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# Cristina de Gennaro: Sage Drawings

written by **Formwork**



**C**ristina de Gennaro's *Sage Drawing VI*, part of a series of works begun in 2012, is on view in Critical Mass at the SP/N Gallery, through November 11, 2017.



*Q. In your statement, you mentioned hiking in the high desert in Taos. Obviously, New Mexico has a massively important artistic tradition from prehistoric times to modernism. I wondered if you feel a sense of artistic kinship with other artists who have worked in the desert there?*

**A.** I've spent a bit of time in Taos over the past seven years and during one trip I had the opportunity to visit Georgia O'Keeffe's home in Abiquiu and I've also visited her beautiful "plaza blanca" a few times. I hadn't seriously looked at O'Keeffe's work since I was in my early twenties, but spending time in her landscape has opened it back up for me and somehow her paintings have become less familiar, perhaps they have become charged with the specifics of the location.

I've also been a frequent visitor to the Agnes Martin Gallery at the Harwood Museum in Taos. The octagonal gallery with an oculus skylight was built specifically for seven of her paintings completed in the early 1990s. Since the oculus is the only source of light in the gallery, the installation is never quite the same as it reflects the time of day and the quality of the light outside. It's a contemplative and calming place, much like the Rothko Chapel in Houston, and the paintings, minimalist bands of blue and white, feel like open space to me, much like the New Mexican landscape.



*Cristina de Gennaro, Sage Drawing I, 2013. Charcoal on mylar, eight panels, 16 x 72 inches overall.*

*Q. Another question is about this specific landscape: the high desert in New Mexico. Historically, certain places have been commonly associated with specific aesthetic concepts, for example, Turner's seascapes with the sublime, or New Jersey's industrial decay with Smithson's entropic "monuments." However — in the case of New Mexico, you noted specifically in your statement that you are interested in the more humble and mundane spaces, rather than the more familiar "grand vistas." How did you end up taking this less familiar approach to the landscape?*

**I sensed a connection between the sublime and the abject — and that connection continues to interest me.**

**A.** When I arrived in Taos in August 2012 for an artist fellowship at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation I had never worked with landscape before. At the time I had been focused on a series of portraits called the "Medusa Drawings" and I was thinking about aspects of the "feminine," specifically in relation to aging and

death, and the prevalent association of the “feminine” in Western culture to earth and decay even while it has clear biological connections to birth and life.

I also had been thinking about the notion of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror*. For Kristeva, abjection is the loss of distinction between subject and object and, in fact, death is *the* primary example of abjection as subject is transformed into object through its very process. Kristeva describes abjection as that which “disturbs identity, system, and order. It doesn’t respect borders, positions, rules.”

As it turned out, the “Medusa Drawings” were too unwieldy to transport to Taos, and I also wanted to take a break from the figure, so I decided I would start a parallel series in Taos that would incorporate some of the above ideas while working directly with landscape.

**I began thinking about the possibility of representing a kind of “underside” to the sublime, one without the religious implications and with a postmodern sense of mutable subjectivity.**

When I first began hiking the high desert in Taos looking for subjects, I felt overwhelmed by the beauty and grandeur of the place. I couldn’t help but think about the Romantic notion of the sublime and 19th century landscape painting. I began reading Edmund Burke (“A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”) and Immanuel Kant (“Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime”). Kant described sublime nature as limitless, that which is at the edge of human capacity to grasp its enormity. And Burke described the emotional effects of the sublime as simultaneously evoking both pleasure and fear, attraction and repulsion to what is “dark, uncertain, and confused.” I sensed a connection between the sublime and the abject — and that connection continues to interest me.

However, the Romantic sublime also evokes a sense of transcendence (think of those dazzling sunsets) and historically has had religious overtones that I don’t embrace, its ideology suggesting an unproblematic sense of the self as stable, whole, and essential. I began thinking about the possibility of representing a kind of “underside” to the sublime, one without the religious implications and with a postmodern sense of mutable subjectivity. So rather than draw the gorgeous skies and fast approaching storms of the New Mexican desert, these entropic spaces (with their Medusa-like forms) are awe-inspiring in their own ways, maybe even terror-producing, especially when one considers how everything in nature, including us, eventually falls apart. This kind of “humbler” landscape might be the closest I can find to a contemporary sense of the sublime.



*Cristina de Gennaro, Sage Drawing VIII, 2016. Charcoal on mylar 42 x 96 inches.*

**Q.** *Although the title refers to sage, you point out in the statement that the drawings also depict weeds and soil; and you also refer to biological structures (root and branch systems) and processes (decay and decomposition). That makes me think of biologist-artists like Ernst Haeckel. Do you see your approach as being in the spirit of scientific study?*

**A.** No, not really, although I love the aesthetics of Ernst Haeckel's drawings and find them visually engaging. I also love an Albrecht Durer botanical watercolor from 1503 called The Large (Great) Turf, which is a depiction, extremely close-up, of a simple clump of wild plants, some with roots exposed. While there is little order in the image, it is depicted with such realism and detail and this creates a sense of tension, I think, between chaos and order, between mundanity and beauty. This tension interests me very much.

**Q.** *I was interested in the way that you use different formats in this series of Sage Drawings: Number I (2013) is a horizontal row of eight panels, while Numbers II-IV are each individual frames (2013-2014). Number V is comprised of nine panels (2014), but it looks like those fit together in a complex way. Then there is the one in Critical Mass: Number VI (2014), which is a 4x4 grid but because of the dimensions each panel is an overall square. Numbers VII and VIII (2015 and 2016) are on much larger sheets of mylar, 42 x 96—I would almost say they are panoramic, except that the point of view is very close-up. So my question is: In general, how does a series like this evolve over the course of producing it, and more specifically, how are you using these different formats to achieve different ends?*

**A.** My creative process involves the synthesis of disparate sources, materials, and ideas and evolves over time through ongoing and new research interests, reflections on life experiences, and intuition. The process of working on a series is transformative and reciprocal, that is, I am changed by and through the process of working and, as such, the work evolves through me.



When I first arrived in Taos I wondered what I could find in the desert that would allow me to express aspects of my experience of aging. I became fascinated with eroding sage brush as they decomposed. The serpentine forms in my drawings are caught in the entropic process from a state of growth to that of dissolution, and yet I find these images of decay and decomposition to be filled with movement, pattern, grace, and beauty. As such, the drawings explore tensions between disorder and order, complexity and pattern, chaos and beauty. I decided that I would experiment with format and installation as a further means of exploring these tensions.

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At first I chose to crop the images, abstracting the forms to make them more ambiguous, reminiscent of root systems, microscopic bodily vessels, Medusa's hair. In these earlier drawings (from 2012-2014) the organic forms simultaneously resist as they are contained by the rectangular boundaries of the individual 12" x 16" mylar panels and the geometric, grid-like structures of the installation formats. I was interested in referencing the complex relationships between scientific methodologies of categorization and actual biological systems and, as you mentioned, the grid structure also sets up visual tensions between conceptual art and figuration.

I'm currently working on large-scale (42" x 96") charcoal drawings. These life-size details of the New Mexican high desert floor are rendered realistically, depicting sagebrush, weeds, and soil. I see these drawings as subverting Western cultural constructs of the landscape genre and specifically in tension with aspects of the Romantic sublime through their focus on mundane and abject spaces. The size of these drawings is of great importance as they must be large enough to be perceived as being within the grand tradition of the very genre they seek to subvert. Much like an Albert Bierstadt painting of the grandeur of Yosemite, these drawings visually surround the viewer, encompassing her in the fullness of the panoramic space that a traditional landscape embodies, even while these particular spaces depict extreme close-up views of the desert floor.