

HEDIEH JAVANSHIR ILCHI

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ESSAY BY BLAIR MURPHY ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION

“WE ARE FOREVER FOLDING INTO THE NIGHT”

In Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi's work, the pours, stains, and expressive drips of American abstraction meet the detailed and precise forms of Persian ornamentation. Over the last decade, the artist has cultivated a painting practice that draws on her experiences growing up in Iran and moving to the United States at eighteen. Her work combines the visual influences she absorbed as a child with the cultural and art historical influences from her life in the United States and her time studying at American art schools. For Ilchi, delving into these aesthetic traditions and artistic techniques has acted as a means of processing and confronting the tension between her country of origin and her adopted home.

In her most recent work, Ilchi has delved further into painting's history, building on both her previous influences and her interest in landscape to engage with the concept of the sublime, reinvigorating it for our contemporary moment. The sublime has a long history as a framework for conceptualizing our relationship with the natural world, the divine, and other forces seemingly beyond human control. Ilchi builds on this history, reimagining the sublime as a lens for considering environmental catastrophe and human conflict in this age of existential threats.

Each of the artist's canvases begins with a pour. Drawing on influences from Western, specifically American, abstraction, Ilchi pours paint onto her canvas, creating foundational colors and compositional elements. She balances spontaneity with an accumulated knowledge of her materials, combining chance and intention. This initial step is unplanned, leaving the foundational form of the work to some degree of chance. After the pours, Ilchi develops the forms of the painting, integrating sections of detailed, decorative patterns.

These elements are refined and shaped in her most recent paintings to evoke physical environments. Some suggest earthly landscapes, others feel extraterrestrial or subaquatic. Dramatic pools of color in surreal green and orange, vibrant blue, and menacing red are transformed into expansive skies framed by dark silhouettes of trees, glowing mountains, and horizon lines. These unsettling, even threatening, landscapes point to a new (and perhaps unexpected) source of inspiration for Ilchi: work by artists associated with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism, including Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner. These artists' depictions of expansive landscapes, turbulent ocean waters, and other overwhelming environ-

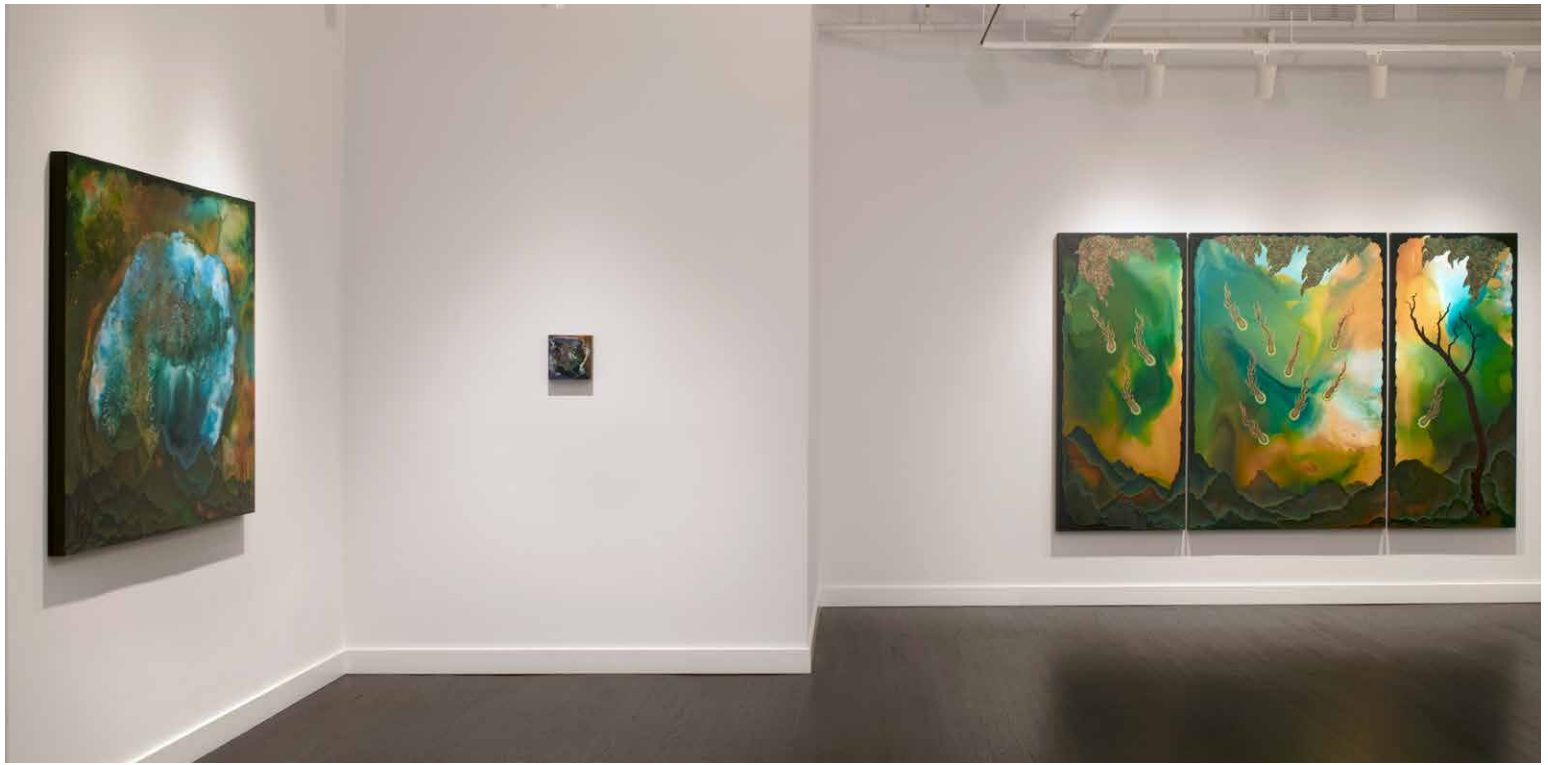
ments and phenomena evoked awe and terror—the two emotions overwhelmingly associated with the sublime during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Paintings intended to evoke the sublime during this period took on many subjects—stormy skies, shipwrecks, dramatic vistas, erupting volcanoes—all tied together by the possibilities they presented for evoking awe and terror. A century later, it was the sublime's association with expansiveness and formlessness that led art historian Robert Rosenblum to coin the term "Abstract Sublime" to discuss the work of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and other artists working with abstraction in mid-century America.¹ In Rosenblum's telling, practitioners of the Abstract Sublime were the descendants—though not always consciously—of these nineteenth-century masters, evoking the awe and terror of the infinite and the divine through their large-scale abstract canvases.

Ilchi's excavations of landscape and abstraction spring from the legacy of the sublime in both traditions. As always, she works with a consciousness of the associations attached to the strains of influence in her work and her relationship to the seemingly disparate worlds they represent. Her use of pouring and dripping brings to mind the macho public image of first-generation Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, whose work was presented to the world as the embodiment of American individualism, freedom, and creativity. In contrast, the Persian ornamentation she references developed from a more collective form of creativity, a tightly controlled and precise painting process centered on workshops and, for Ilchi, evocative of the authoritarian environment of her childhood.

Her interest in the sublime and the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition also bears the knowledge of the genre's limitations and associations. Like the public personas of the early Abstract Expressionists, the sublime was heavily gendered, acting as the masculine counterpart to its feminized opposite, beauty. While the Romantics grappled with the changing world of their time, including the transformative effects of new technologies, some critics and art historians have argued that paintings meant to evoke the sublime ultimately reaffirmed human dominion over nature. Kant described the pleasure of the sublime as "a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital

¹ See Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977) and Robert Rosenblum, "Beyond the Infinite: Robert Rosenblum on the Sublime in Contemporary Art," *ARTnews*, February 1961. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/beyond-the-infinite-robert-rosenblum-on-sublime-contemporary-art-in-1961-3811/>



powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.”² The sublime evoked fear, awe, and terror before reaffirming the autonomy and power of the individual viewer and, ultimately, the gendered, racial, and colonialist hierarchies that shaped the nineteenth century.³

In the expansive skies, glowing mountains, and green-orange clouds of Ilchi’s latest work, she reconsiders the possibilities for the sublime in the twenty-first century, challenging the legacies of both the nineteenth-century sublime and the Abstract Sublime. Ilchi’s compositions forgo an easy closure of the sense of anxiety provoked by the sublime. Rather than returning the viewer to a position of renewed coherence and mastery, Ilchi creates compositions that challenge the possibility and even desirability of that confident state.

In these latest works, dark forms reference trees but, in their flatness, interfere with the consistent style and perspective of the traditional Romantic landscape. In *This time merciful nature saved us from ourselves*, pools of green and orange fill the space above the mountains, giving way in the center to a section of blue, suggesting a stormy sky breaking in the middle. Projectiles that suggest meteors or comets rain down from the sky, both contributing to the threatening ambiance and breaking up the abstrac-

tion of the composition. In *I took away more truth than I ever gave*, the cracking and bubbling of the surface and the pools of green and orange suggest both oceanic and industrial depths, moving the audience from the awe of the sublime toward the revulsion of the abject.

Ilchi troubles the possibility of the sublime by incorporating visual styles and references that reflect her many influences, creating visual ruptures within the compositions. While the paintings contain suggestions of landscape, they are consistently broken up or disturbed by sections of detailed ornamentation, dark framing, and pools of cracking paint. There is expansiveness in the compositions, but also constricted spaces, impenetrable barriers, and bottomless pits.

Ilchi’s work revitalizes the legacies of all of her influences, revealing their potential for speaking to the present moment, when the concerns of the sublime—environmental catastrophe, man’s relationship with the natural world, the potential for large-scale destruction—are top of mind. By evoking the environmental terror of the sublime, Ilchi invites us to sit with the unease, the complexity of identities both real and projected, and our tenuous and interdependent relationship with the natural world .

² Immanuel Kant, from *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), in *The Sublime Reader*, ed. Robert R. Clewis (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1993), p. 123.

³ On the sublime’s connection to and reaffirmation of racial and gendered hierarchies see: Meg Armstrong, “‘The Effects of Blackness’: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Summer, 1996), pp. 213-236 and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990), among other sources.