

A word...

Vast

BY TIM WATERMAN HONORARY EDITOR

I'm a child in the back seat of my parents' car, with my bare legs sticking to the vinyl seating and the blast from the window parting my hair in the wrong direction; there's the first hint of the tang of salt in the air, and I'm sure I hear the cry of a seagull.

The ocean smell deepens and up, over a rise, the first glint of the water! Over the next hill and the full view opens out. The whole ocean glittering up to the sharp edge of the horizon; limitless, vast.

As the second of three boys in a Navy family, this experience was a common one in my youth, but the thrill of approaching the ocean has never diminished. The other emotion experienced at the coast, if you can all it an emotion, is the sense of vastness. The phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard discussed this idea in a chapter of *The Poetics of Space* called 'Intimate Immensity'. In it, he expresses the sense of vastness as something that is both internal and external, a precarious yet exhilarating state of being in which the individual feels simultaneously humble and empowered. It is a state that dangles the ego out into a space where there is no boundary between immense knowledge and madness.

Oceans bring us hard up against not just the concept of immensity, but also the allied one of eternity. Because it is so painful to contemplate the end of the ceaseless waves, perhaps when the sun expands into a red giant, we are forced to imagine eternity. A seascape

is a landscape without end in both space and time.

Along with all the pleasant trips to the seaside, there were just as many reluctant trips to the waterfront to see my father off at the docks. It was a huge sense of loss to witness him sailing off into vastness and eternity, but to later witness his return was proof that one man could do so and return unscathed, heroic and enriched.

This sense of vastness, and the accompanying one of humility, is essential to understanding and working with landscape. Otherwise, there is a risk on the one hand of playing god, and on the other of being overwhelmed by scale. Playing god manifests itself in the 'master of the universe' view of the city. It is characteristic of a strong sense of conquest and dominion engendered by the bird's eye or plan view – the city as seen from the sky, perhaps from a boardroom in a skyscraper. This is another order of vastness, one of power and mastery and, of course, hubris. It's a vastness that's bottled up, smug, and it can be a caged animal with real potential for harm.

Thus, we need enough strength of will and confidence to act upon the landscape. We also need a sense of intimate immensity – both humility and empowerment – if we are to gratefully and eagerly approach the landscape in the same way as we approach the sea. ●



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