THE TAOS SUBLIME

CONTINUUM: LIGHT, SPACE & TIME

The HARWOOD COLLECTION: Blumenschein to Bell

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> *"The great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo range seems as near and as far as it had in the morning... In the blue evening smoke of the two villages, Taos Pueblo and Taos looked* hopelessly *small and forgotten."*
>
> *(Frederic Remington, 1902[1])*

CONTINUUM

Over the course of the 20th century, Taos was a destination of artist émigrés from the Midwest and from both Coasts. Many did not stay. Those who did would shape an overarching narrative that spanned the entire century, a narrative of aesthetic continuity linking diverse artistic styles and cultural currents that evolved in Taos and northern New Mexico. That continuum subtended the "underlying currents and overriding concerns" [2] for an entire century of Taos art. It provides the artistic and cultural continuity of the wide range of works in the Harwood collections.

The matrix of this inclusive narrative is the region's unique high desert aesthetic, one that embraces "the bewildering range of artistic personalities" [3] who experienced it over the course of the twentieth century. Whether they came as "academic realists", impressionists, expressionists, cubists, "modernists", or were born here as Pueblo or Hispano artists, what summoned them all, in varied guise, was a landscape of vast imaginative force—sublime, humbling, and transformative—and its abiding local cultures: a unique sense of place and peoples that would profoundly affect their art, beliefs, and aspirations.

As Near and As Far

From the earliest accounts, artists and writers coming upon Taos for the first time bear witness to the region's unique, compelling sense of place. That testament to place appears in a journal entry of Frederic Remington from the 1880s describing his early encounter with Taos. He and his driver had left the Rio Grande Railroad at Tres Piedras and traveled all day over the mesa:

> *"...and yet the great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo range seems as near and as far as it had in the morning. It was as though we could not get near it ... In the blue evening smoke of the two villages, Taos Pueblo and Taos looked hopelessly small and forgotten." (Frederic Remington, 1902 [4])*

From his vantage at eight thousand feet on "this vast table-land west of the mountains," seeing the Taos mountains "scallop skyward, range after range—snow-capped—beautiful—overpowering..." Remington had the perception of Taos that would profoundly affect later artist émigrés and shape their response to it: there is no middle distance.

Renaissance perspective is the ultimate visual affirmation of the Western view of the world as rational, in which the middle ground links foreground with background as the space recedes from the viewer to a remote horizon in steady gradation of light and measured recession of scale. What Remington found, instead, was that the endless intervening stretch of flat high desert—the middle distance between traveler and both town and pueblo at the remote base of the towering Sangre de Cristo—seems to vanish. So that for all who are crossing it "the range seems as near and as far as it had in the morning."

A half century later Georgia O'Keeffe would manifest that same perception in a painting entitled *From the Faraway Nearby* in which a deer skull with antlers dominates a landscape reduced to a distant horizon. The entry for the painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online catalog ascribes to her inventiveness

what she actually perceived in the landscape, in common with earlier artists like Remington: *Rendering each element in equally sharp focus, she blurred the spatial distinctions between what is perceived of as being near and what is far.*

Rather than confirm the Renaissance rational view of the world as ordered and measured, this spatial apprehension of Taos as a place of extremes—an abrupt juxtaposition of foreground and far horizon produced by a compression of middle ground—is reinforced by its light—saturated by the pervasive high desert's contrasts of bleaching sun and deep shadow.

This polarity in the perception of Taos is an apt metaphor of the region's unique aesthetic. Taos, as place, is a sublime experience: at one extreme is its vastness, its overpowering beauty; at the other extreme is its diminished human dimension. To an artful observer like Remington, the local Pueblo village and the Hispanic town huddled at the base of the looming blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo are, by comparison, "hopelessly small and forgotten."

The Aesthetic of the Sublime

In 1757 the British philosopher Edmund Burke advanced earlier eighteenth-century writings on a rediscovered ancient aesthetic category with his treatise "Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful:" [5] Beyond the qualities of "the beautiful," the sublime also involves—especially in the experience of nature—a feeling of being overwhelmed, in which the pleasure from nature's beauty is accompanied by a sense of awe, fear, or dread. [6] This feeling of the sublime characterizes the experience of overpowering scale in nature—such as "the great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo range" and the endless expanse of its "vast table-land."

By mid-nineteenth century, this aesthetic concept of "the Sublime" had transformed American landscape painting through the Hudson River School movement and its artist founder, Thomas Cole, whose painting The Oxbow

> *"...spoke to the soul by consecrating a real place. [Yet] unlike [Thomas] Doughty's calm and meditative stance, with its intimate scale and distance, rather, Cole gives us a vast opening across the valley, all the more marked by the diminutive presence of the artist with his easel in the foreground." [7]*

Yet while the sublime in Hudson River School landscape suggests comparison to a similar aesthetic at work in the Taos arts tradition, there are critical differences. The artists of the Hudson River School who found initial expression for this British theory of the sublime in the native scenery along the banks of the Hudson River would also find their subjects in New England, Yosemite, the Rockies of Wyoming and the Andes. In other words, artists such as Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, and Alfred Bierstadt imbued with this aesthetic those places that expressed it for them. Their painting "spoke to the soul by consecrating a place."

This is not the experiencee of Remington and subsequent artists who traveled to Taos. They did not bring an aesthetic—they found it in the place itself—and that place "spoke to the soul."

This generative quality of place is what sets Taos and northern New Mexico apart from other locales that have witnessed the emergence of a local art colony, movement, or art center. Unlike any other geographic locus that served as a nurturing environment for the arts, Taos did not simply inspire the rise of a local artist community; it defined it. Taos itself, as physical place, has been both matrix and metaphor of what became, in the course of the twentieth century, an abiding aesthetic for successive migrations of

modernists to the region. That aesthetic both express and inform the critical issues that each generation of artists brings to the region.

The New Sublime

In his 1963 essay, "The American Sublime," art critic Lawrence Alloway notes that there is the risk of slipping into what Benjamin T. Spencer described in *The Quest for Nationality* (1957) as the "Topographical Fallacy," the tendency to attribute sublime aspects in literature—and by extension, in art—to similar qualities in the native landscape, so that "grandeur in scenery would issue in sublimity of poetic vision and loftiness of style. Thus American writing and painting..."would be inevitably infused by the sweep of the prairies, the majesty of the Rockies... and the thunder of Niagara." [8]

Alloway cites Spencer's "Topographical Fallacy" as part of his larger exegesis on the aesthetics of the sublime as the point of comparison for the new phase in the paintings of Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko, heralded by Newman's 1948 essay entitled *The Sublime is Now.* [9] Alloway connects Newman's account of the sublime with its 18th century conception, represented by "momentous and powerful" qualities which Burke attached to the sense of the sublime: greatness of dimensions, vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence, and infinity". For Newman, the sublime involves the artists' reassertion of "man's natural desire for the exalted..." The titles of Newman's paintings—*Tundra, Prometheus Bound, Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—speak to this existential sense of the sublime, one that "gives a sense of grandeur" such that "[t]he spectator's proximity to such a work calls forth the feeling of awe." [10]

For Rothko, the sublime is identified by a subject matter in art "which is tragic and timeless;" he asserts that this "exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source book of art." [11] Early on he refers directly to Greek tragedy, which Alloway describes as "the analogue of Newman's absolute emotion and of Still's 'total responsibility' for "an unqualified act."

An inherent link of the Taos aesthetic with the Abstract Expressionist reprise of the sublime is especially evident in the new sublime's approach to light:

> *In sublime aesthetics... colour was associated with beauty, light with sublimity [Burke, II vii/viii]. Light as a metaphor for illumination (in the sense of revelation) has a different character, and one that is more relevant to Rothko. ...Rothko's characteristic effect of light combined with obscurity is anticipated by Burke when he observes that 'extreme light... obliterates all objects, so as in its effects exactly to resemble darkness'. ...Light, as the medium in which we perceive objects, is often regarded atmospherically as a veil. The continual overlays of thick washes in Rothko... are like veils. Veil imagery is traditional in revelatory art. ...The rhetoric of veils and secreted mystery is implicit in Rothko, and is one source of that feeling which his work has of carrying a momentous but illusive subject... [12]*

Alloway returns to his veil imagery several years later, in 1973, in his reflections on the early grid paintings of Agnes Martin that emerg around 1960 on Coenties Slip, describing the grid as "halfway between a rectangular system of coordinates and a veil ...an open plane ...for all its irregularity, a veil, a shadow, a bloom." [13] And as a Coenties Slip colleague Jack Youngerman [14] recalled, Martin's emerging grids at this time were accompanied by "an extremity of distress.' ...Martin's descents into uncontrollable panic happened, apparently, without warning... no visible slide into melancholy, no crescendo of excitability. ...Agnes was fine—until she wasn't." [15]

As with Rothko's earlier veil iconography, resulting from his "desire for an art of calm and tranquility," Agnes Martin's Coenties Slip grids are a highly personal reflection of the Abstract Expressionist appropriation of the "tranquility tinged with Terror" (Burke) that marked the 18th century aesthetic of the sublime. [16]

In a review of Martin's work in 2005, *New Yorker* art critic Schjeldahl reflected upon the wider import of art's "spirituality as a secular discipline" :

> *What is the value, for life, of spirituality as a secular discipline? Martin's art sustains that question, an American preoccupation since the New England transcendentalists, which became newly acute, in art, with Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt.* [17]

The new sublime, then, is not simply topographical. Like its 18th-century antecedent, it is existential.

The Taos Sublime: Sermo Humilis

For all its parity, there is a crucial difference between the fundamentally Romantic notion of the new sublime and its deeper meaning for the Taos aesthetic.

Viewing Taos for the first time, experiencing the overwhelming scale of its beauty, Remington found the remote Pueblo village and Hispanic town along the horizon as "hopelessly small and forgotten." But to these emigrant Hispano and indigenous Pueblo peoples themselves, this humble, elemental scale of human existence was the fitting complement to the vast, sublime space it inhabited. What is usually described simply as a historical confluence of spectacular landscape and picturesque Native and Hispanic peoples is in fact a unique symbiosis of overwhelmingly sublime place with correspondingly humbled humanity: *Here, the mark of the earth was on the people. The environment largely shaped the life it supported.* [18]

That symbiosis of sublime and humble is reflected in the thousand-year history of Taos Pueblo that has shaped its unique northern New Mexico religious and cultural traditions. And with the arrival in 1540 of Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries in Taos Valley and the establishment of the Spanish village in 1615, the Hispano settlers would adapt their own religious and cultural legacy to create a local culture embodied in the artistic tradition of the santos and bultos.

The aesthetic core of that santos tradition traces to the ancient Christian motif of the "sermo humilis"—the humble or low style—which merged with the "sermo sublimis"—the elevated or grave style—in early Christian art and literature that persisted into the Middle Ages and later periods (especially in Spain). This radical recasting of the classical concept of the Sublime originates in late Antiquity:

> *Of course this mingling of styles is not dictated by artistic purpose—it is rather rooted from the beginning in character of Jewish-Christian literature, it was graphically and harshly dramatized through God's incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions, and through his Passion which, judged by earthly standards, was ignominious; and it naturally came to have…a most decisive bearing upon man's connection of the tragic and the sublime.* [19]

The exemplar of the fusion of this ancient sublime-humble style in the northern New Mexico santos tradition is the patron saint of Santa Fe:

> *At the beginning of the thirteenth century there appears in Italy a man who embodies, in exemplary fashion, the mixture we are discussing of sublimitas and humilitas, of ecstatically sublime immersion in God and humbly concrete everydayness—with a resulting irresolvable fusion of action and expression, of content and form. He is Saint Francis of Assisi. … Self-surrendering and meditative mystic though he*

himself was, the decisive thing for him and his companions was living among the people, living among the lowliest as the lowliest and most despised of them all. [20]

The Hispano transmission of this Franciscan spirituality, with its mixture of "ecstatically sublime immersion in God and humbly concrete everydayness" was fully congruent with the indigenous Pueblo response to "the great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo range." This aesthetic congruence of place and peoples would confront Frederic Remington and the later, artist émigrés to Taos, who were changed by the life they sought to portray.

Scale

A salient trait of this sublime-humble aesthetic in Taos art is its inversion of the epic scale that mark both the late 19th-century Romantic and mid-20th-century American abstraction's embrace of the classical concept of the Sublime. Local depictions of the Taos mountain landscape do not employ the grand canvases of the Hudson River School or follow the similar mural-dimension range of an Abstract Expressionist painting by Pollock, Still, or Rothko—certainly nothing approaching the scale of Barnett Newman's colossal *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (c. 8' x 18').

The sublime for Taos artists [21] turns for its expression to the scale of the easel painting—Blumenschein's *Deserted Mining Camp*, Bert Phillips' *Taos Valley*, Joseph Imhof's *Taos Mountain with Kiva,* Ken Price's *Unreported Sighting* —or, at most, to the four-by-five to five-by-six foot range of the mid-size wall canvas—Earl Stroh's *Blue Vista* (c.52 x 64"), Robert D. Ray's *False Spring*, Bruce Lowney's *Morning Clouds* (c. 44 x 66"). It is as if the abrupt confrontation of "the great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo" with the antiphonal response of village and pueblo sheltering below, as if this harsh juncture of extremes reveals a transcendence that calls for understatement, one whose restrained scale captures what is at the same time monumental and mortal, *mirabile dictu and memento mori.* This experience of a transcendence tied to the human condition pervades Taos landscape painting, mocking the best efforts to coax French Impressionist effects from the high desert sun whose light bleaches the bones that inhabit the bleak terrain of O'Keeffe's canvases. What endures is this earthy, rooted transcendence, as much a part of the dense massive ridge of Ralph Meyers small *Taos Landscape* (11" x 14") as it is a force in John DePuy's fathomless gorges and brooding mesas, echoes of a mute era, portents of the fire next time.

The mural-size acrylic by Bill Gersh (*Untitled,* 1980s) that does employ the scale of the New York School is an exception that proves the rule. The wildly distorted figuration and Neo-expressionist palette uses scale as another device in the existentialist arsenal of Taos paintings whose focus is the *sermo humilis*—the highly personal response of Taos artists to Taos transcendence—life "under the volcano." In poignant counterpoint to the santero's *nunc dimittis* theme of the good death is the tragi-comic strain that links the crude carvings of Dona Sebastiana and her death cart, the life-and-death struggle of Nicholas Herrera's santo, *Mi Vida de 25*, the dance-of-death frolic of the calaveras of Bill Nichols and the eerie desert Edens of Jim Wagner with their creepy harbinger crows—all conceits for a merry *memento mori* that masks an underlying warning it shares in common with Gersh's raging caricatures: "Do not go gentle into that good night."

Peregrinus Expectavi: *I come as a stranger, full of hope*

The paradox of Taos as a sublime place resides in its *sermo humilis*, the mingling of sublime and humble, of high and low styles. How else to explain the equal claim on its aesthetic of Agnes Martin's transcendent grid paintings and Jim Wagner's quirky pastorals of pigs, puffy clouds and magpies, of Ken Price's *Death Shrine* and John Nichols' cartoon *Calaveras*, or of Victor Goler's timeless santos and Nicholas Herrera's low-rider bultos.

The émigré artists were changed by the life they sought to capture. The earliest ones would form the Taos Society of Artists in 1915. Academically trained painters and illustrators, they all experienced, to varying degree, the impact of the region, on them and on their work:

> *We all drifted into Taos like skilled hands looking for a good steady job. We found [it], as it grew into an urge that pushed us to our limits, a joyous inspiration to produce and give to the deepest extent of each man's own caliber. We lived only to paint. And that is what happened to every artist who passed this way!"* (Ernest Blumenschein). [22]

Marsden Hartley wrote in 1918 of the high desert as 'the greatest space a white person could sense—as certainly the red man knows how huge it is—having made his world out of it—his entire cosmos." [23] D.H. Lawrence felt that "for greatness of beauty I have never experienced anything like New Mexico." [24] Yet the Taos of surpassing beauty is also the high desert that O'Keeffe found to be "*vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty.*"

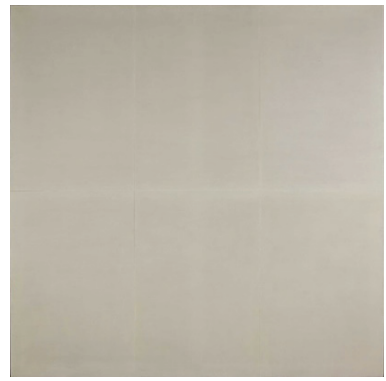
Writing in 2009, art critic and curator David Hickey's reflections on Taos recall those of Remington and O'Keeffe when he noted that "*There is not much that architecture or landscaping can do to mitigate the daunting hegemony of the sky, the sweep of the flat, the looming scale of the distant mountains* [25]*... Taos is hardly even a human place...*".

Larry Bell's work emerges from the fundamental minimalist aesthetic that relies for its effects on the literal object in its actual space, eschewing the notion of the art object as symbolic form whose illusive or allusive inferred traits reference an absent metaphysical reality (e.g. Rothko's implicit veil rhetoric, Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*). The monumental effect of Bell's *Mine Shaft* (1988) composed of laminate strips and metallic materials fused onto a grey canvas, share in common with his reflective, tinted glass sculptures this in situ aesthetic that calls for the perception by a viewer in that space. Bell brought his light and space aesthetic with him to Taos, yet the works done since involving "the interaction of light and surface" testify to the power of Taos as place. Whatever its original inspiration Bell's *Mine Shaft* bears witness to the unique, transformative effect of "the great blue wall of the Sangre de Cristo."

Agnes Martin is arguably the premier expression of the humble-sublime transcendence that defines the Taos aesthetic. In a passage of *The Untroubled Mind*, [26] Agnes Martin describes her revelatory discovery of the Taos sublime—very likely in the Fall of 1957 as she was leaving Taos for New York to spend the next decade painting in lower Manhattan. The passage is a seminal account of her grid paintings that would emerge around 1960:

> *I used to paint mountains here in New Mexico and I thought/*
> *my mountains looked like ant hills*
> *I saw the plains driving out of New Mexico and I thought /*
> *the plain had it/ just the plane*
> *if you draw a diagonal, that's loose at both ends/ I don't like circles-- too expanding/*
> *When I draw horizontals/ you see this big plane and*
> *you have certain feelings/ like you're expanding over the plane* [27]

Martin's illumination—captured in the "plain" to "plane" conversion—revealed the Taos mountain vastness through the "near and far" low lying plains, the pattern of parallel lines that would comprise the very personal nature of Martin's grid facture—involving hand-ruled horizontal and vertical lines, variously spaced, drawn over, under or scored into pale-toned oil (later acrylic) burlap or canvas grounds (rough or smooth)—yielding the classical understated effect of what Lucy Lippard described as "channels of nuance, stretched on a rack of linear tensions—" what Betty Parsons called "heartstrings pulled out, endlessly." The series of seven horizontal-band canvases in the Agnes Martin Gallery painted by artist during 1992-1993 are a testament to the humble-sublime of the Taos aesthetic.



Martin's last painting in Coenties Slip, *Tundra* (1967), a veiled, pallid grid described by Kasha Linville in 1971, supports the accounts of the artist's frequent bouts of anguish (Youngerman).

> *[Tundra's] surface is divided by three lines into six tall rectangles... the surface is closed. It suggests the heavy, white-laden blankness of a snow sky. The lines that divide it are dominant at close range, but something very peculiar happens as you move back... Because the horizontally brushed grayish wash on the surface stops near but not [flush] against the lines, they seem to have halos around them. These halos actually swallow the lines at middle distance, leaving only their white ghosts. Even the ghosts disappear eventually.* [28]

Like all artists who have found themselves face to face with the extremes of Taos transcendence—Burke's "tranquility tinged with terror"—Agnes Martin seemed, over time, to have laid her beast to rest, and—hewing to a fragile peace with herself-—untroubled her mind at last, and attained the imperfect grace of redemption.

Dr. Richard Tobin, Director

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[1] Due to space limitations the endnotes, indicated by numbers in brackets [ ], are not included. Readers may request them by emailing me at rtobin@unm.edu.

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