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**BA1 Sculpture**

## **Existentialism and the Sublime**

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*“Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect.” (Edmund Burke, 1990:53)*

During the course of this essay themes such as existentialism, morbid curiosity, the sea, the infinite and monumentalism will be discussed and explored using the theories of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke and Paul Crowther to explain the concept of the Sublime. These themes will be exemplified through the works of Mark Quinn, Dr Gunther Von Hagens, Jason DeCaires Taylor, Damien Hirst, Richard Serra and Anish Kapoor. In order to do this, the essay will open with an explanation of the Sublime, followed by a discussion on the morbid curiosity that people have and how artists take advantage of this. This will then be followed by a discussion on installation pieces that incorporate the sea as the focus of the art works, followed by a discussion on large scale sculptures that have a certain power over people due to the sense of infinite in the pieces, before finally coming to a conclusion.

The Sublime is an overpowering feeling one experiences when looking or hearing something that is usually grand or infinite, it may not always be large in the physical sense, but large in the sense of an overpowering feeling of the infinite in our minds that we cannot fully comprehend. Kant explains (1790: 69)

*"The sublime is (subjectively) contrapurposive because our imagination tries to apprehend the object of vast magnitude (in size or might) but fails. When we judge such an object. "this judging strains the imagination [as it tries to exhibit the object] to its limits, whether of expansion (mathematically) or of its might over the mind(dynamically)"*

It is a feeling that is in conflict to itself; there is a sense of dread or horror with an after feeling of awe and amazement which creates a stand still in a person's mind, where they are lost for words. It's as if the human mind is unsure of how to feel at first when it comes in contact with something greater than itself it. According to Paul Crowther (1991:08) *"The feeling of the sublime is a feeling which is deeply bound up with our instinct for self-preservation."* Once the person knows there is no real danger to themselves but there is still a danger present within the moment that they're in, the threat becomes more distant from them, allowing them to still feel fear but also a sense of gratitude. According to Burke (1990:43)

*"if the pain or terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts of a troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror; a sort of tranquility tinged with terror"*

It is during these moments that people sometimes come to certain realisations about their life or might question their existence and purpose in life, and although the Sublime is most often experienced in nature it can also be experienced through art because a copy of something can also give the same experience as the original thing. As Burke continues to explain: (1990:43)

*“In imitated distress only difference is the pleasure resulting from the effects of imitation; for it is never so perfect, but we can perceive it is an imitation, and on that principle are somewhat pleased with it. And indeed in some cases we derive as much or more pleasure from that source than from the thing itself. But then I imagine we shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit, and its representations no realities. The nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power.”*

The further the threat is from the viewer the more gratitude the viewer feels. The closer the viewer is to feeling a sense of danger or fear, but still aware that they are safe from any real harm, the more powerful the piece of work becomes.



Figure 1: Quinn. *Self* (1991)

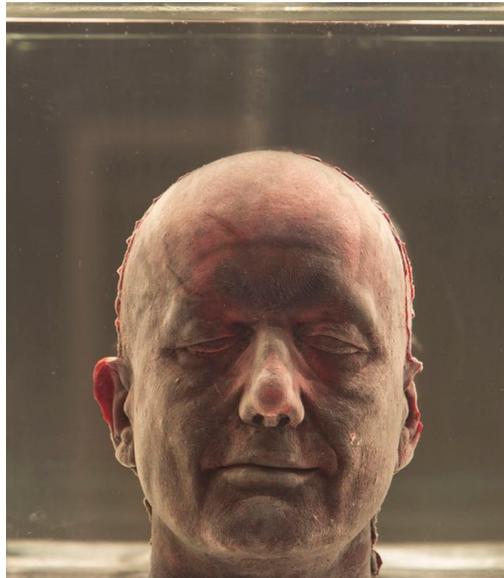


Figure 2: Quinn. *Self* (2011)

*Self*, by Marc Quinn will be the first pieces of work discussed as seen in figure one and two. They are a series of sculptures documenting the ageing of Quinn. They are life casts of the artist's head made from his own blood, each using around 10 pints for each sculpture. The blood is poured into a mould and then frozen to keep their form. The first sculpture he made was during a time when Quinn was an alcoholic and struggling with dependency. This is apparent in the sculptures in how they are presented because the works need to be carefully maintained and rely heavily on being frozen using electricity for them retain their appearance and shape. A statement on Quinn's website states

*"In this way, the materiality of the sculpture has both a symbolic and real function. The work was made at a time when Quinn was an alcoholic and a notion of dependency – of things needing to be plugged in or connected to something to survive"*

The sculptures cause a feeling of the Sublime in many viewers because of the material used, more so than the subject matter because it allows the viewer to question the piece. The series is quite controversial in that many think that using blood as a material is unethical and could be put to better use, but one could argue that the blood belongs to the artist and he should be allowed to use it for what he wants. The use of using blood to create a sculpture is very interesting because it's not a conventional material. To make a self portrait from it is even more captivating because then it becomes self-referential. It arouses a morbid curiosity that allows the viewer to take an interest in the piece even if they dislike it or makes them feel uncomfortable, and that is what makes it Sublime.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3, 4 and 5: Hagens,G. *Body worlds* (1995 - 2007)

In a similar style Dr Gunther Von Hagens' *Body Worlds* exhibitions are very similar in the sense that they are real parts of humans that are being displayed as art works, with the exception that these are full bodies that the public have donated

instead of just partial parts of themselves. Figure three, four and five are examples of some of the works exhibited at the *Body Worlds* exhibitions. The works are made from human bodies that have been through the process of plastination, which makes the bodies durable and allows them to be displayed without decaying. This makes them more fascinating and arouses more curiosity from the public than it would from a replica made from another material.

In an interview with Adams (2008) Hagens said *"Of course, to bring people in and ignite their curiosity, their body interest and health consciousness, I have to be sensationalist, but that must never overshadow the educational aim."* The exhibitions allow the public to look inside real human bodies to gain new insights and perspectives about their existence. The bodies are all displayed differently, showing how our bodies might look while doing certain tasks. The awareness that people have that the bodies are real and authentic, is what makes them so powerful and more shocking, and also a little disturbing. Youngs (2002) reports *"one of the reasons it has been so popular is that it also feeds a morbid fascination that most of us have lurking inside us."* They give that feeling of the Sublime in that the knowledge that these bodies once had lives of their own, and knowing that they are now corpses, allows the viewer to reflect on their life and death. The works have a strong theme of Memento mori (remember that you must die). As Koepferwelten (2013) notes:

*"In today's world death and physicality are being increasingly repressed. Death has been banished from our consciousness an encounter with a*

*dissected body can be a moving experience, it can teach us to appreciate this unique wonder, while at the same time reminding us how transitory life is."*

Death is explored in both Quinn and Hagen's works but they also give the viewer a reminder to appreciate their life. It is evident that the feeling of the unknown is a strong theme within their works and that is what makes them powerful pieces. As a result of analysing Quinn's and Hagen's works, this leads into more discussion of the unknown and unexplored by introducing the work of Jason DeCaires Taylor.



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 6 and 7: Taylor *Cancun Underwater Museum* (2009)

Humans try to take control over most situations, the sea however is something so expansive and unexplored that we have yet to come up with a way to take control over it. There are people out there however, who are trying to work with it. Taylor has devised a way to create sculptures that uses the environment to transform the work the longer it's there. It's an underwater museum of art in and it contains 500 permanent life size sculptures, which have now been incorporated into the sea life as the sculptures are made from specialised materials including a pH neutral marine concrete that promotes coral life.

The installation demonstrates the relationship between man and nature, showing how we both help and damage it. Each sculpture has its own personality showing how people have different attitudes towards our environment. In figure six, the sculptures are shown in a negative light, showing how some people are completely ignoring what's going on around them and are choosing to look away. While in figure seven the sculpture is embracing her surroundings by looking up with her arms in the air taking everything in around her.

To view any of these sculptures you are able to either take a ride on a glass bottom boat or go scuba diving. Depending on how the viewer chooses to view the sculptures, would possibly have an effect on how the viewer is affected by them. One could argue that viewing the piece from a boat where the viewer will have a restricted view may give a less powerful feeling than being able to swim up close to the sculptures. Being surrounded by such a large space filled with the unknown would have a greater impact because the viewer would be completely engulfed by their surroundings as well as the sculptures, causing a more powerful effect. Cúe (2015) reported

*“The dynamically sublime would be all that shows its immeasurable power, as are the wonders of nature. The unlimited, mysterious, majestic and terrifying nature of the sea, enhances this effect on the disturbing sculptures. Therefore, the relationship developed between our understanding and our imagination causes a sublime feeling in us towards what we observe.”*

Being among something so expansive, what might feel like the infinite, while being able to swim around these sculptures that promotes life, would create a feeling of respect. These sculptures have been made to create a larger surface area and a bigger home for the sea life around them. It allows the viewer to think about the different types of life that lives in the sea and how so much of it is unexplored and uncharted, that it might have the capability to force the viewer to feel humble and respectful, in a place where humans are not in control. It is curious to see in comparison, the work of Damien Hirst and how he has chosen to display something that is so dominant in the sea, now displayed in an environment where humans are in control. It is something that creates a big sense of fear, but is now displayed in an environment where people are able to analyse it without a real sense of danger.



Figure 8: Hirst, *Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991)

Hirst's installation piece incorporates the Sublime through using something that lives in the sea as its focus but using an element of the sea in a different way to Taylor. Instead of placing something in the sea, Hirst has chosen to take something out of it into a place where humans feel safe and in control. Although the shark gives no real threat to the viewer, it still has a very powerful effect because of what it is. The way Hirst has displayed the piece in a three sections is quite interesting, as if he wanted it to be displayed as a triptych piece or to show that the shark is now contained behind bars, showing the viewer that the danger is contained. The shark has been killed and suspended in formaldehyde for the public to view. While similar to Hagens' work in the sense that it's authentic it could just as easily be displayed in a museum, but the way it is displayed along with the title is what makes it art. The title of the piece is also just as engaging as the piece itself. It's telling the viewer that they can not comprehend death which starts the viewer to question their mortality and their death. Although the shark itself is actually dead, it's suspended in a way that looks like it's alive, and looks like something that could threaten the viewer's life, but as there is no real threat, it becomes quite a confusing piece to comprehend. White (2010) reports

*"The afterlife of the sublime for Hirst, then, is a means to push his audience's buttons. Hirst has thus spoken of his interest in the shark, for the 'really powerful kind of horror that it produces, and as a 'universal trigger'."*

There is a strong sense of the Sublime in this piece as it definitely has that shock factor because it's an authentic shark body, it creates this connection with the

viewer that this thing was once living and dangerous, is now behind bars. Tinterow (2007) says of it:

*"It's an amazingly powerful work of art, it plays on human emotions, it taps right into our fear of death, injury, dismemberment. Sharks throughout history have been a signal for danger, and simply by placing it in a container in a museum setting in a museum setting he creates the conditions for a work of art."*

The fact that he has chosen a shark, instead of any other animal says a lot about what kind of animals make us fear for our lives. Although Hirst has also used the same process with other animals, they aren't as powerful in making us question our own mortality quite like how a shark does. The knowledge of where the animal comes from also plays a haunting role in how the viewers interpret the piece, because the sea is so grand in size, it invites the viewer to imagine what it would be like to view be confronted by the shark in the sharks' environment which adds another layer of fear.

The ideas expressed through Taylor's work more so than Hirst's work, are also reflected in the work of Richard Serra, in the sense that both works challenge the viewer by creating a strong feeling of monumentalism and expansiveness.



Figure 9: Serra. *The Matter of time*. (2005)

The imagination is a way for us to interpret the outside world, through creating concepts within our minds. When we come into contact with a sensation of something of great magnitude the mind then tries to comprehend it but is unable to fully grasp the size it, creating the sense of the infinite. Burke (1990:67) says

*“Another source of the sublime, infinity; if it does not rather belong to the last. Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. There are scarce any things which can become objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite.”.*

The unknown creates the sense of the infinite which evokes fear within us, creating the feeling of Sublime. Serra has been able to create the feeling of Sublime through the use of enormous sculptures, within many people who have been able to see his sculptures in person, Marks (2011) reports

*"I enter between the torus and the sphere as I might enter a cave, warily. How could it be that the steel plates at this passage are centered enough to stand, this is the first inkling of Kant's sublime feeling which is not as it is sometimes characterised a more intense experience of beauty. Kant's sublime is the aesthetic pleasure but first dis-pleasure, that arises in the presence of something that appears infinite in size or power the immense mountain, the mighty ocean."*

The shapes and scale of his sculptures allows the viewer to become completely immersed within them by creating the sense of the unknown which evokes thoughts of the infinite. The sculptures are made from weathering steel, and use different dimensions in each piece creating a lot of distorted proportions. The viewer is guided through the gallery and are able to walk in between the sculptures. Unaware of where they are going, in a similar sense to how someone may feel when they walk through a maze, it creates the sense of the unknown of where the viewer is being taken. The immense scale of these sculptures also brings in questions to the viewer of how some of the pieces are able to stay balanced and upright, creating that sense of fear that they are in danger of the sculptures falling on top of them but still

knowing that they are safe. It creates a feeling of uncertainty within the viewer, while moving throughout the sculptures with a sense of wonder.



Figure 10



Figure 11

Figure 10 and 11: *Kapoor. Marsyas (2002 - 2003)*

This sculpture by Anish Kapoor is another example of a sculpture of a grand scale. The sculpture consists of three enormous steel rings joined together by a single span on PVC membrane. Two were positioned vertically at either end of the turbine hall at the Tate Modern and then the third was positioned in the middle above the bridge. It's interesting to see that Kapoor left each of the steel rings open for the viewer to look inside the structure as well as the outside allowing the viewer to see it from a different perspective. While the viewer is standing on the bridge underneath the middle steel ring, the viewer is unable to fully see how large the piece, is creating that sense of uncertainty and the unknown. It's as though the sculpture is a reminder

for the viewer to stay humble as the piece itself is so grand in scale that the viewer feels small and insignificant in comparison.

The theorists discussed in this essay were concerned with self awareness and existentialism. Through analysing the work of Hagens and DeCaires in particular, it has become evident that the Sublime is something that is just on the edge of what we understand and what we don't understand. It is a feeling of shock, horror dread and fear with an after feeling of awe, reverence, respect and gratitude all tied into one state of being. Morley (2010) states "*The sublime is a feeling, and yet, more than a feeling in the banal sense, it is the emotion of the subject at the limit*" It must be noted that the the feeling of the Sublime is something that causes a suspension of feeling while at the same time feeling many emotions all at once. It is a feeling that encourages us to question our own lives, existence and purpose while staring in the face of death, the unknown and the unexplored. This essay has argued that objects that are far greater than us in size, prompts our imaginations to think about the infinite and the unknown. As we are unable to comprehend something so expansive and uncertain, it allows us to feel humble and remind us that we do not have control over everything around us, the only thing we truly have control over is ourselves.

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