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Calm the Storm Inside

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **The Approaching Storm**

There is something absolute about a storm. When a storm hits we can't always "make it better" or fix what has been broken. Storms are always in the air, some storms are beautiful displays of nature while others bring hidden grief and destruction. I have always been drawn to the contrast and sensation of powerful storm clouds. I focus on the change in the atmosphere, the dark invasion of a thunderstorm to a stable sky. I seek to capture within my paintings the heart-sinking moment of helplessness when you realize you could lose everything.

Some artist's whose work I reference now and again are Caspar David Friedrich, Robert Roth and William Turner. I am interested in why viewers seem to be both attracted to, and intrigued by, natural disasters. In addition, I would like to do more research on topics concentrating on the theory of change, and how people react in a psychological way. Sooner or later without any warning these storms will hit. When we are in the middle of a storm everything

runs its course and nothing will last forever. The crisis will end or resolve itself. The only lesson learned is how to dance in the rain.

### **We are Nothing Against the Element's of Nature**

While watching the sky one afternoon I tied my ideas together. The emotions I felt are just as different as the changing patterns of weather. The message I would like to send to my viewers is that life gets messy. At times it may seem like things are falling apart but in the end everything will be okay and you can come out even stronger if you face the conflict. By facing our fears and accepting our vulnerability, we can exert some control. Without control you lose a sense of who you are.

The image of the storm stands metaphorically for our sense of anxiety. Anxieties are usually greater energies that then make you run away. Just as pressure builds as a result of the unresolved anxiety; we experience the changing pressure and can signal a pending storm. The storm can overwhelm you, but how you react to both metaphorical “storms” as well as a literal one can bring a sense of control back. It is through the creation of art that I discovered who I am and what gives me control over the anxieties in my life—art is my control and my escape.

Fear stops people from achieving goals in life. The fear of the unknown fits within my concept as well; it's more of the fear of the experiences that are perceived as different. I would like the viewers to see the storms as their own ‘unknown.’ Therefore it is the fear of not knowing where the massive storm will be heading.

## Natural Misfortunes and Storms

Thunderstorms and tornados are the natural disasters I'm interested in portraying. People can relate more to the experience of such common Midwest storms. Additionally, there are a large number of shapes and tones I can play with by manipulating cloud forms and shades. With the wild winds and the extreme danger a tornado will be an eye-catching motif in itself. In the future I might move more towards an investigation of floods or forest fires. Both consist of fast moving destruction, which in my opinion could be interesting to paint.

I am also interested to learn why viewers are attracted by natural disasters. Perhaps it's because it allows you to feel as if you're free from the clutches of controlling every aspect of life. Moreover, everyone comes together to help after the storm passes. Thus, a good question to ask is "What happens to our brains when we see destruction?" According to Dr. John Mayer a clinical psychologist, the process is one that actually triggers our survival instincts. "A disaster enters into our awareness this can be from a live source such as [...] watching a news report about a hurricane" News reporters tend to exaggerate the storms to make an intriguing story that creates drama.

He explains this information triggers our amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for emotions, survival tactics, and memory. This information or data then gets evaluated as to whether it's a threat to you, thus involving an emotionally charged judgment. All in all a "flight or fight" response is evoked. Aristotle talks about the tragedy as invoking fear and pity. Catharsis on the other hand provides relief from emotions like pity or fear by allowing us to work through our emotions in a safe setting. When showing the image of a storm in a gallery, the viewers have time to step back and review the natural disaster in a safe place.

My concept and paintings are similar to the idea of Immanuel Kant's sublime. The sublime is defined within aesthetics as the value of greatness. Part of Kant's theory includes the dynamically sublime; this idea involves the feeling we have towards nature. When we consider it as a power that has control over us, or when we experience nature as fear we get the feeling of the sublime. At the same time it makes us see ourselves as independent of nature, providing both pleasure in nature and displeasure.

My research led me to an article called *Delight in the natural world: Kant in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, part III, The Sublime in Nature*, written by Malcolm Budd. Budd mentions "our physical power, which is puny in comparison with the might of certain natural phenomena, whose force is such as to overwhelm and destroy us: in the face of such might we would be helpless. So with respect to physical force, nature is overwhelmingly superior to us."<sup>1</sup> I agree with this statement and it supports the concept propelling my work quite well.

### **The Sky-Scape Landscape**

I always enjoyed painting different sky-scape's; the mystery of the clouds and changing beauty of the sky each day, push me to create aesthetically pleasing paintings. I also paint 'cheerful' skies from time to time. Most of my inspiration comes from going on drives; to the open farm fields where I grew up. These familiar landscapes are both thought provoking and inspiring. I also went on many road trips across the US as a child, the flat endless land from the

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1. Malcolm Budd, "*Delight in the natural world: Kant in the aesthetic appreciation of nature*", Part III The Sublime in Nature, (Oxford University Press, 1998): 238

deserts have also influenced my work. All sorts of different skies are inspiring to me, from rich, warm sunsets, to rumbling storm clouds rolling in, to rich blue sky against the puffy bright white cloud, and even winter cool gray skies. All are stimulating to me and are even more fascinating than the landscapes below.

People should to look up more often and appreciate what's above their heads everyday.

Sky-scape's relate to my idea of being vulnerable; skies are unpredictable and out of humanity's control. I like to use the word vulnerable when thinking about the sky, since it indeed has no choice at all as to how it alternates. The unpredictable frightens some people. Which relates back to the unknown, we have no idea what these storms or skies might be capable of.

### **Processes and Materials**

The materials and techniques I'm interested in using are oil paints on canvas. The references for my paintings are typically a combination of many photos of storms that I then merge into one composition. I use large handcrafted square canvases. The sizes of my canvases are important. The larger the canvas, the more the viewer will feel consumed or overwhelmed by my work. Over many sizing trials I have found the size of five foot by five foot is the perfect manageable size for the storms. I want the viewer to stand in front of my pieces and feel the storm is rolling right off the canvas.

The square shape of the canvas is both unique and is aesthetically pleasing to the eye—with four equal sides, making the paintings different from the typical sky-scape landscape paintings that use a rectangle canvas. My compositions fit seamlessly in the square, they are usually similar in that the scale of the sky is larger compared to land below. The smoothness of

the brushstrokes mixed with the texture of the palette knife, helps to create the effect of disorderliness I try to achieve. I also limit my color schemes to help keep points of interest.

### **Inspirational Artists**

Similar to my own interests, the work of an English painter who specialized in watercolor landscapes; William Turner also focuses intensely upon violent depictions of weather events. Furthermore, by essentially placing himself in such inclement weather he was able to convey firsthand the violence of such storms. In one of his paintings called *Rain Clouds* he focused on the specific technique of using a wet-on-wet application of watercolor. This technique captures and enhanced the qualities associated with water mediums, especially the sense of the minimal control you have as an artist. Watercolor tends to bleed and flow anywhere, triggered by the amount of water used. Therefore the uncontrolled media helped to convey Turner's ideas of the uncontrollable dangers of the weather.

Another artist whose work I find attention grabbing is that of Robert Roth, an American painter who also paints storms. His subject matter is mostly comprised of sky-scapes, and tends to be small in scale. His work focuses on producing a painterly surface, laying down color to reveal a vast cloud filled sky with a low horizon. One of his paintings called *Marshland No. 4* also demonstrates oil painterly techniques by directly applying thick layers of paint and letting the medium be enjoyed abstractly as paint on a canvas, and secondarily to convey the illusion of land or sky.

Lastly a German Romantic landscape painter named Caspar David Friedrich is also an artist I admire. Friedrich's paintings mostly include strong diagonal lines, night sky-scapes, water, big vast empty skies or land that imply violence. Just as I am, Friedrich was interested in

the unknown; an artwork called *The Old Monk by the Sea*, (Fig. 1) exhibits the implied boundlessness, and dangers of the unknown. This painting shows a monk that is either on a cliff or on the edge of the sea, with a big stormy sky above. He seems small and insignificant to the immeasurable unknown. The use of Friedrich's loose brush strokes in the sky and disappearing horizon line are some of the techniques I use in my paintings. I have also mentioned above the use of Friedrich's horizontal thick lines of color, I too use that technique in my recent work. You will find this technique mainly along the bottom "landscape" portion of each painting.

### **The Moment of Calm Before the Threat**

The mystery of the calm before the storm interests me, that moment when everything in the air feels quiet and still. When the birds stop singing and the earth feels as if it has stopped. I have done some research and found that this eerie feeling only happens under the right conditions. Jessika Toothman a writer and researcher states that "The warm moist air is pulled up into a storm system, it leaves a low-pressure vacuum in its wake. The air travels up through the storm cloud and helps to fuel it."<sup>2</sup> That same air then comes back down to the surface. In that area the descending air then becomes warmer and drier which is somewhat stable, and leaves the air down at our level to be a quiet region. This eerie feeling doesn't last long, but serves as a warning of impending change.

In my work I capture moments of the calm where the storms are just about to strike. They are building up, thus there is still time to run and take cover. This moment in time is

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2. Jessika Toothman, "*Is there really a "calm before the storm"?* ", *The Calm Before the Storm*, (2017) : 1



demonstrated in one of my paintings called *Town Storm* a five-foot by five foot oil on canvas. *Town Storm* (fig. 2) has a small landscape near the bottom edge depicting a tree line and some small signs of life including an abstract town. Above I have a section right below the painted vast gray thunderstorm that's about to over take the landscape. This strip of blue-green safety is my representation of the calm before the storm.

This slowdown of time within the lower half of the painting's atmosphere that separates the land and the storm I kept simple by using a wash technique, which flattens the space but allows for subtle shifts in color. This flattened area is one of my favorite parts of the painting; the color is rich but also conveys a sense of gloom. The horizon line underneath this flattened area is an interesting place for your eye to move back and forth horizontally, and eventually, back around up to the mimicking rolling clouds above.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to continue to see my artwork grow through investing in even larger stretched canvases. By expanding the supports these paintings will help my viewers to feel the sense of awe I have experienced in the presence of such powerful storms. As I have mentioned before, to change up my sky-scape landscape paintings and make them even more unique, I started to use paint as paint. For instance I have been heading towards a more abstract way to paint—blocking in colors with no detail, allowing my self to let go. This process will allow me to challenge myself to let paint lay on the canvas. Hopefully, the abstract tonal storms will also connect with viewer's emotions.

The image of the storm stands metaphorically for our sense of anxiety. Anxieties are usually greater energies that make you run away. Just as pressure builds as a result of the

unresolved anxiety we experience the changing pressure and signaling an impending storm. The calm before the storm that I use frequently in my artwork, gives the viewers the opportunity to make a choice between “flight or fight.” I also use many artists as references such as William Turner who also focuses intensely upon violent depictions of weather events, and Caspar David Friedrich who works with nature’s great damaging displays.

The research that I have found supports my original thesis with the thought of the dynamically sublime; the feeling we have towards nature, nature as fear. We get the feeling of the sublime. At the same time it makes us see ourselves as dependent on nature, thus we find both pleasure and displeasure in nature. By finding out about the dynamically sublime I believe this will help me to expand my original thoughts on my thesis. We are all eventually broken down by nature and then blown away. The storm can overwhelm you, but how you react to both metaphorical “storms” as well as a literal one can bring a sense of control back.

## Figures



Fig. 1. *The Old Monk by the Sea*, Caspar David Friedrich, Oil on canvas, 1810, Staatliche Museen zu, Berlin.



Fig. 2. *Town Storm*, Kathleen Elizabeth Zeck, Oil on canvas, 2017.

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