



# Constructing the (New) Sublime?

[Edit this article](#)

Jack Stuppin at ACA Galleries, Manhattan, USA



Jack Stuppin, Hudson River View from Olana

13 JAN 2016 by DANIEL GAUSS

When English painter Thomas Cole came to the US in the early 1800s, he began painting landscapes from the Hudson River Valley, attempting to capture and convey what Edmund Burke had called the sublime. To Burke, the sublime was astonishment bordering on terror. “The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it.” Burke also dealt with the beautiful, which was distinguished from the sublime by the capacity of the beautiful to engender a desire to possess what was being viewed.

One could argue that the environmental devastation since the time of the Hudson River School was due to a rejection of the sublime in favor of mathematical analysis and technological profiteering along with a perversion of the beautiful toward the possession of the exploitable. By revisiting the Hudson River School movement in his show “Homage to the Hudson River School”, Stuppin, therefore, revisits these two concepts in light of the development of science and technology and the ravaging of the environment for profit. He also, perhaps, questions the extent to which anyone should have bought into either extreme of transcendence or technological exploitation in regard to the American natural environment.

Stuppin uses super-enriched colors for his paintings. Sometimes the colors correspond somewhat to the colors we would expect objects to be, other times they do not. He takes the basic colors of nature, enhances them with a type of luminescence, and sometimes shuffles the colors somewhat so that, for instance, you get blue trees. Charles Burchfield admonished American landscape painters not to paint what they saw, but to paint the hidden, real presence of nature and, consequently, one might guess that these brilliant colors could be thought to reflect the *élan vital* we seem to sense when we engage nature on its own terms, free of cognitive and emotional baggage.

However, it could be that Stuppin points at those aspects of nature that engendered the transcendentalist tradition and hints at what gives nature its capacity to arrest and



## On the street



Like us on  
Facebook



Follow us on  
Twitter



Follow us on  
Instagram



Join us on  
Google+



Follow us on  
Pinterest



Join us on  
LinkedIn

overwhelm us and con us, frankly, into believing in an *élan vital*. We get an awareness of our acceptance of the ancient belief in transcendence and union with nature, which has still not been destroyed through science, but which modern science seems to have refuted. In the paintings this *élan vital*, therefore, is not necessarily to be believed but becomes the starting point for us to become more aware of the limits of our cognition and emotion when contemplating or experiencing nature without the aid of science.

Along with brilliant colors, Stuppin also seems to present what might be called a natural world of averages. For example, I noticed in one painting that he does not have realistically depicted small, medium and large waves or waves of many shapes and sizes vis-à-vis each other; he shuns realistic, individual depictions in favor of rolling rhythmic patterns – his waves, for instance, are basically waves you might get if you took the average size of waves in one area. We learned in the early 20th century that observation changes the thing observed and so we get objects represented by averages instead of individually depicted objects. They are stylized waves imitating and perhaps replicating each other, perhaps intimating the concept of infinity.

Perhaps Stuppin wants to say that when we artistically depict and interpret an experience of nature, without applying any incisive background knowledge of nature to it, with viewers just standing in the presence of the depiction of nature, we are being engaged, basically, by colors and forms, no more, no less. What do we really hope to get from the colors and forms of landscapes? How might it be possible for these colors and forms to even imply a mystical or emotionally moving concept? In the direct presence of nature, colors and forms combine with our previous experiences of the textures of nature – how stone, wood, water etc. feel – as well as sound and smell. But is this even enough to derive that something extra, that deeper knowledge or understanding that nature seems to promise us through our contemplation of it, but which may never be disclosed?

Therefore, Stuppin might be asking whether the transcendental ‘union’ promised through much landscape art from the past is possible. Is the mind separate from nature or is it such a part of nature that it allows a deep intuition of the essence of nature? Stuppin’s work might be saying that what we experience when we engage nature is not nature but the emotions created when we desire to understand but have insufficient tools to do so – neither intuition nor science gets us to the Faustian place we wish to go.

Intuition from an experience in a state of nature leads to mysticism, ritual or mythology, while science leads to the physical destruction of the environment. Yet, this middle ground we want between intuition and science becomes the palpable inability to grasp what we believe is possible to grasp and it becomes a grand experience in itself. The great mystery of landscape painting illustrated through the work of Stuppin is that Burke was right – in the presence of nature we are often overcome by an intense but difficult to describe emotion which subsumes everything else we might feel. It is joyous and painful and goads us to further and deeper experiences while leading to a lingering and obscure longing. Just what we are getting when we give ourselves over to that process is brilliantly and seductively represented by these perfectly executed works by Jack Stuppin.



## Daniel Gauss

Daniel Gauss is the Proletarian Art Snob. He is a graduate of The University of Wisconsin and Columbia University and regularly treks around New York City

[Full profile »](#)

[f Share](#) 5 [T Tweet](#) [in Share](#) 3 [P Pin it](#) [G+1](#) 4







### Captions

1. Jack Stuppin, Apple Trees
2. Jack Stuppin, Oak and Hills
3. Jack Stuppin, Joyfull
4. Jack Stuppin, Adirondack Trees
5. Jack Stuppin, Roeliff Jansen Kill
6. Jack Stuppin, Bridge over West Kill

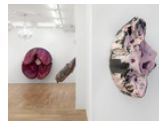
## Related articles



ART

### Smashing

Kelly Reemtsen at De Buck Gallery, Chelsea, Manhattan, USA



ART

### Hole

Kaari Upson's new series



ART

### Playing House

Suzanne Heintz at JoAnne Artman Gallery, Manhattan, USA



ART

### Transcendental

A new bet for Gonkar Gyatso



ART

### The real change has just started

An interview with the Zimbabwean gallerist Jimmy Saruchera\*



ART

### Mao vs. the Beauty Myth

Ling Jian at Klein Sun Gallery