

## The infinite, the eternal and the nature of being

Essay by Robert Zeller

Maria Kreyn's sea-scapes offer a deeply metaphysical, spiritual experience, at once as steeped in Romanticism as they are apocalyptic psychedelia. Which is not to downplay the obvious philosophical and geometric conceptions present in her work. It is easy to get caught up in the technical fireworks, the beautiful fractals, the vast array of colorful, visceral brushwork. Those elements give the work a contemporary vitality. But a focus on the cumulative effect of all of the formal elements is to arrive at the spiritual aspect, and to understand that as the primary strength of the work. Seen from a cyclical perspective — with both the regenerative and destructive aspects of Nature on full display — Kreyn's work considers the totality of existence. This may or may not indicate pantheism, but it does point to an immanent deity of some sort. Viewing this spiritual element from an art historical perspective, there is a canon of borrowed capital that Kreyn taps into from both Eastern and Western art traditions. While spirituality in landscape art is present from the very beginnings in Asian art — going back at least a thousand years — drawing on Daoism and other philosophical traditions, in Western art that quality only becomes explicit in landscape painting in the Baroque and Romantic movements. Kreyn's work carries on the tradition of both, celebrating the sublime power of nature in all of its dynamic ferocity and simultaneous beauty.

Kreyn's ability to fuse the many art historical references present in her work with contemporary themes makes her work relevant to the moment, for this is the age of global climate concerns. This is not to say her work is pandering to current political or social trends. But it isn't above them either. These are works that reflect an immediate, personal consideration of the present moment. They are psychological, psychic depictions of a state of mind, of being, and ultimately, a

portrait of the mind of the artist herself — a manifestation of a desire to make order of an unpredictable, turbulent system. Taking this more expansive view of the natural cycle of birth and death, Kreyn's message is ultimately positive.

From a historical perspective, her storms reference the work of French landscape and seascape artist Joseph Vernet, with his vast array of luminous sunsets, shipwrecks — essentially battle scenes set at sea rather than land — of ships tossed on turbulent seas. In Vernet's telling of the narrative of Man vs. Nature, the men usually lose. Compositionally, Kreyn's work is also evocative of Dutch Baroque era painters such as Ludolf Backhuysen, Hendrik Jacobsz and Willem van de Velde de Jonge. An important compositional device that is present in Kreyn's work is a hallmark of Dutch landscape and seascape painting, one that sets it apart from those of other nations. Because a third of the country is actually below sea level, the horizon line often seems very low, even below one's feet at times. Thus, the sky overhead dominates the view. What is true of the work of Dutch Baroque era painters is also true of Kreyn's work, though she takes it to a further extreme: with the amount of space devoted to the vastness of the atmosphere over the ocean and the foreboding, tempestuous, ever-present clouds that hover over the waves below, these seascapes might better be called "sky-scapes."

Like the British landscape painter William Turner, whose transparency and spontaneity in watercolor and oils were put in the service of capturing the drama of weather and light, Kreyn's work is not nearly imitative of nature, but rather expansive, uncontainable and going quite passionately in several directions at once. And also like Turner, the human elements of the narrative of these seascapes— of ships and their passengers, the people who built them — Kreyn has determined that humans need only be hinted at. Again, this is in the tradition of Asian landscape paintings, where the figures are often quite small or non-existent. Nature dominates, the storms dominate. And a storm

is, of course, a potent metaphor for the human condition, in which metaphysical and spiritual experiences seem to be well inscribed. This diminishing of emphasis on the figure as the central focus is interesting because Kreyn first came to public attention via her figurative work. Her portraits and figures — which often convey a strong sense of feminine intimacy — have been featured in *Vanity Fair*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Art Newspaper*, *The Financial Times*, and many others media outlets. Kreyn's painting *Alone Together* is the central plot device of Shonda Rhimes' ABC television show "The Catch." And, to speak to my own creative overlap with her, Kreyn's eight monumental paintings based on Shakespeare, commissioned by Andrew Lloyd Webber — and now on permanent display in the lobby of London's historic Theater Royal Drury Lane, as well as appearing the award winning show "The Crown" — were featured in my book *New Surrealism: The Uncanny in Contemporary Painting*.

One of the paintings for that Shakespeare Cycle, *The Tempest*, provided the template for this new body of work. In that painting, we see the enormous torso of Prospero, straddling the ocean like a giant, his head lost in the overhead storm clouds, evocative of both Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Goya's *Colossus*. Below him, a ship is tossed precariously on the waves, as ocean meets sky in a tempestuous, frothy struggle. A fractal pattern divides the canopy of the sky into multiple realities, outcomes, of both light and shadow, of death and renewal. A sunrise (sunset?) to the right seems to indicate hope, a favorable outcome. One need not know the entire play to understand what Kreyn offers in this scene. There is no Caliban depicted, no Miranda. Kreyn has used the play in the service of her own narrative, her own muse. This is not a depiction of Man vs. Nature, or Man vs. Man, but rather of Man vs. Self. Prospero, one of Shakespeare's more enigmatic protagonists, was, after all, his own worst enemy. It is interesting that in the seascapes done subsequently, those pictured in this catalog, the figurative element is implied but not explicitly shown. Perhaps *The Tempest* — or maybe the entire Shakespeare Cycle — was the cathartic

purge Kreyn needed to enter a more purely abstract realm, where the themes that drive her work are not limited by depictions of flesh and bone, however passionate and sensual, loaded as they are with implied meaning and the weight of figurative art history.

Formally, there is an undercurrent of psychedelia in terms of Kreyn's choice of a rich, vibrant palette, and the fractal divisions — a folding of time/space — of the picture plane. This visual depiction of multiple perspectives, dimensions, and possible outcomes likely stems from her education in mathematics and philosophy, and a natural curiosity in those disciplines. Kreyn's references to literature and art history have coalesced into a personal vocabulary used to straddle the intersection of formalism, Romantic painting, and contemporary political and environmental climate-based concerns.

Her themes both inform and are integrated with her sense of mark making—of viscous paint layered over thin transparent washes and drips, of randomness and organized chaos, the juxtaposition of highly refined passages against what is almost disintegrating paint. There is simply more flexibility in remaining as abstract as possible to obtain the widest of possible outcomes. The storm itself is the void, an act of nature with no inherent meaning, to which we with our minds then ascribe pattern and analysis and metaphor. In Kreyn's case, she imbues it with the power of the divine, the eternally spiritual.