Going Beyond Illustration of the Lovecraft Novel *At the Mountains of Madness*

By

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1 Introduction

1.1 Abstract

The research examines the relationship between the Sublime, the written works of H. P. Lovecraft, and the researcher’s production in the studio arts. It analyses how the Sublime is approached as a subject matter and principal objective within philosophical and artistic discourses, historically and within a contemporary paradigm. It also investigates the applicability of the Sublime to selected themes uncovered in H. P. Lovecraft’s work in general, and At the Mountains of Madness in particular. This is undertaken through an investigation of primary and secondary sources whose explorations and contextualization informs and supports the researcher’s practical visual studies. A reflective and critical analysis of this studio work is performed and included in the main body of the dissertation, from which a conclusion is drawn about the effectiveness of this approach.

Specifically, the research explores the relevance of the Sublime both as a critical component of contemporary fine arts and as a fundamental element of the work of H. P. Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness in particular. In addition, the research’s practical component consists of a visual exploration of the intersection between the two. Furthermore, it represents an evaluation of this overlap in its effective translation across modes of expression, as interpreted through the medium of the researcher’s creative process.

1.1.1 Keywords

H. P. Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness, Horror literature, Cosmicism, studio arts, fine arts, visual arts, the Sublime
**1.2 Areas of Study**

**1.2.1 The Sublime**

Historically, defining the Sublime as a coherent and fixed concept has been problematic, mostly due to its diverse applications, ranging from the vague “grand and terrifying aspects of nature” (Davies 1990: 525) to the significantly more nebulous “unrepresentable” (Olivier 2009: 195). It is “as if, for lack of a better alternative, contemporary art discourse, when confronted with what it cannot define, invariably reverts to this term” (Carlos, Guerreiro, Nobre de Gusmao, Sardo, Martinho, Chafes and Ambach 1994: 11).

In spite of its problematically unclear definition, the Sublime continues to be a topic of vital interest to visual arts and philosophy because its manifestation in contemporary society, grappling with the nature of the human condition, the transcendental, and the unrepresentable, remains a critical apparatus to any discussions of the indeterminate, the ‘other’, the numinous, and the suprasensible. As such, it continues to surface as a current and relevant counterpoint to the many questions arising out of a progressing and increasingly complex society that, as Olivier (2009: 203) points out, can only be accounted for by “an aesthetic of the sublime (which nevertheless acknowledges the fragmentary existence of beauty and the increasingly pervasive existence of ugliness)."

Moreover, as man’s research into the nature of the cosmos continues to displace any ordered and mechanistic understanding, and as global warming and climate change continues to show man’s control of nature as illusory and fleeting, the Sublime remains a critical topic of research due to “its relevance as an aesthetic of terrible nature, at a moment [of] growing fears about environmental catastrophe” (White: 2013).

Lastly, it further maintains its relevance as an answer to the world’s increased mechanisation, commercialisation, as Olivier (2000: 101) clearly denounces by saying that “unless the arts - from painting through architecture, dancing and
sculpture to cinema - find or invent ways of alluding to the sublime, they will be unable to avoid or resist what Lyotard has unmasked as the manipulation of collective aesthetic sensibilities by the popular "realism" ("kitsch" is a suitable synonym) which serves the exploitative ends of advanced capitalism."

1.2.2 The Sublime in Contemporary Fine Arts

Historically speaking, the Sublime first emerged in the visual arts as a cohesive artistic notion in the works of the Romantics and the Neo-Romantics. Subsequently, it has regularly resurfaced as the animus of art across its history, from 20th Century Modernist movements such as Abstract Expressionism, to postmodern expressions such as the Gothic resurgence of the 1990’s and beyond. Uniformly, and regardless of their roots, all these disparate artistic movements were marked by “the exploration of a continent which is not actually new but to a great extent remains to be recognized. This continent cannot be inhabited without risk: the formless, the terrible, incomparable grandiosity, the threat of death or the imminence of nothingness are situated on the horizon” (Carlos et al 1994: 22). Moreover, it can be understood as an exploration that continues as a current, vital, and relevant program in the visual arts, because it “[intersects] with post-structuralism’s realisation that all representation is insufficient. And contemporary art, in its trend towards shock and disintegration, is continually giving voice to this insufficiency” (Greig 2002: 377-378).

Furthermore, the contemporary visual arts’ continued focus on “the impossibility of representing… formlessness or monstrosity” (Petermann 1991: 5), manifesting itself in arts that have become “ethical witnesses to the unrepresentable” (Rancière 2007: 68), articulates this agenda in a plurality of modes and expressive strategies, including, but not limited to, the representative, the fantastic, the abject, and the abstract, none of them definitive. As such, further inquiries are needed, and new attitudes must be identified.
1.2.3 H. P. Lovecraft

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (August 20, 1890 to March 15, 1937), also known as H. P. Lovecraft, HPL, or simply Lovecraft, was a seminal writer of horror and science fiction whose work has maintained a strong presence in a plethora of popular cultural spheres. He is credited by prominent literary figures, such as award-winning author Neill Gaiman, as having "defined the themes and obsessions of twentieth century horror" (Woodward 2008). This goes some way to explain why is “ranked alongside America's best writers" (Woodward 2008) and considered as “the greatest writer of weird and horrific fiction in English in the 20th century” (Schweitzer 2010: 2), and why his work has often been “reprinted under such prestigious imprints as Penguin Classics or Library of America” (Schweitzer 2010: 2).

Lovecraft’s work is marked by an idiosyncratic worldview projected onto man’s place in the cosmos at large, which emerged from his own, deeply personal, omnipresent angst in face of the world. His difficult and troubled childhood no doubt contributed to this and resulted in his fantastic creation of an entire universe crammed with his insecurities and perceived omnipresent, uncontrollable terrors. For the most part, these took literary form as ancient gods, aliens, and monsters, often referred to as ‘the Old Ones’. Kiernan (Woodward 2008) explains: “[t]he old ones are the universe. The old ones are the cosmos. They are that force beyond us that we are incapable of controlling. And they're the universe that is vaster than we can comprehend."

These overarching themes and foundations of his work are not only important because they “had an enormous influence on the modern horror genre, [but] because they can also help us to think about what lies 'beyond'… [and] are centrally concerned with the paradox of representing entities, things and places that are beyond representation” (Kneale 2006: 106).

Additionally, this becomes of critical interest to contemporary fine arts which are, as Kalinovska (Grunenberg 1997: 218) explains, “nourished by uncomfortable realities,” and seek to find “metaphors for the extremes that keep haunting us” in
its search to articulate the Sublime. A Sublime, it must be added, that is already tied to a literature of terror, such as Lovecraft's, by a direct and intimate connection (Modleski 1986: 771).

Lastly, as his work, and horror literature in general, is “explicitly concerned with thresholds, with metaphors of contact and transgression” (Kneale 2006: 113), and whose purpose is, according to Carroll (Kneale, 2006, 117), to “exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, putatively in principle, unknown and unknowable”, it manifests in narratives that “revolve around the point of disclosure, rendering the unknown known.” In view of this, it becomes clear that Lovecraft’s work, typically dealing with themes of horror and terror, potentially interfaces with the concept of the Sublime.

1.2.4 At the Mountains of Madness

H. P. Lovecraft was a prolific writer, having completed 64 stories in his relatively short life (he was 47 when he died) in which he haltingly and haphazardly expanded on his overarching themes and ideas. Despite this, *At the Mountains of Madness* is often regarded as “the crowning jewel of the Cthulhu Mythos” (Woodward: 2008) and “grows in power and effectiveness at each successive reading” (Derleth 1993: 8). It is also one that Lovecraft himself considered “the most serious work [he had] attempted” (Derleth 1993: 7).

Furthermore, it was also written quite late into his career (1931) and so reflects a distinctively mature, developed, and technically proficient approach.

The book represents a radical departure from Lovecraft’s more traditional New England setting, using the backdrop of Antarctica to enhance the feelings of alienation and isolation possibly due, in no small part, to “[his] own horror and allergy to any temperature lower than 20° [Fahrenheit]” (Lovecraft 1993: 6).

The novella tells the story of geologist William Dryer who is driven to break a secret silence in order to discourage a proposed scientific exploration of the Antarctic. In order to lend weight to his argument, he narrates his own earlier
exploration on behalf of ‘Miskatonic University’, which was terrifying and ill-fated in the absolute, and resulted in the death or madness for almost the entire research team, and culminated in the discovery of ancient and terrible secrets which man was not meant to know.

The story is broad and covers many topics such as “his youthful enthusiasm for geology and the history of Antarctic exploration, and his extreme fondness for Poe’s unfinished novel of South Polar mystery, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*” (Carter 1972: 91), the discovery of “a mysterious world beyond the comprehension of most humans – a world of such cosmic scale, humanity is but an insignificant speck in comparison” (Gray 2010: 13), and Lovecraft’s view that “[l]urking beneath humanity’s naive conception of reality is a darker world, one filled with unimaginable creatures, fearsome god-like entities, and untold power” (Gray 2010: 12).

In view of this support, therefore, it becomes apparent that *At the Mountains of Madness* can be taken to represent an archetypal and principal example of the writing of H. P. Lovecraft.

### 1.2.5 Introduction of the Problem

In summary, the Sublime, that “irresolvable tension between imagination and the ideas of reason; between what cannot be presented in its entirety (the pervasive historical, natural and social degradation of the world, despite ephemeral, fragmentary flashes of beauty, like shards of broken stained-glass, catching the light) and what one nevertheless 'knows', regardless of the complexity involved” (Olivier 2009: 203), continues to be a topic of relevance and importance in contemporary culture.

Furthermore, it is one thing to understand, comprehend, and consume an idea, and quite another to make it Sublime, “to make it affecting to the imagination… [because it] is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions… [it is knowledge] and acquaintance make the most striking
causes affect but little” (Burke 1958:60). As such, the Sublime remains a valid subject strategy for any discourse regarding questions of the human threshold and that which lie beyond them, such as the unknown, the imaginative and the numinous. Thus, the Sublime is a vehicle to engage meaningfully with the unknown and transcendental, as Lyotard (Crome & Williams 2006: 289-290) explains:

First, [the Sublime] is an explanation for the way events stand beyond representation. The occurrence of feelings of the sublime depends on a failure of our powers of grasping and understanding an event. This is because the sublime involves a combination of pleasure and pain, where the pain comes from the frustration of our cognitive faculties. We are attracted to something (pleasure) but when we try to understand it, we fail (pain). The second function of the sublime is to accompany a clash of ways of handling events (understanding and reason, for example). The feeling of the sublime shows how this clash is necessary and how different ways or regimes are incommensurable, that is, have no common measure and cannot justly be brought together in a wider narrative. Events do not only undo representation, they also undo hopes to reconcile different narratives.

The Sublime, in other words, is an effective medium to represent, to engage, and talk about “the unrepresentable… the ‘empty content’” (Olivier 2009: 188). In this way, it becomes that “which displaces either the author or the audience, or both… [and sets up] art against knowledge… art as a matter of invention rather than truth” (Readings 1991: 72), and goes some way to explaining the contemporary visual arts’ multiplicity of approaches and expressive modes.

Thus, the Sublime in contemporary arts also opens itself up to the possibility of the artistic exploration across modes, especially where themes and concerns are shared.

One such avenue of investigation is the artistic expression of the themes found in the works of H. P. Lovecraft, who is “arguably the most significant horror author of the 20th century… [linking] the 19th- and early 20th- century authors who were his own influences… and writers of contemporary horror and fantastic fiction” (Kneale
In addition, furthermore, because Lovecraft concerned himself with aspects of the Sublime, populating his view of the cosmos with horror and the unknown (the unrepresentable, in other words) his work proves to be a fertile environment from which to extrapolate themes and notions of the Sublime into the visual arts. A particularly powerful example of this is a passage from his literary analysis, entitled in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (2011: 423):

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear. And the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form. Against it are discharged all the shafts of a materialistic sophistication which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to uplift the reader towards a suitable degree of smirking optimism."

The research, therefore, proposes that with direct reference to *At the Mountains of Madness*, specific themes, directly or indirectly sublime, can be identified and drawn upon to generate valid strategies that will inform the researcher’s attempts to introduce the Sublime in his own studio work.

1.3 Research Outline

1.3.1 Problem Statement

The problem can be stated thus: How can themes found in H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* be interpreted and applied to articulate the Sublime in visual arts?

1.3.2 Research Objectives

There are two principle objectives to the research.
The first is to identify particular themes found in H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* that exhibit characteristics of the Sublime.

The second aim will be to translate and interpret these themes across expressive modes into a visual medium, specifically as constituents of the researcher’s studio practice.

### 1.4 Methodology

**1.4.1 Methodological Framework**

The research seeks to investigate a creative artefact-making process as the *basis* of the contribution to knowledge. This is referred to as practice-based research (Candy 2006: 1).

More specifically, the research focuses specifically on the researcher’s particular and individual practice of artistic expression. It is, in other words, a study into a specific “meaning-making activity” (Baxter & Babbie 2004: 59) within a well-defined context, following the researcher’s ascription of meaning, importance and value to a practice. Fundamentally, this is because “learning in Art and Design is experiential” (Gray & Malins 2004: 1). It is an active and engaged practice.

It must be noted, however, that within the academic context of this research, the actual process of artistic invention needs more than “active experience”, and requires “reflection on that experience. We learn through practice, through research, and through reflection on both” (Gray & Malins 2004: 1). This is called a reflective practice, which, as Gray & Malins (2004: 20) define, is an effort to:

> Unite research and practice, thought and action into a framework for inquiry which involves practice, and which acknowledges the particular and special knowledge of the practitioner. It is a framework that encourages reflection in different ways. Retrospective reflection – ‘reflection-on-action’ – is a critical research skill and part of the generic research processes of review, evaluation and analysis.
This methodological framework, while ideally suited to research in the visual arts, forces the researcher into a duality of roles as both observer and observed, and requires the research methodology to overlap two methodology meta-theories, namely Constructivism because it asserts that “learning is constructed as a response to each individual’s experiences and prior knowledge… [that] learning occurs through active exploration” (Gray & Malins 2004: 2), and the Interpretist framework because it asserts that “the meaning of human creations, words, actions and experiences can only be ascertained in relation to the contexts in which they occur” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999: 124).

This approach suitably caters for the researcher’s “subjective perceptions of cause and effect and of function” (Baxter & Babbie 2004: 60), in recognition of his unique place as reflective-practitioner, and allows the research to be contextualized, while facilitating reflection and discussion with other observers, as Gray & Malins (2004: 20-21) explain:

In the role of ‘practitioner-researcher’, subjectivity, involvement, reflexivity is acknowledged; the interaction of the researcher with the research material is recognized. Knowledge is negotiated – inter-subjective, context bound, and is a result of personal construction. Research material may not necessarily be replicated, but can be made accessible, communicated and understood.

For this to yield the most meaningful results, it becomes important to place due emphasis on the context of both the research and the artefact-making practice. The Interpretist framework is apposite to this, as it is founded on the idea that “the meaning of human creations, words, actions and experiences can only be ascertained in relation to the contexts in which they occur” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999: 124), and it is the primary goal of interpretive researcher to “understand the web of meanings in which humans act” (Baxter & Babbie 2004: 59).

This is achieved, in part, through critical reflection, and is a key tool that allows for the study of the researcher’s use of symbols, as well as the symbols that emerge from the contextual review, and make sense of the rules that guide them. This is
then reintroduced back into the practice resulting in a process that is “refined hermeneutically, and compared and contrasted dialectically, with the aim of generating one (or a few) constructions on which there is substantial consensus” (Gray & Malins 2004: 20).

**1.4.2 Research Outline**

The practice-based research herein is a qualitative critical investigation into the researcher’s creative processes and production of visual artefacts. The methodology and strategy are intended to result in thematic advancements in the field of studio arts including, but not limited to, the researcher’s own artistic output.

This process uses the researcher’s artefact-creating practice as the focus of the investigation, and employs the researcher himself as the primary interpretative agent through whom the research output can be evaluated objectively, qualitatively, and critically.

As such, the researcher’s involvement with, and exposure to, the visual arts, and the acknowledgement of his tacit knowledge of his practice, constituted crucial influential factors in the research. Similarly, the appreciation of H. P. Lovecraft, his work, and their broader cultural context, all prove important components of this undertaking.

**1.4.3 Delimitations of the research**

The research, due to various constraints, was limited in the number of visual artefacts created as part of the practical component, preferring to focus on thematic considerations rather than the creation of a prolific portfolio. It also took into consideration the researcher’s own creative process, production capacity, and general academic restraints.

Furthermore, preference was given to the researcher’s idiosyncratic approach to art-making and artistic methods, in contrast to the imposition of a specific style or
approach beyond the need to contextualize the studio work within the field of contemporary fine arts.

As such, cognisance is given to the fact that the researcher is primarily a painter, working in traditional oil medium on canvas with some additional techniques, such as collage, objet trouvé, printmaking, and drawing. These oil paintings are normally on medium canvas and canvas-board overlaid with oil pastel drawing and mark-making. Exploration beyond this, though, was permitted in keeping with the multiplicity of artistic approaches available in contemporary arts.

1.4.4 Research Design

The research is broken down into three principal sections.

The first unit is a broad contextualization and investigation of supportive texts, which arrives at a pragmatic and workable definition of the Sublime, as well as a lucid and well-evidenced account of selected themes in the work of H. P. Lovecraft. This is followed by a more in-depth critical review of those themes as they are manifested in At the Mountains of Madness.

This is accompanied by a second unit, which consists of a recorded and evidenced reflective-practice, which has generated a body of work, and supporting documentation.

Within the reflective-practice approach, it is acknowledged that research material does not have to conform to replicable and immediately accessible expectations, and it can reflect the tacit knowledge of the candidate. Nevertheless, in order for the research to be sound, it was critically important that the practice be documented and that the broad concepts are transferable (Gray & Malins 2004: 20-21). It is for this reason that the practical component of the research relied on the following forms of documentation:

- Primary Source
The portfolio of work: As visual artefacts that display evidence of their creation process, the artefacts will stand as the foremost source of visual documentation.

The portfolio of supporting work: The candidate's work process generates, as a consequent, a body of technical experimentation with materials and processes, themes and concepts. They are the results of the candidate's thematic and technical problem-solving.

Secondary Source

Reflective journal: The reflective journal is a critical source of documentation for "planning, describing, evaluating, [and] summarizing... thoughts and feelings about... research" (Gray & Malins 2004: 87). It is here that the researcher recorded notes on symbols and metaphors, themes and techniques, concepts and ideas.

Artistic Evaluations

- Personal evaluations: The researcher undertook personal assessments of the artefacts, evaluating them, on not only themes and techniques, but other visual arts components such as composition, colour use, movement, and so forth.
- Peer Reviews: Selected members of the NMMU Art and Design department have been invited to review and comment on the visual artefacts.

The last and final section of the research is a collection of critiques and reflections based on all the primary and secondary practical documentation, identifying key points, themes, and areas of interest. This systematic integration of personal reflections, accompanied by the peer input into the candidate's creative process, has created a narrative of the creative process.
2 Investigation of Principal Topics

2.1 Introduction

In order to effectively appropriate the Sublime, specifically as it is realized in the work of H. P. Lovecraft, into the studio work, the research must be based on a firm and cohesive understanding of two central topics and two focus areas, namely the Sublime, concentrating on the Sublime in the visual arts, and Lovecraft’s writing, *At the Mountains of Madness* in particular.

This is achieved through a broad historical contextualization and examination of the evolution of the notion of the Sublime, as well as a rigorous and thorough understanding of contemporary Sublime, specifically as it presents itself in the contemporary visual arts. Furthermore, it is also critical that the research explore the various approaches, understandings, and conceptualizations of the Sublime, as it was formulated by certain thinkers and philosophers.

Secondly, the research undertakes a broad examination of Lovecraft’s overarching agenda, identifying distinctive predominant themes in his work, thinking, and philosophies. This is endorsed by references to supporting analyses of his writings and influence in a wider cultural setting. Furthermore, the research then evaluates this assessment in terms of its overlap with contemporary visual arts concerns and its expression of the Sublime specifically.

Lastly, the research undertakes a review of *At the Mountains of Madness* where specific themes, expressive strategies, and conceptual concerns that can be interpreted in the researcher’s studio work, are identified.

2.2 The Sublime

The root of the word is traced back to a manuscript of an imprecise date, estimated between the 1st and 3rd Century AD. It is entitled *On the Sublime* (n. d.)
and is accredited to an author by the name of Longinus whose real identity remains unknown. The manuscript deals primarily with the elements of good writing and oratory, and frames the Sublime as that which “does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself” (Longinus n. d.). In other words, he expresses the Sublime as the ability to engender psychological and emotional transcendence in a subject.

For Longinus, it is a property that “transcends humanity” (Longinus n. d.) and carries the subject (the listener or reader) along with it in an unspecified way that makes no appeal to reason or logic. This transcendence is the essence of the Sublime, and frames it as a discourse about that which not only surpasses humanity, but also permits the subject to partake in this elevation.

Subsequent to this seminal work, the Sublime does not feature in philosophical or artistic discourses again until the 18th Century, where it emerges in a moment marked by an opposition to the Enlightenment’s singular focus on intellectual objectivity and rational thinking. The high point of this reoccurrence is one of Edmund Burke’s (1729-1797) philosophical treatises, *A philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Burke 1958).

In this seminal book, Burke also identifies the Sublime as a source of transcendence, reinforced by continued references to the relationship between the human scale and that which exists beyond it, such as “the extraordinary, the stupendous, the wild, the awesome and the marvellous, particularly in Nature” (Greenhalgh 1992: 279).

Burke’s investigation into the Sublime, and the definition that emerges from his treatise, reveals the not only the overlap between his and Longinus’s conceptions, but also their variances. Importantly, it highlights Burke’s firm linkage of the sensation of the Sublime to almost purely physical and mechanical reactions, avoiding “recourse to internal senses, [and] solving the problems [of defining the sublime] wholly in terms of the conventional faculties” (Hipple 1957: 86). This is in contrast to Longinus’s more metaphysical and spiritual characterization.
Nevertheless, despite his grounded, systematic approach and significant refinement of the concept, Burke’s definition of the Sublime remains ambiguous. This is why, for artists and philosophers following Burke, “the Sublime provided a flexible semantic container for the murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity that begun [sic] to rupture the decorous confines of earlier aesthetic systems” (Rosenblum 1961: 108).

For Burke, the Sublime was not only something inescapably physical but integrally connected to adverse feelings such as pain, which, paradoxically, and like for Longinus, was an ultimately uplifting experience. This apparent contradiction can be understood by the disruption offered through the postponement of misery, so that “a negative sentiment associated with obscurity, with an uncontrolled force, with the infinite, the empty and with deprivation… [with] an immense and very powerful object exceeding all human limits… [is] interrupted and replaced by something else… a second but simultaneous feeling of intense pleasure” (Carlos et al 1994: 25).

Burke, in other words saw the Sublime as a complex interaction between pain and pleasure derived from the exposure to danger and its perpetual delay. Lyotard (1988: 35) explains it by stating that terror suspended and kept at bay provokes a kind of pleasure that is certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but one of relief. This transcendent feeling is at the heart of Burke’s Sublime (Carlos et al 1994: 25):

Burke’s analysis of the sublime focuses not only on the essence of this sentiment, which has to be sought in the way it is expressed, but also on its origin. It is for him a negative sentiment associated with obscurity, with an uncontrolled force, with the infinite, the empty and with deprivation. The individual, when confronted with an immense and very powerful object exceeding all human limits, feels himself threatened by something terrible which is always on the point of taking place, but which remains in suspense. The sublime consists of this feeling of deprivation, of the terrible proximity of death which is, however, interrupted and replaced by something else. From the heart of this terrible feeling, which Burke calls “terror”, there then emerges a second but simultaneous feeling of intense pleasure. The sublime
appears in this way associated with an ambiguous feeling, one of simultaneous pain and pleasure.

Furthermore, as Boulton explains (Burke 1958: XXXV), because Burke anchors the feeling of the Sublime as a mostly physiological consequence to the confrontation with things of tremendous scale, such as natural phenomena, it implies that the things themselves are imbued with an intrinsic property to be a source of aesthetic and Sublime, that is to say transcendental, experiences.

The earliest prominent adopters of this refined notion of the Sublime were the Romantics, a reactionary cultural movement challenging the Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationality and logic. This manifested primarily in cultural works that placed emphasis on that which was beyond logic and easy expression namely the irrational, the emotional, instinctive, psychological, and transcendental - in other words, the Sublime. Petermann (1991: 9) expands on this agenda: “[when] we are represented with a seemingly infinitely large or powerful phenomena [sic] (the desert, a stormy ocean, an avalanche, a volcanic eruption), we feel so overwhelmed by [it] that we shrink to insignificance in comparison. This state of insignificance can be taken as representing the state of affairs before the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment, where our powers were insignificant in comparison to the powers of an almighty nature.”

This Romantic reaction to scientific progress and the advancing frontiers of human knowledge, as well as its claim to a ‘Truth’ found in the irrational and in Nature, mapped out the subsequent development of the Modernist Sublime.

Thereafter, the notion of the Sublime evolved substantively over the course of the centuries that followed, and one of the most significant shifts that occurred was its reframing as a much more internalized process, placing the emphasis more on the beholder as the source of the Sublime and less on the thing beheld. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) primarily led this.

Kant wrote extensively about the Sublime, positing that the Sublime is a much more internalized process than Burke allowed, altering the understanding of the Sublime to something deeply psychological and less immediate, and moving its
locus away from the object and onto the internal processes of the subject. According to Kant, in other words, “the sublime... is a form of aesthetic experience, a feeling generated by a confrontation of the mind with an object which defies assimilation by the senses, an object which threatens to overwhelm our perceptual and imaginative capacities. Such is the cosmos [sic]” (Greigg 2002:15).

For Kant, the Sublime rested with deeper intellectual elements that went beyond the immediate and physical like fear, pain, and pleasure. Its ultimate expression, as Kant saw it, was something continuous and lingering: a deep and permanent disquiet in the viewer, which he termed Angst. Petermann interprets (1991: 18): “it is necessary to make a distinction that is of great importance later in Kant’s critical treatment of the sublime: the distinction between ‘genuine Angst’ (eigentlicher Angst) and ‘mere fear’ (bloßer Furcht). The main, and for our purposes crucial, difference between Angst and fear concerns the object stimulating the fear. As Freud puts it, ‘Angst relates to a state of mind and neglects the object, whereas fear focuses precisely on such an object.’” In addition, Petermann expands the definition to add that Angst may also be understood as the “highest degree of fear,” or “a great and prolonged fear”.

Moreover, this Angst, according to Kant, play an ebbing and flowing battle with rationality and control, which in a significant way represents the battle between Reason and Nature (Petermann 1991: 9), suggestively contributing to the Modernist animus of the Romantics.

The change in focus to the deeper psychological and psychosomatic components of the Sublime was in strong contrast to Burke’s framing of the Sublime as a specific physical property of an object, leading Kant to state that “there are no sublime objects but only sublime sentiments” (Carlos et al 1994: 22).

Kant posited that these Sublime sentiments arose out of “a tension between the completeness of the reason's apprehension of an object, and the incompleteness of the imagination's apprehension thereof” (Wood 1972: 43). The Sublime, in other words, is initiated by an internal discomfort and unresolvable tension between
comprehension and imagination, which then gave way to a moment of elation via one of two mechanisms, which he called the 'Mathematical Sublime' and the 'Dynamic Sublime'. White (n. d.) explains:

The experience of the 'mathematical sublime' is occasioned by an almost ungraspably vast, formless object. Kant suggests that at a certain point, the powers of our senses and of our Imagination (the faculty of the mind that schematises and grasps the sensory world in images and 'forms') fail to be able to synthesise all of the immediate perceptions of such a huge and formless object into a full and unified image of a single figure; its sheer scale threatens to overwhelm the mind's powers of comprehension, our ability to grasp its magnitude with 'the mind's eye'. If this is an initially displeasing, humbling experience, however, this is also the point where reason steps in. For reason has in store another resource - the Idea of Infinity, drawn from within the realm of our supersensuous being. Thus although the object may seem at first to overwhelm our capacities, we find that it is only our sensory capacities that are thus threatened. Our Reason has at its disposal an Idea which is far larger than the object, and so we can figure it as merely approaching - inadequately - the appearance of the infinite. In such a movement, we are drawn away from our sensuous experience towards a recognition of the 'higher,' sublime, transcendental powers of Reason that we have within us.

The 'dynamical sublime' rather than dealing with a large object, deals with an enormously powerful natural force - a storm for example. As with the mathematical sublime, we initially recognise in such a force the seeming inadequacy of the human: we are small and weak, and the storm might easily sweep us away and annihilate us. However, Kant suggests that when we are faced with no immediate danger, when such a storm can be experienced as a mere representation rather than as a direct threat to life and limb (terror, Kant stresses is not in itself sublime; it is an abject, unreasonable, animalistic impulse), then we can recognise it as 'fearful' without being afraid, and at such a point we "discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature." Kant goes on to explain the nature of such a 'power of resistance.' It is a power, "to regard as small those things of which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its might (to which in these matters we are no doubt
subject) as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them." (SS.27) Although objectively we are physically subject to the power of nature to destroy us, as free and reasoning beings, we can also act, in the name of our highest and most rational principles, against this narrow self-interest. What is sublime, then, in this experience is the recognition of the resources for heroism that we have within us. Again it is a triumph of the 'supersensuous' over the 'sensuous'

Kant, in other words, proposes a theory of the Sublime that describes an unbridgeable break between the understanding of a thing (the concept of the distance between stars expressed in light years, for example), and the ability to imagine a thing (trying to visualize or imagine that same distance). This he calls the ‘Mathematical Sublime’ and it is “the highest reach of the creative imagination, the point where the mind, in confronting some overwhelming experience, fails to objectify its sense of wonder and falls back upon its own resources, gaining access to the ‘supersensible’ realm of ideas. The Kantian sublime thus hinges on a relation between perceptual and imaginative excess and rational containment, in which this excess can be comprehended as an idea, thereby reanimating our capacity to create and discover meaning” (Greig 2002: 17).

It is also interesting to note that Kant, despite his rejection of the ‘Sublime object’, still understood the Sublime as arising out of a functional interplay between the human scale and that which supersedes it, whether intellectually, emotionally, or physically. The transcendence of the Sublime, even the "overwhelming destructiveness of the (dynamic) sublime [that] marks the transgression from the understanding to reason" (Petermann 1991: 129), is, at its core, initiated by the confrontation between the human and the "limitless – [the] object without form – [the] indeterminate concept" (Carlos et al 1994: 14). Kant, however, evolved the concept from Burke and defines the Sublime in which “the limitlessness once found in nature gives way... to a limitlessness produced out of an idea which is not interested in being an idea of nature, but one which replaces the idea of nature” (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 67).
Free of physical limits, and as a product of the intellect, the Kantian Sublime transcends the natural world and its physical scales and extends to dangers, vast spans, and intellectual concepts beyond representation, which all exhibit the potential to generate Angst.

Angst, as Kant saw it, is in a diametrically opposed but balanced relationship with control (especially control over nature) and rationality, so that “[i]f rationality advances to some degree (and let us suppose that at a low level of rationality this might happen - accidentally perhaps - despite a high level of Angst), then a decrease of Angst will follow” (Petermann 1991: 19). In this way, Kant sees the Sublime as a fundamental “interplay between the understanding, the imagination, and reason” (Petermann 1991: 2-3).

The Kantian Sublime becomes increasingly significant as it informs his ground-breaking theories of aesthetics. Aesthetics, up until the earlier part of the 20th Century, had focused primarily on beauty, and Kant, by introducing his view of the Sublime as diametrically opposed to beauty, opened the way for a reconsideration of Modernist aesthetics. Wood (1972: 43), quoting Iris Murdoch, summarizes Kant’s position thus: "Whereas beauty is not connected with emotion, the sense of the sublime is. Strictly, whereas objects may be beautiful, no object is ever sublime. It is rather that certain aspects of nature occasion feelings of sublimity in us… [B]eauty results from a harmony between imagination and understanding, sublimity results from a conflict between imagination and reason."

This resulted, in the visual arts, as in other cultural spheres, in a program of exploration of the abject, the ugly, and the terrifying – that is also to say, the Sublime – which stood in opposition to the beautiful and harmonious.

Moreover, this goes some way to explain the rise of an art created to “transgress society’s vague definitions of normality, discretely peeling away the pretences of outmoded conventions and transversing the amorphous border between good and evil, sanity and madness, disinterested pleasure and visual offensiveness” (Grunenberg 1997: 169).
It also represents a significant development from Burke’s understanding and extends it far beyond the limits expressed by the earlier Romantics. No longer tied purely to the physical conflict with Nature, the Sublime found its place in art and philosophy, even when Nature was all but subjugated and the frontiers of humanity expanded through machinery and scientific development, beyond all scopes of Enlightenment thinkers. Jacques Derrida comments on this enlargement of the sense of the Sublime, by saying that the Sublime “must therefore be sought within ourselves who project (hineinbringen) the sublime into nature, ourselves as rational beings” (Morley 2010: 44). It can also be understood as a move from horror, demonstrating the power of nature, to terror, expressing the power of the mind (Grunenberg 1997: 124).

The many changes to, and explorations of, the Sublime, as exemplified and led by Burke to Kant, and informed in part by Georg Hegel (1770-1831), were mirrored heavily in the visual arts, starting with the Romantics of the 19th Century to the abstractions of the 20th Century Modernists, such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Mark Rothko (1903-1970), and many others, who focused on “[putting] forward the unpresentable in the presentation itself… [and searched] for new presentation[s], not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable” (Readings 1991: 24). They also heralded further significant shifts in the notion of the Sublime, led in philosophy by Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), but also, at least tangentially, by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).

These postmodern thinkers and contemporary theorists developed an understanding of the Sublime, which held, at its core, that the transcendent and all things beyond the human scales were also fundamentally beyond adequate representation. The result is that, as Freeman (1995: 65) explains, “the sublime [cannot be] the representation of the unrepresentable, but the presentation of the fact that the unrepresentable exists.” The Sublime, in other words, is a paradox which Zizek (2009: 57) defines thus:

\[
\text{[I]n principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is}
\]
insurmountable – that is, no empirical object, no representation \([\text{Vorstellung}]\) of it can adequately present \([\text{darstellen}]\) the Thing (the suprasensible idea); but the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing. Thus, by means of the very failure of representation, we can have a presentiment of the true dimension of the Thing.

In this way, the inquiries of these latter philosophers, Lyotard foremost amongst them, outlined the Sublime as that which seeks to represent the unrepresentable (Olivier 2009: 188), and thereby confronts the beholder with the limits of the human, enabling a transcendent experience.

In other words, the Sublime in a contemporary context "puts forward the unpresentable in the presentation itself", without recourse to "the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (Readings 1991: 24). The result is that artists, unbound from the need to incorporate acceptable forms and create harmonious or visually pleasing works, are then able to draw more focus to that which cannot be presented - to create artefacts "not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (Readings 1991: 24).

Unlike with Burke and Kant, however, this understanding of the Sublime does not lead to a subsequent elation and transcendental experience. Instead, it revels in being an "irruption into the order of language of the unspeakable, of that which exceeds the capabilities of the systems of language and discourse as we know them. This 'beyond' of any system of discourse is what Lyotard calls the 'differend'… [and] can be imagined as the unformed chaos which swirls around language, which is produced as its other, a productive realm of potentiality from which the new can spring" (White n. d.).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, fundamentally, Lyotard’s conception of the Sublime remains founded on the same interplay of scale that informed the Sublime of Kant, Burke, and Longinus. It is, in this case, extended to a
confrontation between the human and the ‘other’, the inexpressible, the unconceivable, and the ‘unrepresentable’.

The Sublime, understood in this framework, becomes truly “inaccessible and inexpressible”, and its representation and presentation “can no longer be symbolic (in the Hegelian and Saussurean sense of the term, which implies participation or analogical resemblance between the symbol and what it symbolizes). The content (the infinite idea, in the position of the signified and no longer symbolized) destroys the signifier or the representer” (Derrida 1978: 45), and becomes, in other words “the presentation of the unpresentable, and its synonyms the invisible and the undemonstrable, extends to an analysis of contemporary experience itself” (Greig 2002: 19).

Additionally, this conception of the Sublime, is also linked to Hegel's notion of the inadequacy because, “the sublime as an attempt to express the infinite runs into this problem of inadequacy because there is in the phenomenal realm no object that proves itself fitting for this representation” (Petermann 1991: 3). So, in other words, “[u]nlke the modern sublime, which is recognizable by its 'missing content',” the postmodern, poststructural, and contemporary understanding of the Sublime “announces itself by its innovative, inventive means of presentations of what is, in the final analysis, unpresentable” Olivier (2009: 195).

That is not to say that Kant’s approach is outmoded or irrelevant. Quite the contrary: “Kant’s account of the experience of the sublime [as] the initial inability of our conceptual and imaginative capacity to represent the object… followed by our acknowledgement of this incapacity in a process that transforms this initial negativity by emphasising our cognition of the object as transcending us.” This is essentially poststructuralist in its proposition that “all representation [is] insufficient, and that the very expression of this insufficiency affords such positions the capability to evoke the sublime. The sublime can thus be applied to any object which disrupts straightforward assimilation by simultaneously suggesting contradictory readings” (Greig 2002: 187).
And it is this, according to Lyotard, which is the critical importance of the Sublime in contemporary fine arts: it obliges viewers to attempt to respond, confronting them with the futility and impossibility of a response, keeping the instant forever out of reach (Crome & Williams 2006: 290). In other words, as McEvilley (2001: 172) explains, “[t]hat’s the sublime that’s facing us. Art and technology and so on are just role-players in a grand game, which goes on despite their momentary triumphs or disasters. A grand game, which has no score, no goal, no end. The [E]nlightenment itself, it seems, will fade into a crack of the woodwork of the museum. That’s our terrifying sublime.”

2.2.1 The Sublime in Visual Arts

The Sublime is widely accepted to have its roots in the Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th Centuries. This far-ranging literary and artistic movement was “[m]ore an attitude than a stylistic tendency, its core characteristic was a rejection of all norms. Its credo was fidelity to the individual imagination, and many of its paradigmatic themes were violent: cataclysm, suffering, death, [which was] a reaction against the complacent rationalism associated with Enlightenment utopianism, which was widely believed to have spawned the horrors of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars” (Kemp 2000: 304).

This strong reactionary tendency sought to create in the viewer a supra-rational experience instead of a didactic one, so that, rather “than produce images that could edify or educate their viewers, these artists chose to portray subjects that evoked feelings of the sublime and the terrible” (De La Croix, H., Tansey, R. G. & Kirkpatrick, D. 1991: 853). For these artists, the Sublime was “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke 1958: 39), and this extended to the engendering of powerful emotional reactions in the viewer, especially negative ones, like fear, awe, terror, and horror. This was achieved, in part, by confronting the audience with the natural world, which was, at the time, seen as antagonistic, uncontrollable, and in direct contrast to the systemic progress proposed by the Enlightenment, which included the domination of the natural world. Burke (1958: 57) explains: “The passion caused by the great and
sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment… 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 another, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.”

In this way, for Burke and the early Romantics, the Sublime came to be closely linked to “an emotion invoked by the limitlessness and grandeur of wild and awesome scenery and natural phenomena such as storms” (Greenhalgh 1992: 69). It was, at its root, about physical danger and the disparity between man and nature, between the human scale, and all that existed beyond it. In this way, the “body of the viewer as mediator” became “the standard measure… since the sublime is of the colossal, and something before which everything seems small” (Carlos et al 1994: 15).

Underlying this physical reaction and the confrontation with the supra-human is a direct threat and the fear that accompanies it. This was no accident because, for the Romantics and for Burke (1958: 57), “no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of action and reasoning as fear.” In the visual arts, this was strongly reflected in the works of the Romantics, and other subsequent artists dealing with Sublime who saw pain and danger as most powerful catalysts for fear (Burke 1958: 38). Burke (1958: 57) reinforces this point by adding that “[w]hatever therefore is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimension or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous.” Hipple (1957: 90) summarizes:

“*All general privations,*” Burke continues, “are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude,* and *Silence.*” Greatness of dimension, too, is sublime, and infinity fills the mind with that “delightful horror” which is essential effect of sublimity, and effect which is approximated by the “artificial infinite” of succession and uniformity (as in a colonnade), the imagination continuing beyond the actual limits of the object. A work implying immense force and effort to execute it is sublime, and difficulty thus becomes by association a cause of sublimity… Power, too, is a source of the sublime, because of its association with violence, pain
and terror; those instances in which power is stripped of all danger serve to prove that its influence is indeed the consequences of its association with terror.

It is possible to conclude that for Burke, the Romantics and their compeers, fear, the colossal, and the presence of danger, were key to the engendering a sensation of the Sublime. Moreover, this was most effectively represented by Nature, depicted “in its most chaotic, boundless, terrifying dimension,” finding it “best qualified to awaken in us the feeling of the Sublime” (Zizek 2009: 58).

It is the reason why, initially, the idea of the Sublime was expressed by the faithful representation of the majestic and terrifying in the natural world, as can be found in the works of the Romantics, who are also the artists most directly linked to the writings of Burke, such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), James Ward (1769-1859), and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). They, and their contemporaries, used the term ‘Sublime’ to refer to works of art that described “the extraordinary, the stupendous, the wild, the awesome and the marvellous, particularly in Nature” (Greenhalgh 1992, 279). Indeed, these artists saw the “individual and nature [as] no longer [coexisting] in organic harmony, as proposed by the eighteenth century pastoral ideal, but... terrified by the wild and uncomfortable temperament of nature” (Grunenberg 1997: 194). In addition, seeking to represent this in their art, they created work that were, “a statement of the sublime, of the infinite and the immeasurable” (Yarowski 1988: 20).

Ultimately, the Romantic agenda for the representation of the terrifying aspects of the natural world was disrupted. Their artworks were intrinsically unable to capture completely and represent adequately the original Sublime moment because, as Michel Foucault (1926-1984) explains, the Sublime is essentially unrepresentable. And it is this struggle, between the creation of signifiers and the unrepresentable that became the formula of an abstract or modernist Sublime (Rajchman 1985: 17).

One strategy that emerges in the expression of the Sublime is the use of fantastic imagery because as Kneale (2006: 106), quoting Jackson, states: by “[p]resenting
that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be; it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame. Fantastic images, in other words "transcend formal categorization and resist definite conceptualization through a multiplicity of metaphorical meanings" (Grunenberg 1997: 170). This can be found across the historical and contemporary development of the art of the Sublime, from the Romantic work of Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) to that of contemporary artists such as Soda_Jerk (n. d.)

Additionally, the art of the Sublime, in its exploration of the representation of the terrifying 'Sublime object', in both fantastic and directly representational imagery, has also led to an examination of the abject.

The abject focuses on abasement instead of elevation, and has traditionally been placed in opposition to the Sublime but, as Una O’shea (2012) explains, they share a common goal, namely to bring the viewer to an irrational moment:

> The sublime is so often associated with the incomprehensible stretches of outer space with all its connotations of God or some alien life form, the great unknowns; and the main force behind the power of the abject, with its transgression of borders set up to make us feel safe and content, is simply death. Both the sublime and the abject force us in some way to confront the unknown, what is out of reach for both our senses and our imaginations. So the object, event, thing, that triggers this reaction of the abject/sublime has always the idea of the unknown.

In this way the Sublime and abject can both be understood, as Una O’shea adds, as "catalysts or triggers for certain human reactions in the face of the unknown and unknowable" (2012). In this way, the abject, just like fantasy and the faithful depictions of terrifying natural phenomena, attempts to bring the viewer to an instant marked by an irrational confrontation with the ‘other’, similar to the Kantian "tension between the completeness of the reason's apprehension of an object, and the incompleteness of the imagination's apprehension thereof" (Wood 1972: 43). In other words, parallels exist in the artistic strategies of the abject and Kant’s understanding of the Sublime which Petermann (1991: 143-144) defines thus:
Kant starts with the observation that a certain feeling occurs in us when we are in the presence of certain objects. When nature presents itself in one of two forms, i.e., either as appearing infinitely large [mathematical sublime] or as infinitely powerful [dynamical sublime], we experience two contrary and alternating emotions. We feel small, weak, and vulnerable, and the incoming phenomenon is too great for us to fully comprehend. This causes in us an extreme feeling of inadequacy and displeasure. But immediately reason steps in, managing to do precisely what imagination and understanding could not; it makes sense of the natural phenomenon, it shows that, insofar as we have reason, we are superior and greater than nature, which causes us to have a strong feeling of pleasure. It is an intellectual pleasure because “in such an experience we feel ourselves as transcending the limits imposed by embodiment.

From this, it is possible to understand the overlap of strategies between abject and the Sublime, and their divergences. Both aim to generate feelings of inadequacy and displeasure, but whereas the Sublime seeks to use this to generate a transcendental moment thereafter, the abject revels in the abasement for its own sake.

Moreover, the abject, the fantastic, and the illustrative are only some of the presentational strategies relating to the representing the Sublime, which is marked by a plurality of stylistic modes (Grunenberg 1997: 168). This diversity of expressive approaches manifested itself strongly within the Modernist paradigm as it constantly sought new forms, never satisfied with existing styles. During the artistically frenetic period of Modernism, it became increasingly apparent that the effective expression of the Sublime was never to be realized because it was, as Lyotard pointed out, intrinsically unrepresentable.

In view of this shift in awareness, it is possible to view the historical development of modern and contemporary visual arts in relation to the Sublime, as the search to create objects that point “to the fundamental emptiness, ‘the beyond the signified’ [where] no signification could occur… thus [becoming] infinitely attractive, fearful, overbearing, or more simply sublime” (Shaw 2007: 54). Simply put, as Foucault states, art of the Sublime seeks to ‘represent the unrepresentable’. 

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It is following from this idea - this determination to move beyond all signifiers and to represent that which cannot be represented - that artists investigated abstraction as alternative stratagem, and continues to do so. Furthermore, as it found itself easily adopted into the Modernist program to bring to the surface the “invisible life of the unconscious” (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 42), it also became integral to the aesthetic discourses of the 20th Century, manifesting itself as a series of investigations into ways to push the schism between understanding and imagination to its limit because it is when “imagination is strained to its utmost, where all finite determinations dissolve themselves, [that] the failure appears at its purest” (Zizek 2009: 58).

Abstraction, where it relates to the Sublime, can be understood as an attempt to create an art devoid of all signifiers that, as LeVitte Harten explains (1999: 73), allows that which is signified (the unrepresentable) to “appear in all its decorum and become the manifestation of the hidden essence.”

In this way, contemporary abstract visual arts of the Sublime, consciously seeking to avoid all signifiers, attempted to represent the Sublime not “by an image, but by its absence” (Crome & Williams 2006: 291), which places the viewer in a state of unresolved Angst. Crome & Williams (2006: 291) expand: “[t]his absence is not pure, but conveyed by a minimal sense of matter in conjunction with feelings. Here, the sublime conjunction of pleasure and pain, taken from Kant, is supplemented by a terror and relief taken from Burke. The terror is that nothing might happen - the nihilistic sense of a void, time might stop. The relief is only partial - there is [something] happening, but we know not what.”

This challenge to the viewer is fundamental to the contemporary visual arts’ experience of the Sublime, which works towards the “destabilization of a collective ‘taste’ that is invariably orchestrated, via for instance the advertising industry, by globally powerful capital [whose interest it is] to provide the ‘recognizable’, the ‘comforting’, and provide marketable ‘artworks’ to the public, artists must “invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (Olivier 2000: 99).
This sensation, which “cannot be contained in any sensible form… [and] cannot be represented adequately… [but] still made active and called into the intellect, precisely because the inadequacy itself can be represented sensibly” (Petermann 1991: 127) is the essence of the contemporary Sublime.

It is also important to note that the Sublime is not understood as a fixed object or point in time but, rather, as Lyotard puts forth, as “an event, an experience of discontinuity in experience, something beyond the here and now, beyond normal experience, and beyond representation” (Greig 2002: 120). In this way the Sublime can be interpreted, according to both Lyotard and Hegel, as “the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation” thus transforming the Sublime into “an action, an attempt that confronts “something” which is …explicitly… devoid of shape” (Greig 2002: 187).

Thus identified, instances of the Sublime - inexpressible and unrepresentable - defy any singular point of view, whether it is perspective or historical moment, and opposes locked discourses and fixed language. The implication of this is that the Sublime in contemporary arts must be open to multiple viewpoints, and must “always [be] wagered against, and deconstructed by, the continuous or figural distortion in which it is implicated" (Readings 1991: 27). In other words, the Sublime “frames but cannot be framed” (Greig 2002: 201).

The Sublime in contemporary fine arts can only be represented by art's inability to represent it or, as Derrida (Morley 2010: 44) puts it, “[t]he inadequation of presentation is presented. [I]t resists the assurance of a conscious stance or position or knowledge, critique or historical survey" (Readings 1991: 56) and can only be defined as a “feeling that can reveal the limits and failures of any emergent taste or common sense" (Crome & Williams 2006: 289).
2.3 H.P. Lovecraft

The biographies of his life, as well the literary analyses of his work explore many of the key factors in his upbringing, remarking that he “did not have a particularly happy or wholesome or even a very normal childhood. His father was seriously ill – he was, in fact, a paretic – and when Lovecraft was only a child of three years, his father’s illness had advanced to a point at which he was not considered competent to handle his own affairs and he was committed to the care of a legal guardian” (Carter 1972: 22). His mother, Sarah Phillips Lovecraft, only served to exacerbate Lovecraft’s fragility, as she was smothering and determined to shelter her son from the rigours and dangers of life. As Carter (1972: 22) summarizes “[f]or the rest of his life, Lovecraft showed the marks of this, living like a sickly semi-invalid, avoiding the everyday world around him.”

This upbringing informed much of Lovecraft’s worldview and writing, making the monsters and terrors found in his books externalizations of his own phobias and concerns, as Baldwin (2012) explains:

Insanity, fantasy, death, hermitage, and a drive to explore the universe: The seeds of the Lovecraftian horror were sown. Along with his seemingly inexhaustible well of fears—fears of the sea and of sex and of madness—Lovecraft had ample raw material with which to craft his tales of terror. And with his unusual background, personality, and idiosyncrasies, Lovecraft seemed like nothing so much as a character from one of his own stories.

This reflexive analysis of his own fears and troubled childhood informed his reactionary disquiet, shared, in fact, by many of his contemporaries in the face of the increased scientific understanding about the nature of the universe. For it must be noted that he wrote at the beginning of the 20th Century when “contemporary physics [revealed] that the universe is, as Haldane said, 'not only stranger than we imagine, [but] stranger than we can imagine’” (Greig 2002: 60), undermining, then and subsequently, the idea that humanity and Earth were somehow unique and privileged, continuing the erosion started earlier with Darwin’s discovery of
common descent, but confronted humanity with the uncomfortable reality that the rules and laws of the universe may be forever out of man’s conceptual grasp.

This was absorbed by Lovecraft and contributed to his deeply-held beliefs about humanity’s place in the cosmos, namely, “that the virtually limitless universe revealed by science is vast, impersonal, mindless chaos, in which we exist purely by biological-chemical accident and only on a very small scale” (Schweitzer 2010: 4).

Lovecraft has risen to significance as an author and a visionary because he brought to light a “particular Lovecraftian effect, [an] ironically self-understood insignificance brought to light with the collapse of anthropocentric systems of privilege, [which was] unprecedented in literature” (Burleson 1990: 158-159).

This was achieved, in part, by his depiction of the universe as a vast and harrowing place fundamentally opposed to life. He eschewed “the vampires and other supernatural horrors that were standard villains in the pulps of his age, [and] instead created his own brand of horror, a genre that has come to be known as “Cosmicism”” (Baldwin: 2012), a singular concept starkly different from others in the horror genre. Its defining feature was not evil “but the utter insignificance of man… His existential universe is one in which no one and nothing cares about us one way or the other, where the only “gods” are beings of a scale we mortals cannot readily process” (Baldwin: 2012). Lovecraft particularizes this concept in a seminal letter to his friend, Farnsworth Wright (1968: 150):

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. These must be handled with unsparing realism, (not catch-penny
romanticism) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-haunted Outside—we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold.

It is salient to note that this concept did not arise fully formed but, rather, evolved during the course of Lovecraft’s career and development, as Burleson (1990: 6) cautions, “[w]e can dispense with the “authorial intent,” a notion belonging to that old metaphysics of presence that would treat language as having self-present and fixed meaning and would treat the text as being a ready access to the author’s mind, a mind unambiguous and all made up as to its intentions.”

Lovecraft’s cosmology makes itself present in his work as an emergent series of themes and these become all the more prominent when properly contextualized in reference to the scientific advancements made during Lovecraft’s lifetime. He was an avid amateur scientist with a deep love for astronomy and chemistry, and a number of serious scientific articles and studies to his name (Lovecraft 2005). As such, the developments in the arenas of quantum physics and astronomy would have been familiar to him, and this is fundamental to understanding his ‘Cosmicism’.

The research undertaken into subatomic physics during the earlier part of the 20th Century shattered many preconceptions, as Greig (2004: 4-5) explains:

Far from satisfying our desire for certainty, quantum physics subverts our customary view of how the world is. It has exposed a world so alien to the world of everyday appearances that seventy-five years after its inception to explain the behaviour of atoms this puzzling and paradoxical subject continues to confront unresolved and deep issues concerning the nature of reality, the role of observation, and the significance of consciousness in a context where the fundamental limitations on measurement at the quantum level alter the traditional relationship between the observer and the observed.

These advancements in the scientific understanding of the universe had strong cultural and philosophical ramifications, “[o]verturning established notions of reality
founded on a Cartesian doctrine of objectivity, [and presenting] us with the limits of our power to represent the world” (Greig 2002: ii), and continue to do so today.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Lovecraft explores themes which confronted his reader with both the limit of human inquisitiveness, and the catastrophic, irreversible damage that exceeding such a limit could present, as Burleson (1990: 156) points out: “[one] may discern certain broad themes that permeate Lovecraft’s fiction. One notes, for example, the theme of “forbidden knowledge,” or “merciful ignorance” – the theme that there are species of knowledge only by ignorance of which humankind can maintain even the semblance of well-being.” Lovecraft (2011: 425), himself, wrote on this topic, stating that “[f]or though the area of the unknown has been steadily contracting for thousands of years, an infinite reservoir of mystery still engulfs most of the outer cosmos, whilst a vast residuum of powerful inherited associations clings around all the objects and processes that were once mysterious, however well they may now be explained."

Lovecraft approached the representation of damaging and potentially ruinous knowledge, and man’s inability to ever fully grasp it, in a very peculiar, and essentially poststructuralist manner, as Jackson (Kneale 2006: 110) points out: he placed a self-conscious stress on “the impossibility of naming [the] unnameable presence… the 'thing' which can be registered in the text only as absence and shadow. [He] circles around this dark area in an attempt to get beyond language to something other, yet the endeavour to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable is one which inevitably falls short, except by drawing attention to exactly this difficulty of utterance.”

His solution to the problem of representing the unknowable, as Greig (2002: 15) underlines when discussing contemporary physics, leads the reader to an essentially Sublime moment: “[b]y providing partial presentations of a vast and complex reality which, as a totality, is unpresentable, [it] enables us to experience the sublime.”

Moreover, Lovecraft’s approach to this theme, mirroring some of the problems of 20th century physics, clearly “embody an implicit and unacknowledged aesthetic of
the sublime within its discourse” (Greig 2002: ii). Moreover, this can also be understood as a poststructuralist approach, specifically disrupting attempts at grounding: “Lovecraft’s big theme... the ruinousness of self-understanding, seeks to cleave reality into a bipolarity: the hope of humankind to possess meaning and worth in the cosmic scheme on one hand and, on the other, the dashing of such hope by the experience of discovering, and being cursed to be able to contemplate, the blind indifference of the universe to human concerns. But upon closer scrutiny the poles of this opposition are seen to collapse into ultimate indeterminacy. Each of the poles contains, as its condition of possibility, the necessary trace of the other” (Burleson 1990: 159).

This disruption of the subject's sense of grounding offers, primarily, a fundamentally poststructural Sublime experience, but also opens the door for further themes which Lovecraft readily explores. One such core theme is “what may be called the theme of “denied primacy” – the notion that we human beings were not the first lords of this planet, and indeed have never really been its lord” (Burleson 1990: 156), which “articulates the Dionysian wisdom that the world of the inauthentic petit bourgeois neurotic rests on a fundamental Nothingness which he must deny; it defamiliarizes his world, reverses its values, and points toward a new age. Of this sublime transcendence, artists [such as Lovecraft] are the heroes. They articulate "the abyss" which lies behind our world and the limits of what we may experience in it. Artists no longer search for the pleasing style in which to "say the same thing with other words," but heroically explore the very "source" of the language by which we designate things, the source of the fatal uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) which nonartists know only at the cost of madness" (Rajchman 1985: 18).

Lovecraft can be characterized as trying to define a universe entirely alien to human knowledge and human understanding. This specific approach, again, mirrors many of the problems faced with contemporary physics and the arts, which “[d]eal in entities and concepts which defy the imagination,” and attempt “to encompass a whole which we are unable to comprehend as a whole at the level of the senses but which we can comprehend as an Idea of reason, thus enabling us
to experience the sublime,” which then “[n]ecessitate strategies by which to present the unpresentable” (Greig 2002: ii).

Burleson (1990: 157) further adds that underlying the core themes found in Lovecraft’s work, there are others, such as “the theme of “illusory surface appearances,” that is, the theme that things are not as they appear on the surface, below which deeper and more terrible realities are masked,” which surfaces and resurfaces regularly in Lovecraft’s writings, presenting itself as the unknown and terrible knowledge, distinctively malign, buried deep in humanity’s unconscious. This was a purposeful thematic choice, as Lovecraft writes in one of his essays *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (2011: 426):

> A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain - a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of the unplumbed space.

Not only is the theme clearly Sublime in its presentation of the unknown, dangerous, and unpresentable, it also perversely mirrors the scientific understanding of the universe as it began to emerge during Lovecraft’s lifetime. This picture of the universe is still current and posits a universe that is “formless; a realm devoid of form or substance… in which the rational, orderly world of experience is seen to be a “sham,” merely a facade behind which lies a “…murky and paradoxical world of shadowy existence and shifting perspectives…” where “…the apparent solidity of ordinary matter melts away into a frolic of insubstantial patterns of energy” (Greig 2002: 59). Lovecraft paralleled this understanding in much of his writing, commenting, for example, that “[t]he natural laws of the universe imprison us, and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond our sight and analysis” (Ghodrati 2013: 26).

This vision of the physical universe resonated strongly with Lovecraft and he presented it to his readers as one filled with horror, terror, danger, and fear.
Lovecraft depicted a universe in which humanity had no place, except an accidental and mercifully brief one, and one that defied all attempts at understanding. His novels, in this way, sought to represent the unrepresentable, express the inexpressible, and give shape to the shapeless. They confront the reader, unequivocally, with the essence of the Sublime experience.

Lovecraft’s approach to horror leads the reader to specific moment of hesitation and conflict between invention and reality, between the knowable and quantifiable, and the unknown and inexpressible. In this way, Lovecraft’s work extends itself beyond “structuralist concerns, and [can be read as] explorations of the limits of language and representation” (Kneale 2006: 110), which is an unequivocal overlap, even a century later, with those of contemporary fine arts and popular culture in general, where his acceptance continues to grow. This latter renown is especially pronounced in horror literature, as Barnett, quoting Handerson (2013) explains:

Why does she think he is so popular? Lovecraft made a world where humans are alone, floating on a rock in a terrifying larger universe that we cannot possibly comprehend because our time in it has been so short and we are so insignificant compared to the horrors from the Cthulhu Mythos. So much of modern horror is based on that idea.

Furthermore, the concerns and themes informing Lovecraft’s work have such strong parallels to the Sublime in contemporary visual arts that they carry a significant potential to transcend their original mode and find effective expression as art objects. Lovecraft’s central concept of ‘Cosmic Horror’ is one such theme (Ralickas 2007: 364):

Examples of H. P. Lovecraft's use of motifs common to the Burkean and Kantian notions of sublimity abound in his fiction: phenomena whose principal characteristics are their formlessness, infinite expanse, or superhuman might; a subject’s encounter with the negative or, put another way, symbolic presentation of what would be described in the fiction of a humanist as its noumenal self; and the limits of language to represent adequately both the awe-inspiring spectacle and the subject’s experience of the violation of the
limits of being. Lovecraft’s pronouncements on “cosmic horror,” the effect he aimed to convey in his stories, seem to encourage a sublime reading of his work. Cosmic horror—that fear and awe we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension, whose scope extends beyond the narrow field of human affairs and boasts of cosmic significance—compels the expansion of the experiencing subject’s imagination.

Thus, it is clear that the relationship between the work of Lovecraft and the Sublime necessitates further investigation, especially where it talks about a transfer and translation of themes across expressive modes and speaks to contemporary artistic concerns. “The bleak nihilism that runs thematically through his works seems more relevant than ever,” claims Branney of the ‘H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society’ (Baldwin: 2012), “[a]s institutions which were once monolithic in society such as the church crumble around us, even capitalist bastions such as corporations are not enduring institutions that outlive man—rather, they’re transitory, vulnerable, and fragile. When our practical life has little in it that’s more enduring than ourselves, the notion of us inhabiting a speck of dust swirling in an inconceivable vast universe rings especially true. This makes Lovecraft’s themes of man’s utter insignificance in the face of the cosmos ring more true than it ever has.”

Olivier (2000: 96) echoes: “[m]y receptivity for experiencing the sublime in relation to artworks was heightened by an acute awareness that we live at a time when western culture is more subject than ever before in its history to the illusion that everything is epistemically or cognitively transparent and, moreover, technologically controllable.”

2.3.1 At the Mountains of Madness

At the Mountains of Madness marks a literary high point in Lovecraft’s career as Lockwood (Culbard 2010) discusses:

Written in 1931, At the Mountains of Madness is a key work in H.P. Lovecraft’s canon. Originally rejected by Weird Tales,
the novel has since become a firm favourite with readers of the macabre. A haunting combination of science and fantasy in its own right, the novel also explains and connects various elements of Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu mythos”. Indeed, these pages – with their references to Miskatonic University, the dreaded *Necronomicon* and a host of monstrous beings – contain much that will be familiar to devoted Lovecraft fans. For those who have yet to venture into the unknown, *At the Mountains of Madness* is both accessible and exciting, and stands as one of Lovecraft’s most successful tales.

Antarctica – then, as now, one of the least explored areas of the world – marks something of a departure for Lovecraft in terms of setting. As soon as his character arrived on that mysterious continent, Lovecraft’s imagination ran unchecked – he was able to fill the landscape with impossible, malevolent cities, safe in the knowledge that he was unlikely to be contradicted by scientific fact (for a while, at least). This freedom allowed for a sense of scale which is unmatched in Lovecraft’s other works. The vast polar landscape is swiftly established as an enthralling, terrifying location, producing a creeping atmosphere of horror before we have even been introduced to its inhabitants.

Set in the earlier part of the Twentieth Century, the book is written in the first person by the lead protagonist, Professor William Dyer, who is compelled to warn the reader about the danger of a proposed expedition to Antarctica. The warning is initially vague and ill-defined, but his intent is clear: the planned scientific voyage must be stopped. From the outset, this presents one of the primal themes central to *At the Mountains of Madness*: the idea of “Forbidden Knowledge” and the ruinous effect of that knowledge on humanity. As Caitlin R. Kiernan (Woodward 2008) explains: “it’s about that recurring thing in Lovecraft; that fear of science or just human knowledge going where it doesn’t need necessarily to go; of accidentally uncovering things that either there isn’t much point in us knowing them or knowing them could lead to our destruction [*sic*]."

For Lovecraft, humanity must be protected from the untold horrors existing beneath the world as it appears. And in this novella, Professor Dyer has glimpsed at that forbidden knowledge and he, very reluctantly, shares it throughout the narrative. He and the other members of the expedition possess knowledge of a
“hideously amplified world of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could” (Lovecraft 1993: 43). The nature of that knowledge, and the steep cost to attain it, emerges as the story unfolds.

Lovecraft achieves this gradual dissemination through the exposition of snippets, imagery, clues, and supporting evidence. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft does not offer the reader a clear linear narrative so much as present a solidly-evidenced scientific account that is intended to lead the reader to a specific conclusion. It is “a remarkably clever and subtle technique of exposition. There is hardly any plot to the story at all – it is concerned almost entirely with conveying information” (Carter 1972: 76). In other words, he “leads the reader through the jumbled bits of seemingly isolated bits of data, until both the reader and narrator begin to perceive a frightening *pattern* behind these cryptic incidents” (Carter 1972: 68). In this way, he never clearly defines the element of terror but suggests it.

This is more than simply a literary device, though, and touches on another strong idea underlying Lovecraft’s work: it “illustrates the notion of *sublime horror* – the idea that the terrible monster *not seen*, lurking forever beyond the next door, is far worse than any monster you ever *could see*,” clearly promoting the idea that, when it comes to the representation of sublime concepts, “less is better – what we imagine will always be worse than reality” (Gray 2010: 155).

Lovecraft’s writing strategies demonstrate, unequivocally, an agenda to not only resolve the problem of representing the unrepresentable - the Sublime - but to do so in a way that prefigured postmodern and poststructuralist understandings. The parallels become evident when reference is made to Derrida’s examining the idea of ‘sign’ in language: “[the] sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being present, when the
present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. The sign in this sense is deferred presence” (Greig 2002: 196).

Having established, however reluctantly, the need to prevent the Antarctic expedition ("I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why" (Lovecraft 1993: 11)), Professor Dyer begins his narrative, that of a state-of-the-art drilling and geological study with a team of credentialed, noteworthy professors and scientists a few years prior to the current telling. Their expedition was based on sound scientific reasoning and is recounted in careful detail and tedious minutia. However, this should not be mistaken as an attempt by Lovecraft to demonstrate his familiarity with scientific principles but, rather, as part of a specific literary approach, as this quote of Lovecraft’s (Carter 1972: 14) clearly demonstrates:

To make a fictional marvel wear the momentary aspect of exciting fact, we must give it the most elaborate possible approach – building it up insidiously and gradually out of apparently realistic material, realistically handled. The time is past when adults can accept marvelous conditions for granted. Every energy must be bent toward the weaving of a frame of mind which shall make the story’s single departure from nature seem credible – and in the weaving of this mood the utmost subtlety and verisimilitude are required. In every detail except the chosen marvel, the story should be accurately true to nature. The keynote should be that of scientific exposition – since that is the normal way of presenting a ‘fact’ new to existing knowledge – and should not change as the story gradually slides off from the possible into the impossible.

Such a literary tactic also serves an additional purpose: placing emphasis on the achievements of man, and simultaneously setting them up the comparative reference point. He presents the reader with a sound and altogether mundane frame against which will be contrasted the “unknowable, unclassifiable and unidentifiable; some of [the] finest ingredients of creating cosmic horror” (Ghodrati 2013: 61).
Professor Dyer and his staff are consistently described as courteous, intelligent, and eminently capable. Their trip is meticulously mapped out and painstakingly detailed as can be seen, in this sample excerpt: "[t]he successful establishment of the southern base above the glacier in Latitude 86° 7', East Longitude 174° 23', and the phenomenally rapid and effective borings and blastings made at various points reached by our sledge trips and short aeroplane flights, are a matter of history" (Lovecraft 1993: 19). The protagonists are shown to be people of character and integrity and, furthermore, the expedition - the scientific research as a whole - are repeatedly described to be at the cutting-edge technologically and scientifically, benefiting from both a large budget and superior equipment.

However, as the story evolves, this is set up as a counterpoint, serving only to show the ultimate worthlessness and ineffectiveness of the endeavour (or any endeavour) as it is contrasted to, and shrinks to the point of insignificance before the immeasurable and malign cosmos as Lovecraft depicts it. In other words, he does not only set a rigorously detailed and realistic setting for the reader to be immersed in, but purposefully sets up the pinnacle of human achievements as a reference point against which the Sublime and the gargantuan will be eventually compared.

Of all of Lovecraft’s themes this is, perhaps, the most pivotal and important, and one that is found throughout his body of work, as he explains in a letter to Farnsworth Wright on 5 July 1927 (Schweitzer 2010: 1):

All my tales… are based on the fundamental premise that human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all other such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have existed at all.
In *At the Mountains of Madness*, having created a believable and grounded setting within which the protagonists can act, Lovecraft undertakes to confront them, methodically and persistently, against the immeasurable. The first of these encounters are the ‘Mountains of Madness’ themselves.

They are, at first, encountered during a short-range exploration westwards guided by Professor Lake, a biologist, using the team’s four planes. The westward journey itself arises as a deviation from the expedition’s plan, which was precipitated by the discovery of strange markings in a primordial geological layer. The first sight of the mountains is described by the scientists during a short radio transmission: “…After snowstorm, have spied mountain range ahead higher than any hitherto seen… Reaches far as can see to right and left… Mountains surpass anything in imagination… Queer sky line effect – regular sections of cubes clinging to the highest peaks… Like land of mystery in a dream or gateway to forbidden world of untrodden wonder” (Lovecraft 1993: 24), and, later, as “if these stark, nightmare spires marked the pylons of a frightful gateway into forbidden spheres of dream, and complex gulfs of remote time, space, and ultradimensionality” (1993: 44).

Further exploration of the mountain range then goes on to show unnatural and disturbing elements: “Odd formations on the slopes of the highest mountains. Great low square blocks with exactly vertical sides, and rectangular lines of low, vertical ramparts, like the old Asian castles clinging to steep mountains in Roerich’s paintings” (Lovecraft 1993: 25). Later this “disturbing landscape” is made more inhospitable by the advent of “prodigious gales, violent beyond anything we had so far encountered” (Lovecraft 1993: 26), and all serves to reinforce his idea that man has no place in these settings. It is truly inhospitable.

Despite this, Lovecraft describes the “ineffable majesty” of the scenery and the palpable excitement of the scientists as they stood in “the lee of vast, silent pinnacles whose ranks shot up like a wall reaching the sky at the world’s rim” (Lovecraft 1993: 26). This is significant in that it acts as a description of the Burkian and Kantian Sublime: “we can feel pleasure on seeing horrible things –
that “delightful horror”, to use [Burke’s] expression – which is precisely the experience of the sublime” (Carlos et al 1994: 12).

The sheer scale of the mountains does not deter the expedition, however, and the scientists set about scaling the low foothills and undertake drilling nearby. In the meantime, the other scientists, including Professor Dyer, busy themselves with the logistics of the expedition from the base camp. Here, Lovecraft refers several times to the team’s feelings of being disturbed or feeling queer in the presence of the mountains. The atmosphere is reinforced by the sheer magnitude of opposition they encounter from the environment as, repeatedly, the “pages of Madness convey the blighting, blasting, stifling sensation caused by sub-zero temperature in a way that even Poe could not suggest” (Carter 1972: 91).

The landscape and weather, through “Lovecraft's use of baroque description and subjective adjectives” (Woodward 2008), are represented as their own intrinsically insurmountable and belittling obstacle. They serve as a clear reminder that nature is still a potent force and frames man-versus-nature in a way that strongly mirrors the Romantics’ view of Nature.

When a cave, containing “vast deposit of shells and bones, which in places nearly choked the passage” (Lovecraft 1993: 29) is discovered in the midst of a boring, the mood of the book and that of the protagonists changes dramatically. It contained forms and plant life that challenged all the protagonists’ scientific knowledge: “unknown jungles of Mesozoic tree ferns and fungi, and forests of Tertiary cycads, fan palms, and primitive angiosperms... [it was an] osseous medley contained representatives of more Cretaceous, Eocene, and other animal species than the greatest palaeontologist could have counted or classified in a year” (Lovecraft (1993: 29). For the expedition, this discovery is unprecedented and supremely significant because it represents a scientific find of momentous proportions.

This and many other passages like it are laboriously detailed with regular reference to unfathomable geological time scales. This serves two critical purposes: firstly, they establish a credible and realistic context that reinforces the
credibility of the account, and, secondly, they represent another important confrontation with the Sublime. In this case, it is the concept of “deep time” which is, as Caitlin R. Kiernan (Woodward 2008) explains, fundamentally “alien to most people.”

Elsewhere in the book, Lovecraft includes several similar descriptions of Earth’s distant past, stressing its unimaginable magnitude, referring, for example, to the Pleistocene of “some five hundred thousand years ago” as a “mere yesterday” (Lovecraft 1993: 30). This focus on cosmic and geological timescales is not unique to At the Mountains of Madness, and is found across many of Lovecraft’s tales, prompting Kneale (2006: 109) to write, quoting Lovecraft: “‘the reason why time plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe.”

Lovecraft was not alone in this awareness of the sublimity of ‘deep time’; Rosalind Williams suggests that ‘deep time retained its aura of mystery and sacredness’ despite the achievements of Cuvier, Schliemann, and T. H. Huxley.”

Lovecraft, up to this point in the tale, has done nothing more but set the stage for the events to come: inclement weather, an inhospitable landscape, and unfathomable geological timescales. The frame for the story, while dismissible as ‘background’ all contribute directly to create a mood that not only reinforces man’s insignificance, but one of threat and danger. This is intentional for Lovecraft (2011: 426), as he placed high value “not [on] the author's intent, or... the mere mechanics of the plot; but [on] the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point." Moreover, it all contributes significantly to the creation of a sensation of “Terror” as Rinder (1997: 183) explains:

In Dance Macabre, Stephen King proposes for horror three categories of effect. Of these the lowest, in his estimation, is ‘Revulsion’, which is produced simply by gruesome imagery, like the chest-bursting scene in Alien... The middle level, King calls ‘Horror’, which is distinguished from ‘Revulsion’ by leaving more to the imagination while still presenting physical evidence of something amiss... According to the King, the ‘finest’ emotion of the three categories is ‘Terror’ in which
nothing is shown to be wrong, but an atmosphere of fear is created that is impalpable and omnipresent.

It is in this setting, then, that Lake and his colleagues make their first encounter with unknown objects, which, over the course of the story, turn out to be fourteen alien beings. Lovecraft attempts to make them as foreign and unfamiliar to humans as possible, describing them (1993: 32) as a:

[M]onstrous barrel-shaped fossil of wholly unknown nature; probably vegetable unless overgrown specimen of unknown marine radiate... Tough as leather but astonishing flexibility retained in places... Six feet end to end, three and five-tenths feet central diameter, tapering to one foot at each end. Like a barrel with five bulging ridges in place of staves... In furrows between ridges are curious growths – combs or wings that fold up and spread out like fans... Arrangement reminds one of certain monsters of primal myth, especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon*.

The reference to the *Necronomicon* is especially telling. This fictitious book is a pure Lovecraftian invention and surfaces regularly in his writings, representing the definitive example of dangerous forbidden knowledge. Lovecraft’s inclusion of the alien beings in this occult tome serves to underscore the idea that they are beyond rational and scientific exploration.

He goes on for some three pages, describing the scientists’ excited speculations and investigations, as well as the violent reaction that the sled dogs have to the creatures. This concludes with Professor Lake’s repeating his musing that these beings rise out of forbidden myths and legends (Lovecraft 1993: 35): “Complete specimens have such an uncanny resemblance to certain creatures of primal myth that suggestion of ancient existence outside Antarctic becomes inevitable. Dyer and Pabodie have read *Necronomicon* and seen Clark Ashton Smith’s paintings based on text, and will understand when I speak of Elder Things supposed to have created life as jest or mistake.”

Again, Lovecraft uses these passages to reinforce the concept of deep time and of man’s absolute insignificance in the face of it. Furthermore, it foreshadows the denouement of the story, in which the protagonists discover, in fact, that the
Necronomicon is not a fictional work but a wholly accurate one: the existence of all earthly life, and man’s ascendance was accidental. In the context of the story, this knowledge, only recorded in legends and forgotten fables, is long accepted and recognized as true by the mad and the marginal, but ignored by scientists in their hubris. In a significant way, this is a core Romantic concept: pitting the forces of reason and logic here represented by scientific curiosity, against the liminal and discarded. For Lovecraft, as for the Romantics, it is an encounter that rationality and reason always lose.

Lovecraft’s approach, however, is novel in that it describes the encounter from the ‘losing side’. His repeated emphasis on the protagonists’ capabilities, sound scientific grounding, and impressive intellectual capacities only serves to accentuate their inadequacy in the face of the Sublime. Ultimately, over the course of the novella, this contrast will be so significant as exceed all human measure. This is central to the theme of Cosmic Terror, where “the vast gulfs of space and time revealed by sciences like astronomy and geology [have] no human scale” (Kneale 2006: 109). It also serves as an important literary device, as Carter (1972: 65) explains:

Lovecraft seems to have figured out that it was easy enough to give your readers the spooky shudder with a tale laid in the spider-haunted ruins of a crumbling castle in Transylvania, but quite another to raise gooseflesh with a tale firmly set in the sunlit world of today. In order to perform this feat, he deliberately tantalizes the reader with mysterious hints as to exactly what is going on in the story; the story progresses in a broken and jumbled sequence of bits and pieces of evidence, and Lovecraft virtually leaves it up to the reader to piece the scattered jigsaw fragments together himself into a coherent pattern. There is considerable fascination in this kind of writing; it jars the reader from his complacency, and involves his intelligence in active participation of the story.

As the story progresses, Professors Pabodie and Dyer, at the main camp, are unable to join their colleagues and can share their excitement, celebration, and jubilation only vicariously via radio transcript. Lovecraft goes on to describe the mundane details following the find, such as the process of moving the specimens
to the camp, corralling the dogs, and relaying the information back and forth between the camp, the base camp, and the ships. Repeatedly, Lovecraft focuses on the minutiae, which is presented as objectively and methodically journalistic. This serves to heighten the reader’s reception to the Sublime. Greig (2002: 47) describes this apparent paradox: “Insisting that the scientific enterprise founded on conceptions of realism and objectivity tends to displace the human mode of perception from the centre of the picture, O’Hear posits a view of the world in which the self is a mere observer of a world of objects which are threatening in their indifference to us, a world emptied of human meaning.”

Through the radio communications between Pabodie, Dyer, and Lake, it is confirmed that Professor Lake will undertake a dissection of one of the specimens. And here again, Lovecraft takes care to remind the reader of man’s ignorance and ineptitude in the face of the ‘true’ nature of the cosmos (1993: 37-39): “Results… were baffling and provocative… [and] left us all awed and bewildered. Existing biology would have to be wholly revisited, for this thing was no product of any cell growth science knows about… and despite an age of perhaps forty million years the internal organs were wholly intact… this provisional dissection merely deepened its mystery.”

When Professor Dyer receives no more communications from Lake and the others after the dissection, worry and fear set in. Eventually, a plane is readied to make the journey to the camp. It is on this journey that Professor Dyer first encounters the ancient city, although it is initially dismissed as a mirage. “Lovecraft himself was powerfully moved by an emotion of awe and fascination when contemplating the mysterious ruins of unthinkable antiquity,” (Carter 1972: 39), and this deep interest is reflected in his description of the city which runs over several pages, underscoring, as he does, the protagonists’ reaction to it (Lovecraft 1993: 45-46): “a seething labyrinth of fabulous walls and towers and minarets loomed out of the troubled ice vapors above our heads… a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws… of latent malignity and infinitely evil portent.” He then further describes the city as “non-Euclidean” which
carries with it suggestions of the Kantian Sublime because, “while mathematically conceivable, [it] resisted the Euclidean imagination conditioned by its contact with the realm of middle-sized dimensions [the scale familiar to human beings, neither macro- nor microscopic]” (Greig 2002: 63). The description of the city also strongly reflects Lovecraft’s baroque and adjective-heavy prose, a particular idiosyncrasy of his, which, “[r]ather than creating in the reader a mood of terror, [he] describes a mood of terror: the emotion is applied in the adjectives – the valley in which the city lies is ‘terrible’; the ruins themselves are of an ‘unwholesome’ antiquity; certain of the altars and stones ‘suggested forbidden rites of terrible, revolting and inexplicable nature’” (Carter 1972: 37).

After landing, the protagonists discover the camp in complete disarray and are witness to a gruesome and violent bloodbath. Men and dogs alike are “torn and mangled in fiendish and altogether inexplicable ways. Death, so far as we could judge, had in each case come from strangulation or laceration… [S]ome were incised and subtracted from in the most curious, cold-blooded, and inhuman fashion” (Lovecraft 1993: 53-54). At this point, Dyer and his companions not only discover the alien specimens missing but also that some have been buried in a form of funerary mound.

The whole scene is overtly morbid and violent which not only mirrors contemporary culture’s “obsession with grotesque depictions of death, decay, and disease [that] reveals a metaphorical vacuum and the need for a convincing substitute for obsolete moral and religious categories” (Grunenberg 1997: 202), but also Lovecraft’s own enjoyment of the abject, as Barnett (2013), quoting Lovecraft, clearly demonstrates: “‘I am so beastly tired of mankind and the world,’ he once wrote, ‘that nothing can interest me unless it contains a couple of murders on each page, or deals with the horrors unnameable and unaccountable that leer down from the external universes.’”

This sort of pulp-fiction, gratuitous violence found in “the aggressiveness and ferocity of [the] fantastic beings have real world parallels” (Greene & Silem Mohammad 2006: 234) but is also, and in a very significant way, “as apocalyptic
and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure, and the specious good as many types of high art” (Modleski 1986: 771). In this sense, Lovecraft confronts the reader with the visceral brutalization of the human form, the abject, and the insane, all potential signifiers of Burke’s conception of the Sublime, which maintains that “the ugly, [standing] in direct opposition to the beautiful, can partly coincide with the sublime” (Petermann 1991: 2) and that “[t]he sublime is… based on pain, while the beautiful is based on pleasure” (Carlos et al 1994: 12).

But this is not the only instance in which Lovecraft’s tale displays a clear example of the Burkian Sublime, a multitude of examples of the qualities that Burke named as able to “arouse feelings of the sublime” are also found, namely, “terror, obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, magnificence, suddenness, feeling, pain - and also, special conditions of light, color, sounds, smell, and taste” (De La Croix et al 1991: 853).

The story thereafter, repeats and reinforces the themes explored thus far: that of man’s insignificance and ineptitude in contrast to the unimaginable scales of ‘deep time’, vast cosmological distances, and overwhelming natural phenomena. He further reinforces these ideas while simultaneously destabilizing Man’s place in the universe by expanding on the idea that “[n]ot only is humanity negligible in the cosmos at large,” but that humans “are only one of the many masters of the Earth, neither the first nor the last” (Schweitzer 2010: 3). He does this by a method of slow exposition, building up clues, hints and suggestions, meticulously and methodically until a single, inescapable conclusion remains: the cosmos is a violent, dark place where man is inconsequential and has no place. Schweitzer (2010: 4) explains:

While Lovecraft did not personally believe in any supernatural beings or forces and had invested the Necronomicon as a tongue-in-cheek hoax, he did, through the Cthulhu Mythos, express in an indirect yet dramatic way his most firmly held beliefs about the nature of our existence: that the virtually limitless universe revealed by science is vast, impersonal, mindless chaos, in which we exist purely by biological-chemical accident and only on a very small scale. His utterly inhuman monsters are symbols of forces in a cosmos-at-large
that he described to Farnsworth Wright, for which human endeavours have no significance or validity.

And this, fundamentally, creates a deep, pervasive Angst that lingers long beyond the reading of the book, as Lovecraft (2011: 426) himself touches on when proposing a "simple test" for the success of a horror story: "whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude and awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's outmost rim."

Man’s insignificance in the face of the cosmos is the essence of ‘Cosmic Horror’ and it is repeatedly described and emphasised through the protagonists’ discovery of hieroglyphics and cartoons that detail man’s origin as an accidental by-product. Ghodrati (2013: 64), referring to Lovecraft’s text, notes this as:

[T]he climax of cosmic horror in this tale; when man’s view is opened to the core of its existence and creation and beholds nothing. His creation had merely been “the products of unguided evolution.” Human being is but a blot in the vast scheme of cosmos and his creation and existence hold no noble meaning or purpose. Lovecraft, whose views on humanity and its role in the universe had always been extremely pessimistic and misanthropic, has flawlessly “…embodied his misanthropy in providing a degrading origin of our species”. Never in any previous tale had Lovecraft suggested this hideously the irrelevance of mankind in universe and never had he conveyed such dominantly present and pervasive cosmic fear.

Lovecraft’s central themes are then explored and reinforced through the eyes of Professor Dyer and Danforth, via the pedantically detailed archaeological excavation of the ancient city. The culmination of this is their confrontation with the ‘Shoggoth’, a monstrous and terrifying being which fills the beholders with “horror and loathing” (Lovecraft 1993: 91).

In keeping with Lovecraft’s journalistic approach, the Shoggoths are, at first, encountered vaguely depicted on murals and in pictograms. Their history seems to be that of subservient helpers – an entirely engineered slave race – entirely
designed to assist the Old Ones in their immeasurably long reign on Earth. Lovecraft describes them as “normally shapeless entities composed of a viscous jelly which looked like an agglutination of bubbles, and each averaged about fifteen feet in diameter when in a sphere. They had, however, a constantly shifting shape and volume – throwing out temporary developments or forming apparent organs of sight, hearing, and speech in the imitation of their masters” (Lovecraft 1993: 91).

The very formlessness of the ‘Shoggoths’ touches on the Sublime, the inexpressible, and the unrepresentable. “Lovecraft’s narrator actually describes it as ‘the utter, objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist’s “thing that should not be”’. It seems that this ‘terrible, indescribable thing’ can be described, but only as a ‘nightmare plastic column’, ‘a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles... with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light” (Kneale 2006: 111). Beyond this, though, Lovecraft shuns direct descriptions, tacitly acknowledging the inefficacity of language as a signifier of the Sublime, choosing rather to say that “[t]he words reaching the reader can never even suggest the awfulness of the sight itself… it was the utter, objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist’s ‘thing that should not be’… a terrible, indescribable thing” (Lovecraft 1993: 132-133).

It is a final confrontation that the protagonists narrowly escape from, only to return, sanity shattered, to the human world that has now become utterly meaningless to them.
3 Visual Inquiry

3.1 Overview of Practical Component

The practical work was undertaken over the course of 3 years and resulted in a body of seventeen paintings, as well as a quantity of supporting notes, sketches, drawings, photographs, and collected reference material.

Some of the work included was not created specifically for the research but, rather, emerged organically as part of the researcher’s professional practice. Due to this parallel development, and because their creation overlapped thematically with the research itself, they strongly reflect many of its themes, techniques, and developments. As such, they have been included as either reference material or completed works.

The supporting documentation was built up and used throughout the duration of the research. This body of reference material was used in an indiscriminate, subjective, and rounded fashion, reflecting the researcher’s idiosyncratic approach. As such, it will resist a direct one-to-one mapping or reading in reference to the paintings. It is, nevertheless, made available as a whole, and is referred to selectively within this document where it is found to be pertinent and relevant to the paintings.

It must be noted, however, that much of the technical development of, the thinking about, and the visual problem-solving informing the works’ final forms was undertaken as part of the artefact-making process itself. As such, much of the work was created in a repeated cyclical process, responding and reacting to the work, until such a time as the researcher considered the work ‘finished’. Because of this, much of the reflective analysis focuses on the ‘completed’ artefacts.
Lastly, in order to facilitate a narrative about the development of technical aspects and the content, the works have not been included here in chronological order, but rather, in an organization of broad connecting themes.

### 3.2 Reflections and Critiques

#### 3.2.1 How the Land Hates

*How the Land Hates* (see Figure 1) is a stylized and abstracted landscape, created predominantly with oil paints on stretched canvas with additional collaged elements.

The subject matter consists of a fictional and schematised representation of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument, depicted in non-local colours and with a series of roots or tentacles dynamically protruding downwards from it. As such, the composition consists of a simple organization of three dominant forms. There is, firstly, a single horizontal divide approximately at mid-level, rising up dynamically towards either edge. Secondly, in the centre of the picture is a dominant pyramid, below which are multiple forms, the third element, suggesting roots or tentacles. None of the forms is clearly defined, with many fading into one another.

Pictorial space is suggested, but the texture of the ground, formed by the collaged elements and the painterly application of the paint, resists such a reading, and emphasises the picture plane.

The ground consists of printed photographs of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument, a large pyramid in the centre of the city, as well as found objects with specific textured qualities, such as corrugated cardboard.

The Elizabeth Donkin Monument is included as a central element, in this and other works, for several reasons subjective to the researcher. The presence of a pyramid in a modern city is visually contrasting, and aesthetically and architecturally problematical. As there exists a direct iconographic relationship
between pyramids and ancient cultures, the researcher finds its presence as an archaic memorial reminiscent of antiquity within a progressive, Western city full of bourgeois tastes and democratic, capitalistic values is destabilizing. It also presents itself as a historical vignette, one that Lovecraft, “an ardent historic preservationist who wrote travelogues on American colonial towns and buildings” (Archer 2013), would have noted. In this way, the Elizabeth Donkin has all the elements of a quintessential Lovecraftian object for the researcher: it does not appear to fit in with its environment and seems alien because of it, and appears to harken back to bygone ages much farther back than seems historically possible.

Moreover, because the monument is often used at a national and local government level as the emblem of Port Elizabeth in almost all signage and reference material, it has taken on for the researcher, a specific and symbolic
meaning as a signifier of the alien land to which he was uprooted as a young boy. Understood in this context, the Elizabeth Donkin Monument has been absorbed into the researcher’s personal mythology as both as a source of alienation and, in an apparent paradox, as the alien object. This resonated strongly with Lovecraft’s visions of the ‘Cyclopean City’, which is marked by the great sense of alienation and the alien often found in *At the Mountains of Madness* (Lovecraft 1993):

> [W]e did indeed stare across the momentous divide and over the unsampled secrets of an elder and utterly alien earth... that monstrous tangle of dark stone towers, its outre and incredible forms impressing us afresh... the extravagant shapes which this masonry took in its urban manifestations were past all description... utterly alien in every detail to any known art tradition of the human race... the forbidden land... harboring of nameless horrors and Archaean secrets; shunned and prayed to by those who feared to carve their meaning; untrodden by any living thing on earth.

Nevertheless, the researcher recognizes that most viewers would not necessarily associate Port Elizabeth’s most well-known monument with the same personal sensations of alienation or Kantian *Angst*. It is for this reason that tentacles/roots were added lending the form a more malign and dynamic presence. The object is thus transformed into an active, possibly dangerous thing of indeterminate origin. This threatening, unwholesome image, made difficult to read by the rough and uneven texture of the ground, is aimed at engendering the initial conditions for a Sublime event.

Originally, numerous photographs were laid out to form a horizon line of repeated pyramids, broken only by the textured elements. Over the course of the development of the artefact, however, all but one single, dominant pyramid was retained. Similarly, the majority of the textures and visual elements, like the lighthouse, although found on the Elizabeth Donkin grounds, were subsequently removed or erased, leaving only traces of their existence. The decisions to remove or add such elements were informed by both formal compositional considerations and a conscious attempt to replicate Lovecraft’s journalistic approach. That is to say that the process of including and subsequently erasing visual elements,
leaving only traces and suggestions of their original inclusion and existence is a deliberate technical approach that references both Lovecraft’s journalist, piecemeal approach and contemporary reflection about the Sublime’s intrinsically unrepresentability.

Furthermore, as the theme of forbidden knowledge is essential to *At the Mountains of Madness*, the concealed source material aim to emphasise that which cannot be known, and that which is lost and hidden. In this way, the work’s ground becomes forever obfuscated from the viewer and resists any reading.

It also touches on one of the significant observations made by the researcher during the course of the visual investigation: that of the paint’s capacity to act as a concealing agent.

Paint, in its vernacular applications, is used almost exclusively to obscure and alter the colour of that which is being painted (concealing blemishes, concealing construction work, concealing material colour, etc.). Paint, and the act of painting, therefore, can be interpreted as an erasing action, removing that which needs to be hidden from the viewer.

Applying this approach to studio work and specifically to images has allowed the researcher to simultaneously include and exclude clues that would facilitate any reading of the works. The interpretation of the ‘missing’ information must, therefore, take place in the viewer’s imagination that, as Boulton (Burke 1958: XXXV) reminds us, is where “the passions are aroused.”

Informing this approach, and exploring this realization, is a body of experiments and visual explorations. For these, the researcher selected photographs of subjective historic significance and printed them out from a desktop printer. These would then be covered in black PVA paint with a large brush. The results were then evaluated as to their visual impact and ability to incite a Sublime encounter.

The most successful ones had all but peripheral details obscured, suggesting rather than framing the central subject, and suggested a possible resolution to accessing the Sublime for “they refuse to succumb to totalizing or categorical
reading. As creatures of unstable and uncontainable language, they forbid us to know all there is to know about them and indeed insist that the phrase “all there is to know” is of doubtful meaning, even doubtful possibility of meaning” (Burleson 1990: 157). Three examples have been included for reference (see Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4).

Figure 2: Example of the obscuring experiment

Figure 3: Example of the obscuring experiment
3.2.2 The Mountains of Madness

The Mountains of Madness (see Figure 5), a mixed media and oil paint work on canvas-board, was originally the right panel of a diptych but now stands alone. It consists of a large, dominant, and uniformly painted area, separated from a sky-blue band at the top of the painting by a row of stylized pyramidal shapes. Some collaged elements are included.

The work reflects a simple arrangement of formal elements, namely a large monochromatic field that dominates the majority of the canvas, a smaller, textured sky-blue field on the top third of the work, and a row of ochre pyramids dividing the two. As with How the Land Hates, the ground includes printed collaged images of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument. These are arranged in such a way as to form a strong horizon line at about two-thirds of the painting’s height, rising up towards the left edge of the painting. Furthermore, additional similarities can be found, such as the stylized, simplified, and ill-defined forms, and the build-up of textures arising from the painting process, such as drips, splashes, and run-offs. This creates a “representational ambiguity” (Carlos et al 1994: 17) which facilitates a plurality of interpretations while avoiding direct signifier-signified relationships. Additionally, all the collaged elements have similarly been covered, existing only as suggestions of content. The surface activation here, however, is less prominent and more carefully planned, focusing more on the content of the collaged images.
of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument, and less on the textural properties that emerge from their treatment.

This creates a strong visual contrast between the highly textured, active surface of the pyramids and sky, and the vast, evenly-painted, dominating, sombre foreground. This stark contrast of formal elements form an uneasy balance that defies a comfortable reading: the dark expanse, which should recede to the background continuously, pushes forward due to its scale and dominance. This is a conscious attempt to replicate the effects seen in other artworks such as those of Rothko which "by sheer sensuousness of its color areas, by the dimensions, and by the sense of indefinite outward expansion without any central focus, is designed to absorb and engulf the spectator, to assimilate him into a total color experience" (Yarowski 1988: 396).

The subject matter, a depiction of the ‘Mountains of Madness’ is more literal than the other works. The strong separation between the vast darkness and the ‘sky’, reinforced by the row of pyramidal shapes, enhances the sense of disconnection between the unknown scale of the objects depicted in the image and the human scale of the viewer. This is further emphasised by placement of the horizon line close to the uppermost edge of the work. All elements combine to destabilize the viewer’s sense of scale and represent something that is impossible to gauge and difficult to calculate. In this way, it precludes a direct reading. It can be seen as an attempt to push the division between the “mathematical apprehension [which] can proceed successively, ad infinitum without difficulty,” and the “aesthetical comprehension [which] becomes increasingly difficult as the space covered by apprehension increases, finally reaching a magnitude beyond which it is unable to progress” (Greig 2002: 72). This draws directly from Kant’s concept of the Mathematical Sublime, characterized by “the limit of the imagination… [and] an encounter with the immeasurable that is the characteristic feeling of the sublime” (Greig 2002: 72).

The choice of dark, almost black colour, achieved through various mixtures of blues, such as Prussian Blue, and browns, such as Burnt Umber, tries to further
facilitate the Sublime instant because as Hipple (1957: 90) explains, “whatever is terrible to sight, then, is ipso facto sublime, and obscurity is in general necessary to make anything very terrible,” echoing Burke who stated that “a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.”

Furthermore, the incomplete forms of the pyramids and the indeterminate scale and placement of the formal elements leave themselves open to other interpretations beyond that suggested by the title, such as teeth or coral protrusions, which all lend the subject matter a sense of immediate threat and malignancy. Again, the sense of danger, made even more menacing because it is indeterminate and only suggested, feeds directly into the Sublime experience behind the themes in Lovecraft’s work.

Over the course of the research, this sense of menace and the omnipresent confrontation with annihilation become prominent components of the researcher’s works. These elements are central to At the Mountains of Madness and other Lovecraftian tales (and the horror genre in general), and it has been noted that they find a receptive public for the reasons stressed by Burke and Kant: that the Sublime moment created by a danger delayed leads to a sense of euphoria. Lacking the subsequent euphoria, this annihilation moves towards the abject, where the viewers may be found to be “revelling in the demise of the very culture they appear most enthusiastically to support” (Modleski 1986: 771) because it offers them freedom from the “easy, false pleasure... keeping them unaware of their own desperate vacuity” (Modleski 1986: 765).
3.2.3 With Habit and Time, You Disappear Each Day

*With Habit and Time, You Disappear Each Day* (Figure 6) was originally the left section of the *Mountains of Madness* diptych. It is now a single canvas-board panel consisting of mixed media, collaged elements, and oil paint.

It consists of the formal arrangement of two simple, similarly proportioned rectangular forms, namely the ground consisting of the canvas-board itself, and the foreground, which consists of a single strip of ID photos. It is a conscious attempt by the researcher to bring together “a cluster of Burkean notions… the
terror, the obscurity, the infinity, the height, the sombre colour, and the emotional intensity which [he] claims are essential to the sublime” (Burke 1958: CXV).

The ground has been worked in a similar fashion to the other two previous paintings, via a build-up of collaged elements. Again, it includes images of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument, with the addition of gauze and bandages, which were included after feedback from the researcher’s promoter who suggested that the choice of ground and textured elements should be much more deliberately selected, not only for their formal properties (as in How the Land Hates) but also for their expressive significance too. This approach informed the work that followed.

Furthermore, much of this build-up was repeatedly stripped away and re-layered to create a specific texture that suggests, and simultaneously denies access to, content. This is a conscious attempt to replicate not only Lovecraft’s journalistic approach but also the repeated themes of hidden knowledge from in At the Mountains of Madness. The final presentation of this process functions “as a mediating force that veils the terrors of the pit, as Baudelaire puts it” (Greig 2002: 44).

The foreground consists of a single strip of ID photos of the researcher’s mother, deceased in 2010. The photographs have repeatedly been painted over and ‘cleaned’ with either turpentine or paint thinners to the point where the photographs themselves are eroded, damaged, and in danger of being erased. It is placed centrally, about a third up from the bottom of the painting and fights for visual dominance with the background that threatens to engulf it. It also creates, in a similar manner to that of Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) as Kemp (2000: 306-307) explains:

[A] heightened formal tension between foreground and background [that] can evoke the enigmatic interplay between inner life and outer world… [and] simultaneously facilitates and frustrates the viewer’s psychological entry into the picture, in effect restaging the estrangement from the natural world.
The strong tonal contrasts that exist between the foreground and background create a dynamic tension that causes the foreground element to both emerge and recede from the omnipresent darkness of the work. It is informed by an approach to art that seeks to be "self-consciously riddled with devices signifying representation as problematic… [and] confronts its own absolute uncertainty and articulates a deconstructive anti-aesthetic which is associated with an empathic, rhetorical, and empirical sublime identified with the forces that threaten to engulf us" (Greig 2002: 377-378). In addition to which, it attempts to reflect Lovecraft's focus on his protagonists loss of psychological grounding and their confrontation with the destabilizing realization of their, and humanity's, place in cosmos. Death
and the ultimate loss of individual significance in the face of the vastness of the universe is core to Lovecraft’s Cosmicism.

The work, overall, is tonally, chromatically, and texturally subtle which all contribute towards its easy dismissal and apprehension as a readily quantifiable object. The flattening of the pictorial space further resists the creation of pictorial depth which then resist the ‘entry’ into the work by the observer while simultaneously facilitating its total assessment. Both of these effects negate much of the artefact’s capacity to engender the Sublime, which “takes place when the faculty of representation of an idea engendered by something immeasurable and incomparable” (Carlos et al 1994: 27).

Nevertheless, the artefact marks an important departure from the two previous works in that it is no longer even stylistically representative. It exists as a singular entity. This approach proposed an exciting strategy for further development. Still, in view of the uncertain outcome of the work, it becomes increasingly apparent that a work’s potential to engender a Sublime moment rests on a work’s ability to deny its full comprehension to the viewer, recognizing that it is “indeterminacy and ambiguity... [that] are capable of creating a temporary gap in cognition, a disruption of conventional contexting cues, thus enhancing the feeling of potentia and opening towards the reality of nonconceptual mind and interconnected being” (Fedorova 2011).

3.2.4 A Cyclopean City of No Architecture Known to Man

A Cyclopean City of No Architecture Known to Man (see Figure 7) is a vertical heavily-textured painting on canvas-board that incorporates found objects, collage, crack-filler, and oil paint. The composition is simple, consisting of a gradient background, a rough pyramidal shape in the middle-ground, and a framed photograph in the foreground. The texture on the pyramid and photographic frame is built up of heavily applied with a type of durable, all-purpose crack-filler.
The background, graded from a dark, almost black colour at the bottom of the painting, to a light sky-blue at the top, covers a collaged tourist map of Port Elizabeth, as well as several other similar images and documents promoting tourism in Port Elizabeth. As with the other works, this material has been repeatedly added and removed, scratched out or torn, in such a way as to build up a significant texture, which concurrently draws attention to them and obscures any information that could be gleaned.

As with *The Mountains of Madness* and *How the Land Hates*, a representation of the Elizabeth Donkin Monument is a prominent formal element of the composition. The large pyramidal shape is created from the gestural and vigorous application of crack-filler, subsequently covered in a similar way with paint, which allows for run-offs, spills, and splatter. It is a conscious statement of process that also influences the work’s formal elements: it breaks up the strong geometry of the forms, incorporates them visually into the background and one another, and denies a comfortable reading of its form as illusory or representative.

The inclusion of the deliberate build-up of texture, using additional material, specifically crack-filler, is a technique that emerged out of the studio practice as an extension of the obscurings experiments. The build-up of texture is an additional dimension to the process of effacement that serves several purposes: firstly, it draws attention to itself as a concealing agent, and the fact that something is concealed, and, secondly, its gestural and painterly application activates the surface of the painting and facilitates the integration of certain formal elements (in this particular work, those of the frame and pyramid). Lastly, and importantly, it is essentially an unusual, alien and foreign intrusion onto the surface of a traditional painting, which speaks, in a way, to contemporary art’s comfort with the Sublime as a response to the comfortable forms of beauty (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 41).
Also new to the work is the inclusion of a picture frame, within which is placed a photograph. Due to its privileged placement in the centre of the dominant pyramid and prominent significance due to its framing, the photograph of the researcher as a ten year old boy shortly before his arrival in South Africa becomes the focus of the work.

The visual prominence accorded to the photograph is negated, however, by the dominating texture of the pyramid, which covers a large part of the photograph, leaving only the gaze untouched. This creates an invasive and suffocating tension that seems to suggest that the photograph is being consumed by, or assimilated...
into, the pyramid. The calm stare of the subject adds further to the conceptual and visual contrasts generated. The overall effect is an interfering and awkward subjugation of the subject by the alien environment, akin to the animus of horror stories, *At the Mountains of Madness* included, which are “engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish” (Modleski 1986: 767).

The theme behind this work is taken from H. P. Lovecraft’s description of the discovered city high in the mountains, described as suffocating and consuming space that forever alters anyone who is exposed to it. It is an expression of Lovecraft’s concept of Cosmicism that (Ghodrati 2013: 24):

> [I]nsists on the insignificant status of mankind in the vast scheme of cosmos and the intergalactic system. At the recognition of this very fact, cosmic horror appears and develops. When Lovecraft’s characters come to the realization that their life and mankind's existence, intelligence and efforts are but a blot in the vast scheme of cosmos and that the universe if merely indifferent towards them, they experience the cosmic horror Lovecraft creates so masterfully in so many of his stories.

It this fundamental concept that has been reinterpreted by the researcher as universal expression with his sense of deep alienation sensed during his removal to South Africa at a young age.

The technical advances incorporated in this work, such as the inclusion of photographs, personal material, frames, and reference documents, either as individual components or as part of the collaged layering, emerged organically from the researcher’s creative practice. These have all, to a greater or lesser extent, been assimilated into his repertoire as ‘grounding’, personal, and human elements, partially in reference to Lovecraft’s insistence that, in order to effectively write a fantastic tale, it was necessary to first and foremost create a familiar and mundane setting. It is an attitude that finds parallels in the art of the Sublime which insist that artworks must be bound to the human and human perception (Carlos et al 1994: 15), , at least in part, in order to act as a catalyst for the viewer’s
transcendence. The Sublime is introduced as the result of the interaction between two scales: the human and all that which exceeds it. The larger the discrepancy between the two (such as between the mundane and the unrepresentable repetition of the mundane across the globe through mechanization for example), the more commanding the subsequent Sublime instance becomes. It is for this reason that the researcher believes that the inclusion of personal artefacts aids this process. It prominently displays what can be represented, thereby drawing attention to what cannot be, or, as Burke (1958: 47) says, “The nearer… the reality, and the further… [removed] from all ideas of fiction, the more perfect its power.”

3.2.5 Animal/Advance

During the course of the study, the researcher was invited to exhibit in a group show entitled ‘Animal/Advance’, curated by the ‘GFI Gallery’ in Port Elizabeth. Three pieces were created for this showcase namely Sedia Stercoraria (Figure 8), The Cretaceous Watcher (Figure 9), and Admiral Ackbar (Figure 10). All three are drawn from the text of At the Mountains of Madness, other Lovecraft material, and the researcher’s secondary source material.

While the orientation of the three pieces vary (Sedia Stercoraria is a landscape format, and the other two are portrait formats), their size and proportions are identical. Similarly, all three are predominantly oil paintings on canvas-boards with selected collaged elements included. They are significantly more figurative, although fantastic and stylized, than the other studio work created for the research.

In all three, there is no significant middle-ground, and the compositions consist of large central forms in the foreground and largely uniformly painted backgrounds. The result is a flattening of the pictorial space, emphasised by the gestural and painterly application of the medium. Furthermore, textural elements arising from the process, such as dripped glue, are included, drawing attention to the picture plane.
Figure 8: Sedia Stercoraria (2012)
90 cm x 120 cm
Mixed media, oil on canvas-board

The results are emblematic and almost symbolic representations, which, due to their strong presence in the foreground, suggest an invasion into the viewer’s space. This is counteracted by the emphasis placed on the painting surface, such as is offered by the inclusion of collaged written components. Furthermore, the more traditional approach to painting found in these works (avoiding textural build-up, found objects, and other techniques) result in a significantly, and more directly illustrative, outcome. In this way, these three works can be viewed as technical departures from the visual exploration of the research, but not a thematic one.

The themes and inspiration behind the works are strongly informed by the work of Lovecraft who treated the ocean, an oceanic animals, and invertebrates specifically, with immense revulsion as Tyson (2013) explains:

Another of Lovecraft’s deep-seated fears was a terror of the ocean, or more specifically, of the mysteries that lurked beneath the surface… He told a friend, “I have hated fish and feared the sea and everything connected with it since I was
two years old.” The very sight or smell of fish made him physically ill. This dread of the sea surfaces in his tales... In the story *The Horror at Martin’s Beach*, which he wrote in 1922 in concert with his future wife, Sonia Greene, an unseen sea-monster tricks sunbathers on a resort beach into grasping a long rope that extends into the water, and the bathers find themselves unable to release it. Inexorably, they are drawn like fish on a line, screaming and weeping, beneath the waves.

*At the Mountains of Madness* also displays elements of this persistent abhorrence of all things marine, as is evidenced through repeated references to invertebrate animals and the distant past of Earth’s history, and Lovecraft’s descriptions of the ‘Shoggoths’ (1993: 84-85) as “[living] under the sea... [they are] multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of molding their tissues into all sorts of temporary organs... [out of their] viscous masses.”

Drawn from this source, all three works reference depictions of imagined invertebrate beings of indeterminate origins. *Sedia Stercoraria* shows a yellowish slug with multiple articulated limbs that suggest a deep-sea existence but its presence on solid ground, clearly represented by the dark brown soil and sky blue of the background, ambiguously deny this possibility. Furthermore, the words placed inside small callouts linked together organically, similarly to the ‘word blobs’ found in the works of René Magritte (1898-1967), such as *The Living Mirror* (Lubbock. 2010), hint at some form of sentience.

*The Cretaceous Watcher*, on the other hand, portrays a mass of writhing tentacles, coarsely depicted, around a large, central, seemingly mammalian eye. The central label and dark flat background of the top part of the painting, and the amber colour of the flat background, suggest museum cataloguing and formaldehyde jars but, again, this reading is made difficult by the suggested wakefulness and sentience of the eye. The eye itself presents a challenging interpretation due to its light blue colouring foreign to sea creatures and its pinprick pupil seemingly reacting to strong light.
Lastly, *Admiral Ackbar*, the least fantastic of the three pieces, represents a combination of shelled mollusc and jellyfish, against a deep visual field of dark blue, reminiscent of the depth of the ocean. Here, again, though, the visual depth is disrupted by the subject’s overwhelming presence in the foreground, inclusion of suggested teeth, and collaged details.

All three highly stylized, emblematic works disrupt any clear interpretation, ambiguously suggesting multiple contrary readings. The fantastic, imagined subject-matter, replete with chitin, teeth, stingers, and tentacles are intended to generate a sensation of danger or, at the very least, unease, which had been
identified as an essential undercurrent to the success of the work as a mediator of Sublime horror.

The works were based on several documented trips to oceanographic centres, such as Cape Town’s Two Oceans Aquarium and natural history museums, such as Brussels’s Museum of Natural Sciences, where photographic reference material was collected (see Figure 11, Figure 12, and Figure 13), as well as other supporting material.
Figure 11: Example of Photographic Support Material

Figure 12: Example of Photographic Support Material

Figure 13: Example of Photographic Support Material
3.2.6 The Iceberg

The painting entitled *The Iceberg* (see Figure 14 and Figure 15) pre-dates the commencement of the research but was revisited during the course of the practical portion of the study. It is relevant because of its overlap between the works submitted for ‘Animal/Advance’ and *How the Land Hates*.

![Figure 14: The Iceberg, Process Version (2009)](image)

Here again, the pictorial space is flattened, with a minimal, dominating, and central compositional arrangement of formal elements. The ground is made up of added, removed, and built-up elements, similar with *How the Land Hates* but it is incorporated to a greater degree, including layered cardboard packaging material and a pair of ID photos. These elements were much more prominent while the work was in development but they were subsequently removed, at least in part, because they contributed nothing to the intent of the work, acting only as a visually stimulating texture. Such aesthetic concerns had to be abandoned in favour of the more dominant concern, namely the engendering of a Sublime moment.

In its current version, the ground is all but removed and painted over as part of the textural build-up process to create three dominant areas of colour: a dark blue
taking up the bottom three-quarters of the work, a small sky-blue section towards
the top which also forms a horizon line of sorts, and a thin, broken band of black at
the topmost edge of the work. A middle-ground consisting of a large brown
rectangle ‘floats’ above and below the horizon line. Incorporated into this shape is
a highly stylized and symbolical octopus-shape.

Figure 15: The Iceberg (2011)
71 cm x 96 cm
Mixed media, collage, oil on canvas

In contrast to the earlier version, the visual elements have been subsumed into the
background, leaving only hints and suggestions of their existence. This is done,
again, in reference to Lovecraft’s theme of hidden knowledge, of mystery, and
secrecy, only intimated in the most obscure clues. This is further enhanced by the
fact that all the forms fade one into the other, with no clear delimitation between them, mostly due to the gestural and process-focused approach that leaves marks such as splashes, drips, and paint run-offs clearly visible. The result is a discordant work that resists an easy reading, despite that it attempts to be a more direct representation of elements of Lovecraft’s mythology. It also gives an insight into a particular challenge encountered by the researcher, namely the decision of what elements to show and what elements to conceal. This continuous assessment and series of choices were informed by Lovecraft’s various strategies: the use of obscurity, the emphasis on the unknown (and the unknowable), and the theme of ruinous knowledge. As such, the works are marked by a bias towards greater obfuscation.

The idea of obscurity is also supported by the application of Burke’s guidelines (1958: 58-59) about the representation of the Sublime: “[t]o make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.” Again, this speaks to the process of, and balance struck between, concealing and revealing, which, in technical terms, also presents specific hurdles on the one hand, the obscurity of the colour, especially if avoiding pure black (the researcher favours a mixture of dark blues and browns) tends towards the building of the illusion of deep pictorial space but, if applied too thickly and too uniformly, also has the tendency to flatten the picture plane and create areas of ‘dead’ colour.

An Iceberg as a subject-matter is, of course, an uncomplicated metaphor referring to what is visible in contrast to what is hidden, and one that, in the context of the Lovecraft’s work becomes a more universally-recognized metaphor. To the researcher’s evaluation, the result is a depiction that is too literal and too illustrative and one that, therefore, fails to adequately present the unpresentable within the artwork and, by extension, engender a feeling of the Sublime.
Lovecraft, himself, struggled with similar problems and his solution informs much of his work, as his discussed in his essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (2011: 426). For him, the focus should always be on the mood of the work:

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint... memorable fragments scattered through material whose massed effect may be of a very different cast. Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation.

### 3.2.7 Antarctic Exploration I and II

*Antarctic Exploration I* (Figure 18) was a precursor to, and technical experiment behind, *Antarctic Exploration II* (Figure 19). As such, the compositions, themes, contents, and formal approaches of the two artefacts are very similar, but with enough significant differences to allow the works to be treated as separate entities.

The works are both in portrait format and consist of a dominating, heavily-textured, predominantly white ground, although some variances in hues and tones are noticeable. The foregrounds are similarly simple and nuanced: in the centre, vertically, and about a third of the way up, horizontally, there is an embedded element of gauze and hessian on which is placed a single ID photo of the researcher at the time of his arrival in South Africa. An effort has been made to texturally integrate this collage into the background. A single strand of hessian rises up from this focal point to some indefinite point. In both works, the ID portrait has all but been completely obscured.

*Antarctic Exploration I* displays a stronger tonal contrast between the foreground and background, but this is mitigated somewhat by the presence of a dark band at the very bottom of the work. This band is also visually striking in that it is not textured.

The tension of both works relies almost entirely in the competition of the foregrounds, which are dominant and centralized, and the backgrounds, which due
to their comparative sizes, activations, and dominance, threaten to overwhelm and consume the central collaged elements. This is enhanced by the dynamic texture of the ground. In *Antarctic Exploration I*, this tension is made all the stronger due to the absence of strong tonal contrasts and the dark band at the base of the painting.

![Figure 16: Antarctic Exploration II (2013)](image)

There is no pictorial space and no depiction or representation to speak of. The objects stand alone. Nevertheless, despite this, they hold a certain sense of ‘depth’ and presence. This was a deliberate result from applying the thoughts of LeVitte Harten (Morley 2010: 73) who affirms: “The idea of depth is important for
works of art which designate the sublime. Depth is not meant here as a dimension of material space, nor does it only stem from the narrative of the work. It has ‘aura’ and as such transfers the value of the work into an insubstantial realm and by doing so reinvests the phantasm of the artefact with a value in the physical world.”

![Figure 17: Antarctic Exploration I (2013)](image)

These works were created in response to Lovecraft’s theme of isolation and loss of significance in the face of the desolate, barren Antarctic, what he referred to as “the white, aeon-dead world of the ultimate south” (Lovecraft 1993: 19). It has been interpreted as an essential balance of scales between the human, here represented by the small photographs, and the immeasurable emptiness given
form as the unbroken backgrounds. This contrast in the physical sizes of the formal elements, guided by an exploration of Burke and Kant’s suggestion of a correlation between monumentality and the Sublime, is stronger in Antarctic Exploration II due to its significantly larger canvas size. Furthermore, the monumentality of the work is enhanced by denying any noticeable edge to the ground. This flattens out the pictorial space to an almost uniform monochromatic field, and suggests that the visual space extends infinitely beyond the edges of the work, akin to the some works of Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) and Rothko.

It is also relevant to note that the identity of the portrait in both works is concealed, covered up in washes of paint. This is a deliberate choice to depersonalize the work, making its content more applicable while, simultaneously, further reinforcing the loss of identity and potential. The single strand, rising up from these small arrangements, and resembling lifelines or tethers, goes nowhere and link to nothing. These visual anchors are also lost and subsumed into the overwhelming background.

3.2.8 Autopsy

Autopsy (Figure 18) is a portrait format painting on canvas-board that shares strong similarities to Antarctic Exploration I and Antarctic Exploration II in its simple composition consisting of a heavily textured ground and selected, embedded foreground objects. Similarly, it is free of painted representation, existing intrinsically as an autonomous artefact.

Unlike the uniform white of the two other works, the background is more varied, from very dark at the edges of the painting to a more translucent sky blue in the centre. This change in tones and hue helps draw the eye to the focal point an intriguing lighter patch of paint that suggests a cave opening, a window or a patch of sky. The interpretation is intentionally left ambiguous but does create the illusion of pictorial depth.
This is in tension with the heavily textured ground of the work built up of found objects (strips of bright yellow measuring tape) and the negative shape of plant forms embedded in loosely-applied crack-filler on the canvas-board. These plant forms were selected because of their foreign structures, resembling tentacles, which were completely alien to the researcher, especially at the time of his arrival in South Africa. As such, they seem to be an ideal form to be a surrogate for the extra-terrestrial and the outlandish, at least subjectively to the researcher.

![Figure 18: Autopsy (2013)](image)

120 cm x 90 cm
Mixed media, found objects, oil on canvas-board

Because most of the plants were removed, all that is left is their ‘fossil’, their imprint. They are, in a very literal way, missing content, and their absence
suggests hints and invites the viewer to question further. The presence of the measuring tape reinforces this obfuscated message, as it clearly measures nothing in particular. It is, essentially, measuring the immeasurable. The overall result, then, is a painting that negates itself in several ways: its primary subject-matter is missing, the embedded objects that are present are denied their purpose, and its suggested space denied a cohesive reading. As such, it subverts and destabilizes any coherent reading, opening up the possibility to access the Sublime.

3.2.9 Archaean Secrets

*Archaean Secrets* (Figure 19) is a much more direct application of the obfuscating exercises. It consists of a vertical canvas upon which a frame is mounted. The arrangement of formal elements is uncluttered and centralized. The entire arrangement is monochromatic and almost uniformly white. As with *Antarctic Exploration I, Antarctic Exploration II*, and Autopsy, the artefact stands alone as an intrinsic object. It is not representative.

The ground consists of pasted wallpaper, which was selected due to its strong resemblance to the wallpaper of the researcher's grandmother's house. It has been applied, torn down and reworked in a manner similar to the researcher's other work, and has also been painted over in a gestural, violent manner, that leaves dripping paint, splashes, and other marks resulting from the painting process. The light blue hue of the background suggests atmospheric perspective and pictorial depth but this is strongly negated by the prominent texture of the artefact's surface.

In the centre of the work, about two-thirds down the painting, there is a firmly attached framed photograph of the researcher's grandmother. The frame and the photograph have been given the same treatment as the background with the exception of a single section of the image, over the subject's eye. This has the resultant effect of incorporating the frame visually into the background, suggesting
the form without drawing attention to it, and leaves the black-and-white photographed eye as a single focal point and tonally contrasting formal element.

It is interesting to note at this point, that the relatively simple compositional arrangements of the formal elements in most of the researcher’s work was not decided up front, but, rather, emerged organically during the reflexive art-making process.

Figure 19: Archaean Secrets (2013)
102 cm x 51 cm
Mixed media, collage, oil on canvas

In other words, the researcher approached the first few works with the conscious, deliberate intention to create intricate, complex, layered compositions, similar to the baroque, overwrought style of H. P. Lovecraft. These ultimately failed (see an
example of process work, Figure 20) because the Sublime seems, to the researcher at least (and keeping in mind the limited context of the researcher’s own art-making process), more readily communicated by a bolder confrontation, unconstrained by laborious supporting imagery, documentation, and visual explanations. It is for this reason that, over the course of the research, the artefacts were significantly reworked, as part of the researcher’s reflexive art-making activity, to strong, bold, simple compositions that focused, more and more, on the visual contrast of formal elements embodying the antagonistic juxtaposition of the human and the immeasurable.

Figure 20: Deep Time, Process Version (2011)

Archaean Secrets is a reflection on death and the effacement of human achievements in the face of the depth of time and the vastness of the cosmos, which is a quintessential Lovecraftian theme as Ghodrati (2013: 25), quoting Houllebecq explains:

Of course, life has no meaning. But neither does death. And this is another thing that curdles the blood when one discovers Lovecraft’s universe. The deaths of his heroes have no meaning. Death brings no appeasement. It in no way allows the story to conclude. Implacably, [Lovecraft] destroys his characters, evoking only the dismemberment of marionettes. Indifferent to these pitiful vicissitudes, cosmic fear continues to expand. It swells and takes form.

The portrait of the researcher’s grandmother, who passed away in 2013, is framed, which implies both important and significance. It is erased and all but
destroyed by the act of painting over it, which transforms it into a concealing and obfuscating agent. The result is a work similar in many ways to *With Habit and Time, You Disappear Each Day* and *A Cyclopean City of No Architecture Known to Man*, in its erasure of the human presence. Here, however, the integration of most of the elements into the more activated background, draw focus to the subject’s eye here seen in the last moments before disappearing forever. It seems, to the researcher, to stare out simultaneously in supplication and accusation, and resonates with the viewer in such a way as to draw them in and invites them to empathize. The subsequent sensation, it is hoped, is one of suffocation, a threat that leads to *Angst*, and the Sublime.

### 3.2.10 Erosion and Erasures

*Erosion and Erasures* (Figure 21) is very similar in content, style, and execution to *Archaean Secrets*, and is, in many ways, a refinement of technique and approach. The only significant difference between the two works is that the canvas ground has been removed, leaving only the photographic frame (and all that is signifies) as the artefact. Additionally, the frame and image have been covered up not only in paint but in crack-filler as well, lending it a textural dynamism akin to *Antarctic Exploration I*, *Antarctic Exploration II*, and *A Cyclopean City of No Architecture Known to Man* or . The glass of the frame is also broken further emphasising its discarded nature and, by extension, its loss of a privileged place.

A strong tonal contrast exists here between a dark mass moving from the left and the greenish-white from the right. This and the liberal application of crack-filler have the effect of emphasising the consuming nature of the paint. This result is also assisted by the fact that the aperture through the paint is smaller.

The subject, the researcher’s mother who passed away in 2010, stares out towards the viewer but, because there is less of the face perceptible, her exact emotion is not clear. In fact, several observers have mentioned that it appears more menacing.
The ‘awkwardness’ of the object, free from such contextualizing elements as a canvas or painted surface, may contribute to this, making the object appear more alien, foreign, and disturbing.

Figure 21: Erosion and Erasures (2013)
47 cm x 37 cm
Mixed media, found objects

3.2.11 Wordless

*Wordless* (Figure 22) incorporates many of the elements found in the other works thus far discussed. It is a large, horizontal work consisting of an almost uniformly even dark, if not pitch black, background. Variations, created through gestural paint application, activate the surface of the plane. The blue tinge and hue of this background suggests a deep visual field, which is significantly resisted by the presence of the foreground objects, namely the evenly distanced three A5 printed photographs in stained white frames towards the bottom of the painting, on which are large blobs of dripped and painted crack-filler.
All three of the printed images are drawn from the same photograph but have been cropped differently. In the leftmost one, the researcher’s deceased grandfather (he died in 2009) is clearly visible in the bottom-right quadrant. In the central image, he is similarly positioned but slightly more towards the right edge, and in the rightmost instance, he is completely removed from the image. Overall, this creates the illusion of movement and draws attention to the subject’s absence.

The images have also been substantially damaged and stained through the application of water, turpentine, and other substances.

The blobs of crack-filler are an important technical advancement. Painted in a dark colour, dripped almost haphazardly they are difficult to apprehend. They take on a texture and appearance that is at once alien and reminiscent of the deep sea creatures referred to so often by Lovecraft. They are unwelcome and viscerally repellent intrusions that, because they obscure and seem to consume that on which they are resting and protrude significantly off the canvas-board, invade the viewer’s space. It is difficult to view them without imbuing them with a sentience or
at least some sort of animal will. Lastly, their colouring and placement incorporates them visually into the background much more than the photographic frame, and seem to suggest that it is not them that are the intruders but, rather, the ‘Memento Mori’.

3.2.12 Welcoming the Intruder

*Welcoming the Intruder* (Figure 21) is another work incorporating many elements from the other works developed during the course of the research. It is a large, vertical canvas-board layered in a textural application of wallpaper, similar to *How the Land Hates* and *Archaean Secrets*. It is more uniformly and evenly painted, like *Wordless*, although it does include a very dominant and gestural wash of white paint towards the top of the work. The application, which has been left to drip and dry, almost accidentally, is similar to *Erosion and Erasures*, and contributes to a build-up of an activated planed against which the foreground can be contrasted.

The foreground consists of a white frame placed in the central bottom third of the work. It is covered in a darkly painted blob of crack-filler, which links up to the bottom of the work, similar in all its formal qualities to those in *Wordless*.

The notable departures in this work are, firstly, the absence of an image in the frame and, secondly, the overlay and dynamic interplay between the foreground blob and the background paint.

The absence of an image in frame is deliberate, and draws attention to the missing content while, at the same time, still acting as a representative of the human scale. This contrasts with the vast and, due to the lack of borders or definite edge, seemingly endless background of the work. The addition of the white overlay on the background further acts to subsume the frame into the flat and almost featureless background, repeating Lovecraft’s theme of human insignificance.

Moreover, if this assumption of the human elements into the background was not strong enough, it is further assimilated by the blob, which is imbued with much more dynamic elements than in *Wordless*. This is due to both the illusion of
movement due to its strong directional placement, rising out from the bottom edge of the work, and its incorporation into the background, which occurs because the drips and splashes of the white wash are also found on it. The visual result, because the blob is no longer a passive element but rather one that interacts with the other constituents of the work, is a much stronger suggestion that it is sentient, mobile, and active.

Figure 23: Welcoming the Intruder (2013)
180 cm x 120 cm
Mixed media, found objects, oil on canvas-board

Overall, the work invites the viewer to place him or herself, or something of equally strong subjective value, into the empty frame to be consumed, assimilated, and subsequently forgotten. The viewer is led to understand that there is no image, no
work of man, and nothing of value that can remain in the face of the cosmic erosion. This is an attempt to engender the Sublime in the viewer by confronting them with the alien, the other, which “It is not merely… a mystery to the self; it is… a mystery of the self” (McEvilley 1992: 149).

3.2.13 The Shoggoth

The Shoggoth (Figure 24) was one of the earliest works initiated for the research. It has been altered significantly over the course of the research, and represents some two years of alterations and development, as can be seen by contrasting the painting to an earlier version (see Figure 25).

The composition is, again, simple, consisting of a large dark ground from which several elements are seen to emerge. Because the picture plane and the collaged elements has been worked so much, through sanding, pasting and removing of images, the division between foreground and background has ceased to exist.

Three main areas of tonal contrasts exist between the ground and the areas of activation. Some smaller patches of similar material is scattered across the picture plane. These areas are the remnants of a textural build up consisting of HR letters received during the researcher’s employment at an IT company, and stylized, gestural renditions of eyes.

The ‘Shoggoths’, a race of protoplasmic beasts consisting of eyes and bubbles of viscous matter are directly drawn from At the Mountains of Madness. They were a slave race initially created by the ‘Old Ones’ to do their bidding and who eventually rebelled and consumed their masters, leaving very little in their wake. The researcher drew a parallel between this and his ‘day job’ that, at its inception, was meant to aid and support his artistic career but, eventually, consumed all his time and efforts. This was given a presence in the work through the form of HR papers. These were eventually covered in dark paint from which the eyeballs, created by the removal of paint using paint thinners, oil crayons, and oil paint, emerge.
This base, however, proved too facile and hackneyed. Therefore, while it conveyed an intellectual interpretation of the Sublime, it did not engender an irrational and emotional response. For this reason, the collage was subsequently and progressively removed, scratched out, worked with paint thinners, removed, added, and constantly revised.

The result is significantly more successful as an instigator of the Sublime. The content is now hidden but still suggested, and conveyed in subtle clues that frustrate any attempt to decipher them. Furthermore, it becomes difficult to ascertain if the texts and eyes are intentional or accidental, part of the subject or part of the ground. Moreover, the dark wash and tone of the painting, occasionally marked by scratches in oil pastel, suggest pictorial depth and invite the viewer into an exploration of its surface.

This painting also represents an additional technical development: whereas in the other works, the collaged elements serve to emphasise the surface, suggest content, and texturally activate the picture plane, here the technique has been
integrated more completely. It is no longer a passive formal element but an active, critical one.

Furthermore, it achieves a particular aesthetic appearance that the researcher had been trying to replicate, namely that of the heavy build-up of posters and images of the walls of Brussels (and other European cities), which he found visually interesting and conceptually relevant. To explain: many bigger urban centres, specifically across Europe, have walls covered in posters, advertising, political messages, and all sorts of different layers of paint and plaster. They are constantly added, eroded, put up, and pulled down. The result is a rich textured surface that allows a glimpse into the past, similar to archaeological layering. This speaks not only to the mindless erosion of human endeavours by the passage of time as was referenced by many artists and artworks, such as, for example, Francisco Goya’s (1746-1828) *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1823), but also the insignificance of man in the face of it which is strong component of Lovecraft’s ‘Cosmicism’.

![Figure 25: The Shoggoth, Process Version (2011)](image)

### 3.2.14 Out of Time

*Out of Time* (Figure 26) was the first work started for the research and the last one to be completed. Over the course of its development, it became clear that the initial compositions were, like *The Shoggoth* and partly in homage to Lovecraft’s baroque writing style, too complex, overwrought, and literal, none of which seemed to facilitate the engendering of the Sublime. Similarly, the complex
layering of textures, images, symbols, and painted elements detracted from a Sublime encounter because they are as barriers to the initial confrontation between the viewer and the immeasurable.

Figure 26: Out of Time (2013)
120 cm x 180 cm
Mixed media, found objects, oil on canvas-board

The result is a dark brownish-red field, strongly textured due to the repeated addition and removal of elements, from photographs to hessian cloth. The most dominant layer, however, is a coating of crack-filler, thickest at the left and fading to the right, which serves to obscure almost all of the details below it. Again, this is a conscious throwback to the wall textures referred to in analysis of The Shoggoth.

Only a few elements are still visible through this layer, a few visual hints at photographs and the fact that images were added and scrapped off, hessian bands, elements of a timeline just below the half-way point, and a printed photograph of the researcher as a young boy on a large white ground towards the far right edge.

Overlaid on this is a large white abstract shape composed of a large body and several tentacle forms reaching out towards the right. This form has been
approached in a gestural manner, allowing for ‘accidents’ such as drips, splashes, and runoffs. It has also been distorted and transformed by the dripping and pouring of linseed oil and turpentine on it, imbuing it with a dynamic organic texture and fluidity. The overall form suggests a mollusc, alien, or deep-sea creature actively moving from the left and reaching out towards the only semi-visible element on the right: the photograph of the researcher.

The sensation it intends to evoke is one of menace and active malignant intellect from the ancient past (represented by the timeline imbedded in the background) towards the present. It is also a more representative and illustrative work sharing some overlap with the pieces submitted for ‘Animal/Advance’. It also shares strong thematic ties with Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* with its reference to geological timescales, ‘deep time’, alien creatures of unimaginable antiquity, and man’s absolute unimportance in the face of it.


4 Conclusion

The research began with an investigation on the topic of the Sublime, especially where it relates to the visual arts, aiming to arrive at a reasoned, evidenced, and workable definition. This was accompanied by an exploration of certain themes and idiosyncratic approaches in the work of H. P. Lovecraft, specifically those found in *At the Mountains of Madness*, specifically concerning itself identifying valid strategies for the engendering of a Sublime moment in the reader.

The research found that the core of those themes, and their manifestations, revolved around an inequitable comparison between the human and the immeasurable, which both fascinates and repels, significantly beyond the scope of the Romantic's idea of Nature (Petermann 1991: 7). This propagates an existential crisis that is the essential core of H. P. Lovecraft's concept of ‘Cosmicism’, as he himself explains (2011: 425):

Because we remember pain and the menace of death more vividly than pleasure, and because our feelings toward the beneficent aspects of the unknown have from the first been captured and formalised by conventional religious rituals, it has fallen to the lot of the darker and more maleficent side of cosmic mystery to figure chiefly in our popular supernatural folklore. This tendency, too, is naturally enhanced by the fact that uncertainty and danger are always closely allied; thus making any kind of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities. When to this sense of fear and evil the inevitable fascination of wonder and curiosity is superadded, there is born a composite body of keen emotion and imaginative provocation whose vitality must of necessity endure as long as the human race itself. Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse.

With this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear. It has always existed, and always will exist; and no better evidence of its tenacious vigour can
be cited than the impulse which now and then drives writers of totally opposite leanings to try their hands at it in isolated tales, as if to discharge from their minds certain phantasmal shapes which would otherwise haunt them.

It is evident that this core animus to H. P. Lovecraft’s work overlaps significantly with certain reflections on the Sublime, which, in turn, formed the basis of the much narrower exploration of specific themes within *At the Mountains of Madness*. These were selected primarily on their potential to suggest possible strategies for the expression of the Sublime in contemporary fine arts, which is said to be relevant because it exists at “the exact point where art offers itself up for questioning and in this is the *raison d’être* of all modern aesthetics” (Carlos et al 1994: 21).

In the practical component of the research, these themes were then applied to the researcher’s own studio practice, and resulted in the creation of a number of visual artefacts and supporting material. Subsequently, a reflective and critical analysis of these works was then undertaken to evaluate how successfully the themes of H. P. Lovecraft’s narrative translated across modes, as well as identify which technical and formal aspects of the studio works effectively conveyed those selected themes.

From this analysis, it is possible to conclude that the work of H. P. Lovecraft, explicitly and specifically *At the Mountains of Madness*, has rich potential as a basis of themes that are Sublime in scope and intent. Furthermore, H. P. Lovecraft’s central theme, that of terror in face of man’s insignificance, what he termed ‘Cosmic Horror’ or ‘Cosmicism’, is, in itself, a fundamentally Sublime concept that requires further exploration across multiple modes of expression.

Furthermore, it is also possible to conclude that the researcher’s studio work is imbued, at least in part, with the ability to engender Sublime moments through their drawing from selected themes found in H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, particularly ones relating to ‘Cosmicism’. This capacity is enhanced and carried forward by the application of technical and intellectual principles extracted from artistic and philosophical inquiries into the Sublime.
Lastly, the research has enabled the researcher to expand his technical repertoire and develop specific technical approaches ideally suited to the production of Sublime instances in the viewer.
5 References List

5.1 References


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5.2 Bibliography


