

# Elizabeth Dee

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## The Sublime is (Still) Now

### Christoph Steinmeyer, Rowena Dring, Helen Sadler, Marc Handelman, Keith Mayerson, Blake Rayne, Daniel Rich, Chris Sauter

Elizabeth Dee is pleased to announce *The Sublime Is (Still) Now*, a group exhibition of paintings, in the gallery at 545 West 20th Street. An installation by Doug Wada will occupy Gallery 2. There will be an opening reception for the artists on Saturday, May 15, from 6 to 8 pm.

In 1948, Barnett Newman, in his essay "The Sublime Is Now," called for an American art "reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions." He was, at that postwar moment, clearly campaigning for the type of painting, then being done in his own studio and those of his friends, soon to be known as the New York School. Fifty-six years later, Abstract Expressionism, "devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images," is itself a dated style, and representational painting seems to have reassumed its primacy in the collective imagination. Once again, in a world riven by war, artists, American and otherwise, grapple with the subject of the exalted, the absolute, and the ineffable, and strive to find an adequate means for the expression of the sublime.

**Marc Handelman** observes correspondences- ideological, rhetorical, and formal-between nineteenth-century Hudson River School painting and the contemporary military-industrial complex, noting the eerie similarities between, say, Thomas Cole's romantic heavens and George W. Bush's "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad. From serenely glowing execution chambers, Hitler's commandingly infernal view from Berchtesgaden, and enigmatic martial sex machines, to exploding vistas seen from afar and imploding constructions experienced from below, Handelman's paintings examine the vantage points of power and the visual spectacles they induce.

**Daniel Rich** and **Chris Sauter** also depict the technological sublime. Rich paints late modernist towers in a precise, hard-edge manner, isolated on unnatural, monochrome grounds. Sauter pictures construction cranes, radio antennae, and silos in a finely detailed hand, set off against moody, atmospheric skies and barren, unpeopled landscapes. Both artists miniaturize immense, manmade structures for our aesthetic delectation and both seem to point to the desolation of the hubristic aspirations that produced them.

**Rowena Dring's** landscapes reprise an anachronistic form of the sublime as a forested mountain or a woodland stream: untouched nature as foil to culture and modernity. Yet she shoulders nineteenth-century sentimentality only half ironically, creating her pictures in appliquéd fabric. The craftiness of her technique and the kitsch of landscape seem to cancel each other out and create a space for a reappraisal of our relationship with natural beauty.

For several years, **Keith Mayerson** has pieced together a grand, idiosyncratic narrative based on Hamlet by appropriating images from history, cinema, and his own life. In this epic, Keanu is as heroic a subject as Christ, or Abe Lincoln. A space ship hovers above a brown and orange Forbidden Planet; a green-skinned and lopsided Rimbaud poses before an indeterminate ground that recalls a mountain sunset; both are completely enmeshed in their fields and on the surface of the canvas by an allover, quavering frenzy of brushwork. Mayerson seems to merge the pea soup of Ryder with the expressionism of Ensor or Franz Marc, inventing a visual universe that inspires both wonder and

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uncertainty.

**Blake Rayne's** paintings of sculpture portray monuments in public places. Rendered in grisaille, the images resemble faded photographs, both articulated and obscured by passages of vivid, transparent color-greens and pinks, mostly that appear nearly independent of the task of depiction. These painterly stains, like chemical accidents on badly developed film, problematize the nostalgic mood with an absorbing formal enigma, calling into question the grandeur of history and the effects of representation.

**Helen Sadler** paints teenaged girls in the throes of ecstasy at rock concerts. We see the sublime reflected in the faces of subjects driven into paroxysms by their proximity to the objects of their overwhelming adoration. Painting like an early Renaissance master in egg tempera on panel, Sadler transfixes the moment when subjectivity overflows its bounds in the face of the absolute.

**Christoph Steinmeyer** equates the Burkean confrontation with the abyss to the Freudian encounter with the Other. His portraits of composite, perfectly symmetrical women, assembled from parts culled from advertising and fashion photography, nod to Old Master paintings and mythological traditions of femmes fatales. His Woman is beautiful and frightening, great and terrible; all shall love her and despair.

In Gallery 2, **Doug Wada** will present a series of five paintings of vents that seem to puncture the walls and reveal a flowering hedge outside. A tour de force of trompe l'oeil, Wada's arrangement transforms the space of the gallery by suggesting the world beyond its (and our) confines, at the same time it references recent art history, from the formal grids of Minimalism to psychologically- and phenomenologically-oriented installation. Forced to look up to the promise of light, air, and freedom in an otherwise empty and darkened room, the viewer confronts the divide between nature and culture, and the historical gap that separates us from the yearned-for sublimity of the garden just out of our reach.

The curator of the exhibition is Joseph R. Wolin.