

THE RIVER SWEATS OIL AND TAR¹

The spattered streets of London are a membrane, receiving the cascade of the city's rain, absorbing and filtering it to join the subterranean torrents concealed beneath its surface. Charging through the city, unseen below the slabs and tarmac are storm drains, sewerage, buried rivers, their connection to the upper world visible through the gills of drain covers and cast-iron access hatches stamped proprietorially with the Thames Water logo. From street level, this is the view of water tamed – these metal inserts in the kerb suggesting control and order imposed on the city's humors as though they were a stable possession, rather than a mere transient portion of a vast, wild, liquid whole flowing across the globe. What comes from London's taps also rushes over the falls at Victoria, wrecks villages, laps beaches, carves cliffs and brings down boats. Today it may be Thames water, but who can say where the river's rebel offspring may be next week?

A series of painted canvases mounted and then bent and twisted on aluminium, 'The Toxic Sublime' paintings bear the imprint of the Thames Water hatches, like a vanitas, or perhaps a gravestone. The impression of the pavement metalwork – ground into the painted surface of

the canvases with a sander – is a reminder both of the illusion of our control over the elements, and of the impact of human actions on the natural world. This imprinting of street hardware is one of the final stages in the creation of 'The Toxic Sublime', a series built and eroded in unquiet layers – printed, drawn on, ground, taped, painted, sprayed, scratched, sanded, mounted, folded. Deploying repetitive actions and allowing for the role of chance that characterises the action of natural force, these works are exercises in artifice on multiple levels.

Each canvas takes the same point of departure – a printed photograph of an auroral seascape, taken from the shore, looking out to the sun rising over the visible edge of the sea. In the era of Instagram the image that might once have seemed sublime is now generic; a meaningless, geographically unspecific signifier of 'paradise' (itself an increasingly meaningless catch-all, appended to everything from ice cream, to vacations, to beauty therapies), suggesting tropical warmth, ease, freedom from toil; its beauty is banal.

In this root image the sea is a placid thing – sharing the illusory tamed quality of the city's streams. Shattering the textureless plane of the digitally-printed image, 'The Toxic Sublime' series gives that seascape back its tempest – the 'burnt green, and blue and white' of Coleridge's oceanic 'witch's oils'² – poisoning the paradise with buckling metal, billows of sprayed paint, washes of resin and the striation of surface stress. Moored by a line of reflective tape at the horizon line, the works retain a connection to the tradition of seascape paintings and the dramatic depictions of the sublime power of nature. Here, the occluding layers of black and silver paint and the imprint of the whorled surfaces of patterned cast iron suggest mustering clouds or the pitch-edged crests of a raging sea. In those sheets almost completely flooded with silver, faint blushes of pink or scrapes of red hint at a red

dawn tinting the clouds; where the surface is covered in billows of angry darkness the dark paint opens up to the brightly painted sublayers like clouds exposing streaks of sunlight, or the vision of a double rainbow. In those works where the spraypainted underlayers show through in thick blooms of artificial yellow, pink and green, and dot the 'skies' with extra constellations the mind's eye resolves the works as a seascape showing perhaps the surreal colourshow of the aurora borealis, or multiple suns above an extra-terrestrial sea.

In the earliest (paper) works in the series, the reflective tape placed along the horizon line functioned as an imperfect mirror: in reflecting fragments of the image of the viewer they introduced the human form into what appeared to be an unpopulated landscape and transformed the sense of scale: rather than a dramatic vista in which the human form was diminished to show the majesty of nature, the object bearing the viewer's image was 'revealed' as something rather less majestic (twisted, spray-painted metal). As the works in the series have become larger, and more richly worked, the possibility of reflection has diminished, and where it is still possible to make it out, the human form has become proportionally smaller, reinvesting the images with the drama and scale of spectacular seascapes.

Such denuded seascapes offer the natural world at once sublime and abstracted: Constable's Brighton beach, where lapping pewter waters reflect pewter skies; the lowering heavens leaching blackness from a strip of ominous deep in Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) or Turner's storms, confounding the boundaries of the sea and heavens, whipping clouds and spume together in jagged arcs of froth.

In 'The Toxic Sublime' works the attempt to read a faithful portrayal of spectacular meteorology is undermined by evidence of human detritus strewn across the

surface of each painting. Quinn has gathered flotsam – chains, lengths of rubber, industrial plastic, reminders of a world of industry – and laid it onto the canvas that still suggests the presence of a tropical beach, much like the one it was gathered on. The flotsam leaves its outline behind on the spraypainted surface – like pieces of stencilled graffiti, they are evidence of presence, a generic mark of human identity or perhaps a call to attention for something overlooked. Quinn finds lyricism in the marks these polluting objects bring to the final image – the long strips of rubber form soft curves when they fall on the canvas, sliding over themselves they leave shapes like bubbles, clouds, rays of sunlight, feathered x-rays – something apparently organic but incomprehensible and intrusive.

As with the Thames Water logo, the suggestion of graffiti – through the use of stencils, the gestural use of spray paint and scratching in the painted surface – pulls ‘The Toxic Sublime’ works back into an urban context. No longer a sea or weatherscape, they are transformed from paintings into objects: three-dimensional forms in which the canvas is only part of the surface. On the ‘urban’ level they record the impact of a sequence of human gestures, much as the shards of a shell on a beach show the evidence of repeating waves. But rather than the force of natural order, the tactics of graffiti suggest the will to disturb and make the unseen visible by imposing livid marks on a landscape or gouging into a smooth surface.

The cast shell fragments depicted in stainless steel and concrete of the ‘Frozen Wave’ series (2015), show the work of water at close quarters, the layers of calcite and nacre built up over years by the creature within, here stripped back and revealed by the relentless push and pull of the sea. Over time, the fragments become a self-portrait of the wave’s own movement, a work of shaping

that will culminate in its own disappearance. The intimate interior layers that once rubbed the sides of the soft sea snail within and presented a pink and labial edge to the world, are polished to a high sheen in their cast and enlarged forms, coming to resemble the rubbed edge of totemic religious statuary touched for luck by generations of supplicants. The rough outside retains the evidence of years spent building up the protective carapace and the pitting and abrasion it endured. Cast in stainless steel, the formal correspondence between these shards of shell and the sea that formed them becomes manifest – the silvery waves reflecting back the silvery ‘sky’ of ‘The Toxic Sublime’.

After Quinn’s controlled and meticulously planned photorealist painting series – most recently ‘Before and After Humans’ (from 2013) and ‘Flesh Paintings’ (2012–14) – ‘The Toxic Sublime’ is a re-engagement with both chance and physicality. Paint is sprayed onto the canvas in all three series, but the smooth, almost mechanical precision with which it is applied in the earlier series is rejected in ‘The Toxic Sublime’ in favour of an assertion of physical human presence in the creation of the works. The recent ‘History Painting’ series – news agency images of insurrection overlaid with streaks of thrown paint – can be seen as a transition point in which the illusionary depth of the photorealist paintings suffers the impact of a more gestural tradition as the artist casts thick, coloured paint across the surface in an echo of the arcs of movement within the image.

Each of ‘The Toxic Sublime’ works has layers of physical connection with Quinn himself, but the traditional evidence of the hand of the artist – the visible brushstroke on the canvas – is here colourless. Rather than adding to the composition of a picture, the strokes of acrylic that underlie the surface of each work are evidence only of themselves: traces of the artist’s presence. The manual

engagement culminates in the final forming of the canvas after it has been backed with aluminium: an act akin to wrestling the works – which measure as much as 4.5 metres in height – into shape. As large twisted sheets of abraded metal, the finished pieces resemble unspecific debris – perhaps vehicular; perhaps industrial; perhaps architectural – with the attendant suggestion that the marks and patterning are the result of wear and tear developed over time. They are heavily worked objects that ironically come to resemble found objects or readymades, their warped forms suggesting accidental damage rather than a deliberate creative act.

The illusions both of landscape and of found debris are undermined by the triptych, in which the three sheets of ‘found’ metal present a triple ‘sunset’ and the pleats and folds of the aluminium create an overall pattern that corresponds neither to the work of accident nor a previous incarnation as a functioning object. The triptych arrangement nods to the configuration of altarpieces or the folding panels of early religious works. Here, rather than venerating the hand of God through the depiction of his sublime natural creations, we see only evidence of the hand of man, both destructive (in its obliteration of the serene, natural, image) and creative (in its crafting of new forms).

Toxicity is seeped deep within the works – the spray-paint and other noxious substances that all but obliterate the image of the seascape echo human impact on the natural world: the poisoned chalice of sublime beauty in the post-jet age. The photograph of an unspoilt beach acts as an inducement to visit it, and to contribute to its gradual absorption into the built environment.

The first sibling ‘The Toxic Sublime’ works from 2014 were on aluminium-backed paper, rather than canvas. (The switch from paper to canvas is both an explicit engagement with the history of painting, and a licence to

manipulate the works more violently, resilient canvas being able to withstand the onslaughts of successive layers of application and abrasion.) Commenced in 2014, the series started shortly before the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 and the crash of flight MH17. They consciously echoed the dimensions of the metal sheeting used in aircraft fuselage, with the metallic strip of tape along the horizon line occupying the position of the lateral stripe customary in airline livery. The printed photographs of the seascape still faintly visible on each piece suggested the cycle of tourism – image; advertising; desire; voyage; image.

At the other end of the scale, human impact on nature and the destruction that we understand to come with it is seen in its most basic form in the source material for the stainless steel 'Broken Sublime' series (2015): large conch shells in which the fattest bulge of the whorl has been smashed through to give access to the flesh within. Violent as it is, this is mankind's impact shown at its most literal and primal, perhaps even indicative of something closer to a symbiosis or state of nature, in contrast with the destruction by proxy (or attrition) carried out by post-industrial civilisations. Where the earlier shell form *The Architecture of Life* (2013) celebrated the golden section in nature, and the creation of pure beauty without conscious thought, these smashed shells show beauty as a disposable quality: its value in the moment of hunger secondary to the desire for food. Among the earliest forms of decorative adornment, and used as items of value and exchange since prehistory, in the face of conflicting human desire the sublime natural form of the shell lacks power as a protective force. Smashed, with its vulnerable pink interior exposed to view, it loses its value both as a safe vessel for its previous occupant and as an aesthetic object. This shell is just another fragment littering the beach, ready to be eroded by the force of sand and waves.

The giant shards of shell in the 'Frozen Wave' series play with expectations of scale – as visitors to their 'beach' we are either miniaturised or in the presence of molluscs of vast dimensions. Those rendered in white concrete might be remnants of prehistory – the Ordovician era when the shell of the giant cephalopod *Cameroceeras* could reach up to 9 metres in length – or perhaps the beach litter of a far future in which shells could grow to vast dimensions untroubled by human greed. The 'Frozen Wave' series seems out of time with 'The Toxic Sublime', which flips the unpopulated purity of 'Before and After Humans' to show a world very much in the throes of the Anthropocene.

The relentless force of submerged waves hitting a reef in *Before and After Humans (Nyanzapithecus)* (2013) hinted at the regenerative power of nature: water and gravity working together as cleansing forces scrubbing away the evidence of humanity. The paints, solvents and plastic shards applied to the seascape of 'The Toxic Sublime' paintings speak of damage done to water, while the works sing of sandy beaches dotted with exotic shells, 'The Toxic Sublime' is the product of London, and a reminder both of the impact of human activity, and human vulnerability to relentless elemental force. Even in the confines of this city, protected by its river barrier and built for the slow, steady onslaught of drizzle and the polite, un-tropical, storm bursts of Northern Europe, the struggle for harmonious coexistence with water is never ending – roofs leak, roads flood, damp creeps, paper slumps, paint bubbles, and the dust of the city, worn alike from skin and stonework is carried along, down through the drain covers, beneath with cast-iron hatches of the pavement, on and onward to the ever-moving mass of water beyond.

Hettie Judah