

## The Loving Space: Motherhood and the Natural Sublime in Contemporary Floral painting

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**Abstract.** The unconditional love of a mother is spacious. The paper discusses how the connection between a flower and the love of a mother's generosity is as limitless as Mother Nature. Drawing on the natural sublime, a reflection on motherhood becomes a series of large scale paintings of flowers. Rarely is the sublime referred to the greatness or inspirational characteristics or values of human beings through the intimate bonds of relationships. Principles of the sublime deliberates that transcendence, or the act of overcoming oneself arises when the limited ego bows down in awe when confronted by immense nature, by mountains or a thundering rapid. Equally, motherhood holds overreaching power which carries through generations like a river flower through time. Mother, are no less compared to the greatness of nature.

**Keywords:** Sublime; Mothers; Contemporary Floral Painting.

### 1. Introduction

Ancient writers, show that the sublime is merely a fleeting experience, an exciting rush that passes. It is a momentary experience, albeit an unforgettable one. British and German philosophical aesthetics are concern with : the vastness (we can see in the landscape paintings of Joseph Anton Koch and Caspar David Friedrich), power (where natural catastrophes are expressed in J. M. W. Turner's painting Mount Vesuvius), and violence (visible in the paintings of animals by Eugene Delacroix and George Stubbs) [1]. It is man mostly against nature. However, the root of the word sublime is *sublimis*, in Latin, meaning a quality of greatness regardless if this is in nature, principles, aesthetics or metaphysical. It is a greatness beyond calculation, one which cannot be measured. Thus, another kind of sublime exists. In contrast to the traditional theory of the sublime of experiencing nature with a sense of overwhelm or terror, Albert Cohen finds the sublime in the quiet love of his mother's repeated, daily acts of simple and humble things – cooking and doing her ceaseless chores in the kitchen. He writes that 'it's the love in her heart that is felt and seen. It is such humble things which make up sublime love.' [2]. Likewise, Mother Nature feeds life generously, crops beneath vast skies alongside a myriad of waterways landscapes that sustain its inhabitants as does the embrace of a mother. She and nature are inescapable. Driven by a series of images, this paper translates the concept of the natural sublime and mothers' love into paintings of flowers, specifically the jasmine. The idea of scale in nature as a sensation which prompts awe informs the corresponding spacious paintings: Flowers larger-than-life layer by petals the many caring characteristics of mothers.



Figure 1. Flower Image 1, 2023 Oil on canvas (Author's work) Work in progress  
Painting shows a partial view of Jasmine, a flower which represents and symbolizes Mothers in Thailand, given amongst each other for Mother's Day Celebration.

## 2. Love - as spacious as a flower

The sublime is rooted in humans relationships to the world, to nature, and in what lies beyond helps us to formulate an understanding of ourselves as a part of many and the complex. Emmanuel Kant located the sublime in human's initial incapacity to understand the terrifying vastness of the universe and the life within only to then surrender to the limitless. To lose ourselves in awe liberates us when recognizing our limitations beyond our individuality, seeing that we are inter-beings, that someone's mother is also someone's child. Additionally, we are linked with nature as well as thought. I propose the idea of a loving spaciousness as a metaphor for the vast experience of motherhood.

Connecting outwards, upwards to nature and inwards to the child is a process of unfolding, akin to jasmine releasing its bud to a flower. To witness how nature, which for no reasons of greed or grasping gives beauty for the sake of continuing life, to be a link of flowers to come, inspires wonder. Zylinska writes that 'it allows reason to think of the absolute totality, which imagination fails to grasp.' [3]. In this paper I search for an expression of motherly love in painting flowers dissolving their earthbound forms to something transcendent working with layers of transparency and scale. The work revisits my experience of motherhood raising three sons. I scale up the diminutive jasmine to be larger than life to connect through a physical closeness with the viewer becoming smaller than the flower. Love fills the canvas with one flower. It is an union between the flower and the viewer immersed in the loving presence of a mother. The mutual wonder of love for a child portrayed by the flower is embodied in paintings. Flowers and especially the jasmine, open petal by petal on the canvas into a lifetime of caring. Remembering the call for patience and surpassing my own needs when raising children I transform these thoughts into paintings felt as emotional spaces inviting the viewer to experience the love of a mother. By enlarging the flower, I invite the viewer to reflect on the internal experience of the sublime, that is awe. The conflicting feelings of the sublime and the responsibility of raising a child, both anxiety and transcendence, I transpose to brushstrokes in layers of transparency covering and revealing light and dark. I celebrate motherhood knowing that as a flower flourishes, so can motherhood. This is the sublime as beauty, and not terror, but awe (spacious scale) and the aesthetic (transparency) translated into my paintings. To me, motherly love is a kind and gentle force, although I am aware that not all experiences of motherhood translate into caring, but can be felt as hardship. Therefore the paintings are wholly

shaped by my experience. Kant, in his *Critique in the Power of Judgement* (1790) explored the dynamics of the sublime and concluded in his 'Analytic of the Sublime' that 'sublimity as an aesthetic concept is . . . entirely subjective' [4].

The sublime move through various contexts: the natural world, philosophical thought, and artistic reinforcing one another's claim to sublimity. Ultimately, the sublime is central to humanity's relationship with the world, and to the ever changing nature. Motherhood is equally temporal and forever. Glauthier asked if the sublime is merely a fleeting experience, an exciting rush that passes? [5]. It is a momentary experience, albeit an unforgettable one. It is one embrace after another between mother and child. One instant, one aspect of nature contains it all," said Claude Monet [6]. Nature, like a mother holds us in a grasp. Meeting in a moment it is the embrace that lingers in memory. Robert Doran in *The Classical Sublime* describes the sublime as a feeling of a dual structure, an experience equally overwhelming as exalted, overpowering and uplifting while subjective to everyone's emotional encounter. It is usually a moment of transcendence, described as the sense of amazement or fear [7].

Greatness or scale is central to the sublime. Claude Monet, who deeply cared for his family, and called his second wife saintly, painted ponds of waterlilies from the late 1890s, that now cover the entire walls in the L'Orangerie in Paris [8]. When entering the room, the viewer shrinks in size to the vast canvases. McKee writes that "Monet's last paintings mark a shift from a concern with the world's beauty to a concern with its sublime aspects." [9]. Monet's lily ponds that stretch around the room seem at first to be a peaceful vista of water lilies. Moving closer, the flowers are but a mass of fast moving, loose brushstrokes. When we see clearly by changing perspective moving from close to afar straining our necks to look at paintings that take over the room. Kant's proposition of awe may define the features that embody the sublime in Monet's paintings as a method of scale. The enormous eight feet high painting from floor to ceiling, loose broken brushstrokes that leave the edges uncovered, and the formlessness are regarded as the main indicator of the sublime. Other than its overwhelming dimensions, the paintings are usually painted with loose and light strokes resulting in partially covered canvases, sketching abstractions, a texture of roughness, and leaving all edges and ends unclear. Uncannily, Monet's loose brushstrokes show some similarity to Chinese ink paintings, where the brushstrokes are fast and light, sweeping over its surface as in a caress.

Similar techniques are used here in my work. I scale up my experimental work three times to overpower the room rather than to sit back on its walls. Parts of the canvas lay bare. No sharp edges indicate where the flower ends or begins. Close, the flower is formless. It may at first be a disconcerting shadow and the jasmine flower has lost its true form. The viewer, half blinded steps back, and the immense flower opens.

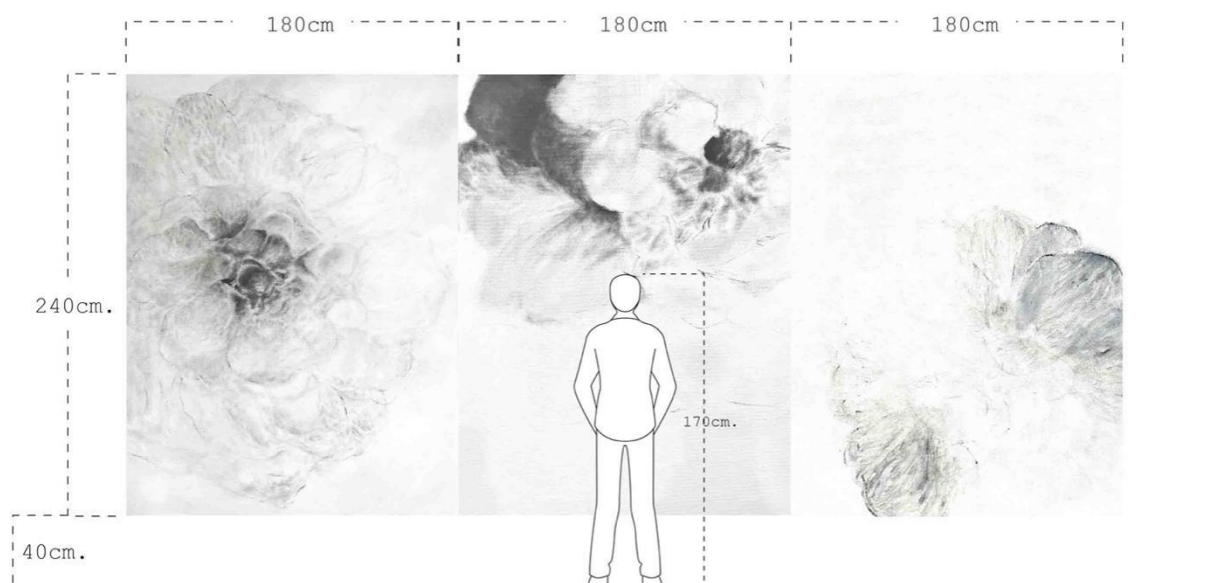


Figure 2. Viewer's perspective (Author's work)

The viewer is immersed in the love of a mother. An altered eyesight, (it) nevertheless served Monet's effort to separate appearance and metaphysical reality, but in an object- the canvas. Monet uses the size of the canvases, showing that the subject of the painting is as much the act of viewing as it is the landscape itself, asserting even more forcefully that the sublime exists in us, not the object [10]. The necessity of the object- i.e. the pairing which incorporates scale and movement- in my case , it is the painting. If Kant's Critical Sublime finds later Romantic echoes in the form of transcendence and the moral subject within, what about the 'other regarding' dimension of the sublime, its outwardness or the fact that external (paradigmatically) natural objects are required for the experience to arise. What is the status of 'nature' and its 'objects' if these are merely the 'occasion' for an experience that is fundamentally private and self-regarding. Can a painting be an object of contemplation rather than something to briefly look at? Here, the oversized canvases lead to the sublime, and layers of transparency and intermittent light illuminate pigments, a momentous reality which invites awe. The illusion of what we see first is not what we experience later. The following of my paintings, revolving around gentleness, unseen, sacrifice and serenity portray motherhood poetically, enforced by considerations of scale to evoke emotions of awe.

### 3. Unfolding the flower into spaciousness: the paintings

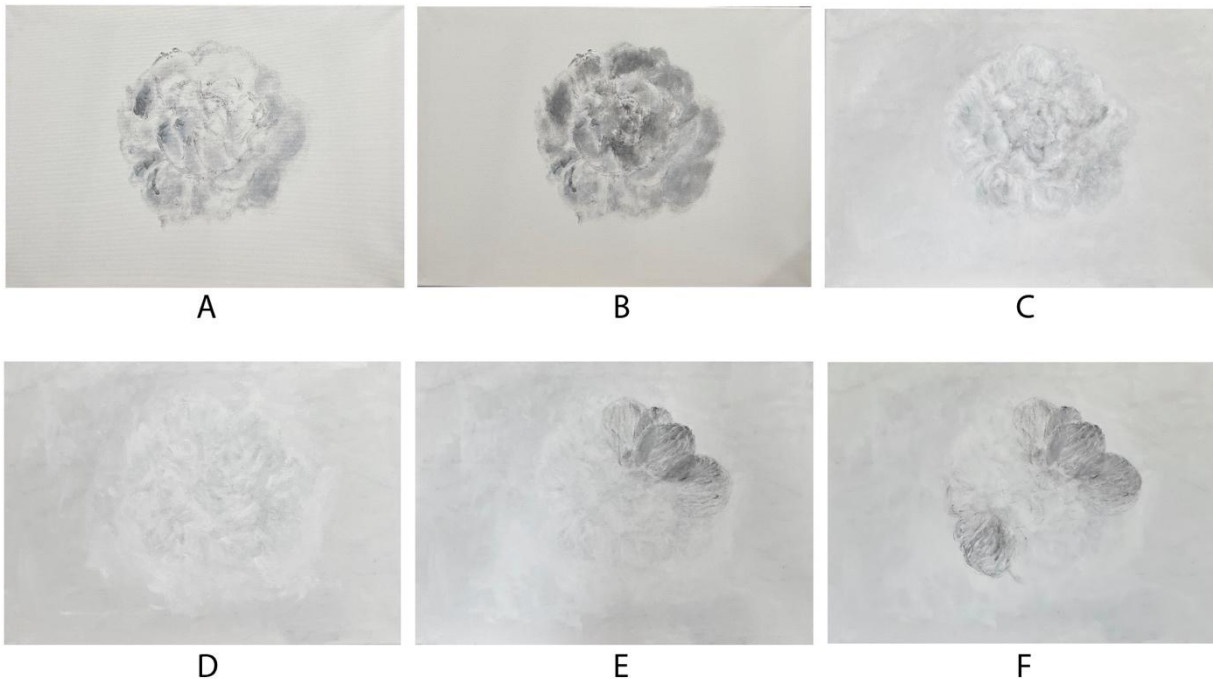


Figure 3. Process (Author's work)

Initially, the work starts as sketches on the canvas when painting a jasmine flower in winter. The above image shows the process and the beginnings of the final works following.

- A- The shape of the jasmine flower is formed with a light grey tone of paint
- B- A darker layer of grey is added to enhance the impression of flower to create depth
- C- White paint is then layered on the flower to show the jasmine cover in snow
- D- Here jasmine flower is surrounded by more white, as if it is immersed in fresh snow
- E- Dark colours pushes out of the white, creating a sense of part of the flower pushing forward, protruding out of the snow
- F- This images shows more visibility of parts of the jasmine flower appearing in dark tones. It evokes an emotion of a much stronger feeling of the subject pushing its way out of the snow scape towards the viewer



Figure 3. Flower Image 2, 2023 Oil on linen (Author's work)

Flower Image 2 (as in Figure 3): The gentleness of motherhood is evident when a baby is born, mothers wrap the child in their arms, often with a smile. Jasmine Flowers here is painted with light and gentle brush strokes. It is like drawing a sketch where emphasis is on the contrast of dark and light lines. The flowers hover with spaces between them, yet all the flowers are seeming to be drawn to each other. [5].

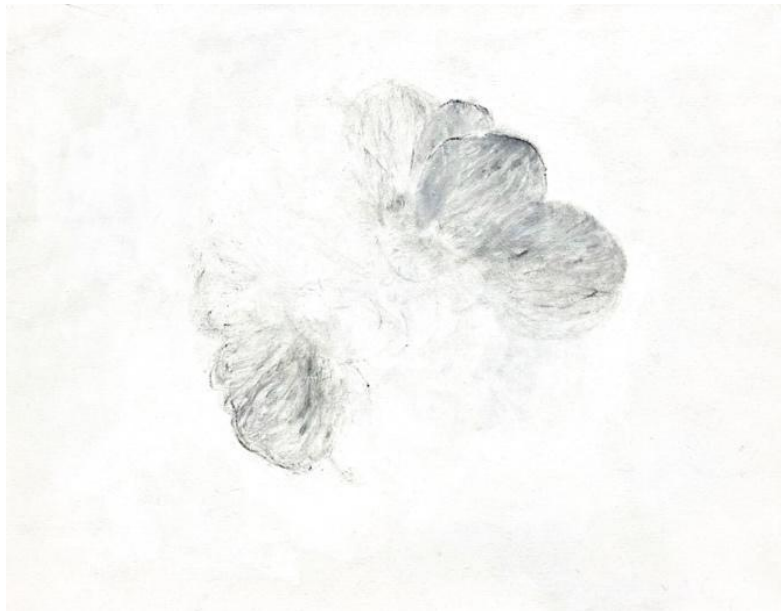


Figure 4. Flower Image 1, 2023 Oil on canvas (Author's work) Final

Flower Image 1 (as in Figure 4): The sacrificial nature of mothers may not be evident, but it is a series of unseen sacrifices. The unclear or missing part of the flower in the painting holds an intent to communicate that the unseen can be as valuable as the seen. Darker tones on the other petals are more obvious with some details of texture. I added white to the center part to create a heavy mist that covers up part of the flower. [6].





Figure 5. Flower Image 3, 2023 Oil on canvas (Author's work)

Flower Image 3 (as in Figure 5): Security is a basic emotional human need. Mothers are usually the first person the child connects with and looks for security. [7]



Figure 6. Flower Image 4, 2023 Oil on canvas (Author's work)

Flower Image 4 (as in Figure 6): Nurturing is essence, but is often overtaken by shortcuts of provided quick solutions. Nurturing demands time and patience.

#### 4. Summary

After concluding the series of jasmine, I find that the sublime in motherhood and nature is first and foremost an aspect of harmony secured by greatness. Motherhood is not control but

guidance. In nature, harmony superimposed by control is an impossibility. Nature comes alive by its generosity and sustains life like a mother tending to her child. What is not more awe inspiring and sublime than unconditional love? Relationships are balanced, not by power or terror but by the equality of constant flowing love and generosity. I find solace in realizing that harmony is a dynamic process, an equilibrium of wavering forces. I feel that the tensions and inner conflicts of a mother who must often forsake her own needs nevertheless can be peaceful, deceptively still as the toil of nurturing, or the flourishing of a flower. It is the white jasmine on a white canvas, barely discernible. 'The essential claim of the sublime...is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human predicament' with words and emotions' [11]. Drawing on the sublime I use the beauty of nature, its landscapes and the capacity of a woman to create life within herself, a child, rather than fear as the vehicle for transformation. In my paintings, I depict flowers knitted together by layers of transparency and translucency that almost like a veil pulled aside to offer a clear vision of what this emotion is - connected to motherly love. I start from a flower, a metaphor for the fragility of life and follow its changes from bud, to bloom and finally decay. 'Toothless or not, strong or weak, young or old, our mothers love us. And the weaker we are, the more they love us. Our mothers' incomparable love.' [12]. The child grows up, and the mother ages. Some parts of the flower are clearly delineated, seemingly stable, while other parts merge into the background. Half obscured, parts are either clear or veiled by layers of transparency growing into translucency, to see temporality as a phenomenon. Glimpsed in separate moments, to some it is a flower, and later to another, fallen petals, but always its essence, remains the jasmine.

The sublime argues that insight cannot be understood intellectually but must be experienced as a complete, almost physical sensation by mind and body. Motherhood is understood through the body. For the philosopher it starts with ideas, and for the painter, it is the surface of the canvas. Informed by the natural sublime its notion of awe, confronting scale, transparency and the momentary in painting, my flowers embody overcoming change and challenges of motherhood, a love towards transcendence.

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