dust; in *Unstrung* (2007), Cecily Brennan shows a woman being knocked down over and over by a stream of black liquid; Clare Langan's *Trilogy* (1999-2002) has the recurring motif of vast inhospitable terrains – ice, desert, a lava flow (reminiscent of Danby's *Opening of the Sixth Seal*), over which small female figures travel. However, these do not appear overwhelmed by their fraught situations, but resemble Friedrich's *The Wanderer above a Sea of Mist* (c.1818) in their bourgeois-seeming insouciance.

Such carefully chosen echoes and unities promise exciting and productive interactions between the historical and contemporary dimensions of this exhibition. The paintings from the era of Burke, and of the Romanticism that gave expression in a variety of ways to the concept of the sublime which he articulated, set up a series of questions and responses whose enduring relevance is evident in the remarkable range of contemporary art on view. Confront your anxieties, embrace your sublime and make the trip to the Crawford. ■

Terror and the Sublime: Art in an Age of Anxiety Crawford Art Gallery, Cork 20 November – 27 February 2010.

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