

The American Sublime

Transcendental Landscape Painting
from the Hudson River School
to the New York School

"The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God.
[Nature] is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual,
and strives to lead back the individual to it." - Emerson, *Nature* (1836)

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ICONOGRAPHY OF INFINITY

Essays on Art and Philosophy

Edited by Lanier Graham    2008.4a    American Landscape Painting  
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# Sublime Philosophy

From the Renaissance through most of the 18th century, the aesthetic ideals of the Western art world were those of classicism, rooted in the ancient visual traditions of Greece and Rome. The arrival of Asian art in Europe during the 18th century, especially Chinese garden designs, with very different but curiously attractive aesthetics, made Europeans begin to question their artistic assumptions about objective standards. Attention shifted inwardly, away from traditional criticism of external formal features and metaphysics, toward subjective psychology and the physiology of perception.

The best known theory to emerge at that time was articulated by Edmund Burke, an Englishman, in a very influential work called A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757). He was an empiricist in the mode of John Locke, so he thought that everything in the mind gets there by means of sense experience. He focused on the term “sublime” which had been used to denote the awe-inspiring and/or divine. However, he moved away from religious associations.

Burke divided the beautiful from the sublime, and was the first to do so. He associated the beautiful with feminine softness, and the sublime with powerful, masculine, fearsome. He thought pain and pleasure were at the root of aesthetic experience. Beauty has a relaxing effect on the fibers of the body he said. The sublime tightens the body's fibers in painful ways in response to fear, indeed terror.

As for metaphysics, Burke regarded God as a distant reality, ultimately benevolent but very much a terror-inducing Jehovah. Burke was not very interested in landscape painting, and actually did not think painters could evoke the sublime. Nevertheless, for some time artists and connoisseurs used his terminology in Europe and America for landscape painting.(1)

Since the 18th century artists, critics, and philosophers have come up with many other ways to define the “sublime.” This term is tricky and has alluded anything like a consensus as to what it actually means. The range of definitions in recent centuries is large. Today, it might mean nothing more than a “sublime” meal. In the past, it was a powerful term referring to a feeling of awesome boundlessness.(2) For many, this is still true. What did “sublime” mean during the time of the Hudson River School in the minds of the leading painters of that movement?

The very first American landscape painters in the early 19th century used Burke's vocabulary as they struggled to render both the beautiful and the sublime. But they found his approach limited. They felt much more than mere sense experience was involved in the experience of art and beauty. They found themselves drawn towards the thought of English Romantic poets and to German philosophers especially Kant.

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1. For an overview of the interest of American artists in the concept of the sublime, see Powell, “Luminism & the American Sublime,” in Wilmerding, ed., American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1980.

2. For a general bibliography of the sublime in the United States and Europe, see Graham, “American Landscape Painting: a Bibliography,” in Iconography of Infinity, 2008.

Kant, a German Idealist, had criticized Burke, arguing sense experience can only take us to a certain level of understanding, and not up to the transcendent. Kant said aesthetic experience is a great deal more than the result of physiology. It involves a profound harmony in the mind of understanding and feeling. The highest experience of the sublime involves self-transcendence. Those who are able to reach this level of transcendent self-hood, and experience what lies beyond the ordinary conceptualization of space and time, have attained a consciousness which is all-loving. In Kant's words such enlightenment takes place "when universal affection towards the human species has become a principle within you." (1) Kant's philosophy, which he called "Transcendental Idealism," pointed to aesthetic consciousness as a connecting link between spirit and matter. (2)

The thinking of James Jackson Jarves, an influential 19th century American art critic and collector, was similar to that of Kant. He wrote: "Art should exhibit a scientific correctness in every particular, and as a unity, be expressive of the general principle at the center of being. In this manner, feeling and reason are reconciled, and a complete and harmonious whole is obtained." (3) This American aesthetic that unites "scientific correctness" of detail with spiritual "being" also was voiced by Emerson when he said: "...we want the Exact and the Vast." (4) Spiritual traditions usually have aesthetics that fuse opposites. American painters found a way to fuse heaven and earth in their idealized landscapes. The extreme popularity of their paintings and prints gave these landscape painters an almost priestly function.

Kant's philosophy is at the fountainhead of modern metaphysics. The Empirical approach had seemed rather mechanical, not very humanistic. The Idealism that descends from Plato had seemed too abstract, too remote. Kant steered away from both perspectives, regarding all perceptions as the projections of each unique mind. This way of thinking with its combination of spirituality and individualism stimulated the literary American Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau as well as many American landscape painters.

American Transcendentalism developed between the 1830s and 1850s as a radical spiritual philosophy and a literary movement with a very active social consciousness. (5) Its theology developed from Unitarian Christianity which opposed the 18th century thinking of the Congregational Calvinists who dominated Colonial American Christianity. The Congregational Calvinists descended from 17th century Puritans. They were strong on sin, believed in the Trinity ("Father-Son-Holy Spirit"), and liked the tightly rational empiricism of John Locke. The Unitarians did not believe in the Trinity. They held the radical belief that Jesus was extremely important but not the same as God, and they continued to like the rationalism of John Locke.

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1. Kant, The Critique of Judgement, translated in Crowther, p. 10.

2. See Kant, The Critique of Judgement, 1790, and Crowther, The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art, 1989. Professor Rudolph Wittkower, my advisor at Columbia University, explained to me in 1965 that Kant's key term often translated as "reason" would be better translated as intuition or rational intuition, "as with Plato." For Kant and intuition, as well as an overview of the importance of intuition throughout the history of Western philosophy, see Lanier Graham, Balanced Mind: The Perennial Synthesis of Reason & Intuition in Western Philosophy. A Study Guide, 1995.

3. Jarves, The Art-Idea, 1864 & 1960 [[HTTP://xroads.virginia.edu](http://xroads.virginia.edu)] "We are still in Eden: Iconography of HRS"

4. Emerson, [Novak, 2007, p.98]

5. The starting point of Transcendentalism often is said to be Emerson's book Nature (1836).

The Transcendentalists were more radical. They said human beings are basically good, like God the Creator. There is no "original sin." Moreover, they claimed we are all connected by means of the Oversoul. This cosmic connectedness enables us to have direct communion with each other, with nature, and with the divine - all of which are aspects of the same universal reality. This spiritual communion is accomplished by means of each person's own intuition, and need not involve any kind of church or doctrine. Evil only exists because of people's limited awareness of their goodness. They stressed self-knowledge, self-reliance, and reverence for nature.

The Transcendentalists were not armchair philosophers. They were tireless educators and social activists. Their lives were filled with writing, editing, lecturing, and teaching. They argued for Women's Suffrage, Native American rights, and World Peace. Members of the loosely organized Transcendentalist group developed new kinds of education including kindergarten, adult education, and learning systems based on intuition. They also argued passionately against slavery. Thoreau is best known for the unification with nature that he wrote about after two years at Walden Pond. However, this self-proclaimed mystic also was part of the Underground Railway to bring Black people up from the South into freedom. Thoreau's ideas and actions on when it is right to break the law, as articulated in "Civil Disobedience" (1849) directly inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

## American Sublime

What relates the Transcendentalists most closely to 19th century art is landscape painting and the metaphysics of the "sublime." One of the most important recent efforts to define this term in American art was "The American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880." This was a major exhibition of American landscape painting organized by the Tate, London, which then came to the U.S. in 2002. Most Europeans know little about the subject. Those who do tend to trivialize it as "colonial" extensions of Europeans such as Claude, Rosa, Martin, Turner, et al. It is only modern American painting that has come to be admired and collected in Europe. It is true those Europeans were important influences. Allston, Cole, and Durand were well acquainted with the landscapes of Claude and the others. But those influences were assimilated and transcended. Something else came into being, an aesthetic that fused the precise poetry of physical fact with a unique transcendent luminosity.

Like the first major French presentation of 19th century American painting at the Grand Palais of Paris in 1984, for which I was an advisor, the Tate exhibition was a welcome project, and Europeans were quite impressed, and so were American visitors most of whom were seeing this art for the first time.<sup>(1)</sup> However, the Tate's attempt to make the Burkean "sublime" apply to most of the greatest American landscape paintings is Anglocentric and misleading. They also claim Turner and Constable as primary influences, whereas Claude and Rosa actually were more important. <sup>(2)</sup>

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1. The catalogue is by the lead curator T. E. Stebbins, Jr., The New World: Masterpieces of American Painting, 1760-1910, 1984. General organization and selection of the curator was done by the senior curatorial staff of the Louvre. I was asked to assist in that process by Laclotte and Rosenberg.

2. Church was often compared with Turner but the parallels seem to be more of status than style. Actual influence seems limited to the idea of heroic panoramas and intensely colored luminosity. In key monographs, the Huntington and Kelly suggestions of specific early influence from engravings are suggestive but not convincing. Howat sees only modest influence quite late.

They dominated the first generation of the Hudson River School from c1825 to c1850. Turner's luminosity and epic spirit were admired but not his un-solid forms which Cole compared to "jelly" and "suger candy"(1). Constable painted highly cultivated landscapes; the Americans liked wilderness. The Tate perspective continues the old prejudice against America's unique creativity. Burke was less important in America than they suggest. Burke's definition of "sublime" involves terror. He wrote: "...terror is the source of the sublime."(2a) He gave equal attention to horror. "Whatever is fitted...to excite the ideas of pain or danger...is a source of the sublime."(2b) Such Burkean thinking was indeed on the mind of Washington Allston very early in the century, and Thomas Cole when he painted his melodramatic narratives of the 1820s and 1830s at the start of the Hudson River School. Burke's terms are in their writings. However, such thinking was not a major part of the thinking of most painters of the Hudson River School when their work matured during the 1850s and 1860s. It is now widely accepted by the leading art historians that the more influential philosophy was Transcendentalism, the American Transcendental philosophy articulated best by Emerson and Thoreau.(3) Their sublime was associated with eternity.(4) Emerson said: "Revelation...attended by the emotion of the sublime...is an influx of the Divine Mind into our mind."(5) The Transcendentalists were at the forefront of transforming nature into the face of God for Americans who were looking for a national symbol, a symbol which became the Wilderness in the eyes of of newly pantheistic Christians.

As we have seen, the roots of their thinking go back to the philosophy of Kant, to Plato's vision of matter as a manifestation of a higher reality, and to Asian metaphysics, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, rather than the empiricism of Burke. The curators of "The American Sublime" try to make Burke's sublime apply almost everywhere, but it does not work. They try to narrow the influence of Transcendentalism to only the Luminist branch of the Hudson River School - Lane, Heade, et al. That is a very narrow understanding of pictorial Transcendentalism. Cole in the 1820s & '30s felt very much as Emerson did when Cole hoped his paintings of the wilderness would "stir in...many a holier feeling."(6) Durand and Church in the 1840s & '50s also were pervaded by Emersonian thoughts about divine nature. (7) The Luminists of the 1850s & '60s appear to have been painting in the spirit of pure Transcendentalism.

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1. Cole quoted in Dunlap, A History of the Rise & Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, (1834), 1965 ed., vol. III, p. 153.

2. Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Feelings of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757 & 1759), Phillips, ed. 1990, pp. 36 & ??

3. See the publications of Novak, Stebbins, and Wilmerding. Their books and exhibitions have defined the field over the last half century. Some of Church's work can be called *sublime* in a Burkean way, but most of his greatest work is not. Church's favorite book, Cosmos (English ed. 1849), by the famous naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, is animated by metaphysics very like the metaphysics of Emerson. Humboldt's sense of nature as a cosmic harmony guided by God was shared by many until Darwin's Origins of the Species (1859) spoke of non-divine struggle not spiritual harmony.

4. E.g., Thoreau, Walden, or Life in the Woods (1854); [Wilson p.12]: "In eternity there is something true and sublime. ... And we are enabled to apprehend...what is sublime...only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us."

5. Emerson, "The Over-Soul," Selected Writings, Atkinson, ed., 1950, p. 269.

6. Cole, quoted in Perry, The Art of Thomas Cole, 1988, p. 31.

7. See Durand, "Letters on Landscape Painting," The Crayon, (1855) xxx [McCoubrey 112] & Cole: "We are...in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance..." Noble After Icebergs

American painters were no longer reading Burke, but they were reading Emerson, Thoreau, and Ruskin, as well as Coleridge, who thought much like Kant, and Wordsworth, whose poetry spoke of "God in Nature." They liked Ruskin's way of saying the physical is only an expression of the spiritual. That was also the American perspective. In Emerson's words, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." (1) Emerson also explained his version of the core psychology of Perennial Philosophy which teaches the necessity of moving beyond the ego: "...to make anything... beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind. ... {So} that it shall be the production of the universal soul...the artist...must disindividualize himself [in order to] be an organ through which the universal mind acts." (2)

Emerson's trans-personal, Transcendental sense of "sublime" unity with universal being is a long way from Burke. Burke had become irrelevant to many. Ruskin, at the very beginning of Modern Painters rejects the term "sublime" as a meaningless term. (3) In the New York art world, there was more specific rejection of Burke. "[In] 1833...a writer for The Knickerbocker assailed Burke's theory for its foundation in terror and referred to [an earlier] conception of the sublime. ... This sublime [is] an experience of divinity brought on by 'an impression...of infinitude,' and the sensation provoked was not one of fear but of a kind of transcendent bliss." (4)

In her review of the Tate exhibition in Artforum, Barbara Novak, a leading historian of 19th century American landscape painting, wrote:  
 "What interests me...is the word sublime. The Burkean sublime [is] filled with 'gothick' dread and terror. It is nonetheless more an aesthetic sublime than the version that developed in America.... . By the 1820s, the word had been overused to the point of devaluation. It took on more meaning, however, as the nineteenth century progressed and by midcentury, after Emerson's essays "Nature" (1836) and "The Over-Soul" (1841) had appeared, was so infused with spiritual significance that it signaled a divine emanation whenever uttered. ... "

"The exhibition stresses the religious. But in spite of being highly Christianized, the American sublime was curiously less religious than spiritual. It is distinguished by an almost Asian transcendence, which sets the tone of most of the paintings and is not found in their European counterparts. ... In the American paintings the spiritual is more often conveyed by a smooth, crystalline light. Even in Church, arguably the most atmospheric of the Americans, atmosphere tends to assume a smooth stillness... . [The] light of Church's universe... in Emerson's terms 'becomes transparent,...the light of higher laws than its own' shining through it." (5)

In short, the Burkean sublime, which is filled with negative emotions, such as terror and horror, became the "transcendental sublime" which is filled with positive emotions. (6) This trans-rational feeling is brought forth by a vision of the presence of God in Nature, if not by an even deeper mystical unification with the divine. The robust pantheism of Transcendentalism stimulated a nation-wide reverence for the wilderness as divine and put new meaning into Burke's old term, transmuting it from horrific to ecstatic, and elevating its significance from empty to full. (7)

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1. Emerson, "Nature," chapter IV, 1836
  2. Emerson, "Thought on Art," The Dial, Jan. 1841
  3. Ruskin, vol. 1, 1844 London; 1847 New York. See Landow, "Ruskin's Theories of the Sublime" xxx
  4. Ketner & Tammenga, The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque: British Influences on American Landscape Painting, 1984 quoting "Examination of Burke's Theory of the Sublime," The Knickerbocker, Aug. 1833, p. 119
  5. ARTFORUM, January 2002
  6. The term "transcendental sublime" appears several times from the pen of Powell in Wilmerding,, ed., American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850-1875, 1980, e.g., pp. 73, 77, 78, & 93. Huntington calls Church a "transcendental rationalist" (1966), p. 109
  7. For Romantic Christianity, see Apostolos-Cappadona, The Spirit & the Vision: The Influence of Christian Romanticism on the Development of 19th-Century American Art, 1995. Most Protestants before the Civil War came to see nature as a profoundly beautiful manifestation of God and a national symbol. With wilderness as sacred, many hung landscape prints in their homes. Transcendentalists went farther and felt nature was not merely a symbol of God but was God. See also, Dillenberger, The Visual Arts & Christianity in America. From the Colonial Period to the Present, 1988; and Harris, "Art & Transcendentalism," in The Artist in American Society, 1966 & 1982

Burke believed in God but God is not prominent in his aesthetics. In short, there is little spirituality in Burke, and little that is anything like horror or terror in classic Hudson River painting. Instead, what we see evocations of the numinous. The usual American mood is a kind of spiritual ecstasy, a blissful connectedness with the transcendent. Here are the words of Thomas Cole: "...in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind...the chords...struck in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate." (1)

When I was Chief Curator of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco during the 1970s we were actively expanding our 19th century American collection, even before we began negotiating with John D. Rockefeller 3rd for his American collection. We were able to acquire a number of major works including "The Courtship" by Eakins, as well as paintings by Peto, Haberle, and Pope to expand our Trompe l'Oeil gallery which centered on Harnett's famous "After the Hunt." (2)

Our most important acquisition was Church's "Rainy Season in the Tropics" (1866), one of the great American masterpieces of the 19th century. It was because of paintings such as this that Church became the most famous painter in mid-century America, and was the first American painter of the period to be praised in England and France. Emerson described Church's "Heart of the Andes" (1859) as "a fairer creation than we know." (3) A leading British critic even awarded Church the mantle of Turner. (4)

When I was giving training lectures to the FAMSF docents on how to talk about this painting on their tours I was once asked if Burke was an influence on Church. I said "apparently little or none." Then I went on to discuss the psychological differences between joy and horror, and pointed to the writings of Emerson and Humboldt.

The "sublime" in Burke's sense is so far from the heart of most Hudson River painters that the word does not even appear in the index of most major histories of 19th century American painting. In monographs on the Hudson River School Burke's term also is usually absent or given very little space.

To sum up, I was very impressed with the quality of the selections in the "American Sublime" exhibition and in the monumental, magnificently printed catalogue. However, the primary exhibition concept, which was constructed by two specialists in 19th century English art (not American art), is not as solid as one might have wished. There are veils of Eurocentric prejudice that still need to be lifted.

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1. Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," American Monthly Magazine, Jan. 1836.

2. For a history of how the FAMSF collection was formed see Simpson, et al., The American Canvas: Paintings from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1980. For how the Rockefeller gift came to San Francisco see Simpson & Junker, The Rockefeller Collection of American Art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1994.

3. Emerson, quoted in Millhouse, American Wilderness, 2007, p. 105.

4. This remarkable opinion was published in the Art Journal, London, Oct. 1859, England's leading art magazine. Based on "Niagara," Ruskin's admiration for Church seems to have been sincere but not unqualified. In Paris "Niagara" won a Gold Medal and the admiration of Gerome. See Huntington, The Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church, 1966, pp. 1-4 & 59; and Adamson, Niagara: Two Centuries of Changing Attitudes, 1697-1901, 1985.

# New York School

The term “sublime” went out of fashion among art critics and then came back to life during the 1940s & ‘50s when the New York School dominated contemporary art. A number of artists of the New York School are on record as being interested in the tradition of Transcendentalism, e. g., Rothko, Gottlieb, Pollock, Krasner, and especially Newman. (1)

When Barnett Newman wrote his essay “The Sublime is Now” in 1948 (2) he was pointing to the fact that he and other members of the New York School were dealing with a new kind of subject matter. Some spoke of this subject matter as the “self.” Others called it the “not-self.” (3)

When I discussed this with him over dinner in 1969 (4), Newman explained that in terms of subject matter they had replaced “representation” with “presentation.” To represent an object from memory (a still life, landscape, or a figure) puts us there, not here, he said, because mental associations take us away from NOW to an abstract realm of associations. The paintings of the New York School were intended to bypass intellectual associations so that that we can “be here NOW.” What they “presented” was an experience of the present, a present empty of distant associations, and also empty of self-reflection and even self-centeredness. I asked: “Might we call such paintings landscapes of what is not?” “Yes!” he said, slapping his hand on the table.

He went on to explain avoiding associations also is why many paintings of the period are untitled, and why he and others moved from the scale of easel painting to the scale of wall murals in the late ‘40s. “The larger the scale the more intimate the experience,” he said. I did not understand that and asked him to explain. This was more or less his reply: When one looks at an easel painting, you are larger than it is. When one is looking at a mural it is larger than you are. In that process of perception the self tends to disappear, and that is when the fullness of NOW is present. He concluded with words that sounded very Emersonian: “It is this experience of the empty eye, of selflessness, which is truly sublime.” (5)

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1. See Sandler, The Triumph of American Painting xxx & Novak, “Lee Krasner Interview,” <http://openvault.wgbh.org>

2. In The Tiger’s Eye #6, Dec. 1948.

3. This was a term used by Rothko. See Donald Goddard, “Rothko’s Journey into the Unknown,” Artnews 78, Jan. 1979, p. 37.

4. This conversation about the self and the sublime took place March 25, 1969 after his opening at Knoedler’s. Our other conversations have been recorded elsewhere. See Lanier Graham, Barnett Newman: In Memoriam, 1970, & Lanier Graham, Images of the Infinite: Spiritual Philosophy on Modern Art, A Study Guide, 1998. I am grateful to Annalee Newman for her many kindnesses and especially for her encouragement to publish these conversations.

5. One of Emerson’s most famous passages is from “Nature” (1836): “Standing on bare ground...all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.” For the fact that Newman liked Emerson very much see M. Baigell, “Barnett Newman’s Stripe Paintings & Kabbalah,” American Art, 8:2, Spring 1994, p. 36.

So, said Newman with a large smile, he had no problem with what the art historian Robert Rosenblum did in 1961 when he characterized the New York School in Artnews as "Abstract Sublime." (1)

I was still a bit troubled by something he wrote. In his 1948 essay Newman made this striking statement: "Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our feelings." After several glasses of wine, I was bold enough to say this: "Your statement about cathedrals does not actually sound very selfless." He leaned forward and said "That depends on how you are looking - from the inside or the outside of this thing called 'self'. The most sublime aspect of cathedrals is their emptiness, their sublime VOID. The same is true of people, once emptiness has been realized."

Then Newman and I went on to talk about Zen, but that's another story. (2)

FLG  
Kent Cottage  
Brentwood, California  
2003 (revised 2008)

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1. Rosenblum was one of the first art historians to articulate the thread of transcendent symbolism in modern art. His principle argument is in MODERN ART & THE NORTHERN ROMANTIC TRADITION, 1975. His best known article is "The Abstract Sublime" in ART NEWS, Feb. 1961, pp.38-41. Included in this article are Newman, Rothko, Pollock, and Still. They are linked back to earlier Europeans but not to earlier Americans, except when it is noted that Dore Ashton compared Still to Church. My conversations with Ashton and Rosenblum, and with Newman, de Kooning and Motherwell during the late 1960s were major inspirations during my early research on modernism as a secular search for the sacred.

2. I am preparing a book titled ZEN & MODERN ART based on the CSUEB exhibition of the same name which I curated in 2003. An overview of that exhibition is at [www.csueastbay.edu/artgallery](http://www.csueastbay.edu/artgallery).