

Integrative Project Thesis: Forces Unleashed

The forces of nature are particularly intriguing through the unexpected paradox of beauty and terror found in natural disasters. For my IP project I will be creating a series of digital paintings that depict the most distinctive natural disasters - a tornado, hurricane, and volcanic eruption. With the increasing of natural disasters, the media has mainly focused on their negative aftermath.

My project will emphasize the beauty that is typically forgotten in the aftermath of devastation, and how we are attracted to the sublime. Simon Schama's Landscape and Memory, illustrates the beauty and horror of the sublime experience through nature. Schama's book referenced Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, which focused on travelers' experiences discovering unsettled and unfamiliar lands (Schama 449). The book really inspired me by relating themes of what can be a "delightful horror," such as the unease travelers experienced while journeying through unfamiliar territory, and the new astonishing feelings artist experienced while painting new exotic lands. I will present different characteristics of each natural disaster based on my research about cultural legends, myths, and symbolism surrounding these occurrences. By creating these natural disasters digitally I will be enhancing natural phenomena with my digital effects that will immerse viewers in the disasters. Through my digital style I aim to animate conceptions and personal experiences of natural disasters and the sublime. To further emphasize the sublimity of these forces, face mounting my wall sized painting onto plexiglass and having them lit from behind will help evoke the similar visual awe that would be felt when facing these natural disasters in person.

In exploring the sublime, a lot of research has been done to conceptualize and interpret the occurrences of natural disasters. My research consisted of analyzing weather conditions, myths, legends, poems, personal experiences, symbolism, illustrations,

photography, and digital painting. These are the contextual references of my work and creative process. Specific key words and quotes were recorded from my research to make each natural disaster unique yet identifiable. Through my research I could visualize new aspects of the storms and abstract them through a new cultural lens that connects them to gods, animals, or positive change. Other artists' work have also inspired and helped me face the challenge of creating immersive art based on nature. This is how I was able to interpret each natural disaster digitally in a sublime style that depicts their beautiful yet terrifying power.

For the tornado, key words and phrases that were inspiring referred to its wispy shape, energy, and funnel form. The key words I worked with were wild, free, dizzy, confused, electric, and crazy. One of my favorite descriptions of a tornado from Missouri reads, “stretched into a serpentine-like form, hung up by the head and writhing in agony, its tail curling and lashing as if actuated by the impulses of a living body” (Blake). This caused me to draw out longer forms of a tornado with a snake-like body. I learned that Native Americans associated tornados with dirt and soil, so I used earth color tones when creating my tornado. Some phrases that really inspired me visually were about the vortex of a tornado, how it can reference breathing, other dimensions, or time travel (Blake). I drew the vortex shape often, diving in or out of it, swirling and rotating my pens, markers, and later digital pen to capture the feeling of rushing and lifting winds.

Other things I found fascinating were stories, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, that used tornadoes as a metaphor for change or devastating events such as the Great Depression. These stories added a supernatural element to my work, which I incorporated by using heavier shadows and contrasting colors. I also enjoyed reading [Legends of Landforms: Native American Lore and the Geology of the Land](#) by Carole G. Vogel. It described the formation of mountains and hills in a mystical way by



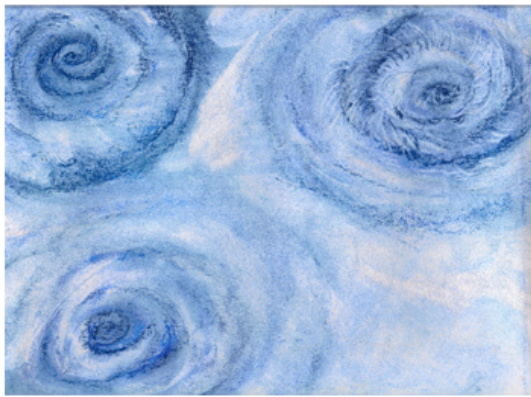
One of my early Tornado sketches.

characterizing the wind as a divine being. Based on my readings, I experimented with light, whimsical colors such as electric blue, yellow, deep purple, and cool grays to capture energy, moisture, and wind. I also found great visual power in the storm clouds that form tornados because of the way they could be altered visually in thickness and weight with overlapping brush strokes. Line weight and style also became very important. Bold solid lines prevented viewers from being immersed in the tornado, while dashed stokes and lines referred to the high wind speeds I was researching. These aspects of my research imbedded the crucial artistic decisions and style I needed to make my tornado sublime with the alluring but dangerous speed of wind.

Based on my hurricane research, the key words, quotes, and phrases that I found most interesting connected to a much more unpredictable realm than that of the tornado. Key words for my hurricane were coils, deep abyss, foam, tranquil core, and turbulence. To my amazement I came to study Hurakan, the Mayan weather snake-god who lives in the windy mist above the floodwaters. The word “hurricane” derives from his name (www.helium.com). The text and visual descriptions of Hurakan’s underwater kingdom and how a young woman was annually sacrificed with a warrior to lead her to the weather god was very inspiring! The mist and feeling of being taken to Hurakan was something I tried to capture in my drawings and compositions. I was also inspired by Christopher Columbus’ account of a hurricane, “Eyes never beheld the seas so high, angry and covered by foam...We were forced to keep out in this bloody ocean, seething like a pot on a hot fire. Never did the sky look more terrible.” (<http://library.thinkquest.org>). Christopher Columbus did not describe how his ship got wrecked or how his goods were lost; instead he described the image of a hurricane boiling and fuming like a pot over a stove, and that stuck with me throughout my sketching. The image of boiling water and foam also connected to witchcraft, representing again a mysterious force and unfamiliar power.

I was able to interpret hurricanes though a positive cultural lens after reading [Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba](#). The book featured poems in Spanish, and Spanish being my first language, I was truly able to set myself in the experiences of a hurricane. In contrast to American culture, people in South America connect hurricanes to the attractiveness of women in having twists and curves like

a hurricane, or dancing well with force and fluidity. One of my favorite quotes reads “Es el ciclón, con una capa de viento destructor-como un toro” connecting the strength and destructive tendencies of a bull to a hurricane (Perez 153). I really enjoyed how natural disasters were being connected to people and animals, such as the tornado with the snake, mentioned above. These different connections provided new visual meanings to the actions



My "Eye" of God pastel sketch.

and occurrences of natural disasters that no longer focused on destroyed cities or dying people. These became great examples of how natural disasters do not solely connect to chaos. I also loved Fidel Castro's quote that inspired rebellion and strength in his people, "The hurricane has done its thing; now it is time for us to do ours" (Perez 140). Fidel Castro puts the power of a hurricane in

a positive light to symbolize strength; strength I came to paint digitally though dirty water tones and twisting brush strokes. At first I drew a number of graceful and fluid water forms, but they were too beautiful and failed to convey the hurricane as a terrifying and powerful phenomenon. My pastel drawings captured more force and mass in the water while my readings about the eye of a hurricane symbolizing the "eye" of God really came through (Yeager). I received the best feedback when I incorporated fluid and forceful waves that looked dirty, and also conveying natural light reflected in the water. I kept the eye of the hurricane as the calm focal point to contrast the unstable turbulences of water in the rest of the work, setting it in a different cultural lens. I discovered that doing so helped identifying the natural disaster and its unpredictable tendencies.

Researching volcanic eruptions highlighted the element of fire in a much more jarring way than the elements of wind and water that I was working with before. The color palette for my volcanic eruption



Tailings #30, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996, by Edward Burtynsky
<http://www.virtualdavis.com/2010/12/>

was distinctive as it consisted of warmer color tones that embodied bolts of energy more obviously than any of the colors I was using before. Keywords I worked with for my volcanic eruption were epic, burst, fierce, vast, blood veins, muddy, doughy, walls or mountains of fire. I studied a lot of photographs and myths about volcanoes so that I could create an immersive and overwhelming composition that captured the experience of discovering a towering volcano. The textures Edward Burtynsky captured in his photographs from *Manufactured Landscapes* were full of awe and inspiration. A lot of his eroded landscape photographs looked just like lava, setting up the image of the earth bleeding out or being scrapped off. Also in his work were brown and red polluted trails of water that would cut up rocky terrains, making it look like the earth was about to shatter. I also added this kind of effect to my volcano so it would feel like it was about to shatter or explode in your face.



My digital volcanic eruption.

Another great resource that helped me capture the vast and bursting effects of a volcano was [The Red Volcanoes: Face to Face with the Mountains of Fire](#), featuring breathtaking photos by national volcanologist Jack Lockwood. The full range of colors and close-ups of lava were fantastic because they made me visualize veins and bread dough. I also envisioned piles of cigarettes, fumes, and different forms of smoke and ash mixed together, which I later painted digitally. Also in this great book were the Hawaiian legends of Pele the fire Goddess. Pele has many forms and is usually charming, playful, and tempts other gods, but can also be a wrathful old hag who is violent and spiteful. Her description, along with other Greek storm Gods, showed the paradox of being beautiful, nice, ugly, and terrible at the same time,



Vesuvius from Portici by Joseph Wright of Derby
<http://volcanism.wordpress.com>

just like natural disasters. This paradox, just like the tornado and hurricane, helped me convey my volcano in a sublime style based on the visual attractions but alarming aspects of an eruption. Another aspect that led me to conveyed delicate lava forms and bright fire activity came from reading that the name of one of the Hawaiian volcanoes Kilauea (ki-lau-*ea*) refers to the rising leaves of the ti plant, and conveys an image of fumes, or lava fountains, rising above the volcano's summit (Lewis, G. Brad, and Paul-Edouard Bernard de Lajartre 12). Drawing out the beauty described by personal accounts such as Mark Twain's quote about the Hawaiian Islands being "the loveliest fleet of islands that lies anchored in any sea" and the visual jewels of fire found in Joseph Wright's painting *Vesuvius from Portici* really pushed me to give my volcano an overflowing elegance (Lewis, G. Brad, and Paul-Edouard Bernard de Lajartre 9). My volcanic eruption became captivatingly bright with the thin active brush strokes and uproar of lava I painted.

My creative process then consisted of me sketching compositions and traits of each natural disaster from my research. I would later scan my best sketches to use as references for when I would digitally paint in Adobe Photoshop. At first I did most of my sketches on tracing paper with Copic markers, pens, color pencils, and caracole, but encountered the problem of not capturing the storms' identities well enough. I explored other media and discovered that pastels were the best to sketch with, especially for my hurricane studies. Wind, water, and fire were the three elements of nature that I identified for the most powerful and recognizable natural disasters. I decided to dedicate my work to depict a tornado, hurricane, and volcanic eruption in a sublime style that derived from my research.



Polar Sea / The Destroyed Hope by Caspar Friedrich
<http://www.sightswithin.com/Caspar.David.Friedrich/>

As mentioned above, other artists' work inspired and helped me face the challenge of creating an immersive and sublime art piece. I had to tackle and research the question of what is the "sublime", what it meant to me, others, and how could I create such an experience of awe. I looked at artists such as Caspar Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner, both known for painting sublime landscapes in the historical context of capturing



A Disaster at Sea. by J.M.W. Turner
<http://www.thearttribune.com/Art-and-the-Sublime.html>

newly discovered lands. I studied Friedrich's *Polar Sea / The Destroyed Hope*, which reminded me of my rocky volcano, and discovered how he created a sublime setting by referencing natural light to feature the still-pointy rocks that look threatening yet alluring. I found Turner's work to be more abstract and that encouraged me to abstract the forms of my natural disasters, adding enticing visual interest to my work. I

especially loved his interpretation of water and wind, making them terribly forceful yet soft; this can be seen in his *A Disaster at Sea*. He creates a sense of mystery by not being overt about what is happening, but there is also a sense of destruction felt in the contrasting golden and holy light against the dark looming waters. He creates dazzling spectacles with dramatic lighting and use of edge, as seen in his *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains* that plays with the volcano's dazzling brightness to set a surreal and awing feeling.

Other artists' work that I found related to these paintings and nature through the sublime were Francis Danby and Joseph Wright. Danby's *The Deluge* plays with the eerie power of water while Derby's *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* presents a sense of oncoming catastrophe with high-contrast colors. I found their work, like Turner's, relating to ideas of nature and the sublime from Schama's Landscape and



The Deluge, 1840 by Francis Danby
<http://www.thearttribune.com/Art-and-the-Sublime.html>



Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples
by Joseph Wright of Derby
<http://www.thearttribune.com/Art-and-the-Sublime.html>

Memory. They conveyed how discovering a new land was exciting, yet terrifying.

Self-taught Australian photographer Peter Lik, who is one of the world's most honored and prolific landscape photographers, has also inspired my work. He travels a lot and captures many remarkable landscapes, using natural light in amazing, abstract ways to create unique images. He is also known for printing on FujiFlex paper, a polyester-based paper I was considering to print my final work with because it allows light to shine through the back. This creates a more realistic and immersive visual of the work.

Other inspirations I have for creating my own digital effects and styles come from video game design, concept art, and superheroes who wield powers from the forces of nature, such as in the Anime series *Sailor Moon*. The art behind the book and TV series *Sailor Moon* embodies the beautiful and terrifying elements of nature in a surreal style.



Sailor Mars' Fire Soul Attack, Anime
http://wikimoon.org/index.php?title=Fire_Soul

Sailor Mars for example holds the elemental power of fire and shoots spiraling fire beams that are realistically illustrated. However, that attack looks surreal because the fire gets projected in multiples of spiraling balls - a shape and force that no actual fire could realistically embody. Sailor Mercury and Neptune's water-based powers are also drawn realistically with heavy shadows that embody the fluidity of water, but become surreal when the elegant shapes of the water waves stand up on their

own for long periods of time. Out of the inspiration I found in *Sailor Moon*, I combined the elemental shapes of these heroines' powers to the abstracted forms of my natural disasters. Concept art and digital paintings for video games also have a similar surreal style that looks neither hand-painted nor digitally produced. This is a style my digital paintings have aimed to incorporate. The digital effects found in fictional video game environments and characters' attacks have also inspired my interpretations of natural disasters by having similar surreal styles and elemental powers to those seen in *Sailor Moon*.

In finalizing my styles, sketches, and research inspirations I have also explored new printing methods for my final prints. I was fortunate enough this summer to study abroad in Europe and view Diasec prints, which is digital work printed on glass. It was then that I was inspired to print or mount my work onto plexiglass, a technology that is new to the United States. Printing on plexiglass has proven to be expensive and rare, so I experimented with printing on enhanced photo glossy paper, transparency film, and metallic glossy paper from B&H in New York. The printing papers proved to be inadequate compared to the effects of printing on plexiglass by not having a hard surface that reflected light through the prints properly. I later got in contact with Artisan Colour, Inc., a printing company in Arizona that printed work directly onto glass and was able to have them send me samples of my natural disasters on plexiglass. Their services however pixilated some of the quality of my work and there was a risk of getting the colors of my natural disasters lost due to the different printing settings that are used for plexiglass. But in collaboration with G and B Graphics in Ann Arbor Michigan, I was able to reproduce the similar quality Diasec prints have in enhancing a work to look more realistic and immersive. We did this by printing my work on enhanced glossy banner paper; face mounting each print onto plexiglass, and then illuminate them from behind with florescent lights. Based on my research and inspirations to make my work immersive and striking, I produce my prints at a scale of 36"x55". Each print was hung from brackets on the wall of the gallery, acting as floating frames with light spilling out behind them. The florescent lights were also screwed into the wall. With light shining through my prints, my digital work became much more awe striking, enhancing the sublime aspects of the beauty and terror found in natural forces.

Inspired by cultural legends, myths, symbolism, and the sublime occurrences of natural disasters, I was able to create powerful digital interpretations of a tornado, hurricane, and volcanic eruption. My work developed ordinary natural disasters into awing, beautiful, terrifying, uneasy, and abstract interpretations. Highlighting the paradox of beauty and terror found in these forces encourages people to view nature through a new mystical and cultural lens.

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Sailor Moon

Oliver Vernon

Peter Lik