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*Elegy II.III* by Mara De Luca  
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### Requiem for Sublime

“How were we first persuaded to perform  
our every act as though it were our last?  
As one might halt upon the last high ground,  
which shows him his own valley one last time,  
and turn; and linger; and hang back...  
... so we dwell here, forever taking leave” (Rilke 69, lines 14-19)

During the course of several conversations and studio visits I had with Mara De Luca over the past four years, I have developed a heartfelt admiration for her work. The artist passionately engages her viewers through critical investigations of the history of painting. She addresses the visual language employed by contemporary culture and reflects upon the dichotomy of the artificial modes that coexist with the atmospheric and often breathtaking Southern California backdrop.

The artist's practice operates largely within the realm of relationships. De Luca typically works in a series of paintings related by a formal or a conceptual theme. Each series comes to life and exists as a striking 'libretto for cantata' that takes the viewer on a euphonious journey.

The most recent collection of works, "Elegies" (2012) is based on the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and consists of ten paintings. One painting in particular titled, "Elegy II.III," resonates with me strongly. At first glance, the techniques employed by De Luca in the painting, such as pours and stains, render it familiar and recurring. The artist skillfully constructs a pictorial platform of a flat and brushless surface suggestive of Barnett Newman's well known painting "Vir Heroicus Sublimis", 1950-51 (see fig. 1) and it is of equally calm intensity. As in Newman's work, the "Elegy II.III" provokes a sense of sublimity through its size, space and light. De Luca's massive canvas measures approximately 182 cm x 274 cm, which further seduces an observer to submit to its unequivocal beauty. In addition, the subtle play of light to achieve an atmospheric effect brings to mind California "Light and Space" artist James Turrell. Turrell's iconic architectural installations "Skyscapes" (see fig. 2) offer a window into the natural sky allowing viewers a heightened experience of an ever-changing phenomenon of light to dusk.

Like Turrell, the tone of De Luca's pictorial space recalls an earlier movement, specifically the representational models of the nineteenth's century Romantic painters such as, Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner. The oil painting by Friedrich titled, "Moonlit Night on the Beach with Fishermen", 1817 (see fig. 3), and Turner's "Fishermen at Sea", 1796 (see fig. 4), depict dramatic and awe-inspiring nighttime atmosphere. Similarly, De Luca's "Elegy II.III" echoes with powerful visual pathos. De Luca focuses on an opaque, cloud-like form that glides across the picture plane as if to camouflage a misty, moonlit scenery. She achieves this effect by overlaying a freshly painted canvas with what she calls, "a ready-made monochrome" (De Luca) – a semi-transparent, black fabric. The material, when removed from its original context loses its function as an everyday fashion accessory and becomes a central figure in the work. This brings to mind ready-mades by Marcel Duchamp. However, unlike the sculptural objects that Duchamp created with "preference for ideas over purely visual effects" (Gale, "Ready-made"), De Luca's painting benefits from its ready-made in that it functions as a stand-in for an effective night cloud. The action of layering further enhances the shadowing effect as it literally covers the moonlit sky depicted on the canvas. The fabric's synthetic quality simulates an appropriate metaphor for our contemporary, yet superficial visual culture, while mellifluous black layers blur with thin washes of gray to provide a stunning natural backdrop.

The intelligence with which De Luca approaches the painting manifests itself in the complex layering of diverse visual and theoretical paradigms and her effortless play with both painterly material and process. She addresses existential questions through an art historical lens, drawing upon various painting conventions: she reinvents the techniques of late modernist painters, recreates the minimal atmospheric effects of the California Light and Space movement and simulates nature's Romantic sky setting. The underlying current that runs through these diverse art styles is one of transcendental experience. As Newman, Friedrich and Turner did, so does Turrell believe in the magnitude of spiritual content in the art they produced. For De Luca, Abstraction, Minimalism and Romanticism as referenced in "Elegy II.III" are tools used to mine the history of painting's rich visual language, to reaffirm the longstanding notion of art as an instrument to transcend chaos and to re-define its place in a contemporary and undeniably digital landscape.

#### Works Cited:

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*. Trans. Stephen Cohen. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1998.  
Print.

De Luca, Mara. "Re: review". Artist Statement. 11 Oct. 2012. Email

Gale, Matthew, Grove Art Online. "Ready-made". *MOMA*. Oxford University Press. 2009. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

#### Figure Captions:



Fig. 1. Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51. Oil on canvas. 242.2 x 541.7 cm. MoMA. New York. *MoMA*. Web. 22 Oct. 2012



Fig. 2. James Turrell, *Light Reign*, 2003. Interior view. Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA. *Henry Art Gallery*. Web. 24 Oct. 2012.



Fig. 3. Caspar David Friedrich, *Moonlit Night on the Beach with Fishermen*, 1817. Oil on canvas. Unknown Size. Collection unknown. Great Masters Gallery. *Topofart.com*. Web. 28 Oct. 2012.



Fig. 4. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Fishermen at Sea*, 1796. Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 122.2 cm. Tate Britain. *Tate, London*. Web. 28 Oct. 2012.