

**APPROACHES TO THE SUBLIME:
Aspects of the esoteric in
contemporary painting**

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

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contemporary painting**

October 28 - November 11 1993

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

The University of New South Wales • College of Fine Arts
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FOREWORD

A variety of philosophers, poets, artists and writers, quoted in this catalogue by the participating artists, extend the interconnectedness of the sublime and help to create a contemporary context for a subject that Edmund Burke, amongst others, penetrated in the last century.

Nicole Ellis quotes Thomas Weiskel's belief that "...our experience remains riddled by discontinuities, and the sublime or something like it, as well as the bathetic or something like it, will always be found in the ill-defined zones of anxiety between discrete orders of meaning."

The interstices do indeed provide for many artists the means of approaching previously unrevealed possibilities.

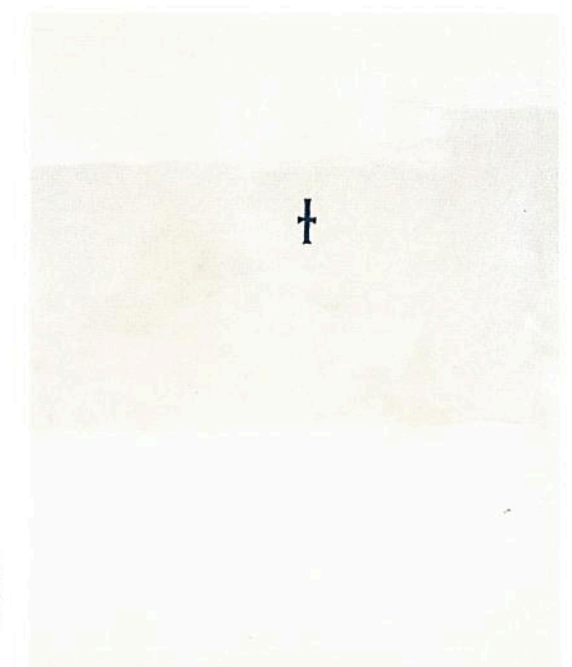
Leonard Brown writes of "a family of relationships ... [which] all pertain to a view of the Cosmos and Reality, an alternative that exists outside our predominantly scientific, Copernican construct of reality."

This exhibition, if it is able to articulate this as well as other such 'alternatives' will be immensely worthwhile. I take this opportunity to warmly thank Andrew Christofides and Ian Grant for conceiving and jointly curating *Approaches to the Sublime* and to the other artists for their commitment and provision of such stimulating works, which together presents a multifarity of approaches to the subject within a thoroughly contemporary context.

Nick Waterlow OAM
Director
Ivan Dougherty Gallery



MARION BORGELT
Field & Body Series: Threshold 1993
258 x 228 cm pastel, pigment and sand
on paper



LEONARD BROWN
Precious and Life-giving Cross 1993
152 x 121 cm oil on Belgian linen

INTRODUCTION

Whilst the sublime has a familiar historical position in literature, philosophy and the arts in general it has meant different things to different people. The term occurs from time to time in current writing and general discourse on the visual arts and it seems timely and interesting to investigate the concept as it relates to contemporary painting. From its conception this exhibition has had in view the demonstration of interest in the sublime through the work and strategies of a number of contemporary artists from within the broader field of painting.

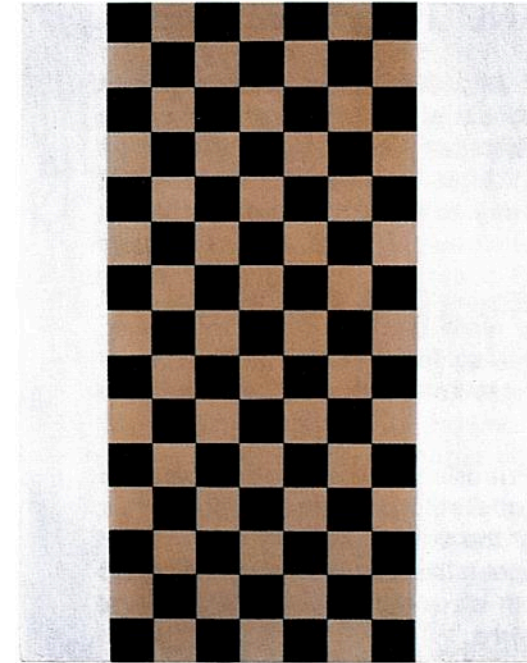
In choosing to deal with such a loaded term as 'sublime' it became immediately apparent that there were problems of definition. In particular, for the scope of the exhibition and for working purposes, it became necessary to separate the term 'sublime' from related terms such as 'romantic', 'spiritual', 'religious' and 'metaphysical'. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties of definition and scope, the idea remains significant and recurring in contemporary art and is therefore worthy of exploration within the context of an exhibition.

Of particular significance to the exhibition is the manner in which contemporary painters approach the sublime. There is a long tradition of treatment of the sublime within various conventions of painting during the twentieth century and previously, and thus the medium provides precedent, scope and diversity in dealing with the subject.

Painting affords the means to work outside of dialectics and is able to evoke the sensory or even the spiritual without the inhibitions and specifics of written language. The idea of the sublime has been approached through formal structures which allude to fixed and eternal experience by centred or static format; through reference to geometry as elevated domain of Classical thought; through colour as symbol of higher consciousness, or through tonality where absence of colour can suggest an undistracted absolute of intellect. Further to the richness and diversity of formal language, painting offers meaning through subject matter and its modes of expression.

Given the above, the intention of this exhibition is to reflect a range of approach to the sublime. Artists included have used the languages of painting in various ways toward similar ends. The aim has been to avoid absolute definition or prescription but rather to present diversity in addressing ends which are necessarily qualitative in nature.

Andrew Christofides
Ian Grant



ANDREW CHRISTOFIDES
Blue Painting No. 1 1991-92
50.5 x 41 cm acrylic on canvas



NICOLE ELLIS
Site Work 4 (#1) 1993
230 x 221 cm acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion,
paper, found paint, machine oil

THOUGHTS ON PAINTING AND THE SUBLIME

About two years ago Ian Grant and Andrew Christofides began to discuss a proposal to mount an exhibition concerned with the concept of the sublime in art. Not surprisingly many of their colleagues and contemporaries treated the proposal with some scepticism. After all it would require great courage or monumental naivety to lumber any exhibition with a title which includes the adjective "sublime".

They had no such intention but even the use of the word "sublime" as a noun might reasonably be expected to draw more than its fair share of flak. Notions of the sublime in art or anything else for that matter do not sit comfortably in this prosaic age. Even if God is not dead, She has little time for such a romantic notion.

For nineteenth century artists like Friedrich, Bierstadt or Cole, the sublime conceived as the demonstration of God's presence was entirely consistent with the sensibility of the time. For the artists in this exhibition such a view would be difficult to sustain, nevertheless this exhibition demonstrates that they continue to define their directions in ways that concede a notion of the sublime conceived in twentieth century terms.

The problem is, what definition will work? We could, for instance, regard the sublime as the transcendence of the ordinary, but if we did then all art could be said to aspire to the sublime. Hardly a useful way to go. For those represented in this exhibition there has to be a more appropriate definition of what the sublime can mean for artists now.

Such a definition must also be flexible enough to encompass the diverse styles and approaches adopted by these artists. It is evident that the sublime may be approached via the refinements of abstraction as easily as by realist imagery.

In his preparatory notes for the exhibition, Andrew Christofides refers to Sheldon Cheney, who, in *Expressionism in Art* suggests that the sublime must be beyond physical existence; an "elevation into a region of harmonious accord of spiritual and physical living". This definition would seem to serve the purpose and it certainly sits more comfortably than one which invokes a deity.

The remarkable thing about this show is that despite their common purpose there is such a diversity of style but obviously certain characteristics

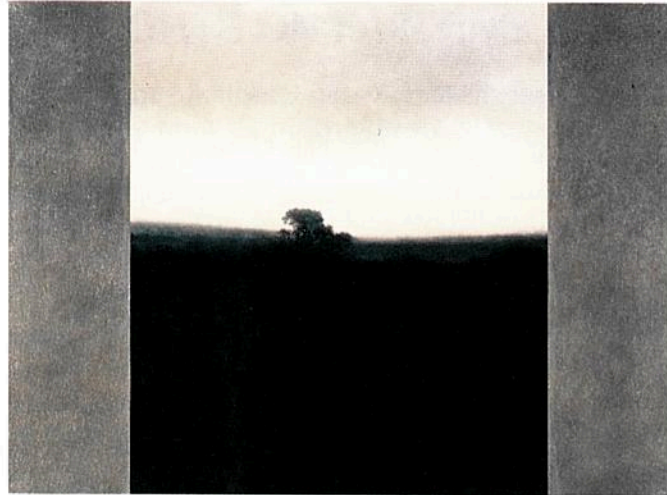
are shared. In a note written for the exhibition Kristin Headlam suggests that she seeks to infuse simple images with something which for her is "inexplicable, mysterious and challenging", something which "goes beyond the image itself". I believe that each of the contributors to this exhibition would agree with this proposition. Imagery, whether abstract or figurative, is a medium by which the unseeable subject is approached. An image used to make an anecdotal reference or to focus on human idiosyncrasy would destroy the transcendental quality the subject demands.

Above all there must be stillness; a visual silence which, by a kind of paradox, drowns out the flashing cacophony of ordinary perception. When it happens the witness is mesmerised and connected to a reality infinitely greater than the sum of images contained within a frame.....

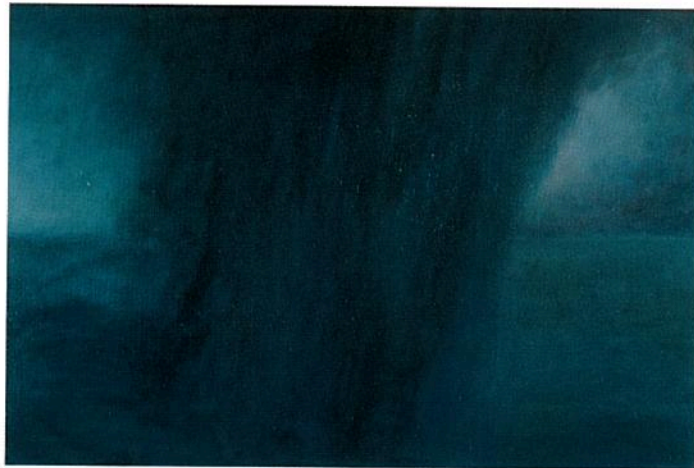
Right there the debate about an exhibition entitled "Approaches to the Sublime" becomes most heated. Is it not a gross presumption for an artist to claim that her or his work is capable of producing a state akin to religious ecstasy?

These artists make no such claim. Their works are private journeys from which private discoveries are made. That they aspire to approach the sublime is a supremely romantic act of courage. The viewer is a witness to this process and the visual delights that can be enjoyed are many. This is justification enough - and there is always the possibility of more.

Col Jordan



IAN GRANT
12. *The Valley* 1993
91 x 122 cm
acrylic on canvas



KRISTIN HEADLAM
16. *Rain* 1992
122 x 183 cm
oil on linen

EXHIBITING ARTISTS

MARION BORGELT

Born Nhill Vic. 1954
Lives and works in Paris and Sydney

LEONARD BROWN

Born Brisbane 1949
Lives and works in Brisbane

ANDREW CHRISTOFIDES

Born Cyprus 1946
Lives and works in Sydney

NICOLE ELLIS

Born Adelaide 1951
Lives and works in Sydney

IAN GRANT

Born Sydney 1947
Lives and works in Sydney

KRISTIN HEADLAM

Born Launceston 1952
Lives and works in Melbourne

TIM MAGUIRE

Born Chertsey U.K. 1958
Lives and works in Katoomba

HILARIE MAIS

Born Leeds U.K. 1952
Lives and works in Sydney

CASSANDRA SHARP

Born Sydney 1962
Lives and works in Sydney

ARTISTS' STATEMENTS

Marion Borgelt

9th September 1993 (Paris)

"My images are themselves, symbols and metaphors of the process of growth and becoming. It is as if this process were about a perpetual state of arrival.

They speak of life cycles and cycles within cycles which manifest from personal real-life experiences. They convey personal interpretations of the *FEMININE PRINCIPLE which is not to be seen in a singly erotic sense nor is it a support for a feminist ideology as it refers to a force possessing transformative qualities which is present in both men and women.

No-one's art can be created from a vacuum. It is a product in every instance of the way the artist thinks, feels, senses and responds to this outer stimuli processed by self, which is itself an inseparable component of the world at large.

My work is a journey back to the home, the primal nest where all that we have created: science, technology, art and language, are meant as means to better our essential needs."

*FEMININE PRINCIPLE being synonymous with 'yin' (as in the Chinese medicine) and referring to archetypal, psychological principles.

Leonard Brown

August 1993 (Brisbane)

Depending on our cultural background, The Cross, Crosses, will mean something different, associatively, to each one of us. Geographical, political, theological factors provide a pluralism of interpretation.

The Cross, for me, and in these paintings, has the contextual background of a vocabulary that pertains to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, where the Cross bears the particular and lofty appellation of "The Precious and Lifegiving Cross".

This mode of thinking about the Cross does not remain fixed within a static historical, often inappropriate, sado-masochistic focus on the passion of Jesus. These textural distinctions are made apparent by Patrick Leigh Fermore in his book, "Mani" -

"The Western Medieval Madonna is a gentle and beautiful mediatrix, a celestial Philippa of Hainault, and we are the Burghers of Calais with ropes around our necks, for whom she will intercede.

"When the Italian version of disinterred paganism had set new pulses beating, her statues, like Venus addressing a reluctant Adonis, seem almost to woo her devotees, at its worst there is a hint of an ogle, a veiled appeal for fans. In the West, iconographically, Our Lord and Our Lady and the army of saints, whether they are exquisite idealizations, or smirking and blubbery simulacra, are, each of them, one of us.

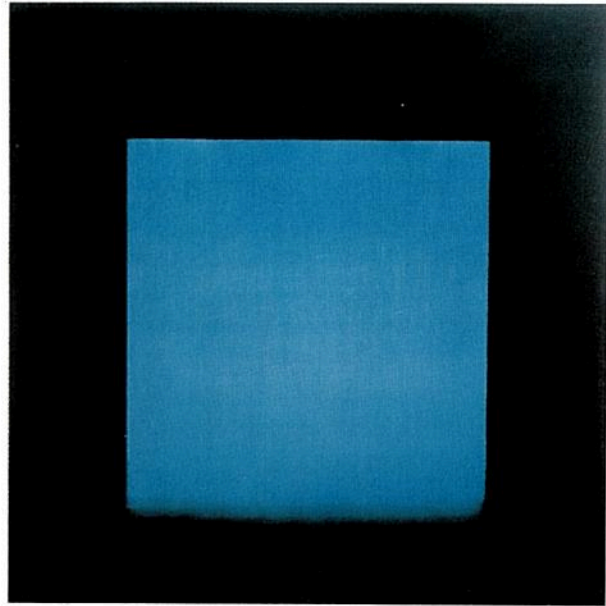
"Their Eastern effigies, during all these mutations, scarcely changed in thirteen centuries - are emphatically different. The expression of the Panayia (The All Holy Virgin) even at the foot of the Cross, says 'No Comment'. If an expression can be detected in the raised arcs of eyebrow and the wide eyes enigmatically gazing through the kisses and the incense and the candle flames, it is most strangely, a faintly quizzical and ironic one, 'Do not worship me', perhaps, 'but what I represent'."

There is also contained within this tradition an unbroken regard for the ancient antecedents - The Tree of Life, The Great Column, The Great Vertical Axis of the Skydoor - these all being revered and expressed within the ancient pre-Christian world...the Cross arose out of these great verticals...there is a family of relationships...these all pertain to a view of the Cosmos and Reality, an alternative that exists outside our predominantly scientific, Copernican construct of reality.

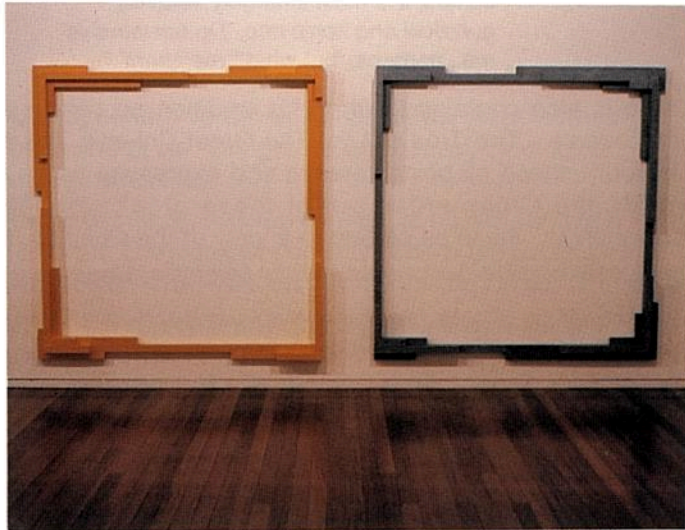
The presence of this great life-line is imbued in all creation. The Cross marks, connects and defines sacred relationships. It surmounts structures. It is placed in front of holy places. Orthodox Christians wear one suspended from their neck to denote that they are a holy place; a relationship of God-bearing is expressed.

"the intersection of the timeless with time"

These paintings hold the Cross in this guise; in the dissection, contemplation of time and space within the gesture of painting, a sublime and sacred act.



TIM MAGUIRE
Untitled 1992
91 x 91 cm
oil on canvas



HILARIE MAIS
Boatman 1990
2 parts, each part 181 x 176 x 9 cm
painted wood construction

Andrew Christofides

September 1993 (Sydney)

The essentially esoteric nature of the 'sublime' places it in a realm beyond the comprehension of the senses and intellect; but, nonetheless, accessible to human experience.

It, therefore, seems that any attempt to deal with notions of the 'sublime' must necessarily develop a language capable of bridging two states: the verifiable and the transcendental.

For me, the focus has been the search for a language capable of transcending the specifics of time and place, on the one hand: yet, on the other, providing a context within which the work can operate.

Of particular significance to this search has been an emphasis on 'stillness' and a contemplative ambience through the use of distilled geometric forms.

Nicole Ellis

September 1993 (Sydney)

"...our experience remains riddled by discontinuities, and the sublime or something like it, as well as the bathetic or something like it, will always be found in the ill-defined zones of anxiety between discrete orders of meaning."

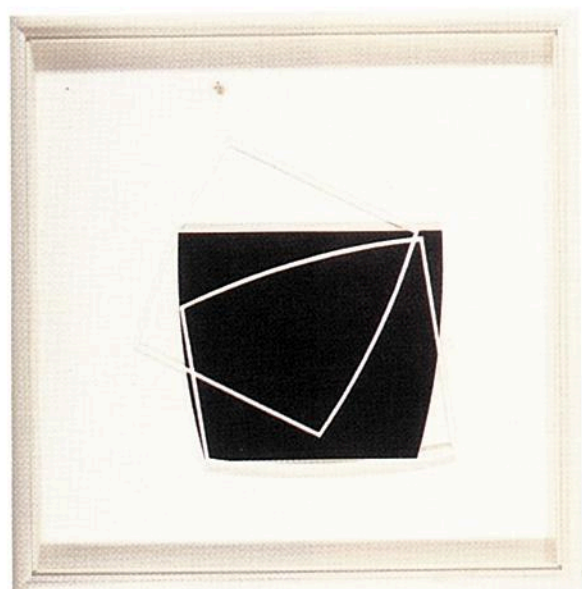
Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976), 21

My current work is generated from the floorboards of my studio in lower Oxford Street, Sydney, a building once used in the rag trade. The processes I employ 'transfer' the surfaces of the floor and produce a 'found' surface, its randomness created by oil, dirt, wood and fabric. These paint skins suggest the presence or aura of past use - work, toil, etc.

It has been said that many modernist formulations of 'autonomous vision' (which can be seen to have concluded with abstraction), excluded the body. That the practices became, in a sense, disembodied. My work rejects this position and seeks to reaffirm the critical status of the body.

"Experience is indivisible and continuous, at least within a single lifetime and perhaps over many lifetimes.... And so the act of approaching a given moment of experience involves both scrutiny (closeness) and the capacity to connect (distance)."

John Berger, *Pig Earth* (1979), 6.



CASSANDRA SHARP
Through the Lyre's Strings #10 1993
54.5 x 53.7 x 0.5 cm
alpha rag board and gouache

Ian Grant

October 1993 (Sydney)

For me the selection of imagery and context is critical and the choice of landscape arises out of examination of various possibilities in subject matter. Landscape has broad and diverse historical positioning and therefore carries no loaded meaning but refers to basic, universal and recurring human relationships with the natural world, with earth and sky. In a Judaic Christian sense it also may allude to an unspoiled and serene world, beyond and before human intervention.

Painted images are different to other images. Painting has a social and historical context and an understood process of response, scrutiny and mediation which extends beyond its pictorial characteristics.

Hilarie Mais

October 1993 (Sydney)

In my work a variety of interpretations will present themselves and an individual work will touch upon varied extremities in its progress, becoming the residue of its history.

While *Boatman*, the large two piece work included in *Approaches to the Sublime* clearly offers itself to a variety of other readings, it concurs with the theme in the broad sense of its metaphysical intention, and in a more literal, etymological sense in that it refers to an idea, common to much of my work, of a threshold or, in this particular work, portal; between the "here" and the "there", actual space and metaphysical journey.

Cassandra Sharp

October 1993 (Sydney)

"We local and ephemeral as we are, are not for one moment contented in the world of time nor confined within it, we keep on crossing over to our predecessors, to our descent and to those who apparently come after us."

Rainer Maria Rilke
The Sonnets to Orpheus

Kristin Headlam and **Tim Maguire** have chosen not to make a written statement.

LIST OF WORKS

MARION BORGELT

1. *Field & Body with Axis* 1992 228 x 191 cm pastel, pigment, oils and sand on paper
2. *Field & Body Series: Threshold* 1993 258 x 228 cm pastel, pigment and sand on paper (reproduced in catalogue)

LEONARD BROWN

3. *Precious and Life-giving Cross* 1993 152 x 121 cm oil on Belgian linen (reproduced in catalogue)
4. *Precious and Life-giving Cross* 1993 152 x 121 cm oil on Belgian linen
5. *Precious and Life-giving Cross* 1993 152 x 121 cm oil on Belgian linen

ANDREW CHRISTOFIDES

6. *Blue Painting No. 1* 1991-92 50.5 x 41 cm acrylic on canvas (reproduced in catalogue)

7. *Grey Painting No. 25* 1993 50.5 x 50.5 cm acrylic on canvas
8. *Grey Painting No. 29* 1993 50.5 x 50.5 cm acrylic on canvas

NICOLE ELLIS

9. *Site Work 4 (#1)* 1993 230 x 221 cm acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion, paper, found paint, machine oil (reproduced in catalogue)
10. *Site Work 5 (#1)* 1993 230 x 221 cm acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion, paper, found paint, machine oil

IAN GRANT

11. *Tree with Moon* 1993 91 x 122 cm acrylic on canvas
12. *The Valley* 1993 91 x 122 cm acrylic on canvas (reproduced in catalogue)
13. *Tree with Moon (Study)* 1993 25 x 30 cm acrylic on canvas
14. *Row of Small Trees VI* 1993 42 x 51 cm acrylic on canvas

KRISTIN HEADLAM

15. *Orpheus Turned* 1990 153 x 122 cm oil on linen
16. *Rain* 1992 122 x 183 cm oil on linen (reproduced in catalogue)

TIM MAGUIRE

17. *Untitled* 1992 91 x 91 cm oil on canvas (reproduced in catalogue)
18. *Untitled* 1992 91 x 91 cm oil on canvas

HILARIE MAIS

19. *Boatman* 1990 2 parts, each part 181 x 176 x 9 cm painted wood construction (reproduced in catalogue)
20. *Y* 1990 60 x 60 x 6 cm painted wood construction

CASSANDRA SHARP

21. *Through the Lyre's Strings #10* 1993 54.5 x 53.7 x 0.5 cm alpha rag board and gouache (reproduced in catalogue)

The curators wish to thank the following galleries and persons for their assistance in the preparation of this exhibition:
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