

# Moving Pictures

By Jeff Kelley

## The Apocalyptic Video-Soundscapes of Deborah Oropallo and Andy Rappaport

*A night on the sea in an open boat is a long night.* – Stephen Crane

Paintings were the movies of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hanging floor-to-ceiling in the voluminous Paris Salon, the highest ones tilted downward, collared in ornate Beaux-Arts frames, vying for the best spots on the wall, the paintings were pitching their storylines – dramas, documentaries, comedies – to the well-heeled members of the French bourgeoisie who strolled by, darted about, or stood aghast below. The Salons were the art fairs of their time.

The high-minded mentor of the era was Denis Diderot, who wrote not only about the Paris Salons between 1759 and 1781, but argued passionately for the literary, non-religious meaning of painting and, in the stories told therein, the moral instruction of the aristocracy (especially Russia's Catharine the Great). As an art critic, Diderot was preoccupied with the power of art to empirically represent the subjective complexity of natural (today we might say authentic) experience. Theater, not painting, was the art form that, with its fourth wall, could function as a kind of staged Naturalism. Diderot's importance for Enlightenment painting was to apply this effect of theater to a two-dimensional visual field that, in order to come alive for the earnest viewer, required a third dimension - and that was literature, or the scripted and acted words of theater interpolated into pictures. Therein, words would animate a morality tale, the fourth wall of theater would reappear, and the otherwise static, two-dimensional art behind it would imitate life as a kind of second nature.

Over the past two decades, Deborah Oropallo has reinvented her painting - which began as oil on canvas - in terms of emerging digital technology, mostly by eliminating elements that were once regarded as fundamental to the nature of modern painting: paint, the act of painting, a surface to paint on, the materiality of the medium, the presence of the artist's hand, and the close proximity of the painter to the canvas. Indeed, she has gotten rid of the physical conventions of painting while retaining its visual appearance and historical references. Thus, Oropallo's recent works are light projections on walls or internal illuminations in video monitors. Yet they do not feel

thin. Using documentary photographs of fires, floods, oil spills, and the warming edges of a melting world, Oropallo, in collaboration with Andy Rappaport, mixes still photography from journalistic sources with electronic sound (extended minimalist compositions) that drive not so much a visual narrative as a sense of imminent and underlying global catastrophe. They move forward in time the way a river rises or a glacier melts – you can't see it happening until you're waist-deep. The projected photographs are layered atop each other without entirely obscuring the ones beneath. They are less a parade of images than a semi-transparent stack, each adding to – or becoming – the surface beneath which prior images recede. Especially when they depict surfaces of water, these images feel deep; a metaphor of infinite regress, turtles all the way down. Although the pictures are digital surfaces – there is no actual depth – the impression is that they stack up, like pictures in a fireplace, or sink down, like people in a flood. But those impressions are after-effects, quickly vanishing memories of preceding images, like recalling the oil in the water before the oil we see in the water now. We don't have time to think about the picture we see (& just saw) before it is covered by the one we see now (and will soon lose sight of). The immediate future slips into the immediate past through the provisional holding pond of the present, which is always filling and spilling its contents. Thus, the images pollute the Romantic landscapes and seascapes Oropallo selects from the history of art or from the fields of geographic/journalistic photography to mark the environmental crime scenes of our age. To stop the spill, to douse the fire, is somehow to freeze the frame and reverse direction, but the clock never stops. Neither does the music, humming, grinding, tolling on. We intuit the tension between the ever-presentness of the image and the relentless momentum of the sound. We are attracted to both, anxious to move but locked in place, like witnesses to a slow-motion atrocity.

In the video "Blazes," a long three minutes and thirty one seconds, the sonorous, bass-baritone voice of Johnny Cash, singing "The Green, Green Grass of Home," intones a lugubrious yet ironic hymn that drifts across the surface of a video sequence of photographic images, layered one atop another at one-second intervals, depicting modest white clapboard houses and barns – homesteads, really – burning, licked by flames, crackling, stoking a roaring conflagration on a startlingly green prairie. What comes to mind? Maybe the Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House," an anthem of the age. An American house, charming and bright, good fences, good neighbors. Now charring, its modest pride of place reduced to skeletal, ashen remains. A little house on the prairie, a white house. A habitat. Our habitat. The hallowed grounds of grandparents, of parents' childhood homes (including Cash's childhood house in Dyess, Arkansas).

A place we may remember from a dream we may have dreamed in stories heard in childhood of ancestors we longed to know, whose crumbled stone foundations now reflect the ember's heat and lay in smoldering ruin. The scorched dead grass of home.

Oropallo's burning houses look like Kansas, or Iowa, but the grass also looks like the warming, mushy tundra of the Arctic. The green is acrid, microbial but not fertile, the garish hue of thawing toxins. There is never a sense that the houses are inhabited, just abandoned, and their surrounding grasslands seem forgotten, though their coordinates are likely inscribed in a yellowed county assessor's register from a long-ago land rush. Certain clusters of houses and barns look like villages torched in a rush of violence, maybe tribal, probably environmental. Home in flames. World on fire. Scaled in our minds to the horizon, with hundreds of tiny houses in a row, we imagine California, the smokey, hellish umber of another suburban wildfire, flaring up one cracker box at a time.

Sometimes Rappaport's soundscapes evoke actual space: compressed (even dense), extended (almost endless), seldom bright and airy, often dark and clouded. Because each soundscape plays throughout a given video, it enacts the literal time of that video; poetically, though, it grinds toward eternity, beyond the time frames of art. It grinds and it tolls, as if from within, as if from above. It doesn't narrate space so much as it stretches, churns, folds, and layers it. Although musical, the sounds are not distillations of the pitches, rhythms, melodies, and harmonies we know as music, but amplifications of the textures, timbres, resonances and echoes of the material world that pulsate through physical space and psychological time.

"Crude," an unsettling six-minute, forty-second video soundscape, summons from recent memory the disastrous 2010 explosion and oil spill of the infamous Deepwater Horizon drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico, but also, through images of sailing ships from the history of Western painting, it invokes the centuries-long project of maritime exploration and exploitation. The video begins with oil derricks appearing on the gulf horizon like small black insects, while, in the foreground, surfers cut shallow, lazy arcs in the waves along the shore. This juxtaposition of heedless leisure and immanent threat is striking, as it always is in a disaster movie (or a pandemic). As the photographs overlay, images of derricks, barges, icebergs, and 19th century galleons (again, from paintings) trade places on the ocean's surface in the manner of chess pieces globally maneuvered by an invisible hand.

While the visual field is, like a movie, fully engaged, the pictures projected onto it are of various sizes, some filling the screen, most punctuating it, like visual beats, with quick successions of smaller photos, often one atop another. The smaller photographs feel like snapshots despite depicting vast seascapes and skies. This gives rise to a string of poetic associations as the images tick along: an oil derrick becomes an ocean schooner; an oil barge echoes the declining shape of a melting iceberg; barges multiply across the horizon, like boxcars in the desert; a flat dirty sky swells into a regal sunset; a flat photographic surface is punctured by the deep space of a painting; a flock of waterfowl scatter as a fleet of kayaks assembles; gulls and galleons tangle by air and by sea; almost beneath us, a whale spouts in passing; meanwhile, we notice the light has changed and the sun is setting; a postmodern drilling rig is bright yellow and a pre-modern sailing ship is on fire; the sky darkens as ships and rigs and barges converge (as if in rescue), their lights blinking; the waters roil, ships heave and toss; the blackening sea reflects the brightening lights of these gargantuan drilling rigs that rise from the ocean like skeletal, alien cities; 5,000 feet below, liquid clouds of crude, the color of crankcase sludge, billows up from the wellhead, fouling the deep and rising relentlessly to the surface, where it burns off on the water, pushing smoke skyward like a mushroom cloud, closing the scene on modernity.

Through all of this, the music tolls on. For “Crude,” Rappaport seems to have composed from a single electronic note an extended, pulsing wave - a kind of buzzing baseline - that breaks at regular intervals into a pattern of six or seven quickly thrashing beats before returning to the single note. These beats are themselves different notes, so over time a minimalist wave seems to rise, hold, fall, and rise again. This tension between the single line and the quick staccato beats echoes a nautical distress call - S.O.S. - while conjuring in the mind a horizon line with intermittent peaks, like the surface of the water. One fathom below, we feel the thumping of our hearts.

Above all of this, bells toll, at first as a marker of musical time, and then, in time, they quicken and multiply in number, sounding an increasingly panicky warning that resonates in space like a chorus of pealing church steeples telling townsfolk their global village is on fire. It is too late. A kind of rapture seizes the video-scape as oil platforms burn, schooners sink, fireboats spray long, useless arcs of water at burning derricks, and plumes of black smoke gather on the blue horizon like a front of angry tornados. Indeed, “Crude” is a Dantesque vision of our time; the fire of Hell rises from deep in the ocean and by the time it reaches the sky we are all underwater.

From video to video, the artists have composed ecologies of images and sounds. The images may skip along the surface, or drown in the deep, and the sounds may get caught in endless eddies or rock the cradle of heaven. Compellingly, the pictures are silent, especially as they transition from one to the next; we half-expect to hear the telltale “clicks” of slides dropping during a chemical-era art history lecture. But the machinery is soundless. Without the metronome, all the action is in the play of images (and its interplay with the music). While the screen-filling seascapes set the stage, the smaller pictures of people and other debris enact a pantomime of quiet panic as they rapidly abut, sometimes overlap, and slowly dissolve. They seem to beckon each other, to reach out, to drift apart, and finally to wash away. It’s these quickly paced handoffs between images, one after another, that suggests not so much a human narrative as a force of nature unconcerned with humanity. This is especially true of “Flood,” a video in which imperceptibly rising flood waters (maybe Houston, maybe New Orleans) inundate an urban population (or at least a lot of people) who wades and floats and carries each other to wherever it is they are trying to go.

As they do, the sound of a bow vibrates on a steel string, dragging, grating, whining as note follows mournful note, too stretched out for listeners to discern a melody, but likely a dirge to accompany the deluge. The sound never much rises or falls - it just plays on, like strings onboard the Titanic. And like Stephan Crane’s “The Open Boat,” from 1897, Oropallo & Rappaport’s video soundscapes are forms of American Naturalism, that is, they are both ecstatic and cruel. The ecstasy rises up from the Romantic land- and seascapes, inherited from 18th century Europe and passed to America via the Oxbow bend of the Connecticut River, and the cruelty bleeds through the utter inevitability of what the videos bear witness to. They are not documentaries (though all their visual matter is clipped from the world of photojournalism), but works of art. As such, they feel epic, almost literary, like visualizations of the opening paragraph of Crane’s short story:

*“None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops which were foaming white, and all of the men knew the color of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.”*

American literary Naturalism, though in the wake of European Romanticism, is not transcendental. It stays at the level of the earth and sea, with the details of empirical experience. It is eye level.

Crane keeps his words, and those of his castaway characters (one of whom was autobiographical), within the compressed range of what they could see from their tiny open boat, despite the vastness all around and above them and the depths beneath. Romanticism was transcendent emotionally, as Neoclassicism was idealistically. But in 1897, the crew does not escape its circumstances, and something closer to existential dread seeps through the misty panorama of Romantic sublimity. God will not bail them out, and Nature doesn't care.

Fifty years earlier, in 1851, Nature, personified as a great white whale, cared with a vengeance in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." So did Capitan Ahab, who sought revenge for his half-eaten (now wooden) leg. We don't know whether the white whale died, but surely Ahab did, lashed by harpoon rope to the bloody back of the leviathan as it cracks the spine of Ahab's whaling ship, sending all but the narrator down in a whirlpool. "Moby Dick" marks the plunge of American literature into the sub-genre of Dark Romanticism (Poe, Hawthorn), with its interest in the irrational and the grotesque, states of intensified human emotion beyond the reach of transcendentalist light and enlightenment reason. But the sense of meaninglessness permeating "The Open Boat," perhaps the purest work of American Naturalism, foreshadows 20th century Existentialism. "Shipwrecks are apropos of nothing," Crane writes. There is just no reason why a man's downing is important to the sea.

A recurring motif of Oropallo & Rappaport's videos is destruction, relentless but anticlimactic. There are no firestorms, raging beasts, or walls of water. Focus shifts from the moment of destruction to its stagnant aftermath. Likewise heroism, which is random, at the margins, or simply unwitnessed. The Romantic trope of Man versus Nature is, in these works, an artifact of art history, a photo montage of 18th and 19th century paintings (Friedrich, Turner, Gericault) of sinking rafts, burning ships, or ill-fated vessels of discovery crushed in merciless strata of ice. The destruction pictured in Oropallo & Rappaport's videos is not saturated with intense human emotion. The lenses that capture these episodes of nature's disinterest are both photojournalistic and opportunistic, detached by necessity, sympathetic but not heartfelt. With a grim curiosity, we observe people swamped in boats, thankful we are not them, but increasingly apprehensive that we could be.

An ancestor of Oropallo & Rappaport's land- and seascape videos is the 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi*, a slow-motion and time-lapse "tone poem" in which continuous filming of the natural and man-made environments is accompanied by a soundtrack composed by Philip Glass.

In the Hopi language, Koyaanisqatsi means “unbalanced life,” and the film is a masterpiece of 1970s environmentalism before climate change complicated the Man vs Nature dualism of the early ecology movement. Still, its minimalist, somewhat detached visualization of the impact of human progress upon the earth plays out across a span of time and space that, probably for the first time in cinema, transcended the romance, sublimity, and picturesqueness of our post-nuclear and pre-digital conceptions of nature as both a limitless resource and, after that, a web of systems and influences. It’s like subjecting the long chords of “Appalachian Spring” to the sustained attack of “Einstein on the Beach.”

Compared with Koyaanisqatsi’s 46-minute expanse, Oropallo & Rappaport’s video soundscapes are bite-sized; however, because they are digital, they don’t have to be cinematic to pack an epic punch. They play out like anxious photo-journalistic etudes in which space and time are compressed while the sound is elongated, stretching each vignette to the breaking point of opera. Although minimalist in style - a clean structure, short visual and musical phrases, gradual change over extended time - the subject matter, writhing from within, borders on the Baroque: billows of black smoke and raging tongues of fire, sinking wooden galleons and blue ice melting, drowning photographs of wading people who may also be drowning, a low red sun, glistening tar on the sand, and faint stars in the night. “The Ecstasy of Mother Earth?”

Beginning around 2000, with then-called “Iris Prints,” (invented in 1985, and since replaced by Epson printers with archival inks) Oropallo articulated a kind of middle distance between paint on canvas and pixels on screens where an image could hold its place in a dimensionless digital space. In this sense, she has always been interested in the modern practice of painting minus its haptic, hands-on physicality. Nothing holds the eye’s mind like a resonant visual image suspended just beyond reach, which is where things come into focus for Oropallo. In the newer works with Rappaport, she pushes that distance toward the horizon, which opens a precipitous space at our feet - a space we can feel more than see. It is a considered space - a space of art - for which journalistic photography doesn’t usually have the time. Although richly digital, these video-soundscapes offer few savage close-ups or seductive details (which would be their Baroque-ness). The beauty is in the distance, the ugliness at our feet. We confront a betrayal of Romanticism by the real. And at our feet is exactly where the artists lay the warm oily debris of industrial Capitalism.

We behold the Romantic landscape at a distance, until a dusty John Wayne, big as the sky, steps into view from the running board of a stagecoach. Therein, the American struggle between man and nature ensues for a new century, and man thereafter fills the picture, an anthropomorphic monument in Monument Valley. Eighty years on, we are tiny people hailing helicopters from rooftops, stranded on elevated freeways, floating down streets on inner tubes, pushing wheelchairs and shopping carts with dying elders and hapless children. We are wet, parched, our hair thickened with ash. We are forlorn refugees holding our pets, waiting for FEMA, unable to say what we've lost. The figure/ground equation has been reversed: we no longer fill the picture - the picture is what little we can see of our surroundings as water fills our low-slung open boat.

*“Presently, it seemed that even the captain dozed, and the correspondent thought that he was the one man afloat on all the ocean. The wind had a voice as it came over the waves, and it was sadder than the end.”*

In Crane's story, the captain and the correspondent mark the initial American split between the Romantic hero and the pragmatic witness. The captain is not Ahab and there is no devil fish. If Romanticism suffused the sky with human feeling, the correspondent tells his story to an indifferent sea. Journalistic objectivity is the opposite of indifference - it is profoundly interested in what it witnesses. It keeps its distance to find the subject's scale, its focus, or to frame a bigger picture. Sometimes the story is intimate, other times panoramic. We are told the best journalistic photographs capture moments that resonate beyond themselves, yet most are initially fixed in monotonous strings of before-and-after images. Those images in Oropallo & Rappaport's videos constitute a kind of staccato montage that counters the smoother motion of the flames, smoke, and waves with a sense of anxious witnessing. This anxiety feels modern, an effect - and an affect - of lens media. Therein, the Romanticism of the sea is muted and the Biblical melodrama of people caught in the deluge dissolves into news. “The media exhaust the news,” said the philosopher Fredric Jameson, but Oropallo & Rappaport's anxious montage of mediated images puts human tragedy in the context of environmental catastrophe. No single anonymous, dispossessed person is the subject of these videos, nor even are all of them. They are human debris in the collapse of world order - not the order of nation states, societies, or economies (not yet), but of season, habitat, and species.



Romanticism's appeal involves a nostalgia for ruins, and while there are shipwrecks, oil spills, burning oceans, and melting ice plateaus in Oropallo & Rappaport's videos, taken together, as a kind of pastiche, these tropes today express the ruination of 18th century Romantic representation in painting. Drained of the mineral materiality of paint and its powdery pigments, these videos are more like referents to, rather than instances of, a two-hundred-year-old landscape of human passion. The natural world of the Romantic age is relegated to a despoiled yet picturesque backdrop for an apocalyptic setting. We recognize that backdrop, but don't quite believe it - we know the difference between clouds and billowing oil smoke, between a sinking galleon and a burning derrick. But like a projection, this picturesque landscape hangs over the horizon as a visual reminder of an eco-systemic complexity we cannot see except for the debris that washes ashore or the ash that drifts in the air.

Painting, photography, and the digital field - like three overlaid scrims - illuminate, muddy, and bleed through each other. The point is not to argue that Oropallo is a painter or produces paintings *per se* but to assert that she works in a variety of media as the painter she has always been. We still think of Robert Rauschenberg's 1961 photo-silkscreens as paintings, even though they are mostly collages. Allan Kaprow's Happenings emerged from impulses he sensed in action painting. Carolee Schneemann, the early experimental performance artist, always thought of herself as a painter: "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter. Everything that I have developed has to do with extending visual principles off the canvas." Modern painting has been as much a conceptual framework for non-painting as it has a medium with its own unique material and visual properties. Maybe it has always been both.

Since 2000, Oropallo's increasingly digitized work has extended from the mineral ground of painting. Her collaborations with Rappaport leave behind that ground for a sea of pixels, and yet we don't think of them as "video art" so much as paintings by digital means. Clearly, they're electronic, 21st century artworks, but their high craft and pictorial subjects are mineralesque. The art historian T. J. Clark once noted that large format photography - the C-prints of twenty years ago by artists like Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Candida Hofer - came to occupy the psychic wall space that once belonged to painting, which has been threatening to disappear for a hundred years. But painting hasn't so much disappeared as seeped into the architecture. Given the so-called immersive technology of our time, dense, meaty painting may be more important than ever, reassuring (or terrifying) us with expressions of corporeal existence. But a reductive

spawn of the medium from 1970s conceptualism continues to occupy museum walls as a mental placeholder waiting for something new to fill it up - like, for instance, video images of oil, fire, water, and ice. If digital projections and monitors now occupy the spaces of painting, they do not displace it. Video art, which emerged in the hands of visual artists as a renegade alternative to television around 1970, will morph along with evolving technology well before painting disappears. David Antin once called television the “frightful parent” of video art, as we can also say painting was to performance art, or radio to television, the phonograph to the radio, the TV screen to the computer screen, the camera to the iPhone to the wristwatch to the heart monitor, and so on. The “death of painting” is a drawn-out, century-long affair that never quite expires, calling to mind Robert Smithson’s maxim that “Poetry is always a dying language, but never a dead language.”

Over the last twenty years, Oropallo has digitally erased the object of painting while infusing her newer digital works with many of 17th and 18th century painting’s traditional subjects, most especially portraiture and history painting in which historical images of powerful men (Napoleon, Washington) are merged with fetishistic phantoms of beguiling and mysterious women (a lion tamer, the Queen of Hearts, a nurse). In a sense, Oropallo’s critique of painting amounts to a digital dress-up (or dress-down) in which she strips away the pomp of power, the ensembles of empire, and the regalia of Romanticism in favor of a kind of digital drag with gender at its core. Indeed, when she lived in a cool industrial live/work building in a Berkeley neighborhood then transforming itself from light-manufacturing and chemical storage to a mix of artist studios and “new-economy” businesses, Oropallo - with a small child at the time (she has two now, both grown) - focused on what might be called the domestic front of the feminist avant-garde. Much of her subject matter then - electric stove burners, mouse traps, toy railroad tracks - drew upon the home-studio itself and its surrounding industrial neighborhood. In this sense, her work has been environmental for decades. When she left the East Bay in 2013 and moved to a working 20-acre farm in Marin County, her “environment” reverted from a gentrifying urban neighborhood to a loamy rural homestead. Therein, the pace and rhythms of city life gave way to the organic cycles of nitrogen, carbon, and respiration, coastal-range weather, birthing, feeding, living, and dying. The mud, blood, skins, and shit of animals were the new haptic textures of live/work farming. Oropallo’s domestic/industrial studio in Berkeley, with canvases leaning against the walls and all manner of paint and ink and apparatus (including a series of Macs) arranged throughout the space, was essentially reduced to an online connection between the internet and a computer, the

computer and a digital projector, and the projector and a large white wall. Oropallo seems to have captured some of that light from around the farm and ground it into a fine digital dust. This is Oropallo's studio now: a dusty beam of light in a dim outbuilding on a farm.

A farm seems an unlikely place from which to project beams of code-dust into the art world. Given the seafaring and earth-scorching Naturalism of Oropallo & Rappaport's video-soundscapes, the clean, well-lighted spaces of galleries and museums provide elegant, minimalist settings against which the digital intensity of their videos is set. Though the idea of painting is part of their background, the videos can also activate spaces less formally associated with art world aesthetics, like public parks and art fairs. For example, "Flood," which debuted in 2019, was a multi-channel video projected onto an upright, three-sided (triangular) white screen (like a minimalist sailing ship) installed in - and seemingly floating upon - a reflecting pool at the Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanical Garden in Pasadena. "Flood" came to life as the California sun set and the sky darkened, as the water in the reflecting pool blackened, as the imagery on its twenty-two-foot screens shone rising waters, sinking people, watercraft and inner tubes, and a floating coffin with flowers on it drifting by. Rappaport's slow sound offered a counter-rhythm, a kind of resistance, to the rising panic. But it could not stop the flood. The screen flickered in the night like a fiery malevolent vision that burned its own reflection into the water - a kind of digital spill.

How close are these digital moving pictures to their sources in the physical world? Do they punch holes in the gallery, bidding us step into the roiling sea and onto the smoldering tundra - into the ice and fire that groans and howls beyond? Watching them carefully tends to erase, or at least blur, our awareness of the glossy black monitors that frame them; early 21st century technology falls away and the high drama of 18th century painting reappears. If "The Open Boat" is the literary analogue of Oropallo & Rappaport's video soundscapes, Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa," and Friedrich's "Sea of Ice," are its pictorial precursors. As we watch, we step into our own historical memories of Romantic painting. So the videos connect with the early emotional intensity of 18th century Romanticism and the slow-burn abjectness of its post-industrial, information age ruination. Once, human feeling was expressed as nature's tempests; now, human indifference has ruined nature, and human feeling is flat as the sea. So, in the sense that screams from early and late Romanticism are compressed against a wall plane by a projected beam of

light, or illuminated across a liquid crystal screen, these digital pictures are very close indeed to their sources in the world.

As if to make this very point, at the 2019 “Untitled” art fair in Miami the artists presented an outdoor ensemble of nine video monitors of various sizes, some vertical, others horizontal, each collared with a golden Beaux-Arts frame, standing and hanging as if against an unseen wall with the beach and sea their backdrop. Art fair visitors watched this array from a raised platform inside a small aluminum-pole framework covered by a blue canvas roof, rather like a carnival stand on an ocean boardwalk. From the viewer’s perspective, the screens occupied roughly the human field of vision - an oval of focus - but the actual sand, water, and sky leaned against them from behind, like nature pressing back upon a picture of nature. An equilibrium emerges from the tension between such grand dualities as reality vs representation, a frame vs an endless expanse, here -vs- way out there, and the present moment -vs- all that we anticipate, remember, and (try to) forget. We become aware of the interposition of the scrim of art upon life, and of the pull of life upon that scrim. It’s a slow exchange without crescendo, like the wash and backwash of waves on a beach. What anchors this tension is the alignment of the ocean’s horizon with the horizon lines running through the three eye-level video screens. The mind locks the scene in place, not unlike a painting in the Louvre. And yet, quite unlike a painting in the Louvre since Oropallo & Rappaport’s video array, called “Flight,” stands in a place very like that which it depicts. A lot of art has moved outside the gallery in the last fifty years - earthworks, performance, spectacles, systems art, telepresence - but not many paintings; Oropallo & Rappaport are calling the question in this regard, presenting a video ensemble steeped in Romantic sea- and landscape painting against a beach which is itself an outdoor extension of an art fair. At this realization, the art circus flickers briefly into focus.

And yet, we are left facing the digital contents, the slow-moving pictures and the bow-plucked strings and muffled bells. “Flight,” represents wave after wave of refugees clinging to low-slung craft, floating upon and sinking beneath each other as images dissolve one into the next. Taken from the internet of bitter migration from civil war and ethnic cleansing, over four hundred photographs of people afloat appear like ghosts from the sea and disappear the same way. As the minutes pass and the bells toll, the screens beneath the horizon line fill with refugees crammed into all manner of vessels, whether orange or blue inflatable lifeboats or rickety wooden rafts with bedsheet sails. Soon, the screens swell with people, their forms and faces ripe and squinting

from hazy sun and haunting shadow, bodies entangled in a chiaroscuro nightmare of the twenty-first century Baroque. Individuals come into view, sometimes alone in the water. Often, they are blurred and earthy, as if squeegeed into a layer of paint. Figures and faces from famous nautical disaster paintings (again, like “The Raft of the Medusa”) drift through the boatloads of refugees as they arrive and arrive and arrive. The semi-transparency of the overlain photographs pushes them underwater and backwards in time, and this progression feels seamless until you notice the slight, mechanical tick tick tick of each image’s appearance, and thereby sense a count-down for cataclysm.

The end of the world might be the never-ending dislocation of refugees from war-torn and famine plagued homelands as climate change renders certain regions uninhabitable or ungovernable. “Flight” suggests the disarray of drift and the push and pull of panic. The sublimity of its video fleet, triggered by the unblinking vastness and desperate struggle of those seeking land, is matched only by the queasiness of watching its writhing, drowning masses from a raised platform on a warm sunny beach. The effect, which comes quickly, is of phantoms arising from the hazy middle distance and washing up onto the sand at our feet. The sound, a dirge as much as anything, plucks our gut strings as we watch, stricken and transfixed.

Near the end of “The Open Boat,” once the crew abandons its craft and swims toward shore, Crane’s correspondent observes that the water is icy, “colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida.” Florida (ugh). The shore, “with its white slope of sand and its green bluff ... was spread like a picture before him.” The correspondent was impressed, “as one who, in a gallery, looks at a scene from Brittany or Algiers.” Tossed and dragged by the waves, the correspondent “arrived in water that reached only to his waist, but his condition did not enable him to stand for more than a moment. Each wave knocked him into a heap, and the undertow pulled at him.” Almost instantly, the beach “was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee-pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds.” The crew had survived, save the oiler, who drowned within sight of the shore, his forehead touching sand that was, “between each wave, clear of the sea,” Just so the Syrian boy who drowned on a Turkish resort beach in 2015, his tiny face in the sand, clearing the sea with each wave, the opposite of breathing.

Diderot believed that great painting conveyed such emotional intensity that words to describe its meanings were unnecessary since viewers would be the interpreters. The painter reached out and the audience reached back. Since Diderot's painter-of-record was Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805), whose pictures were overwrought morality tales, any outreach was usually melodramatic and treacly. A better theorist than art critic, Diderot did help open the floodgates of audience sentiment and, in the long run, perhaps some kind of participatory impulse that helped make art modern. Fair enough. But by placing an ensemble of gold-framed video screens, each overrun with pitiless open boats overspilling with desperate voyagers, on an actual art fair beach in Miami, Oropallo & Rappaport confront us with a Salon for our time: a provisional platform for spectral images and fleeting sounds, gathered from epic real-world events, cached in the memory bank of the internet, synthesized as quasi-paintings by an actual painter, and suspended for an elite audience staged as close to a refugee's eye-level as may be allowed. Romanticism is flattened into Naturalism by journalism; squalls of sublimity, waves of indifference, ripples of clarity.

Romanticism thrilled us in ways that were often tasteless, all naked and Biblical and scary and in-your-eye, like the oculus of a devil fish, a wooden leg, or the point of a harpoon. Oropallo & Rappaport's videos retain the thrill of tragic myths European paintings premiered before the era of photography, but the Romanticism they offer is an after-effect of a dramaturgy seen only now in movies. Their digital moving pictures embrace the montage realism of journalistic photography as the mournful, never-ending cadence of our time. As the news. The swashbuckling bravado and grinding, suicidal grievance of Ahab is flattened into the sea-level survivalism of the correspondent who, as he tries to swim ashore, merely wonders whether "an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature." Existentialism is on the horizon.

Deborah Oropallo and Andy Rappaport, in their collaboration, offer us portals into the vistas and depths of our shrinking planet and all the creatures, great and small, scrambling to set foot upon some forgiving soil. The pain and suffering of the people they portray are plain to see. We meet them at the edge of our lives as photo-montage phantoms. They never meet us, of course, but only our lenses, at least in that moment of first contact. Sometimes the black sinking hand of a drowning refugee seems to rise back up as if holding a lighted green lamp by a golden door. We would like to think so. But there is a screen between us, which is not only that of a digital display. It is the characteristic detachment of photojournalism, which is also that of American Naturalism. It is no

accident that Crane's protagonist in "The Open Boat" is a correspondent. The space opened by this detachment always carries within it the charge of complicity with craft in the moment of crisis - do we reach for survivors or keep taking pictures? This excruciating, existential choice fills the space of journalistic detachment. It seems a space too vast to see, too layered to penetrate, too endless to hear. But the technological capacity to upload that space with counter-narratives, to layer it with the mineral intensity of painting, to echo the tolling in our heads, to evoke the memory art still holds of history, has never been so great. Oropallo and Rappaport's video-soundscapes reach out to the audiences for art and justice, reinforcing, perhaps, the privilege of distance, but also pressing us back to the edge of the end, where the sodden burden and solemn responsibility of witnessing await us.

Crane ends his story this way:

*"When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters."*

Jeff Kelley

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