

AFTON LOVE  
*Perfect Union*



516 ARTS

February 27 – May 22, 2021  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

AFTON LOVE

Born 1983, Butte Creek Canyon, California  
Lives in Ojo Caliente, New Mexico

EDUCATION

BFA, California College of the Arts, Oakland, CA

SELECTED SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Perfect Union*, 516 ARTS, Albuquerque, NM (solo)
- 2019 *Ranging*, Gallery 238 Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, NM
- 2018 *Afton Love*, 5. Gallery, Santa Fe, NM (solo)  
*A Circle to Go Into*, Roswell Museum, Roswell, NM
- 2017 *First There is a Mountain*, Revolt Gallery, Taos, NM (two person)  
*The Object of Empty Space*, Interface Gallery, Oakland CA (solo)  
*Tolerance & Time*, Ell Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
*Veilings and Their Aftermath*, Isaac's Pipe & Supply Gallery, Roswell, NM  
*Through Stone*, Gallery Route One, Point Reyes Station, CA (solo)  
*Open Rock*, Esqueleto, Oakland, CA (solo)
- 2016 *Castle Rock*, Esqueleto Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (solo)  
Student Annex Gallery, UNM Taos, NM (solo)
- 2015 *Ranges, Boot Up*, Palo Alto, CA (solo)  
*Black & White*, Ntropic, San Francisco, CA  
*Source*, Esqueleto Gallery, Oakland, CA (solo)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 *Taos Contemporary*, Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, NM  
*Taos Select*, Gallery 203, Taos, NM
- 2019 *Big Picture*, Big Pictures Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA
- 2018 *Picture*, Holiday Presents, Los Angeles, CA
- 2017 Winter Group Show, Hashimoto Contemporary, San Francisco, CA  
*Soft Serve*, Holiday Presents, Los Angeles, CA  
*Babel's Bricks*, Gallery 51, North Adams, MA  
*Rhizospere*, The Midway Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2016 *Dia De Los Muertos*, Esqueleto Gallery, Oakland, CA  
*Witness of the Empty Sky*, 1078 Gallery Chico, CA  
Wurlitzer Foundation Open Studios, Taos, NM
- 2015 National Drawing Exhibition, Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, Novato, CA  
Benefit Art Auction, Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA  
*Friends With Karma*, Pro Arts Center, Oakland, CA  
Open Studios, Santa Fe Art Institute, Santa Fe, NM  
*Here II*, Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, CA  
*The Possibilities of Paper*, Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA  
Open Studios, Santa Fe Art Institute, Santa Fe, NM

RESIDENCIES & AWARDS

- 2018-2019 Roswell Artist-in-Residence Grant, Roswell, NM
- 2017 Facebook Residency, Palo Alto, CA
- 2016-2017 Full Fellowship, Gallery Route One, Point Reyes, CA
- 2016 Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, Taos, NM
- 2015 Santa Fe Art Institute, Santa Fe, NM  
Resident Signal Fire Residency, AZ
- 2014 Vermont Studio Center, VT



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516 ARTS is a non-collecting contemporary art museum in the center of Downtown Albuquerque that celebrates thought-provoking art in the here and now. Our mission is to connect contemporary artists and diverse audiences. 516 ARTS presents relevant exhibitions and public programs, which feature a mix of local, national and international artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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ABOVE: Afton Love, photo by Andrew Paynter

COVER: *Center Stone*, 2020, graphite on vellum dipped in beeswax, 34 x 28 inches

# SUBLIME FORMATIONS: THE BEAUTY AND THE HORROR OF AFTON LOVE’S DESERTSCAPES

By Rebecca Ora/rora

A sleek metal lith looms, massive and shining in the sun, surrounded by craggy geological formations. The first of several mysterious monoliths discovered around the world in the final months of 2020, all located amid natural surroundings, was a mystery on several counts: how was this formidable structure embedded deep in the living rock in Red Rock Country, Utah, and without anyone knowing? How long ago was this structure installed, and by whom? And how was this tableau so breathtaking and yet so absolutely terrifying?

This intersection of beauty and horror is what we call the sublime: the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant described this paradoxical phenomenon as “delightful horror,” and “a sort of tranquility tinged with terror”<sup>2</sup> that overcomes us when we are confronted with natural spectacle, creative feats or technologically astonishing phenomena. The greater the fear we experience within this “negative pleasure,”<sup>3</sup> the greater, too, is our satisfaction.

This same union of ecstasy and terror infuses the artwork of Afton Love.

It is no slight to state that Love’s large-scale landscape drawings and installed casts of the New Mexico landscape are not “beautiful;” the sublime surpasses the beautiful in its power, profundity and ultimate gratification. By favoring elements that philosopher Edmund Burke attributed to experiences of the sublime, Love’s desertscapes obviate the visually beautiful in favor of a darker, more engaged audience encounter.

Love’s use of abstraction is redolent of Burke’s description of “obscurity”—the opposite of clarity<sup>4</sup>—that is fundamental to experiences of the sublime. The series of tierra blanca and gypsum casts of the negative space at the surface of rock formations that comprise *Embedded Sequent* abstract the landscape through representing it in excerpts. The tile-like imprints of landscape shards, featuring subtly textured irregular surfaces, provide little information regarding precise site or significance. The viewer is left to meander within these mysterious crevices that obliquely reference the cracks and creases of human skin.

By casting in stark black or white, and drawing in monochromatic values on paper, Love’s work further decontextualizes and estranges scenes of the American West. Robert Rosenblum described the “abstract sublime” in 1961 as accessing the “infinite voids” that lie beyond reason.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Kant’s sublime requires a level of “disinterestedness,”<sup>6</sup> a segregation from mundane association and utility that is captured in Love’s treatment of these potentially familiar forms that, in these uncanny renditions, force us to look more carefully at what is before us.

The dimensions of Love’s work, too, induces sublime sensation. *Far Range (Peñasco)*, a graphite drawing on vellum dipped in beeswax (51 x 210 inches), is immersive in size and scale, simultaneously enveloping and towering over the viewer.



Love’s ambitious drawing is both painstakingly specific and imposingly generalized. According to Burke, “it is vastness” or “greatness of dimension,” which is “a powerful cause of the sublime,”<sup>7</sup> like “looking down from a precipice” of a mountain. However, the infinitesimally small, too, as in the fineness of Love’s marks, is an experience of the sublime: “we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effect this extreme of littleness from the vast itself.”<sup>8</sup> Confronted by these objects, we simultaneously shrink before imposing grandeur even as we tower above the delicate and miniscule.

The mark making on the vast horizontal surface is studied and careful; each crack and curvature formed over eons of erosion is lovingly and meticulously illustrated. Meanwhile, when beheld in its entirety, the drawing has no distinct beginning or end: this is clearly a fragment of a larger space that continues in either direction, perhaps into infinity. This boundlessness is key to the capacity of the sublime to overwhelm not only the senses but also the imagination. The repetition in *Embedded Sequent* similarly implies a multiplicity that feels limitless. This series of cast tiles proposes an archive, a record of a rock’s continuous erosion obsessively preserved. Burke: “the ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have: and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity.”<sup>9</sup> The limitlessness of Love’s careful marks, and of the number of modular units that might someday comprise the series of casts, and of the boundaries of the immense drawn landscape are inextricably linked to the incomprehensibility of time also etched within this work. Love’s practice is bound up in the attempt to grasp nature through imagining this rock hewn through unfathomable spans of time. This mystery compels not only these pieces, but the artist’s project overall.

On the one hand, so many artists turn to natural landscapes because they seem eternal, meaning they are never out of style but also never quite current. The work exhibited in *Perfect Union*, however, speaks directly to our contemporary moment, its urgencies and our resulting anxieties.

2020 was a year wherein the natural world and technology alike overwhelmed the imagination by their show of force. We have contended with simultaneously comprehending the invisible size of 70–90 nm—the measurement of a single virus particle—while at once apprehending what twenty-five million sick bodies look like. On September 9, I awoke to a deep amber sky, dyed by the smoke of fires caused by climate change and the destruction of forest, homes, human

ABOVE: *Far Range (Peñasco)*, 2017, graphite on vellum dipped in beeswax, 48 x 252 inches

lives. As I write this, we in Northern California—Afton Love’s birthplace—are sheltering from an “atmospheric river,” a storm event that shakes us even as we are unable to turn away our gaze. So many, in isolation due to pandemic, have taken to the landscape not simply for solitude and meditation but also because the terrifying magnificence reflects back our experience of incomprehensible horror.

Before a sublime object (experience, artwork, scape...), the figure is both fixed and displaced, made invisible and set alight. The experience of Love’s work harnesses the dualisms that connect us to a natural world that is both our source of greatest inspiration even as it is also our most formidable predator. In our attempts to hold these contradictions together, we find the simultaneous constitution and dissolution of our humanity. According to Julia Kristeva, “the sublime is a *something* added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination.”<sup>10</sup> Before nature, as before this artwork, we are both created and destroyed.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 20.
- <sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, 1st edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 376.
- <sup>3</sup> Kant, 129.
- <sup>4</sup> Burke, 42.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” *Art News*, February 1961.
- <sup>6</sup> Kant, 90.
- <sup>7</sup> Burke, 60.
- <sup>8</sup> Burke, 56.
- <sup>9</sup> Burke, 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Reprint edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 12.

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Rebecca Ora/rora is a California-based artist, performer, filmmaker and scholar. Her darkly humorous socially-engaged work explores comedy, discomfort, conflict, and the limits of representation of trauma. She holds an MFA from California College of the Arts in Social Practice, and is completing a PhD in Film & Digital Media at UC Santa Cruz.