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Thalassic: Women, Gender, and the Sublime in Relation to Marine Art

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The word thalassic means ‘relating to the sea.’ Its etymology stems from the Greek word for ‘sea’; Thalassa, which is also the name of a marine goddess in Ancient Greek mythology, whose body was synonymous with the sea. From the figure of Thalassa it was believed that all ocean life was birthed

Marie-Claire Beaulieu, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination.*
Abstract

The sea may be regarded as a source of tranquility as well as one of unsettling trepidation, ambiguous even in its representation. Those who are called to it must be relentless in the face of uncertainty; what awaits them is the immeasurable sublime. Defined in art as a reference to greatness beyond all possibility of control, the sublime invokes an urge to pursue pleasurable terror in the unmanageable. On heavily trafficked and dangerous seas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the strict gender hierarchy of authority on board ships in seafaring industries was solidified. Thus, the dominance of the male role in seafaring was established in the Atlantic (Western) world. Using the panorama, a nineteenth century form of mass media as a source, Thalassic transports the viewer to a world that they may never otherwise experience; an environment in which women, as well as men, take to a life of labor at sea. Using motifs of the sublime and invoking the tradition of marine painting, Thalassic integrates the “heroine” into a historically masculine seafaring context, by challenging that context, presenting a woman who is openly combatting nature’s harshest elements and her own innate fears.
Introduction

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the connotation of masculinity with seafaring was fortified, not only because of the traditional assumption of maritime work being men’s work but also because of the expanding Victorian stereotypes of gender. “After all, women never went to sea; seafaring was a man’s world and a man’s world only” (Norling). Nevertheless, the longing to experience the unknowable – from awe to terror – calls many, among both sexes, to labor on the sea. Yet, disparities between the genders are still palpable in today's sailing professions. Most women are expected to assume roles below deck working as stewardesses or cooks, while above deck men continue to fill traditionally masculine roles as captains or mates, defined by power, strength, and splendor. The few women who break into roles as deckhands, mates, and captains fight a constant battle to be heard and respected.

*Thalassic* resembles the nineteenth century panorama by immersing the viewer in an illusory world. Yet in this particular panorama, the female seafarer is the heroine facing the challenges of the sea while advocating for women in this historically male-dominated setting. The large scale and semi-circular spatial placement of the panorama throws the viewer off balance. The juxtaposition of imagined terror with documented experience forges a connection between reality and deeply threatening thoughts. This thesis focuses on the sublime, traditional marine painting, and the implications of societal gender roles of the nineteenth century, *Thalassic* integrates the heroine into a nineteenth century form of mass media with the resolve to rework the history of women and the sea for the modern era.
The Panorama and the Female Seafaring Narrative

The sea is one of humankind’s most essential symbols. From antiquity onward, it has suggested mysterious powers, limitless depths, and a path to unknown adventures. It is an awesome natural force—a feminine entity from which all life evolved.

Gloria Groom, “The Sea as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France.”

Kelsy Patnaude, From Dread to: This is Where I am Meant to Be, photo-transfer and oil on canvas, 36” x 95”, 2019. (Prototype for Thalassic)

Thalassic uses oil paints in hues of blue and green with minor applications of fleshy pink. Combined with the paint are photo-transfers of waves and seafaring figures. Ropes and dizzying horizon lines create tension and a constant timeline throughout the piece. In Thalassic, less attention is paid to depicting the details of the sea realistically than to recreating its metaphoric resonance and immense unearthly power as it relates to human existence. The paint handling is not an imitation of a particular style\(^1\) but represents the process of letting go, in the way one might submit to the force of nature. Relinquishing control at sea invites risk and failure in the face of danger. However, to yield calmly, confidently, and without fear onto the canvas demonstrates the fluidity of the subject, capturing the sea’s ephemeral quality. In the process of

\(^1\)Although Thalassic aesthetically resembles a Japanese scroll or Emakimono, the work unintentionally draws inspiration from them. As well as similarities in the way the paint is handled, Thalassic and Emaki are both long horizontal narratives that combine pictures that are painted and stamped. “Emaki were intended to record history, disseminate cultural information, and teach moral values” (Strauch-Nelson).
making the piece itself, two versions of fear are being overcome; fear in relation to the sea and fear of working with the unknown. The scene depicts an ambivalence that aligns with the notion of the sublime; there is a balance to be achieved. The sea is not simply viewed as antagonist - it is as nourishing as it is destructive.

This project shares aspects of the nineteenth century panoramas which were meticulously organized experiences to make the illusionary seem real. In Thalassic these themes are mirrored by the photo-transfers (the real) and the atmospheric imagery (the invented fears). The combination of paint with photographs of moments at sea create a documentary self-portrait. The figures that shift in scale make the marine-scape less literal, disrupting the attempt of reality, anchoring the real in the fictionalized. Thalassic favors an upward creeping horizon line. This forces the viewer to become engulfed in the drama, creating an unsettling feeling of the weight of water and raising their gaze in the search of safety. To further simulate this effect, the work is tall and horizontally curved, forcing the viewer to enter the space, and inviting a physical reaction to the piece. Flanked by washes of waves with an open space at the center, the viewer can only swim into the middle toward tranquility and the inviting hopeful pink horizon line.

Kelsy Patnaude, From Dread to: This is Where I am Meant to Be (detail).

Thalassic addresses past societal views of gender as a means to rewrite the history of women and the sea for the modern era. The repetition of the female figures endorses the protagonist’s narrative of a heroine at sea. The piece challenges the discipline of marine painting
as a solely masculine space. Its purpose is to make the image of a strong seafaring heroine more than a mere curiosity.

The figure in control at the wheel is the female contemporary representation of Neptune. The same hue of pink found at the horizon is glowing around her, reminiscent of iconic sacred imagery. She looks over the narration, offering hope and strength to the heroine who is tossed into the waves. The independent, resourceful, and resilient presence of the female figures in this realm creates a camaraderie among the women in seafaring. They are in fellowship, working together to quite literally raise each other up. This is my ambition for the work because of my time as a professional seafaring woman. These women who combat the sea are real people for me and I have an agenda to create equality in seafaring, as do they.

The Leicester Square Cyclorama, opened in 1793. The cyclorama with two viewing chambers was able to display 12,700 square feet of work.

The early panoramas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were large circular paintings intended to give the viewer the experience of being physically present in a scene. The Irish-born painter, Robert Baker developed the patent for the panorama in 1787. It included a cylindrical painting, a circular building (cyclorama) designed to house the work, a viewing platform in the center, with barriers placed so that viewers could not see above or below the painting (Shelin). The panorama was more like a carefully controlled experience than a work of

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2 They had various functions, as mass entertainment, education, or propaganda.
The design of these buildings was so effective that viewers became disoriented as they passed through a virtual world³, with the result that some experienced actual seasickness.

The cost and size of the cycloramas soon led to the creation of the moving panorama, which continued to grow in length.⁴ The moving panorama created an entirely different experience, a more linear, authored narrative of an expedition or voyage through space and time. As well as offering experiences of far-off places, moving panoramas indirectly and simultaneously reviewed landscapes of the past, present, and future⁵.

³ The illusion of the all-encompassing view that mimicked reality succeeded in part due to the scale of the panoramas, some well over 40 feet high and 400 feet long.

⁴ “Moving panoramas were mounted on several spools and displayed on large custom structures that scrolled through the panorama much like celluloid film. The “panorama” could then be displayed in any large room or theater and would often be accompanied by a narrator, music, lighting, and other theatrics” (Connett).

⁵ Sea voyage panoramas needed a particular use of the viewer’s imagination since the circumnavigation voyages they documented spanned several years, while the performance lasted only an hour or two (Jones).

Thalassic adopts installation methods from the cyclorama panoramas: controlled experience, the illusion of an all-encompassing view, and disorientation. However, the narration through space and time is inspired by the later moving panoramas. Although the photo-transfers reference the contemporary sailing profession, the imagery contains enough ambiguity to imply marine tradition and art. By excluding color and background boat details the piece cannot be easily
placed within a specific era. Given the polarities of time, *Thalassic* conjures ideas of seafaring history and the possibilities of tomorrow.

![Image of Caleb Purrington and Benjamin Russell, Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World, partial views, 1848.](image)

Moving panoramas offered the viewer the impression of direct experience through illusionistic painting and descriptive narrative, making them often journalistic in nature. Designed to exploit the panorama craze with tales of the high seas, the *Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World* by Caleb Purrington and Benjamin Russell, completed in 1848, transported audiences into the shoes of the Yankee-whaleman who embarks on a journey from New Bedford, Massachusetts across the world via ship in search of whales. The whaling panorama depicts the whaleman and what he saw as a heroic narration of a male protagonist facing with the dangers of the sea and exploration (Connett). It enhances its illusion and the quality of its narrative through Russell’s firsthand experience as a whaleman between 1841-1844 aboard Kutusoff, before he began his career as New Bedford’s foremost whaling artist. Russell took his experience to the public with the panorama. In reviews of the exhibition whaling captains applauded its accuracy and indicated that ‘landsharks’ could glean from it a very good idea of a sea voyage, without the seasickness (Connett).

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6 The work is painted with distemper on cotton sheeting, the top sewn to three strand lines for support. Four rolls are over eight feet high and 300 feet long each, creating a work that is 1,295 feet in length overall. Although nothing is known about how the artists painted the work, it was probably done flat on the floor, perhaps in a local sail loft.
As in Russell’s panorama, *Thalassic* illustrates the importance of authenticity through first-hand experience. The issues associated with gender, principally women and seafaring, are important because of my experience in the profession. To capture these moments with the heroine I had to physically be in the same environment and situations. The use of photography to document our time at sea acts as a visual record and as a version of self-portraiture. Rather than being fully illustrative, the photo-transfers give the work a journalistic authority, leaving a residue of genuineness.

![Nancy Spero, Notes in Time on Women, partial view, cut-and-pasted painted paper, gouache, and pencil on joined sheets of paper, 20” x 210”, 1979.](image)

In exploring historical whaling panoramas and other artists who use scrolls in their work I was entranced by artist and activist Nancy Spero. Spero’s *Notes in Time on Women* carries journalistic storyline elements and all-encompassing perspectives, similar to the panorama and *Thalassic*. In the 1970s Spero began creating long works that merged text and image to create change in a society that oppressed women. To do so, she made oppression visible. Spero documents women’s pain and victimization throughout time, presenting epic-scale paintings that hold a collection of voices and figures representing women from prehistory to the present (Lyon). Unlike the panoramas of the nineteenth century, Spero did not try to carry her viewer to a physical place, but transported her viewer to engage with a feeling. Drawing from this,

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7 Like the panoramas of the nineteenth century, Spero’s work aims for engagement with the audience, but instead of employing illusion she uses obliqueness with the use of perspective. Prior to the early 1970s Spero’s paintings were
Thalassic’s disorderly perspective and non-representational qualities are used to overdramatize the disorganization of the sea. Abstractly interpreting the waves enhances the spectacle of water splashing, flowing, and at sometimes eliciting a feeling of panic in the water. This does not give the mind enough time to digest what the eye sees.

*Notes in Time* explores the place of women in history and, like the panoramas, the viewer is brought on a journey, presenting a record that changes through time and place. In *Thalassic*, the images of the female seafarer make the active woman in the marine environment the default. This challenges the historical categorization of woman as Other in relation to the sea. This objective, to display the narration of the woman as heroine is similar to what Spero does by depicting woman as protagonist and corresponds to the epic depiction of the whaleman as hero in the whaling panorama. Spero’s main philosophical gesture was to elevate and affirm woman as protagonist and not as Other (Lyon). “Spero’s move may be best understood as a kind of thought experiment, a philosophical “what if?” What if women were the default subject, as makers of art? What if, Spero proposes, women artists were to regain control of their own image?” (Soriano).

![Nancy Spero, Notes in Time on Women, partial view, 1979.](image)

hardly realistic in nature but still relied upon an accepted perspective, a point of view. She began to choose her images of the figure for their usefulness in conveying her conceptual message, rather than for aesthetic value. “Supports are arrayed in vertical strips or horizontally arranged bands in order to effectively convey information, not to create a convincing representation of material reality” (Lyon).
Spero’s scroll, *Notes in Time*, has a repeating cycle of figures and themes, including the festivity of the feminine form (Lyon). Spero presents the obstacles that have obstructed women’s liberation, from stereotypes against women originating in ancient history and myth to contemporary political ones. Spero’s figures leap, run, and dance boldly across the scrolls using their female energy, strength, and sexuality to disrupt the stereotypical text and assert their female independence (Heartney). “Spero turned the image into a kind of running-figure hieroglyph, which we might translate as “active-woman-freedom” (Lyon). Just as Spero chooses particular recurring figures for her narrative, *Thalassic* uses repeating images of female seafaring figures. The repetition of the figure allows the viewer to connect with the story of the character and to become invested in her welfare. The heroine in *Thalassic* gains control and freedom to tell her story as well as the artist’s story, of battling and becoming unbroken in one of nature’s most dangerous, beautiful, and traditionally masculine environments – the sea.

**Women, Work, and Seafaring as Profession**

*Bolstered by the belief that the personal is political, women artists sat down to create art that expressed their feelings as women artists in a man’s world, as women in a man’s world, and just as women.*

Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women’s Self-Portraits.*

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John Singleton Copley, *The Return of Neptune*, oil on canvas, 27.5” x 44.5”, 1754.
George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*, oil on canvas, 47” x 84”, 1850.

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8 The panels include accounts of torture of women, as well as quotations from male writers and philosophers that overtly express misogynist thinking in Western culture.
The sea in traditional art and literature has been personified by the male form (Neptune) while it has also been represented by the female form (Venus⁹, Ophelia, Sirens). Marking the sea as either predominantly masculine or feminine is impossible. Its ambiguity is chronic, water is related with life and re-birth but also to death and destruction.

Swimming out to sea and to her doom—death by drowning—is generally positioned as a feminine choice starting with Ophelia, picked up in Victorian representation by George Frederic Watts in *Found Drowned*, redeemed by Modernism in Brecht’s “Drowned Girl” or Stevie Smith’s “Not Waving but Drowning,” or in real life, as Virginia Woolf meeting her watery fate with stones in her pocket. (Nochlin 180)

Where women were concerned in myth, literary, and visual representation, a kind of reckoning was linked. Letting go, plunging into the unknown, and releasing control to the vastness of the sea is seen as particularly dangerous for women.

As a result, the ability to let go safely in relation to the sea becomes associated with masculinity and then solidified itself in nineteenth century gender roles. The Victorian public was experiencing increased anxiety regarding gender chaos¹⁰. “They feared that ‘women were becoming more like men, and men more like women,’ creating a type of cultural insecurity” (Kushner). By relating suicide, and in particular suicide by drowning, with women who departed

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⁹ In mythology Venus is viewed as the embodiment of what is female, goddess of beauty and love born from the sea foam; rebirth, the new woman.

¹⁰ Female suicide by drowning became so familiar to the public that an image of a woman near a body of water would immediately suggest that she was of ill repute and about to kill herself, a stereotype *thalassic* is working to disprove. “Drowning was seen as an innately feminine act, as if women had ‘drowned in their own tears, or returned to the water of the womb’ (Gates). Women who worked in a more physically demanding occupation were said to be brought “near to man”, having a higher propensity for suicide, a masculine behavior. (Meesen). These nineteenth-century social psychoanalysis indicated female ruin as the rational consequence of closing the wide gap between genders. Why were powerful women seen as taboo?
from approved gender roles, nineteenth century society was enforcing its beliefs of suitable female behavior.


The photograph, *Thetis from Below*, recalls these nineteenth century views and reminds us of the universal fear of drowning. The figure has fingers un-cupped in a manner that would prevent swimming to the surface. It is unclear whether the she is in distress or in a state of purposeful release or letting go to limitlessness. Once again, the woman at sea inhabits an unclear role and this photograph is making that obscurity visible.

How were women in relation to the sea depicted? Aside from nineteenth century ethics relating women and the sea with suicide caused by ruin and masculine behaviors, women also saw themselves portrayed as aquatic artifices. The illusionistic nude bathers painted by male artists in the nineteenth century were often portrayed as sea nymphs in a realistic style in order to convince the viewer that the fantastical is real. The female figures were depicted in improbable poses with elongated limbs and idealized bodies, making them incapable to have a physical existence at sea. The women bathers were sexualized and found only in equally romanticized company, reinforcing the notion that female independence in relation to the sea as fantasy.

In the late 1960s feminist artists began to rewrite the male-dominated canon of art history influencing cultural outlooks and transforming stereotypes (Heartney). Feminist artists saw their work as a tool to question their social and political surroundings, leading toward equal
opportunity. These artists took the opportunity to depict women for themselves, a kind of self-portraiture that revealed to the world how they saw themselves rather than how men saw them. Taking inspiration from pioneering feminist artists, in *Thalassic*, the objective is to portray women not as idealistic nudes or ruined women pushed to suicide but as women really are and see themselves in relation to the sea.

![Image of The Birth of Venus by Alexandre Cabanel and Grinding—Going Upwind by Kelsy Patnaud](image)


In *Grinding—Going Upwind* and the other images of the panorama, special effort was made to display the female figure in her relationship with the sea as gritty, salty, and de-sexualized. These images capture moments in which sailors either feel at their most defeated or most elevated. Showing these contrasts of real emotions is the tool used to combat the traditional idealized images of women and the sea. In *Grinding—Going Upwind* the bold, clear image of the heroine is against her actual photographed space. Contrast to the previous photo-transferred images of the panorama with removed photographic backgrounds, she is now put back into reality. Turned to face the rest of the work she is reclaiming her space and asserting control over her rope and as a result taking control of her position onboard.

The high volume of sea occupations and culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exerted an influence on today’s seafaring profession. During that time masculinity in seafaring was highly reinforced. Although women were found on ships, the majority were
traveling cargo rather than part of the workforce\textsuperscript{11} (Norling). Reinforcing the bond between men and seafaring were the new notions of sexual difference that resulted from shifts in nineteenth century social, political, and economic life.

\ldots these new concepts of gender centered around claims that male and female behaviours and roles derived from basic biological distinctions. Enlightenment science, which stressed binary oppositions, promoted ideas of male activity and female passivity, male strength and female frailty, male rationality and female emotionality, qualities that were defined as universal and permanently rooted in nature. (Creighton ix)

Society prescribed domesticity for women and public activity for men, which no doubt kept women away from adventurous outdoor undertakings such as sea travel. The ocean remained a single-sex masculine space, and courage was traditionally seen as a masculine virtue\textsuperscript{12}.

The strict (often gendered) hierarchy was believed to be central to survival onboard ships.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figurehead.png}
\caption{Nannie Dee – Clipper Cutty Sark Figurehead, 1869.}
\end{figure}

“Virtually all maritime scholars agree, however, that for centuries seafaring has been one of the

\textsuperscript{11} The few who were employed on board were only cooks, cleaners, wives, or whores.
\textsuperscript{12} The feminized nineteenth century bourgeois on-land society in contrast to the masculine rugged seafaring labor overdramatized the differences a woman’s duties and working on the water. The sea became a male proving ground, breeding a tough hardy type of manhood. “Historians ever since have unquestioningly linked the ocean with boldness and virility, regardless of the eras they investigated or the subjects they studied. Thus, they have perpetuated iron manhood as both natural and inevitable” (Creighton x). Seafaring was considered a line of work thought to make a man out of anyone, intense physical strength and stamina were required for making non-modern ships workable. Pulling of halyards, raising large sails, manually pumping out bilges: the list of physical activities is endless.
most exclusively male-dominated occupations” (Creighton ix). Widespread certainty that female sexuality was hazardous to this hierarchal social order is a key reason why women were not allowed in the maritime workforce. Sexual repression was believed to be necessary to do the work of the ship and women were seen as potential breaches in the masculine order. As a result, sailors saw women as sources of bad luck and dangerous conflict onboard ships while still fantasizing about them as objects of adoration. It was widely understood that any woman found onboard could combat this ill luck by exposing her breasts to calm the enraged seas, this is why many figureheads on ships had a bare-breasted woman on the bow. The strictly working masculine setting underwrites the way women and the sea have been perceived in art, society, and seafaring professions today.

In today’s industry, the challenges facing women working in masculine roles continue to prevent them from achieving equality with their male counterparts. This is reinforced by the creation of competition among women. Since seafaring has been mostly a male-dominated profession there are few positions available for female crew. This competition for jobs results in divisiveness among women and consequently a lack of mutual support and encouragement. “The toughest but most necessary change will come not from men or from the media, but from women, in the way we see and behave toward other women” (Wolf). What the profession needs is for the veil of competition to be broken, allowing female seafarers to champion and campaign for each other. The suppression of women in seafaring generated by rivalry results in the destructive practice of self-doubt while the international nature of seafaring makes it almost impossible to police workplace discrimination and harassment\(^\text{13}\).

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\(^{13}\) Admiralty law or maritime law is a body of law that governs nautical issues and private maritime disputes. Admiralty law consists of both domestic law on maritime activities, and private international law governing the relationships between private parties operating or using ocean-going ships. (Wikipedia)
Before entering a career in seafaring, I had a deep fear of sailing; the heel of the hull, a distrust of the deck below me, and the sense of unpredictability filled me with dread. My fear of sailing and the sea is innate, not only can I not control my fate but I cannot control my fear. I will forever be afraid. One day I became inquisitive about these sensations and took to the sea for work. My phobia undoubtedly informs *Thalassic* and its representation of the sublime; high horizons, disorganized waves, the scale of the sea in relation to the figures, and breathtaking delicate use of color. I set out to conquer my fear and to attest that a woman can position herself in a traditionally male position onboard.

To better understand my own pursuit of pleasurable terror I began to look to my seafaring peers. For three years, I have kept a record of interviews with other female seafaring crew. These are chronicles of their everyday lives, of how they feel and react to their environment. Some of the questions I asked were:

*In what situations involving seafaring do you feel most empowered? ... feel most defeated?*

*Do you feel as though you needed to do more, have more experience, or prove yourself to a higher degree to gain the same positions as men?*

(See Appendix for more interview questions and answers)

Some of the answers did not surprise me and mirrored my own feelings, for example my colleague Erica Lush answered, “One situation that makes me feel particularly defeated is having
things physically taken out of my hands. This is often accompanied by the words “let me help you.” It’s such a blatant overstepping of boundaries which often leaves me lost for words.”

The physical act of taking a line out of someone’s hand is a visceral way of taking away someone’s role and security onboard. No longer in charge of the task that has been assigned, what remains is the validity of her role. This negates her value and reason for being there, which is a literal life line. In Thalassic the importance of the heroine holding the rope while assertively reclaiming her space (seen in the bottom right as Grinding—Going Upwind) reassures her of her profession, worth, and security in relation to the sea. The male figure (in the bottom middle left of the piece) taking the rope from her, represents her insecurities and instability. The painting is not just remarking on ropes and lines, common nautical imagery, but also discusses strength, security, and how it can be broken and frayed.

“In my experience sexism happens in small, often discrete doses. Any of the incidents that I think of as being absolutely ludicrous don’t actually sound that bad out of context. But shit, they add up!” (Erica Lush). These powerful responses confirm why I made the decision to put my energy into a project that would combat preconceived notions of women working in seafaring. The doses of discrimination and harassment that I endured onboard added up making fighting my fear and working in a sublime environment even more challenging.

Seafaring and the Sublime

*The sea by its very nature conjures up notions of depth, mystery, and the elemental force of nature.*
Gloria Groom, “The Sea as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France.”

The concept of the sublime became widespread in the arts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to describe the blurred lines between experiencing awe and terror in nature\textsuperscript{14}. It is an experience of the unknowable, of what happens when one is faced with something that cannot be understood or controlled. Witnessing the sublime has the power to transform the self through the challenge of extreme experiences, an occurrence I am searching for when combatting my own fear of the sea.

There are strong parallels between the perception of the sublime and seafaring. A sense of striving or pushing upward against an overbearing force is present in both. In 1757, Irishman Edmund Burke broke down the idea of the sublime in \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful} into seven aspects: Darkness, which constrains the sense of sight; Obscurity, which confuses judgement; Privation, as pain is more influential than pleasure; Vastness, which is beyond comprehension; Magnificence, in the face of which we are in awe; Loudness, which overwhelsms us; Suddenness, which shocks our sensibilities to the point of disablement (Burke). All of these aspects are readily experienced in the act of seafaring; fog or the darkness of night constrain the sight; being removed from society for periods of time confuses judgement\textsuperscript{15}; the infinite vastness of the ocean challenges our understanding; the beauty of the sea inspires our awe; the strength and loudness of storms, the howling wind, and the suddenness with which things can change drastically at sea, consume us. The reactions to

\textsuperscript{14} “Although the theory of the sublime was discussed across many western cultures, it was especially important in eighteenth-century Britain, mainly because of the increasing importance of landscape as a subject category for artists and critics and because of the impact in the eighteenth century of the best-known theory of the sublime in English, which is found in the Irishman Edmund Burke’s \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful}, published in 1757” (Llewellyn).

\textsuperscript{15} One only needs to think of what happened to the crew in Moby Dick and how quick they were to follow Ahab to their doom.
overcoming these encounters lead to a pleasurable yet fulfilling kind of terror. The fascination, unease, and terror evoked by the vastness of the sea are essential to Burke’s brief of the sublime.

![J.M.W. Turner, *The Shipwreck*, oil on canvas, 162” x 176”, 1805.](image)

Considering Burke’s theory, it is no surprise that marine artists were drawn to the concept of the sublime. *The Shipwreck* is an example of nineteenth century British marine painter J.M.W. Turner using formal and compositional techniques to create the sublime experience. The painting is executed on an immense scale, which is exaggerated by the contrast between the small figures and the vastness of the turbulent surroundings. In *The Shipwreck*, there is what Burke might call a sensation of Darkness and Obscurity because of the dramatic variations of light across the water that make it difficult for one to find their bearings. Within the composition, Turner has positioned the viewer in unsafe space by the exclusion of a shoreline from where the viewer can safely watch the storm. As in *Thalassic*, through Turner’s elimination of shore or any promising horizon line, the viewer is immersed in the unsettled sea, alongside those who are fiercely fighting for their survival, making the viewer feel overwhelmed despite still inhabiting a position

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16 “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. A level plain of a vast land, is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean; but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself? This is owing to several causes, but it is owing to none more than this, that the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke).
of safety. The horizon line—partially visible in its dark depiction—is high up on the canvas pulling the viewer closer to the waves and making the sea more towering and enveloping. Turner’s paintings influence Thalassic’s strategies to create a sublime image: sharp contrasts, massive scale, uncontrollable stormy landscapes, struggling figures, the elimination of shore, and the immersion of the viewer into the drama.

J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*, oil on canvas, 36” x 48”, 1842.

Turner’s work not only influences Thalassic in the way he creates a sublime image but also by the way he fully immersed himself into his subject for understanding. The most well-known, eccentric, and likely fictitious story about Turner is that he tied himself to the mast of a steamship during a night snow storm. Whether this was a field experiment or a method of observation, Turner, like myself, inserted himself into raw heavy elements: resulting in an understanding of light and of what we cannot see. As a result, in *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*, Turner painted with liberty, layering colors with spirited and varied expressive strokes of white. Contrasts of light and dark muddle the senses and give the viewer a feeling of bobbing up and down frigid waves. “The artist was charged with “subliming truth,” that is, sacrificing naturalism for expressive impact” (Hokanson).

Turner’s turbulent late seascapes suggest a focus on the sublime capacity of drowning. *Snow Storm* indicates the viewer’s vision is blurred by being battered in the waves, frantically
looking for hope at the surface\textsuperscript{17}. The image is both calming and terrifying, superb and exhausting. Turner’s abstract painting style informs \textit{Thalassic} by putting his viewer at the center of a snowy vortex, demonstrating his full engagement with the natural world, contrasted with mankind’s ineffective struggles against the overpowering forces of nature. Like Turner’s work, \textit{Thalassic} captures the beauty and horror of nature by using expressive washes of paint that mimic my own lived experiences working on the sea. And where Turner strapped himself to the mast for research, the panorama engulfs the viewer in a realm of photographically recorded figures immersed in atmospheric washes that depict the sublime power of the sea.

![Kelsy Patnaude, The Sea Monsters Below Us, digital photograph, 2017.](image)

![Kelsy Patnaude, Flat on Back, digital photograph, 2018.](image)

Seeing above and below the water’s surface also depicts the ambiguous dualities of the sea. In the photographs above, the separation between the two suggests surrender and anxiety. On one side, the feeling of being overcome by the pressure is sensed by the heaviness of the oncoming waves. The unidentifiable figures in \textit{The Sea Monsters Below Us} allude to the anxieties of the unknown in relation to the sea while familiar salvation is seen in the boat that can only be reached once the viewer faces and swims past the figures. And on the other side, \textit{Flat on

\textsuperscript{17} “Like the fold, the wave serves as a means of transporting bodies between and through different states: the subjects of Turner’s seascapes are swept up, down and along by his waves, and therefore undergo a giddying ‘alteration’ between being borne aloft and consumed, between transcendence and decomposition. In this painting, the characteristically circular composition of his late seascapes acts as an engine, forcefully propelling the painting’s effects out and into our space, so that Turner’s waves serve as both figures and vehicles for an aesthetic experience in which the image might enfold its viewer” (Monks).
Back uses the sky as source of salvation. The viewer is put into the piece breathing and laying peacefully waiting, for either rescue or the eventual surrender to the depth of the sea. The sense of surrender in the photographs creates a dual response, as soothing as they are troubling. The viewer’s feelings of uncomfortable turmoil and pleasurable attraction, represent our ambiguous connections with the sea.

Similar solitary and dreamy binary seascapes can be seen in contemporary Tokyo-based photographer Asako Narahashi’s work. Her perspectives, semi-submerged, disconnect the viewer from civilization in the form of a breaking wave splitting the frame, often in half, with familiar cityscapes in the background. The languid distance formed between subject and coast is powerfully tranquil while also being terribly solitary. This separation alerts the viewer to the sense of how uncomfortable they feel engulfed in this unfamiliar setting.

The images are convincing not only because of the unusual point of view, but also through an unusual ambivalence and poetry. Fascination and fear, liquidity and hardness — the water which continuously surrounds us remains in Narahashi’s photography somewhat mysterious and, finally, inexplicable. On the other hand, the land visible in the distance signalizes familiar safety. (Marie)

Observers of marine artwork usually view the sea from a stable place on land, feeling safe and comfortable. Narahashi positions the viewer directly within a body of water that is placidly
working to submerge their gaze. With the hope of civilization far in the distance, in my photographs as well as Narahashi’s, the viewer experiences both floating comfort and sinking anxiety: at any moment, the waves will swallow the frame and this will become the viewer’s last disorienting glimpse of the world before being pulled below the rising sea.

Edouard Manet, *Escape of Rochefort*, oil on canvas, 31” x 28, 1881.

Willem van de Velde the Younger, *The Dutch Fleet Assembling Before the Four Days' Battle of 11–14 June 1666*, oil on canvas 1670.

Another example of a divided marine scene is the nineteenth century French Impressionist Edouard Manet’s *Escape of Rochefort*.\(^{18}\) To contrast his work to the traditional Dutch marine paintings, which often held ships down and centered in the middle ground of a composition engaged in battle at close range, Manet puts emphasis on the expanse of water in the foreground, creates a high horizon line, and places the ships randomly yet naturally. Manet modified his work to portray the sea’s movement and liveliness\(^ {19}\) rather than the smooth surfaces of the Dutch marine works, suggesting indefiniteness and the changing quality of the water rather than the historical masculine magnificence of a battle at sea (May).

The way Manet’s *Escape of Rochefort* completely embraces the sea as subject, has influenced *Thalassic* and the viewer’s feeling of being inconsequential when in front of the large

\(^{18}\) Manet’s *Escape of Rochefort* depicts the 1874 escape of Victor-Henri Rochefort, Marquis de Rochefort-Luçay from captivity in New Caledonia.

\(^{19}\) As an impressionist, he did not wish to stop the power of the sea for even a moment, but rather have the viewer sense the impermanence of the natural scene (Druick).
piece. With Rochefort found on an insignificant rowboat, and a horizon line with a distant ship at the very top of the canvas: the rowboat is lost in a limitless sea and the viewer’s eye is drawn toward a dark unpromising horizon (Wilson-Bareau). Although rescue seems nearby, as with glimpses of civilization in Narahashi’s photographs and promising boats and sky in my own photographs, the vessel does not appear to intend to offer salvation. An equivalent challenging of traditional marine artwork is visible in Thalassic. With the shift from a low focal point, the high horizons, elimination of the safety of ships, and expressive brushwork make the focus of sea as subject: concluding in the viewer experiencing feelings of loneliness in front of the work.

**The Oceanic Feeling**

*Fear as a term implies anxiety and usually loss of courage. Fear of the unknown dread usually adds the idea of intense reluctance to face or meet a person or situation and suggests aversion as well as anxiety.*

(“Dread”, Webster Dictionary).

As previously discussed the sea was not always regarded as a place for recreation; shipwrecks were once very common making anxiety and the sea related. Fear of disappearing into limitless space or drowning in the endless depth of the sea makes one think of the non-nurturing, powerful, and critical side of the ocean. “It is when the artist leaves the disquieting boundary of the beach, linked however precariously with the stability of familiar ground and firm footing, and sails out on the open sea that anxiety is transformed into terror, allegory into actuality” (Nochlin 182). In Thalassic the elimination of a distant shoreline, and the hand that is grasping for rescue elicit feelings of anxiety and limitlessness, hope and despair. The endless
enveloping sea conjures up the danger and drama of the situation and creates a lurking unease.
The hand depicting the internalized fears of the seafaring heroine is reaching for the promising light on the horizon; without ropes to grasp there is no contact with any lifeline. The anonymous emptiness of space is disquieting - a dreamlike reminder of what can happen when one goes out to sea.


In her collection of essays, “Bathers, Bodies, Beauties,” Linda Nochlin’s original misreading and later understanding of the ‘Oceanic Feeling’ relates to the topics in *Thalassic*. Nochlin originally believed that the concept was about anxiety and being enveloped by and sucked down into the ocean: being lost at sea. She later compared her feelings with Manet’s *Rochefort* painting which personifies her version of oceanic anxiety: limitlessness, extremely high horizons, and the entire canvas being taken up by the sea. Nochlin states,

I was disconcerted to find that the oceanic feeling was attached to something positive, unifying the individual with the universe. The sensation of something limitless and boundless suggests not eternity but a submerging of the individual, isolation from all known, substantial material reality-things in the world. Manet’s painting is the very

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20 The ‘Oceanic Feeling’ is a concept developed and expressed by Romain Rolland, a friend of Freud, and made popular in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1930.
epitome of my very different alienating and frightening version of it—‘alone, alone, all
all alone, / Alone on a wide, wide sea,’ to echo Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. That to me
is still the “oceanic feeling”. (Nochlin 190-191)

The concept of the ‘Oceanic Feeling’, is in fact the notion of the origin of religion. It is a
sensation of an unbreakable bond with the external world in its primary form. Freud states, “It is
a feeling which he [Rolland] would like to call a sensation of “eternity,” a feeling as of
something limitless, unbounded-as it were “oceanic.” This feeling is the source of religious
energy” (Freud). The Oceanic Feeling can be described as a sort of oneness with the world or
peace in the limitlessness (Nochlin).

I identify intimately with Nochlin’s initial misreading and then with the actual definition
from Rolland. This dichotomy is one that is felt everyday by those who choose to make a life at
sea. Fear and fascination are equally felt, experiencing both at the same time is a paradox, yet it
is the reality in relation to the sea. *Thalassic* mirrors how the oceanic feeling represents my
anxiety and pleasure of the immersion into an other-worldly environment, the sea. These
thoughts are what drive people to embrace the sea even in the face of fear. The ever-present
dichotomies in relation to the sea are what drive women in the seafaring profession today and
continues to push them forward beyond the barriers placed on them because of their gender.
Conclusion

“We must treat the success of women in yachting with a degree of normalcy, because success and achievements are worthy of recognition, whether by men or women”.


Seafaring women are beginning to believe in each other. However, all-female crews are viewed as a spectacle, a curiosity to be championed. The past few years have seen the emergence of all-female crews on boats. For example, in the 2017-18 Volvo Ocean Race, Team SCA an all-female raced boat, was the only team to have female competitors in the race.

Equal representation of the genders in seafaring must become the default, thereby removing women from their position as Other. Thalassic is multi-layered and driven by my love of the sea and the wish to see my female colleagues excelling in its environment. By challenging the tradition of marine painting and the deepening societal gender restrictions of the nineteenth century, the Thalassic panorama comments on a particular period in history that created lasting negative effects for women in seafaring. The work integrates its heroine into a historically masculine seafaring context, thus interrogating the system by presenting a heroine who is boldly combatting the elements and her psyche.

While working to remove the female seafarer as Other, the work uses perspectives which render the sea beautiful and alarming, serene and turbulent, earnest and unnerving, masculine
and feminine to reveal the honest visions one feels in relation to the sea. These dualities which are internally felt by female seafarers make it the beautiful, ever-challenging frontier that begs exploration.
Appendix

Portion from my ‘Interviews Log’

What attracted you down this career path?

Could you describe the most (or the top few) sexist incidents that happened to you in the industry?

How do you manage the inequality or stigma about being a female professional yachtswoman? (what is your stance or attitude toward it?)

What do you think needs to happen to make the industry more equal for men and women?

“The hardest part of being a female in the industry is the assumption that you don’t know what you are doing and the propensity of other sailors to tell you how before giving you a chance.” (Laurel Gaudet)

“Watching overqualified friends get passed over for jobs that are then given to less qualified men. Seeing how disheartened female sailors get after countless and unnecessary rejection, not due to skill but due to their sex.” (Jamie Enos)

“I was once told ‘I see you’re on your knees again.’ It was insanely offensive and the last day I worked on that boat. In the VOR (Volvo Ocean Race) it was really eye opening in the way the media saw the team—we’d be asked different questions than the guys. Like the mums were asked about leaving their kids but the dads of the race were asked the tough sailing questions. In the VOR, everyone is the same—you have to be tough as fuck and it doesn’t matter if you’re a man or woman—or it shouldn’t.” (Corinna Halloran)

“Seeing my hand at the helm is providing more exposure of women who are successful in the industry. Hopefully one day people won’t be so surprised [to see a woman as captain].” (Erica Lush)
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