Clowns of Climate Change

In the early and mid-19th century philosophers as well as artists and writers were intrigued by the wild side of nature's beauty, what they termed the sublime. The serenity of pastoral picturesque landscape painting was supplanted by what Kant described as "a delightful horror" or "a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" of the sublime. A group of landscape painters emerged inspired by the wild imagery of Lord Byron and the maxims of Burke and Kant. They searched out settings that embodied those notions and examples of the sublime they found in literature.

Artists like Thomas Cole and later Fredrick Church often followed in the footsteps of explorers. They sought out wild spectacular places and did open- air studies, oil sketches, sometimes perched in trees to get the best possible view. The vistas they searched out were often remote, unspoiled and as yet unexploited. It's hard to believe, for instance, that in the mid-19th century the Catskills and the upper Hudson River were places where one could encounter that savage beauty that inspired the awe of the sublime but many great paintings attest to it.

When Cole contemplated the "natural majesty" of the Catskills and upper Hudson with its "rugged precipices and green undulating shores" he went so far as to speculate what sort of future development mankind would bring to it. "We may anticipate the time when ample waters (of the Hudson) shall reflect temple, and tower, and dome, in every variety of picturesque and magnificence."

He could not have anticipated the Hudson's real future as an industrial sewer. Even today despite all the pollution restrictions that have been in place since the eighties, the river is full of   industrial toxins. They linger on in the river sediment and taint the fish with mercury, cadmium and PCBs.

In a perverse twist the future palatial structures, "the temple, and tower, and dome..." Cole imagined on the banks of the Hudson came to be. The nuclear power plant at Indian point on the banks of the Hudson certainly has the architectural components and scale of magnificence with its towering column- like smoke stake and its two massive containment domes.

Enter the Clowns

Were the Hudson River Artists, and their like, the Luminists, the Transcendentalists, and the Romantics to return from the dead they would find their sublime wildernesses changed beyond recognition but they could not complain about a lack of color.

The Clowns of Climate change have made the world a more colorful place. Sunsets are more vibrant thanks to particulates in the air. Red tides color the seas and phosphates feed algae that change clear

lake waters to a brilliant lime green. Industrial polluters tint rivers with bright cadmiums and the transparent blue of plastic waste glimmers magically on the open seas.

In this series Clowns have, as it were, jumped into these beloved 19th century landscapes and transformed them. All this without particular malice. It's just in keeping with their nature. To open up the views they raze forests with flash fires. If the forest is not prone to drought, they send in invasive insects and species. Herbicides, fracking and super storms are all in their bag of tricks.

Change is literally in the air as the clowns fill the skies with beautiful methane bubbles. They float up from smoke stacks. They collect above cattle or upwell from the ocean floors and melting icecaps to hover on the horizon. For humans the consequences may be unpleasant but for the clowns it's the music of the spheres.

It is as if the bill has come due for a century's long binge and the price of the earth's human imposed bad diet is a gastro intestinal disorder of mythic proportions. It may be a catastrophe for mankind but the visual effects are beautiful, magnificent and even sublime. The Climate Clowns are magicians. They retool nature's palette with carnival colors, sprinkle shinny plastic things everywhere and fill the sky with bubbles. In all this fecundity of "wonder works" it's hardly noticeable that humans have been painted out of the picture.