

# Melancholy: A Call for Radical Boredom

by Eva Diaz

Melancholy is a fraught term, one easily subsumed by connotations of wistfulness and regret, of inaction and depression, or, worse yet, of pseudo-adolescent brooding and hopelessness. Sigmund Freud, in his 1917 study **Mourning and Melancholia**, considered a reduced sense of ego the characteristic feature of melancholia, counterposing it to the loss of a beloved object in a mourning process. This experience of missing selfhood, to Freud, can lead melancholics to suffer symptoms of dejection, self-recrimination, lethargy, and inadequacy. Thus melancholia indicates a fixation with past wholeness which spirals into a listless foreboding and an inability to metabolize grief.

The condition of melancholy may not be entirely unredeemable, however. Putting aside, for the moment, its gloomy associations, melancholia is also a condition of thoughtful pensiveness and self-questioning; it even implies a state of reflection and self-awareness. Immanuel Kant connected melancholy to the overwhelming and awe-inspiring power of the sublime, in which the unformed and turbulent power of nature contrasts with the formed and ordered logic of the beautiful. Though the ego is momentarily overcome by the force and violence of natural phenomenon, its power of reason is then recuperated as a pleasurable contemplation of nature's power. The experience of reflection reduces the speed and intensity of experience, not to dull observation, but to explore the potential of a deliberate consideration of the stimuli of perception. It is this lengthening of attention that is the tactic of artworks drawn together here under the umbrella of the melancholy.

The forceful drama of nature and its destructive (though often preventable) effects are the subjects of Christine Bailey's and Elizabeth Blick's projects. In **Tornado No. 2 (2006)**, Bailey represents a giant cyclone winding out of violent storm clouds, touching down in an almost incidental scuffle compared with the tumult of an entire sky rend asunder. The awesome scale and volatility of the funnel cloud are depicted by Bailey in a most deliberate and exacting media—she uses loose photocopy toner powder to painstakingly render the image in a series of carefully modulated smudges, then heat sets the image, affixing it permanently to the page.

In contrast, Elizabeth Blick's **Remains 25 (2006)**, like many documents produced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, marshals the immediacy of the photograph to register the sustained neglect—rot even—of areas virtually abandoned throughout New Orleans in the storm's aftermath. The ruin Blick depicts, a church whose ceiling and walls are corroded to the point of decomposition, was accomplished over months of festering inattention. Both Blick and Bailey effect a subtle accusation against those who claim of nature's devastation the quietism of an "Act of God." For it seems that a pattern of negligence and failure to protect those in its predictable path is the regrettable order of political responses to nature's fury.

Kira Lynn Harris and Sean Ryan, in a series of separate but related projects, linger over seemingly familiar elements of everyday existence in order to reveal a nuanced perception of these surroundings. Harris' depictions of absent beds activate various scenarios of speculation, from both intimate associations to possibly sinister effects. Ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous, objects in domestic settings become sites of haunting mystery when given over to patient visual study in her soft focus photographs.

In the early 1920s cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer appealed for experiences of "radical boredom" in which the hustle-bustle of daily life could be reflected upon and possibly reconsidered. These experiences he opposed to "the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery," the unfortunate condition of those who lack the luxury of leisure.<sup>1</sup> Ryan's **Window Study (2004/5)**, a two-and-a-half minute digital video, depicts the rainy day experience of attenuated time and extended contemplation that results when nature intercedes on busy outdoor plans. Prolonging the length and complexity of seemingly banal events, Ryan's fixed camera stares beyond a houseplant to the dreary, sodden scene past a window. Imposing a different order of attention than the instrumentalized expediency of workaday cares, Ryan's protracted shot allows the mind to expand the experience of vision with a long moment of reverie.

The ineluctable vastness of nature is reduced to human scale in works by Sigrid Sandstrom and Jina Valentine. Sandström's **Flag I (2004)** is an almost absurdist work in its use of repetition. The video depicts a cross-country skier gliding across a snowy landscape, planting a black flag center frame in a heroic gesture of claim, and skiing off into the empty distance. Connotations of conquer are quickly dismissed, however, when moments later another skier stridently approaches and dislodges the flag, following the first traveler off screen. Repeated numerous times, the pattern of placing and removing of the flag becomes tragicomic, the vacant scene of the arctic hinterland populated by competing, though ultimately fruitless, gestures of possession and refusal.

Jina Valentine's landscapes, like Sandstrom's scenes, portray wintry settings animated to almost hyperbolic degrees. In Valentine's **Sange Froid II (2006)** a photograph of an icy, gray forest is invigorated with the addition of tangled underbrush of ghostly white cutout forms overlaying the forest scene in a web-like screen. "Sange froid," literally translated as "cold blood" or colloquially, icy composure, here melts into a jumble of fervent though repressed growth, the lattice of superimposed forms a premonition of the coming spring.

1. Siegfried Kracauer, **The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 331.

The "naturalness" of nature is called into question by several works on view. Centuries of humanity's interventions in landscapes have led to the development of concepts such as the picturesque, in which an environment forms like a tableau before the viewer's eyes. It has long been noted, however, that the picturesque is experienced only in physical distance—proximity to a landscape, to its grit, pollution, and inhospitable extremes is much more the condition of labor, not of scenic contemplation. The progressive disenchantment of nature, of humanity's mastery over the elements and its taming of once wild environments, is part of a larger "civilizing" project to make the world in the image of humankind. Yet as the image forms, grotesque distortions ensue, often in strangely personified surroundings.

Ann Craven's **Orange Dream (2006)** portrays nature becoming threatening in its almost totally artificial schematization. A Technicolor bird of pink and red plumage awkwardly poses against an equally garish fiery red backdrop. Often repeating similar motifs and poses from previous works, Craven's bird suffers from a degradation of nuance as the generations of reproduction have eroded it into near indistinguishability—only the color seems to intensify in successive versions. To Craven nature is a realm devoid of subtlety; a surfeit of nightmarish intensity imposes her avian creatures upon the viewer. Like her other "portraits" of animals such as dainty deer, the saccharine cuteness of her wild animals quickly becomes estranging, excessive and fake.

Sabeen Raja also uses an over-saturated palette to underscore the artifice of her creations. The unmodulated lime green backdrop of **I Am Forgiven (2006)** depicts a hairy, horned demon atop a plush armchair, his mild gaze fixed upon a lotus flower grasped in his incongruously graceful hand. The tiny image is itself a mere postcard size, and the delicately rendered details—the creature's patterned sash and gently gathered trousers—contrast with the complete lack of spatial context in the uniformly flat setting. The demon's wistful trance is contextualized as a possibly sinister force by Raja's companion piece, *My Wedding Night (2005)*, in which a similarly elegant horned devil tugs on a woman's sash. Shrouding her face with her hands, the woman refuses to gaze upon the demon's medusa-like stare.

Rashawn Griffin marshals similarly ambiguous effects from the plentitude of the earth, creating arrangements of uncertain meaning that question just what "order" nature presents. The fragility of the organic, and the fickle provisionality of our attachment to objects (hence their proclivity to end up at the dump), are treated by Griffin as symptoms of our estrangement from nature. His **Landscape/Bed (2006)** employs pallets of dirt as cot-like objects; carefully encased the dirt seems both atavistic in its implication of a bed of filth, and strangely minimalist in its contained order.

William Downs' melodramatic titles—**Death to Everyone** and **Leave Me Alone**, for example—belie the ambiguous scenarios depicted in his drawings. In **Leave Me Alone** a gargantuan, naked figure with plodding, elephantine feet stands against a landscape receding into tiny barracks. The Janus-faced head sprouts distorted faces, one apparently moustached, both atop a breasted female form. This hybrid figure begs the question of just which "me" of the piece's title demands to be left alone? Remember, in Freud's schema, melancholy characterized a loss of ego; here, Downs' figure seems to proliferate polymorphous body arrangements in the loss of a centered ego.

If, as Kant suggests, the sublime is not the awe-inspiring grandness of nature but rather our reflections upon the power of reason over brute nature, he poses melancholy as the condition of that reflection. ("Melancholy characterizes those with a superb sense of the sublime," he wrote in 1764.)<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest melancholy as the romantic concept of yore, but rather to see in it an attention to details overlooked in a work ethic that prizes profit and efficiency over reflection. It is this condition of rumination that exemplifies the best features of artistic practices, slowing down the perception of the world beyond the flux of trivial and transient events. Thus melancholy is not reducible to a mere pathology—it can embody real desires to redress events of the past, to avoid the amnesia of a culture that is always inventing new desires in order to forget past injustices. Dwelling on events can be a form of remembrance that flags painful moments of the past to counter the ideology of cultural "progress." Melancholia asks "Whose progress?" and "What is being repressed?" in the striving towards change.

2. Immanuel Kant. **Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime** (1764). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

# cotton candy on a rainy day

november 2 - december 16, 2006

christine bailey  
elizabeth bick  
ann craven  
william downs  
rashawn griffin  
kira lynn harris  
sabeen raja  
sean ryan  
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