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The Art of Somatopia

Project Overview:

Throughout this semester, I was intrigued by the recurring imposition of human qualities upon landscape. This mapping between the attributes of humans and landscape has a name: *somatopia*. By studying somatopia, we gain insight on how we perceive and imagine landscape relative to ourselves. I was also, unsurprisingly, interested in the portrayals of landscape in painting.

Due to my developing curiosity regarding somatopia and my continuing passion for visual art, this final project was an opportunity to explore analogies of body and landscape primarily through researching its portrayals in art and creating my own painting inspired by research. Furthermore, creating my own landscape painting helped me further understand perceptions of landscape.

To gain a more thorough understanding of somatopia, I first researched the concept in general. I then focused on the usage of somatopia in painting and the defining elements of landscape paintings. By studying other paintings, I was able to create a design for my painting as well as formulate opinions regarding depictions of femininity and sexuality in somatopic art. Through my research, I was finally able to produce my painting.

Origins of Somatopia:

The first step to studying somatopia is to understand the commentary of Darby Lewes, who was the first to use the term (1). While the concept of somatopia has been prevalent throughout history, the term itself was not invented until about twenty years ago. Using the Greek words for *body* and *place*, Lewes coined a term to describe the construction of a landscape modeled after a body, a body-place. Lewes was predominately interested in the use of body-places in British literature, from which she came to the conclusion that somatopia is an inherently sexual, possibly even pornographic, way of portraying the human body. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society that associates nature with purity and fertility, landscapes are more likely to be likened to the ideal female body. This leads Lewes to believe that through somatopia, the notion of utopia, the idealization of place, is closely tied to the ideal human body.

Lewes references the symbolism used in the first book of William Wordsworth's *Prelude* as an example of somatopia and to support her views regarding somatopia. Nature is portrayed as both a maternal and paternal figure for an orphaned boy (Lewes 3). The poem features a water cave that Lewes describes as "suspiciously womblike." There, the boy steals a boat and then emerges from the cave as it births him into the world. As the boy rows through the lake, the poem's language becomes rather sexual, signifying a rape of nature. However, the paternal side of nature retaliates in the form of a growing "phallic" precipice that scares the boy into returning the boat. While I agree with Lewes that the poem's landscape is the orphaned boy's utopia, as it grants him the wish of parents, I do not find the imagery as sexual as she does. To me, a womb is not sexual nor is a precipice necessarily phallic. The precipice is definitely a power symbol, but I see it as a disciplining hand rather than a penis. While Lewes's commentary on somatopia is

insightful and something I kept in mind during the rest of my research, I choose not to agree with it completely.

Somatopia in Painting:

When researching artwork regarding somatopia, I narrowed my scope to only paintings. Not only was studying paintings more relevant to the development of a painting, I admired the subtle portrayal of somatopia in painting as opposed to in illustrative cartography and installation art, where its portrayal is blatant. I also focused on painters that varied in their portrayals of somatopia for a more comprehensive understanding.

I first studied the works of Gustave Courbet, who in the 1860s, painted four views of water caves near his home village entitled *The Source of the Loue* (Schama 372). Various elements establish the paintings as a symbol of birth. Each painting shows an ominous pitch-black hole from where water streams out, an analogy to amniotic fluids flowing from a vagina. The location of the birthing water caves is also proximate to Courbet's own birthplace. The title, *Source*, suggests the paintings depict a form of genesis. Furthermore, the mapping of cave to womb, as previously discussed, was used in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and is an established symbol in the Western literary memory.

A few years later, Courbet painted an image of a vulva entitled *The Origin of the World* (Schama 373). What marks this painting as a landscape painting lies in its composition, which is virtually identical to that of the water cave paintings. Though *The Origin of the World* literally depicts a human body part rather than a piece of landscape, it is still related to somatopia. A human body with attributes of landscape either takes somatopia to the extreme, in that a landscape becomes a body, or inverts it, in that a body is modeled after a landscape. Furthermore,

the painting incorporates non-human objects into the landscape, particularly the cascading sheets upon which the body lies. *The Origin of the World* was also produced for a collector of erotica (Schama 373), which recalls Darby Lewes's argument regarding the inherently pornographic nature of somatopia. However, in my opinion, the vulva is shown as a place of birth rather than a place of pleasure.

The second artist I studied was Caspar David Friedrich, who in the late 1820s created several landscape paintings featuring trees (Amstutz 455). Friedrich painted in the midst of Romanticism and believed in universal forms, the idea everything is composed of the same geometry, so it is no surprise that Friedrich's tree paintings can be seen as depictions of human blood vessels (Amstutz 455). Friedrich's landscape paintings defy painting traditions in that they are oriented vertically. This vertical orientation and the paintings' overall compositions cause the images to closely resemble medical illustrations of pulmonary veins and arteries. The paintings' color schemes are overall monochromatically blue, yet scarlet speckles on tree trunks and dark maroon pools in the snow extend the blood vessel imagery. Like Courbet, Friedrich conveys somatopia primarily through composition, but details also play an important role.

To refute Darby Lewes, Friedrich's tree paintings are examples of somatopia that lack sexual implications. In fact, Friedrich does not even use somatopia in a gendered way. However, one of the most defining human features of the paintings is the bleeding trees. The tree paintings show that somatopia does not necessarily need to be sexual and that violence can be substitute. This raises the question of whether or not somatopia is intrinsically graphic.

The last artist I studied was April Gornik, a contemporary landscape and feminist painter (Beckenstein 7). One notable painting is *Waterfall 1995*, which shows a stream drizzling out a V-

shape formed by two mountain tops (Beckenstein 9). Like Friedrich's tree paintings, the painting is vertically oriented. Its composition suggests a pair of closed thighs. If that is the case, the mountains' texture resembles muscles, and the painting's vast size, 70" x 62", further strengthens the thighs. The mountain thighs are distinctly female in the V-shape they form. In between the pair of thighs, the ambiguous stream becomes unsettling. Gornik's work is feminist in that its use of somatopia to portray the female body defies the precedents set. Female body-places in other works, particularly the water-caves in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Courbet's paintings, are depicted as passive, but Gornik's strong mountains are more reminiscent of *Prelude*'s masculine precipice.

Through studying three different artists, I came to several conclusions about somatopia, both in painting and in general. When designing a somatopic painting, the composition is the most important element. Small details yet noticeable details, such as the red paint in Friedrich's tree paintings, can also help convey human qualities. As with most landscape paintings, somatopic landscapes have a limited color scheme. In regards to the concept of somatopia, I do not believe it is intrinsically sexual, but some other instinctively primal quality, a quality distinct of living beings that cannot be attributed to landscape alone, may need to be present.

Elements of Landscape Painting:

In order to create a landscape painting, I needed to determine the elements of a landscape painting. These defining features are exemplified in Marsden Hartley's *New Mexico Recollection #12*. While the piece is abstractly rendered in that each object depicted has been reduced to a geometric shape, the scene is clearly a landscape with mountains. This is achieved through

referencing the aesthetic language and preserving the most important facets of realism (Giordano 2015 Feb 25).

New Mexico Recollection #12 relies heavily on the aesthetic language to convey an image of landscape. Like with somatopic paintings, the most important element is composition. In order to be a landscape depiction, the piece is oriented horizontally and contains three distinct horizontal divisions separating foreground, middleground, and background. Other noteworthy elements are colors and forms. The painting's color scheme is mostly earth-tones with hints of blue and green, recalling other images of mountains and water. Forms in the painting take on symbolic shapes; the oscillating outline of the red ochre middleground is undoubtedly a mountain while large, white shapes suspended above the mountains evoke the image of clouds.

Facets of realism are preserved through the painting's textures. The mountains are built using wide brushstrokes that resemble strata, rock layers of the earth. Similarly, layering of tonal values in the clouds create a sense of depth similar to real clouds.

Painting Design:

My painting, entitled *Strata*, contains elements based off and derived from the other artworks I studied. *Strata* depicts a hand resting upon an arm; the background is vague and simple. Various considerations were made in regards to each portion of the design.

When choosing the subject of the painting, I primarily considered other somatopic paintings. To me, the most interesting painting I studied was Courbet's *The Origin of the World* due to how it flipped typical portrayals of somatopia. Inspired, I chose to paint human anatomy that resembled landscape rather than the reverse. The painting's subject, a hand, is analogous to a

mountain. Furthermore, my painting differed from other somatopic paintings, including *The Origin of the World*, in that it portrays the interaction of two bodies, though only parts can be seen, instead of one. This interaction is not necessarily sexual and definitely not violent. However, it does convey a sense of intimacy, conforming to my idea that somatopic images ought to present a distinctly living quality that cannot be attributed to landscape alone.

In regards to gender, the subject's meaning is meant to be ambiguous. The hand is slender and feminine yet overall androgynous while the arm upon which the hand rests lacks gender completely. The subject's mostly genderless quality is a reference to the same quality found in Friedrich's tree paintings.

When recalling both somatopic paintings and the abstract landscape in *New Mexico Recollection #12*, composition was the most important element in evoking an image, whether it was of human anatomy or of landscape. To convey an image of landscape from a depiction of human body parts, I oriented the painting horizontally and partitioned the design into three sections: the arm, the hand, and the sky-like background.

Other design choices include using color scheme, texture, and naming to create a balance between human body depiction and landscape imagery. Conveniently, earth-tones and flesh-tones are very similar, so my limited color scheme was mostly tones of red-ochre and brown. I also included hints of green and blue, colors prevalent in landscape paintings but not in skin tones, to further convey landscape imagery. Unlike its color scheme, the painting's texture involved more compromise; while mountains and rocks are rough, flesh is smooth. However, the layering of colors in *New Mexico Recollection #12* allowed for the depiction of smooth strata. I decided to incorporate this technique to simultaneously render the different light values in flesh and evoke

images of strata. Lastly, I gave the painting a title that describes what the image is analogous to, similar to the way *The Origin of the World* was named.

Painting Execution:

The production of *Strata* resulted in a 24" x 18" acrylic on canvas painting. *Strata* was painted over the course of two sessions at a studio space in the UT Austin Visual Arts Center.

A 24" x 18" stretched canvas was chosen primarily for its size but also due to various constraints. Ideally, I would have liked a larger canvas, similar to those April Gornik uses, but a larger canvas would have been impossible to transport in and out of the studio, not to mention very expensive. My original design was an image with panoramic dimensions — its width significantly greater than its height. However, this would require me to stretch my own canvas, which I had neither the skills nor resources to do so. Due to these constraints, I settled on a pre-stretched canvas with acceptable dimensions and adjusted my design accordingly.

Though all the paintings studied were painted in oil, I chose to paint in acrylic for its fast dry-time. While oil paints can take days to dry, acrylic paints take no more than an hour. This fast dry-time allowed me to work quickly and continuously, not ever waiting long periods between layers of paint. I could then easily create the layers necessary for the strata-like texture. Most importantly, the use of acrylic paint meant the painting could be transported around campus and stored anywhere.

When painting *Strata*, the paint was applied primarily using wide paintbrushes and a paint spatula. A narrow paintbrush and washes were used for finishing touches. Wide brushstrokes were necessary to create the strata texture while the paint spatula served as an aide in mixing “streaky” paints. Wide paintbrushes also allowed for quick paint application. The

narrow paintbrush was used to paint details and create cleaner edges. Blue and green washes were created by applying paints diluted with water and then dabbing away moisture and pigment, leaving only a stain.

Artist Statement:

Strata is a landscape painting disguised as portrayal of human body parts. Through this imagery, human qualities are attributed to a landscape, thus channeling somatopia. Research in somatopia and landscape painting helped me form my own perceptions of landscape and ultimately create an design for an imagined landscape. While carrying out that design, I had to work and problem solve under various constraints to ultimately produce a painting.

Works Cited

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