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## Women's Work: The Sublime is Now

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### Recommended Citation

Blackstone, Michelle, "Women's Work: The Sublime is Now" (2023). *MFA in Visual Arts Theses*. 20.  
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# Women's Work

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Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

June 2023

**Abstract**

What influences the lens through which we view art and the value we ascribe to it? This paper investigates the ways in which the historically gendered philosophy of “The Sublime,” a lack of institutional access for female artists, and traditionally gendered materials have acted as impediments for women in the arts. With this in mind, I will discuss the ways that masculine rhetoric in terms of “The Sublime” prevented women from attaining what was once considered the highest level of artistic achievement. I will also discuss the obstructions female artists face(d) in terms of gaining intuitional access within the art world. Finally, I examine the ways in which works using certain materials – specifically textiles, fibers, and needlework – have traditionally been dismissively classified as “craft” or “women’s work.” Throughout the paper, I will also examine how my own artistic practice seeks to address these issues. Towards this end, I will analyze specific examples of my work and how it not only serves to decenter a traditional history of landscape painting, but to empower female artists and their experiences.

## Introduction

Many of the clothes my sister and I wore growing up were made by my paternal Granny. I was always impressed that she could make such delicate items “just like the store.” I also remember seeing my maternal Grandma’s quilt room. Technically, it was her bedroom, but there were piles of fabric scraps covering her bed and every corner of the green, shag carpet. The sewing machine sat under the window, though she would often quilt by hand on the go too. That was how she taught me to sew my first quilt square – by hand, at a craft fair. When I was older, she taught me how to use the sewing machine. If Grandma wasn’t quilting, she was embroidering, crocheting, or sewing. My mom learned from her too, and developed a talent for sewing and crocheting. As I got older, she taught me more complex patterns for clothes or bags.

When I was little, sitting with my grandma at the craft fair, I enjoyed it. It brought us together, and sharing something that she loved made me feel closer to her. It sparked my creativity as the possibilities seemed endless with the many patterns and designs we could piece together, and I felt a sense of pride and accomplishment when I completed it. But as I got older, I acquired a distaste for it. That sort of thing was just “doing crafts,” and it was “girly” or even “childish.” I can’t remember how, when, or why, but messages were disseminated to me that sewing, quilting, and craft were things women did. At the same time, I came to associate anything specifically “feminine” with being weak, depreciated, and something to be looked down on. If I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, I needed to let those things go.

Consequently, I decided to further my fine art education in college. All of my art faculty were male. I took two art history classes, in which we used *Gardner’s Art*

*Through the Ages* textbook. In these classes, our exams consisted of memorizing a work of art, the artist, and the year it was completed. The only female painters I can remember learning about were Georgia O’Keeffe, Mary Cassatt, and Frida Khalo. When these painters were discussed, however, it was to emphasize that the subjects of their work were feminine in nature, largely due to the restrictions women faced at the time, but kudos to them for “making it.”

In these same classes, we discussed at length the idea of “The Sublime,” insomuch as it referred to a transcendent experience. In these lessons, “The Sublime” was defined as a sense of awe and terror (often experienced in an encounter with nature), aligning with definitions based on the writings of philosophers Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. By extension, a painting representing this kind of experience could offer the same sense of awe and exaltation to the viewer. I was enamored with the works of painters like J.M.W. Turner, the painters of the Hudson River School, Albert Bierstadt, and so on. Feeling as though I had encountered such experiences in nature, I thought if I could just paint as well as they could, I could prove that women had a place in the dialogue of “great painters” too.

With this backdrop in mind, my early work dealt mostly with landscape. However, modern ease of travel and the plethora of photographs by which we can “experience” the natural world means that contemporary landscape painting isn’t necessarily focused on replicating scenes like the “Old Masters.” Still, I was looking for a way to prove to myself that a woman could experience and represent the grandiose idea I had of “The Sublime,” since I hadn’t learned of any female landscape painters whose work was regarded as such. In some way, I wanted to embrace the autonomy and

freedom I had that so many female artists before me did not – to practice painting and to experience a world beyond “the home.” This desire to enter into the male-dominated discourses of art led me to practice landscape painting – as seen in *Guatemala* and *Hawaii* – in which I sought to emulate the techniques and compositions of celebrated nineteenth-century landscape painters. In retrospect, I now understand that these paintings were simply derivative in both form and conception.



Figure 1. Michelle Blackstone. *Guatemala* (2017) (left) *Hawaii* (2018) (right)

### **The Sublime Landscape**

In my current work, I continue to incorporate oil paint, landscape painting, and the idea of the “The Sublime,” as artistic signifiers that reference a tradition in art history that was dominated by white, male artists. By incorporating these signifiers with the materiality of dyed fabric or needlework (traditions often associated with “craft” or “women’s work”), my work acts as a critical commentary on the male-dominated art world and the exclusion of women from the canons of art. This is evident in my installation piece entitled *Women’s Work*, as a magnificent landscape is rendered (and

simultaneously fragmented) on multiple strips of dyed fabric. In fact, this landscape doesn't entirely imitate the "Old Masters" or their highly illusionistic mode of representation. It is more fluid with washes of thinner paint. It "listens" to the materiality of the canvas itself, with its wrinkles and frays. The landscape is fragmented into eight separate panels (or strips), and is unable to be viewed as a single, unified image. Unlike a painting stretched on a canvas and hung on a wall, this piece invites viewers to walk through it and experience the landscape from within. This technique of "interrupting" an otherwise traditional landscape painting can also be seen in my *Venice Series* paintings, *Old Masters Study*, and *Embellishments Study*. Further discussion will be given to the meaning and significance of these more recent works later in this paper.



Figure 3. Michelle Blackstone. *Women's Work* (2023)

In painting landscapes and investigating "The Sublime," I came to realize that despite the freedom and autonomy I may enjoy, the philosophy and rhetoric of "The

Sublime” were not intended to include me. Indeed, concepts of “The Sublime” have shifted over time from spiritual transcendence to encounters with nature to technology and more. Nevertheless, one thing remains consistent. The rhetoric relating to this ideology has been largely male-centric, even to the extent that “the feminine sublime” has been given its own label and separate category. In *Romantic Visualities*, Jacqueline M. Labbe comments on the gendered nature of the Sublime. As she notes, the Sublime and its conception of nature entail “a masculine rite of passage, that it is constructed theoretically and experientially by eighteenth-century theoreticians ... in such a way as, not pointedly to exclude, but rather to elide, the feminine” (Labbe 36).

Why does this matter? It has been purported throughout history, perhaps beginning with painter and critic Jonathan Richardson, that “the sublime is not only desirable but is indeed the highest level of artistic attainment” (Riding and Llewellyn). If this is true, and the language around the sublime reserves this category for men, then might we (along with art critics and historians), presume that only male artists are capable of reaching the highest level of “artistic attainment?”

As Simon Morley has argued, “The sublime is an experience looking for context...[one] that can serve many interests” (Morley 10) In this case, I would argue that it is crucial to broaden the rhetoric of “The Sublime” to include the experiences of all kinds of artists, rather than continue to replicate white, male experiences and privilege. Framing the dialogue in masculine terms has led to an imbalance in the type of artists whose work receives institutional recognition and those whose work does not. My work seeks to broaden conceptions of the Sublime to include female artists by incorporating traditionally feminine (and consequentially feminist) media.



An example of this can be found in *Embellishments Study*. In this piece, there is a reference to traditional Sublime landscape painting. However, the painting is “embellished” with embroidery floss. The embroidery represents a traditionally feminine medium, and as it enters into this traditionally male-dominated artistic tradition, it challenges our expectations and assumptions about high art and the Sublime. In fact, this work proposes a new category of aesthetic experience that is neither bound to the traditions of landscape painting nor the presumption of what embroidery should be.



Figure 4. Michelle Blackstone. *Embellishments Study* (2023).

### **Institutional Access**

Indeed, the vast majority of oil paintings seen in art history textbooks and museums are by men (Clark, et al.). And since 2008, only 11% of the art purchased by museums was produced by women (Jacobs). Women who have been deemed successful in painting are often still validated by their comparisons to male painters. The artist Mira

Schor has termed this “patrilineage.” Further, as Linda Nochlin stated, “the white male is often implicitly present in...paintings, his controlling gaze being the one which brings such a world into being and for which it is ultimately intended” (Nochlin 37). Nochlin also notes in her groundbreaking essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” that women have traditionally lacked access to the educational training required for becoming a successful artist. She suggests that the institutional structures within the art world have made it impossible (or at least extremely difficult) for women to succeed in the arts, offering the example of the lack of access to the nude model at a time when studying nude figures was essential to one’s artistic education. Nochlin also discusses the lack of social mobility and freedom that women faced. A woman was expected to be married and concerned with the needs of the home, and not to be distracted by her career or ambition. She was also instructed to be good at many things but excel in nothing, which would hardly allow her to become a “great artist.” Finally, the work of a female artist required the endorsement of a man (such as an artist father or close artist patron) to be taken seriously, which meant that if she were not born into such circles, she would have little opportunity for recognition.

In response to Nochlin’s essay, Roger Clark, Ashley R. Folgo and Jane Pichette co-authored the essay “Have There Now Been Any Great Women Artists? An Investigation of the Visibility of Women Artists in Recent Art History Textbooks.” In this essay, they outline the blatant absence of female artists in art history textbooks. They argue that women artists could not be labeled as “great” because art historians did not recognize their existence. Further, they write that the revisions seen in later textbook editions largely correlate to one of the authors being a female art historian or seeking to

appeal to the female teachers using the textbook. Even in such cases, the authors are hard-pressed to find women artists to include because "'rediscovery'...depends on the fact that...women artists must first have been 'discovered.' And there were always forces that militated against such 'discovery;' such as the absence of supportive teachers, patrons, critics, and audiences." (Clark et al. 10). In their 1988 work – entitled *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* – the Guerilla Girls address the discriminatory conditions of the art world. As they state (ironically), one of the advantages of being a woman artist is working without the pressure or possibility of success.



Figure 6. The Guerilla Girls. *The Advantages Of Being A Woman Artist* (1988).

The exclusionary nature of the art world and its institutions gave rise to my *Obstructions* series. In this series, I create moments in which the observer's gaze is physically blocked or obstructed as a metaphor for the professional obstacles that female artists have faced and the resulting marginalization they have suffered. In this body of work, I do not create paintings that provide a clear or transparent illusion of reality, nor do I strip away the visual obstructions for the sake of a more legible or pleasing image. Rather, the object of interest within each work is unapologetically blocked. Ironically,

this also serves to bring the object of obstruction (the windows, wires, locks, etc.) to greater prominence. This is intended to elicit a sense of frustration in the viewer who wishes to see what is concealed or obstructed.

The series consists of a number of small (9"x12") paintings that feature a potentially beautiful or pleasurable view that is partially obstructed by something that stands in the way. In one, there is a sunset blocked by a cityscape and telephone wires. In another, the view of an ornate pagoda is blocked by locked doors. Another depicts the view of a city blocked by the window frame and blinds. These images positioned side-by-side might evoke feelings of being trapped or constrained since the viewer's ability to see what they wish to see is either blocked or restricted. For others, it might bring a sense of beauty and honor to that which would otherwise be overlooked – the wires one might squint through, the locked doors one might simply walk past without stopping to peer through the crack, or the window one might look through rather than at. This is important to me because I think women often feel overlooked or "in the way" in trying to present their artistic work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Especially if it involves "craft" or something "feminine," but further discussion will be given to this topic later.



Figure 7. Michelle Blackstone. *Wires* (2020) (right)

*Door* (2023) (center)

*Window* (2023) (left)

The concept of obstructions is evident in my work entitled *Women's Work* as well. When viewed head-on, the eight canvas panels appear to constitute a cohesive landscape. However, the panels are installed and hung in three separate rows, so the viewer is ultimately unable to perceive the whole (or unified) image at any one time. On the back, a sea of unique dye patterns and irregularities can be observed. Each panel is draped over a dowel that is suspended from a single point, allowing it to turn and sway at will, sometimes “blocking” a section of the landscape or interrupting one’s view of the dye patterns from the back. It also “obstructs” (or complicates) the traditional binary opposition between “fine art” and “craft”; for it is neither a truly “sublime” example of landscape painting or a work of pure craft. Additionally, it challenges the transcendent nature of Sublime landscape painting insofar as the visceral nature of the piece calls attention to its materiality. *Women's Work* engenders a space of ambiguity and disorientation, a questioning of what one knows, and a disrupting of the neat, the familiar, and the expected. This in-between state might create a sort of liminal experience – one that liberates us from rigid systems of thought and ideology. As George Quasha and Charles Stein note, “Liminality could be described as the state in which reality questions

itself, inquires into what it is to itself” (Quasha and Stein 215). It is this kind of questioning that I want to evoke for the viewer as they observe and interact with this piece, perhaps even calling into question the binary structures upon which patriarchal power and biases rest.

## **Craft**

One such bias can be observed in the delineation between what is considered “art” and what is considered “craft.” Writing in 1973, Lucy Lippard noted that “women artists had, up until then, avoided ‘female techniques’ like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines—all natural elements of artmaking,” for fear of being labeled “feminine artists” (Lippard). Historically speaking, oil paint is “a medium that is almost synonymous in the public mind with the idea of fine art” (Crowne). Due to the professional barriers that female artists have faced, oil painting was also typically associated with the work of male artists. Conversely, fiber work was dismissed or denigrated with the term “women’s work,” signifying “the boring, mundane...tasks beneath the dignity of a man” (Auther 21). Despite the efforts of American fiber artists in the 60s and 70s, critics like John Bentley Mays still observed in 1986 that “art critics will never be paying as much attention to crafts...not because craft or craft-as-art are inferior, but because they are not art” (Auther xviii).

Despite the strides that have been made in advocating for craft and fiber arts<sup>2</sup>, statistics prove that major museums still lean heavily white and male and that works of

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<sup>2</sup> I think of the work of Anni Albers and the Bauhäusler, the Glasgow Girls, Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, Faith Ringgold’s painted quilts, the Gee’s Bend quilts, and contemporary quilt artist, Bisa Butler. At the same time, contributions from male artists like Mike Kelley, Charles LeDray, Claus Odenburg’s fabric sculptures (though his wife did the actual sewing), Alan Shields and Nick Cave have aided in elevating fabric and textiles into the realm of the fine art canons as well. Yet, while many view these contributions as

art signed by men are assigned greater monetary value (Elsesser). Additionally, paintings still account for 65% of the global Contemporary Art Market, according to the Artprice's findings in 2020 (Ehrmann). It is typically assumed that a museum collection will include paintings. However, fiber art is rarely included in these collections, and when it is, it is often relegated to the miscellaneous, mixed media, or historical "decorative" sections of a museum. And yet, fiber artists persist – either because of the process, the materiality, or the politicization – and feminist fiber artists have made great strides in advocating for their place in the realm of fine art.<sup>3</sup> By using fibers and textiles as a medium, artists continue to call for "future revisions of what we count as art" (Auther 176). This phrase "what we count as art" is perhaps what subconsciously led me to abandon "crafts," including the needlework and sewing my Grandma taught me, in favor of the more highly regarded medium of oil painting.

Several attempts have been made to distinguish craft from art and define "what we count as art." Discussion has been given to the use or function of the object as well as the method of making (learned or "felt out"). M. Anna Fariello suggests that "art is imagination, with or without skill; craft is skill, with or without imagination" (Fariello 40). Interestingly enough, one of the notions separating art from craft was the idea of the sublime. Indeed, as Espen Hammer has noted: "Although instinctively skeptical of the notion of the sublime because of its traditional (18th and 19th century) association with

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progress, some critics, like Lucy Lippard, would suggest that it reveals the uneven scales in the way art is viewed. As Lippard has argued, "when a man makes, say, a macaroni figure or a hand-tooled Last Supper, it tends to raise the sphere rather than lower the man, and he is likely to be written up in the local newspaper. Women dabbling in men's spheres, on the other hand, are still either inferior or just freakishly amazing" (Lippard 33).

<sup>3</sup> Further examples include Elaine Reicheck, Do-Ho Suh, Hu Xiaoyuan, and Yinka Shonibare, among others.

the heroic awesomeness of sheer magnitude, and thus its implicit celebration of domination... [Theodor] Adorno [suggested that] ‘the sublime delimits art from what goes by the name of ‘arts and crafts’” (Hammer).

Disregarding the historic distinction between art and craft, I have returned to the “feminine” practices I learned from my matrilineage and I blend them with references to the tradition of the Sublime in painting. These references to the Sublime include depictions of the landscape and encounters with nature, creating something that is beyond the viewer’s control (sometimes obstructed or moving), and producing liminal spaces of experience that destabilize the rigid binaries that have traditionally structured our understanding of art.<sup>4</sup> Breaking down the walls between art and craft in my work is both liberating and empowering as it brings together, to borrow Lippard’s term, “men’s spheres” of landscape oil painting and “women’s spheres” of hand-dyed fabrics as seen in *Women’s Work*, quilting in *Old Masters Study*, and embroidery in *Embellishments Study* and *Draped Study*.

With some exceptions, it would seem that many women working in textile and fiber arts felt that they had to prove they belonged in the “men’s sphere.” I think, for example, of the women of the Bauhäusler, such as Anni Albers, whose fiber and textile pieces reflect many of the same goals of modernist painting of the time. Albers also hung her weavings on the wall at eye-level like a painting (which, indeed, was innovative and groundbreaking). In other instances, I think of fiber artists who make their work larger than life, a scale so macho no one would dare call it “feminine.” One such example is

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<sup>4</sup> Is it a painting or textile? Art or craft? Landscape or obstruction? Men’s sphere or women’s sphere?



Sheila Hicks. Though her ‘minimes’ and ‘ponytails’ are very important to her practice, she struggled to gain gallery recognition making them. It wasn’t until she was asked to make large scale works that she gained recognition, and these ‘bundles’ remain her most recognizable pieces. I approach this topic with some trepidation, because in no way do I wish to belittle or take away from the magnificent contributions these female artists have made. I look to their work with deep admiration and appreciation.



Figure 9. Anni Albers. Black-White-Yellow (1926)



Figure 10. Sheila Hicks. Black-White-Yellow (1926). *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* (2016–17)

While one might argue that my work follows this same trajectory by adding landscape painting to the piece, I prefer to look at it from a different vantage point. In each example of my work, the landscape is in some way downplayed in favor of the textile or needlework. For example, in *Women’s Work*, the painting is rendered in washes (rather than illusionistic representation) and the canvas is cut into eight strips, while the frays, dye patterns, and materiality of the woven canvas are unabashedly apparent. In *Old Masters Study*, the paintings are cut and sewn into a quilt, favoring the pattern and sewing over the traditional tenets of painting (a stretched canvas, concealed with paint

and hung on the wall). In *Embellishments Study* and *Draped Study*, the landscape painting is obstructed and interrupted by the embroidery, which captures the viewer's gaze and demands their attention.



Figure 11. Michelle Blackstone. *Old Masters Study* (2023) (left) *Draped Study* (2023) (right)

In some way, I want to create an almost satirical irony – a world in which painting, or “men’s spheres” feel the need to fit into “women’s spheres” (i.e. Imagine a world in which needlework was so highly regarded, that a male painter would use his painting medium, but literally veil it with embroidery for recognition). After the initial disorientation, I would like the viewer to recognize that there is no need for such gendered categories, and that, in fact, one can be strengthened by the other and vice versa, coming together to create an entirely new “sphere” – one in which distinct gendered terms are essentially dissolved. I hope the viewer may come to realize the absurdity of such binaries and hierarchies, and reconsider their own implicit biases toward the gender of the artist or the materials of the work. In this process, perhaps the viewer may transform their thinking in a way that honors “all the arts of making as equal

products of a creative impulse” and “gives meaning to all things” (Nochlin). We might also find ourselves in a post-gender or gender-neutral world where the creative impulse of a person, using whatever creative sphere they are drawn to, can be recognized and celebrated. By questioning (and perhaps dissolving) the boundaries of the “feminine” and “the sublime,” I seek to promote a visual consciousness-raising that no longer seeks to establish hierarchies or make nothings into somethings, but to honor the “nothings” as “somethings” in their own right (Nochlin).<sup>5</sup>

One piece that functions in this way is *Draped Study*. In this piece, the landscape painting is overlaid with a sheer fabric featuring an embroidered design. It elevates the “nothing” (often associated with needlework) by asking us to look at a “something” (the painting). And yet, we cannot really see the painting. It has been obstructed by the fabric, causing the viewer to shift their gaze toward the embroidery. This hiding away of the landscape painting might feel like a disgrace, but at the same time, one might see the “disgrace” of ignoring the needlework, and hopefully come to appreciate the whole, or at least to appreciate each discipline in its own right.

Approaching this discussion in a 2023 – when we work in a context shaped by conceptualism, interdisciplinary practice, fourth-wave feminism, and post-genderism – the conversation feels like it should be dated and stale. Faith Ringgold even optimistically predicted: “maybe by the year 2000 people will be asking what that [the desire to make a distinction between art and craft] was all about” (Auther 117). And yet, as Katy Hessel

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<sup>5</sup> Nochlin uses the term “nothings” here to refer to craft works like quilts and textiles, and “somethings” to refer to elevated works gaining institutional recognition.

has argued in her book *The History of Art Without Men*, assumptions about what art is and who should be making it are deeply embedded and linger today.

## **Conclusion**

Moving forward in my practice, I want to continue to explore ways to create a world in which the “women’s sphere” is, in fact, already a place worthy of all the same honor and prestige as the male-dominated museum or gallery — a place admirable enough that “men’s work” is looking for ways to fit into it rather than the other way around. I do this, in part, as a means of honoring my background – my Granny and Grandma whose work was often thankless (to borrow Bonnie Mann’s term for the daily “drudgery-work” women were expected to do without ever being noticed or thanked), but truly deserved its due recognition. By working with textiles, I’m gaining new appreciation for the people and practices I had been socialized to condescend, seeking healing, and discovering new connection to my grandmothers in the process.

I would also like to collaborate with other artists using a variety of mediums to find new ways and places for isolated “spheres” to be invited into other “spheres” in a way in which each seeks to elevate the other. By doing so, I hope to invite viewers into a space where they are asked to reconsider their preconceptions toward the artist or the materials of the work and transform their thinking about the kinds assumptions they may hold.

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