

# BEYOND THE SUBLIME: An Extended Artist Statement

**Ronald DeWitt Mills-Pinyas**



## **Introduction: The Anaesthesia of Consensus Reality**

The present writing elucidates my studio painting practice—distinct from the social praxis of my mural work and the centering meditations of my watercolors—as a synthesis of raw materiality and philosophical inquiry.

In an era increasingly mediated by the frictionless digital interface, human consciousness has succumbed to what contemporary neuro-aesthetics defines as a "controlled hallucination" [Seth, 2021]. To conserve biological energy, our brains project safe, static grids and pre-packaged concepts onto the wildness of being. We live in a state of perceptual anaesthesia, accepting a collective, conceptual illusion: Consensus Reality. My current work in the studio is a radical dissent against this flattening of the world. It seeks boundless infinity by establishing extreme visual density on the surface of the canvas, thereby creating a profound tension between qualia and qualities.

When fully realized, the dense "flesh" of the surface is saturated with a rich field of chromatic and textural optical attractors in which the restless eye of the viewer plays, seeking to configure and reconfigure the field. The viewer hopefully remains fully aware that they are inventing gestalts (a form of meta-cognition, pareidolia) as the eye skips and links bits here and there to make sense of the infinite—like constellations one may imagine in the heavens—in an effort to see something of what the mind already knows, if even for a fleeting moment.

The exhaustion of this mechanism then offers a meditation on pure potential that requires entirely new cognitive parameters to make sense, marking the moment in which the body reclaims a primal, fresh, and original perception. In this state, the predictive brain collapses, and the exhaustion of the eye becomes a moment of grace in which the mind is open and receptive.

This reflection is, in effect, a form of philosophical dissent. It questions aesthetic terms like "beauty" and "the sublime," challenging their tendency to sidetrack deeper noticing. I reconsider the Mathematical, Dynamic, and Traumatic sublime states [Kant, 1790; Lyotard, 1991; Kuspit, 1988], as well as Malevich's Suprematism, and conclude that they are essentially conceptual off-ramps that prematurely end the ever-closer observation I seek. I posit that these traditional terms act as intellectual and aesthetic insulation against the unsettling, uncontrollable "wild substance" of reality.

My practice is an attempt to snatch a fragment of physical and expressive infinity as a destination more profound than the swooning maxims of the past. To achieve this, I forgo the palliative comforts of the "sublime" in all three definitions in favor of a higher, deeper, and truer beauty: soberly seeking to face the ambiguous, the incomplete, and the ineffable—the raw state of awe encountered only when we deign to notice more deeply [Moore, 2024].

### **Purpose and Intellectual References: The Studio as Alembic**

The purpose of this extended artist statement is to take inventory of the diverse influences—spanning nearly sixty years of continuous practice—that have shaped my identity and my thoughts as a painter. It is perhaps an intellectual confession.

For me, the studio operates as an *alembic*—an alchemical vessel where base matter and the painter's own nervous system are fused and distilled into pure presence. My practice is rooted in a calculated surrender: a deliberate, even passionate suspension of authorial will to invite the "thing-power" [Bennett, 2010] of the material world to speak—if not shout—for itself. Through the agency of metallic pigments and the volatile chemistry of oxidation, I initiate a revelation that transcends conventional artifice.

This substrate, laden with nearly uncontrollable dynamics, allows me to engage the ineffable and the open-ended—a decidedly wild and impersonal realm of wonder. Here, the work moves beyond the boundaries of the "self." It is no longer characteristically about the identity of the artist, personal psychology, or social imperatives; rather, it is a descent into a primary, material state of being where creative expressivity is eclipsed by the autonomous vitality of the matter itself.

These truths remain as I first felt them to be, decades ago in the Oak Groves of Ojai, California, listening to the cogent admonitions of Jiddu Krishnamurti. His idea of a "freedom from the known" permeated his thought and has marked the tone and ambition of my work ever since. In this context, the application of paint becomes a transcendental empiricism [Deleuze, 1994]: a moment where I am fundamentally transformed by the material encounter. By articulating the oxidized fields with the logic of simultaneous contrast [Albers, 2013; Chevreul, 1839], I synthesize the "wild" agency of the earth with the "directed" longing of my own body. It is within this friction between the enfolded energy of the universe and the explicative intent of the brush that ethical autonomy is born.

## **I. The Threshold of Response: Breaching the Shield**

Drawing upon the existential imperative of Simone de Beauvoir [1947], I argue that the traditional Sublime functions as a manifestation of the "spirit of seriousness"—a flight from the Ethics of Ambiguity. By fixing the infinite into a manageable aesthetic category, the viewer evades the heavy responsibility of existing within a world that is fundamentally unfinished and contingent.

I perceive the sublime as a limiting rhetoric: a "Mathematical Shield" of reason that maintains a safe distance between the observer and the observed. I contend that "beauty" and the "sublime," as traditionally utilized, are end-all descriptors that anesthetize deeper perception precisely when the mind reaches its limits. They are not gateways, but termini—philosophical walls that neutralize the unsettling "wild substance" of reality. Therefore, an epistemology of art must be forcefully breached to encounter a more profound, unmediated authenticity. In this light, the classical Sublime is reframed: no longer a moment of liberation, it is revealed as an act of containment that must be dissolved.

## **II. Historical Genealogy: Material Suprematism**

This search for the "non-objective" spirit finds its historical anchor in Suprematism [Malevich, 1959], yet I move to expand the project. Where Malevich sought the infinite through radical subtraction and the white void, I seek it within the absolute material density of the world. I propose that the infinite is not found by leaving the world behind, but by plunging into its most granular, weighted depths.

Positioned at the intersection of David Bohm's [1980] holomovement and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's [1968, 2012] chiasm, my work reclaims the canvas as a site of transformative ritual. It is a somatic response to the "density of qualia" that surrounds us —a process of making the Implicate Order (the enfolded potentiality of reality) felt through the "flesh" of the visible world.

### **Material Suprematism: Density vs. The Void**

Kazimir Malevich sought the "zero point" of form through radical subtraction. Material Suprematism counters this. I achieve the Suprematist aim not through absence, but through absolute material density. By creating a surface of such multiscalar complexity that the eye can never finish "reading" it, I replicate the Suprematist "desert" through an informational overwhelm that invites the surrender of the intellect.

### **The Satiation of the Eye**

Where the "Void" starves the analytical mind of data until it falls silent, "Density" satiates the mind with such a volume of simultaneous data—metallic shimmer, chemical fracture, and gestural strike—that the analytical faculty "short-circuits". This is a state of Fullness-as-Emptiness. The Suprematist "desert" is found not in the lack of things to see, but in the impossibility of naming what is seen.

### **Apophatic Density: The Counter-Response to Legibility**

In the apophatic tradition of knowing through negation, I assert that art must no longer be at the service of the "legible." My use of density is a material counter-response to the "clean" geometry of early Suprematism. If Malevich found the infinite in the sky, I find it in the textured gel, the acid, and the oxidized metallic pigments.

### **The Infinite in the Atom: The Quantum Reality**

By utilizing metallic powders and chemical "mordant bites," I move the Suprematist project from the macroscopic (the square) to the microscopic and reticulated surface. Modern physics has demonstrated that at the subatomic level, matter is not a collection of discrete objects, but a vibrating field of relational energy. The crystalline fissures and conspiring colors ensure that the experience of "Boundless Infinity" is not a remote concept, but a visceral reality existing within the very "flesh" of the material world. The gaze is directed into the world's most granular and quantum materialities.

### **III. Immanent Infinity vs. Hegelian Spirit**

#### **1. Against Absolute Knowledge: The Door into the Atom**

My practice represents a significant ontological shift from both the Hegelian Ideal and the Abstract Expressionist (AbEx) tradition. Whereas Rothko was looking for a window to the divine, I am looking for a door into the atom. While both Hegel and the AbEx painters viewed the Sublime as a vehicle for transcendence—a movement away from the physical—I propose a sublime of immanence.

#### **2. Rejecting the "Discarded Husk"**

To Hegel, the material object was a "discarded husk." I reject this hierarchy. By utilizing visual density, I argue that the infinite is enfolded within the "thing-power" [Bennett, 2010] of the matter itself. I don't seek to crush the material to see the Idea; I strike the material to reveal the infinite density already inherent in its "flesh".

#### **3. Somatic Descent vs. Heroic Transcendence**

Abstract Expressionism often framed the sublime as a "heroic" gesture moving upward. My sublime is somatic—a movement downward and inward. By using monumental scale, I do not invite the viewer to transcend their body; I invite them to inhabit it. To resolve the form would be to succumb to the "soft fascism" of the static image.

#### **4. Beyond the Romantic Precipice**

Where the Romantics [Friedrich, Turner] positioned the observer on a precipice to safely contemplate the infinite from a distance, I seek to dissolve the precipice entirely. My work is not a view of the wild substance, but a somatic immersion within it. The sublime is not my end-goal, but an intermediate stage—a "shield" that must be dissolved to allow a sober, fugitive, and more profound glimpse of infinity.

### **IV. The Propositional Act: The Stroke as Kinetic Energy**

Drawing from the scholarship of Brian Winkenweder [2018, 2023] and his analysis of the "propositional" nature of modernism, this statement identifies my practice as an ethical dissent against the static, digital image. I embrace material indeterminacy—a lineage informed by Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, and Lynda Benglis.

**The Strike as a Truth-Claim:** The painterly "Stroke" in my work is never a passive application of color; it is a transfer of raw kinetic energy from the human body into the

mineral world. In a digital era of frictionless pixels, the strike of a branch asserts the reality of gravity, velocity, and the physical resistance of the *lebenswelt*. Each mark is a proposition that reality is not a static, finished product, but a continuous event of becoming.

**The Branch as a Non-Dual Instrument:** The branch acts as a bridge between the *purusha* (pure consciousness/artist's intent) and the *prakriti* (primal matter). Because the branch is an organic, irregular extension of the body, it introduces a "wild" agency and a "density of qualia" that cannot be domesticated.

## **V. Ethical Response: The Phenomenological Circuit**

In the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir [1947], this reclamation is an act of "choosing oneself" in the face of the abyss. It is a refusal to let the "thing-in-itself" be silenced by convenient labels. By relinquishing representational control through somatic labor, I initiate a dialogue between the hidden reality of matter and the directed intent of the hand.

### **Soul-Making: Fracture and Re-Integration**

Drawing upon Donald Kuspit's traumatic sublime, Edmund Burke's [1757] "terrible made safe," and Carl Jung's alchemical studies, I frame the resulting unresolved form as an act of psychic re-integration. This is "soul-making"—a transmutation of material fracture into aesthetic awe.

## **VI. Monumental Scale: Piercing the Mathematical Shield**

I utilize a large, immersive scale to achieve a "one-to-one" relationship with the viewer. When the canvas exceeds the span of human reach, it becomes a "field of engagement". This scale is the mechanical prerequisite for breaking the Mathematical Sublime [Kant, 1790]: the mind confronts an informational density that exceeds its ability to "measure," forcing the viewer to inhabit the flux of the holomovement [Bohm, 1980].

**Scale as a Cognitive Disruptor:** By overwhelming the cognitive faculties, the scale invites the viewer to abandon the safety of intellectual distance. One cannot merely "look at" the work; one must "inhabit" it.

## VII. Material Agency: The Full Ritual of Process

The studio is a laboratory for Material Agency [Bennett, 2010], initiating a Dynamic Sublime [Lyotard, 1994] as a permanent record of enacted force.

- **The Somatic Pat:** Working on the floor, I saturate the surface with thick translucent gel resin applied directly with my hands, creating a receptive "material flesh" that retains the memory of every touch.
- **Pigment Dispersal:** I dust raw powdered pigments (copper, brass, steel, iron, carbon, and mica) into this wet field. These are mineral participants with latent reactive histories.
- **Branches as Natural Brushes:** Dragged, flogged, or struck, the branches generate a vegetal syntax exceeding intentional design, dispersing authorship into material "thing-power".
- **Alchemical Oxidation and the Mordant's Bite:** I apply an acidic mordant (mordere, "to bite"), initiating an autonomous chemical revelation.
- **Salt Bloom and Charcoal:** Flinging salt crystals initiates a chaotic "bloom" of fissures. Charcoal provides the "sober" substrate—the carbonized remains representing the alchemical *nigredo*, a dissolution of rigid ego structures [Jung, 1968].
- 

## VIII. The Beauvoirian Re-Entry: Breadcrumbs of Form

Once the substrate has reached a state of archival repose, I perform a calculated re-entry with acrylic veils and bits of color. Using conventional brushes, I deposit "breadcrumbs" of saturated color—intentional marks serving as cognitive anchors. These marks manifest the "Ethics of Ambiguity" by refusing to settle into a static, "solved" image. The eye is invited to coalesce form, only to find it denied and offered endlessly.

## IX. The Apophatic Threshold: The Cloud of Unknowing

To enter the work, the viewer must cast a "cloud of forgetting" [Anonymous, 14th Century] over the impulse to name and categorize. This aligns with the phenomenological *epochē* [Husserl, 1970]. The visual density acts as a Material Cloud, an informational thickness resisting the "light" of reason. This cognitive collapse is a necessary breach of the shield required for a direct encounter with the "thing-power" of the surface.

## X. Neuroaesthetic Activation and the Somatic Bridge

The transition from the "mordant's bite" to "deep noticing" constitutes a transfer of energy across the chiasm [Merleau-Ponty, 1968]. The painting functions as a biological disruptor, bypassing intellectual filters.

- **Haptic Vision:** Topographies of crystalline structures stimulate cross-modal tactile-visual processing; the eye "feels" the ridges. This collapses the distance between seeing and touching.
- **Mirror Neuron System:** Because the velocities and strikes of the branch are sedimented in the resin, they activate the viewer's mirror neuron system [Noë, 2004]. The viewer internally simulates the gestures and impacts, kinesthetically re-enacting the ritual.
- **Aesthetic Arrest:** Following George Moore [2024], this resonance induces a state of Aesthetic Arrest. Informational density exceeds gestalt closure, silencing analytical chatter and suspending the viewer in awe.

## XI. The Shimmering Event: The "Sometimes Luminous"

Because metallic pigments and crystalline structures are anisotropic, the image is never a stable, fixed entity. It is an emergent phenomenon existing only in the "dance" between the light source, the surface, and the moving body of the viewer.

The numinous presence of the work is the constant aim, but the "Shimmer"—that actual, optical radiance—is a hard-won, conditional event. It is the *sometimes luminous*. It is a transient grace that resists my mastery, serving as a constant reminder that true awe is found not in the conquering of materials, but in my vulnerability to them.

## XII. Against "Soft Fascism": Art as Social Praxis

I assert that the contemporary subject is increasingly pacified by "soft fascism"—the subtle control of frictionless digital imagery and the clinical impersonality of Consensus Reality.

- **Labor-as-Dissent:** My work enacts resistance through labor. The physical labor—the striking, the industrial mask, the somatic pat—is a vitalist rejection of the sanitized instant.
- **Disrupting the Spectacle:** Following Adorno and Horkheimer [1997], the work resists becoming a mere fetishized commodity. Manifesting a visual density that cannot be "exhausted" by a digital lens, the painting asserts its own autonomy.

## XIII. Closing Statement: The Final Breach

By manifesting the Cloud of Unknowing in material form, this statement seeks to reinvent the spiritual project not as a flight from the world, but as a somatic attunement. As the viewer enters the Chiasm [Merleau-Ponty, 1968], the boundary between the "I" and the "Other" dissolves into the holomovement [Bohm, 1980]. To stand before these oxidized fields is to participate in the materialization of the Infinite. It is a return to the *lebenswelt*—a final affirmation that within the fracture, there is an inexhaustible, undivided wholeness awaiting our arrival; if we can remain awake.

As Susan Sontag [1966] observed: "Every era has to reinvent the project of 'spirituality' for itself".

## Addendum: The Shadow

### Blood and Bone: A Somatic History

The foundation of my work began in the oak groves of Ojai, California, with the somatic memory of the "switch". In my youth, the switch was a tool of impact—a raw confrontation with gravity and velocity leaving a burning signature upon the skin. Through Beauvoir [1947], I recognize this as my first encounter with the "Ethics of Ambiguity": the realization that the body is simultaneously a sovereign subject that feels and a finite object that can be struck.

This transformed into a desire to "strike back" creatively. To reach "Freedom from the Known" [Krishnamurti, 1969], I returned to the grove. Freshly cut branches introduce a "wild" agency, where authorship is dispersed between human impulse and material "thing-power". Charcoal represents the nigredo stage—carbonized remains that have survived the fire to become a witness. The ritual of salt flinging is a somatic re-enactment of desiccated lake beds, an "Alchemical Wound" that breaks the rigid ego. Volume II is the history of a practice that moved from the "blood" of the switch to the "bone" of the charcoal substrate—a refusal to let the "thing-in-itself" be silenced.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Adorno, Theodor W., & Horkheimer, Max. [1997].** *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. University of Minnesota Press. (Referenced for the critique of the culture industry and resistance against the fetishized commodity).

**Albers, Josef. [2013].** *Interaction of Color*. 50th Anniversary ed. Yale University Press. (Referenced for the logic of simultaneous contrast and the synthesized movement of the eye).

**Anonymous. [14th Century / 2001].** *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Edited by James Walsh. Paulist Press. (Referenced for the apophatic tradition of knowing through negation and the suspension of categories).

**Barad, Karen. [2007].** *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press. (Referenced for the concepts of "Agential Realism" and quantum entanglement at the subatomic scale).

**Beauvoir, Simone de. [1947].** *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. Philosophical Library. (Referenced for the "Ethics of Ambiguity," the rejection of the "spirit of seriousness," and the somatic memory of the body as an object).

**Bennett, Jane. [2010].** *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press. (Referenced for the concept of "Thing-Power" and the autonomous agency of mineral and chemical materials).

**Bergson, Henri. [2001].** *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Translated by F. L. Pogson. Dover Publications. (Referenced for the immediate, lived experience of duration versus the spatialized, scientific measurement of time).

**Bohm, David. [1980].** *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Routledge. (Referenced for the concept of the "Holomovement" and the enfolded potentiality of quantum reality).

**Burke, Edmund. [1757 / 1990].** *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Oxford University Press. (Referenced for the historical definition of the sublime as the "terrible made safe").

**Chevreul, Michel Eugène. [1839 / 1854].** *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours*. Translated by Charles Martel. Henry G. Bohn. (Referenced for the foundational theories on chromatic tension and optical mixing).

**Clark, Andy. [2013].** "Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36(3), 181-204. (Referenced as the neuroscientific foundation for "Predictive Coding" and the top-down processing of the nervous system.)

**Deleuze, Gilles. [1994].** *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. Columbia University Press. (Referenced for the concept of "transcendental empiricism" and transformation through material encounter.)

**Gallagher, Shaun. [2005].** *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford University Press. (Referenced for the integration of cognitive science with the phenomenology of embodiment.)

**Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. [1835 / 1975].** *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Clarendon Press. (Referenced as a philosophical foil, rejecting the view of material matter as the "discarded husk" of the Spirit.)

**Husserl, Edmund. [1970].** *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated by David Carr. Northwestern University Press. (Referenced for the concept of the phenomenological epochē—the suspension of the "natural attitude").

**Jung, Carl Gustav. [1968].** *Alchemical Studies*. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton University Press. (Referenced for the "nigredo" stage, the dissolution of the ego, and the psychological concept of "soul-making").

**Kant, Immanuel. [1790 / 1987].** *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Hackett Publishing Company. (Referenced for the "Mathematical" and "Dynamic" Sublime, specifically as a cognitive shield of safety).

**Krishnamurti, Jiddu. [1969].** *Freedom from the Known*. Edited by Mary Lutyens. Harper & Row. (Referenced for the lifelong influence regarding the rejection of pre-packaged conditioning and "the known").

**Kuspit, Donald. [1988].** *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s*. UMI Research Press. (Referenced for the "Traumatic Sublime," the critical framing of the "shattered" surface, and the alchemical wound).

**Lyotard, Jean-François. [1991 / 1994].** *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford University Press. (Referenced for the postmodern interpretation of unrepresentable magnitudes).

**Malevich, Kazimir. [1959].** *The Non-Objective World*. Translated by Howard Dearstyne. Paul Theobald and Company. (Referenced for the Suprematist pursuit of "pure feeling" and the "zero point" of form).

**Mandelbrot, Benoit B. [1982].** *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*. W. H. Freeman and Company. (Referenced for the mathematical structures of multiscalar complexity and infinitely repeating patterns).

**Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1968].** *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press. (Referenced for the concept of the "Chiasm" and the carnal interlace between the seer and the seen).

**Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [2012].** *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Routledge. (Referenced for the body as the primary site of knowledge and perception.)

**Moore, George. [2024].** *Noticing and Awe: A Field Guide to the Forgotten Sensations of Being Alive*. Tiller Press. (Referenced for the concept of "Aesthetic Arrest" and the reclamation of the nervous system from the digital age.)

**Noë, Alva. [2004].** *Action in Perception*. MIT Press. (Referenced for the enactive approach to cognition and the role of the Mirror Neuron System in simulating movement.)

**Seth, Anil. [2021].** *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*. Faber & Faber. (Referenced for the neuroscientific definition of normal waking consciousness as a "controlled hallucination.")

**Sontag, Susan. [1966].** *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Referenced for the "Erotics of Art" and the continuous reinvention of the spiritual project.)

**Vaughan, William. [1994].** *Friedrich*. Phaidon Press. (Referenced for the analysis of the 19th-century Romantic Sublime and the position of the safe observer.)

**Winkenweder, Brian. [2018].** *Art History as Social Praxis: The Collected Writings of David Craven*. Brill. (Referenced for framing the act of painting as an ethical dissent and social praxis.)

**Winkenweder, Brian. [2023].** *Painting to Be: Autonomy, Dissent, and the Soft Fascism of Late Capitalism*. Routledge. (Referenced for the concept of "soft fascism" and the propositional nature of the painterly mark.)