

“Skyscapes”: New Paintings by Christopher Kuhl
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Cristopher Kuhl’s Immersive Sublime

By Richard Vine

Christopher Kuhl’s newest paintings are, in their luscious visual impact, a departure from his earlier socially embedded works. Gone are the direct references to the architecture, languages, history, and cultural norms of non-Western peoples. Gone, too, are all representations of objects, words, schemas, structures, and figures. One would look in vain here for stylized depictions of Seminole pathways, mosques in North Africa, Arabic street signs, or any other motif from the mid-career artist’s earlier series.

Instead, the quasi-monochrome canvases of “Skyscapes,” aglow with paint applied in wide horizontal bands, bespeak a ghostly gesturalism and a thematic concern with the erasure of all physical and mental boundaries. The point of departure, for the artist and viewers alike, seems to be the contemplation of a lushly colored sunsets over a tropical ocean—a subject that envelopes both the eye and the “I” in a seamless melding of sky and water, self and nature, suggesting a third state of being: a purely aesthetic experience.

Gone is the daily world, but not forgotten. Abstract painters often attest that all their previous seeing, feeling, and thinking—which, for Kuhl, springs from a childhood on military bases in the South, education at Notre Dame, devotion to the sacraments and artistic tradition of the Catholic Church, and discerning travels throughout the world—is concentrated in the marks, shapes, textures, and colors of their formal compositions. The stimuli of embodied life flow through the artist, as medium, to the picture plane, ideally to become signifiers of the infinite.

Kuhl’s approach has clear precedents in mid-20th-century Abstract Expressionism, whose creators (especially Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still, known for their vast pictorial fields)

sought to unmoor art completely from the indexical function of Realism and Naturalism, and to envelop viewers in pure art. Instead of aiming to have *these* marks on the canvas visually replicate *these* items in the physical world—a bowl of fruit, an everyday scene in the city or countryside, a telltale human visage, acts of great mythic or historical import—Abstract painters sought to spiritually transport the viewer through an immediate, wordless apprehension of color harmonies, shapes, and formal relationships. Even earlier in history of modernism, pioneers of that non-representational mode such as af Klint, Malevich, and Kandinsky had linked geometry and/or gesturalism to an incorporeal dimension, one more diffuse but no less transcendent than the relatively familiar divinity, innate in the natural world, evoked by the 19th-century Hudson River and Luminist painters.

Like Monet, who dissolved the distinction between water and reflected sky in his immensely scaled *Water Lilies* series, these practitioners—Kuhl's direct antecedents—fused somewhat contradictory experiences. In their art, the self is at once nearly effaced yet exalted, a paradox that in the 18th century was dubbed the Sublime. Writers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant saw in great heights and depths, sweeping vistas, and the tremendous forces of nature an at once threatening and exhilarating disorder, capable of overwhelming, even obliterating, the human body and intellect alike—a heightened state opposed to classical Beauty, with its emphasis on reason, just proportion, and emotional restraint.

This was, of course, not a new category of sensation but a philosophical recognition, a naming, of a response that had been with us always, from the first shake of a shaman's rattle. The term, and the adventures into "the wild" that it spurred among the Romantic poets and others, was a conceptual attempt to honor, to *feel*, and simultaneously to tame the unknowable—the epistemological void that, until the 18th-century Enlightenment, absorbed a major portion of our cognitive activity. Immersion in the ultimately unfathomable, inducing awe, has long been a rite of passage to adulthood and a sustained condition of life in the community, necessary for the eventual attainment of wisdom. It infused the initiation ceremonies of tribal cultures; the temple complexes of in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and other high civilizations of the ancient world; the cathedrals of the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. And, passing through the through the panoramas and cycloramas of the 19th

century, it remains with us today—in such metaphysically attenuated forms as immersive art installations, alternative-reality computer games, the internet, and IMAX cinema.

Some artists, for example Rothko in his famous black chapel murals, have dwelt on the darker aspects of this dynamic. For the deepest (and hence most Sublime) abyss of all is, of course, the human psyche and its emotional turmoil. Kuhl, however, remains in the light and seems to soar slowly toward its celestial source, a journey bathed in color and powered by what he calls “the energy of the world.” Luminescence has been a metaphor for redemption-through-knowledge at least since the Manicheans divided the cosmos into forces of darkness and light. For the Buddha, enlightenment was synonymous nirvana. Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, made heavenly radiance consubstantial with Love and God. The secular Bavarian Illuminati coopted the term for the banishment of ignorance and superstition. Such associations linger on today, in the works of Minimalist sculptor Dan Flavin as well those of Light and Space artists such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell. Meanwhile, Olafur Eliasson’s 2003 *Weather Project*, with its illusion of a giant fiery orb hovering high above visitors, reminds us that this fascination dates as far back as the earliest sun worship, itself prompted in all likelihood by physiological responses in the brain, glandular systems, and cells.

We can add one further step today. Although Kuhl’s work makes no specific allusion to current mores, it can be viewed also as conveying a dissolution of the ego, the self-centered self, into a pervasive identification with other beings and our shared physical habitat. This immersive, environmental Sublime implicitly encompasses both social justice and ecological conscientiousness. It conveys the *effect* of biological and social connectedness without detailing the networks and mechanisms that produce it. The florid colors of “Skyscapes” are possible only because certain environmental conditions prevail; the mind that registers this intermingling of sky and water, processing it simultaneously as a chromatically modulated canvas and a spiritual empyrean, is a product of not only of a particular cultural history but of the specific neurological development of our species, intricately entwined with the fate of all other life forms.