

Abstract

Exploring The Sublime and Affect in the Glacier Paintings of the artist Wilhemena Barns-Graham via the work of contemporary filmmaker and artist Mark Cousins.

The key themes of this essay include capturing a sense of the sublime, in landscape and visceral experience, as exemplified by the Glacier Paintings of Wilhemena Barns-Graham (1912 - 2004) and the Mark Cousins autobiographical film “A Sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things” 2024. We will be exploring the Sublime, Barns-Graham's methods of conveying the epic experience of the sublime in nature through her glacier paintings and considering whether these landscapes are effectively conveyed by Cousins through the cinematic as an equivalent experience.

This essay addresses the themes of space and place in the works of Wilhelmina Barns Graham. We are investigating the sublime as an affecting factor on the body and in landscape by examining the question, did the landscape abstractionist painter Wilhelmina Barns-Graham experience the sublime on Grindelwald Glacier in Switzerland in May 1949, and has the Mark Cousins film, “A Sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things” 2024 successfully conveyed a sense of the sublime by cinematically translating the work of the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham for a contemporary audience? In examining the work of both artists, we will investigate if it is possible for Cousins to have cultivated a co-existent relationship with an artist he has never met, to effectively produce a cinematic work in symbiosis. Could the work of Mark Cousins exist without Barns-Graham, and has he effectively used cinema to bring to life an epiphany experienced in nature by a woman in 1949?

In identifying an affinity to this artist's dogged persistence, the beauty of her work and lone wolf spirit this essay aligns with the spirit and values of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. This essay is intended to pay attention to and honour the work of a woman who typical of a generation of female artists who due to circumstances and attitudes in their lifetimes have not had the focus and attention they deserve. It is hoped that prior to the 2026 retrospective at Tate St Ives, we can view the world through Barns-Graham's vision, brought to life by Mark Cousins, offering us a glimpse to deeper things indeed.

Introduction

This essay argues that the artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912-2004) experienced a bodily and affective incidence of the Kantian Sublime during an expedition to the Grindelwald Glacier, Switzerland in May 1949. The artist went on to produce over 100 works based on the glaciers, which she explored through painting and abstraction over the course of her lifetime, until her death in 2004. This experience is both reactivated and reframed by the artist Mark Cousins through cinematic form. Does Cousins succeed in bringing this sublime encounter to life giving the viewer a sense of reliving the experience of Wilhelmina Barns Graham as opposed to just documenting it?

About the artist

Born to Scottish landed gentry 8 June 1912, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham set her sights on a career as an artist as early as age eight “Amongst my earliest memories are my pencil and crayon drawings, abstract irregular or rectangular shapes, usually outlined in blue and filled with a single colour” (*McQueen. P, Art Quarterly, Winter 2024*)

Barns-Graham was dissuaded from pursuing art by her parents, and endured following gruelling childhood respiratory and bronchial illnesses, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, pleurisy and bronchitis, she received encouragement and financial support from an Aunt and enrolled to the Edinburgh college of art in 1931, and enjoyed the benefit of a sequence of scholarships there until 1937. Due to ongoing ill health and the outbreak of war limiting travel to Europe she was directed to St Ives and the artistic community of up-and-coming modernists there. She encountered the work of Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum and Miriam Gabo and Alfred Wallis. Working out of the famed Porthmeor studios and developing her landscape artworks she showed great aptitude for form, and colour and it is impossible to imagine anyone working in these studios without developing an affinity for light, space and seascapes.

Encountering Barns-Graham on film through Mark Cousins

The genesis of this essay followed an initial encounter with the work of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham via a chance viewing of the Mark Cousins film “A sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things” which was affective on my psyche. Who was this artist whose work seemed at once familiar and brand new? I was enlivened by the mission of the film – to bring to life the colour, scale and life of Barns Graham using non-linear storytelling. Not quite an avant garde exploration but using techniques at times reminiscent of Stan Brakage, with layers of colour and chaotically falling shapes across the screen to invoke a sense of feeling, affinity and awe in the artist's experience and subsequent works.

Further reading and research into the re-presentation of Cousins installation presented at Edinburgh fruit market 2022 it is evident that Cousins has an affinity for the work and personality of Barns-Graham. Through Cousin's reframing of Barns-Graham work audiences are encouraged to consider the belief that Barns-Graham had a sublime encounter on Grindelwald glacier. It seems almost accepted as fact by Cousins and by Rob Airey of the Barns-Graham trust that we believe that the Glacier paintings of Barns-Graham produced throughout her career are a key visual touchstone in exploring the contemporary sublime, and that her explorations of light, space and abstraction have connections to, and pave the way for a number of contemporary artists to further explore light, space and materialism in their works. It is this essays stance that the subtle modernist reworkings of form and space in these paintings by Barns-Graham is on its way to becoming more widely recognised when we look at her work retrospectively, and with a more informed position about women artists, her role in St Ives modernism, and her character and personality. All have a part to play and to turn our attentions to in the current preparedness of a life's retrospective due at Tate St Ives, in the later of 2026.

The current contemporary position of Barns-Graham views her as a female artist about to have her breakthrough renaissance 22 years after her death. Recent articles such as that by Paul McQueen writing in *Art Quarterly*, winter 2004 refers to a "flurry of cultural activity" surrounding Barns-Graham in recent times. This essay offers an opportunity to explore the role of a woman who doggedly pursued a painting career and has experienced self doubts along the way. McQueen and this essay responds in turn to two key texts about the artist, namely W. Barns-Graham, *A Studio Life*, Lynne Green the key artists monograph published by Lund Humphries and due for a re-issued publication in 2026, and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, *The Glaciers*, Edited by Rob Airey, the director of the Wilhemina Barns-Graham trust and again publishing with Lund Humphries.

Upon examining Barns Grahams character, perhaps means that she is not front and centre of a St Ives modernist painting movement and perceived more as a lone wolf or independent individual. Her role perhaps seems to be one more of continuity, than loudest voice, e.g. such as comparison to Barbara Hepworth or Ben Nicholson, contemporaries as opposed to partners. Keeping the scene going rather than individual celebrity. According to Hall writing in her *Guardian Obituary* hints as much (see bib).

Key factors in attending to the work of Barns-Graham include, examining Her response to encounter with Grindelwald glacier as her process of documenting and recording via drawing and painting her experience of the sublime.

That the continuing return in her work to deconstructed landscapes, of glaciers or volcanic fields and her use of geometric planes to express landscape appeals to a

sense of modernism, an eye for geometric form and explorations of light, shade contrasts and use of the colour blue in its glacial hues.

How successful her work is in first representing and then abstracting the essential qualities of light, colour and a sense of geometric planes of a glacier.

Feeling an affinity with Barns-Graham and fascination with her experiences of the glacier, her physical and tangible response to the glacier as wanting to be inside, above and part of the ice. Her absorption of this landscape into her psyche and continuing attempts to redraw and reframe it over a fifty year period tell me she found something important within this landscape. I want to explore further what this could be.

I have paid particular attention to the writing of Alice Strang and the accompanying texts with the book *Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, The Glaciers* Ed Rob Airey. This has become a key text for this essay.

We are also considering if Barns-Graham is making work representationally and then abstracting her view over the course of her career. The glacier as a motif, and as representation of a state of being, in rapture, or awe immersed in an alien landscape. Is she observing from a safe distance, or immersing herself within the planes of the ice field? Professor Peter Nienow, write in *Art and Ice Loss – A Glaciologist's look at Wilhelmina Barns- Graham* (included in *Glaciers- Airey et al 2024*) that Barns-Graham's visit to the Upper Grindelwald Glacier, is “often described as an epiphany” leading us to be encouraged to accept this as fact. Nienow makes interesting observations about glaciers as sites of flow, slow but critically landscapes of change and perpetual dynamism even though at a glacial pace. He draws our attention to the special qualities of these landscapes, and their impermanence's especially in the light of global warming. Nienow refers in his essay to Barns-Grahams vivid and poetic description where she “publicly articulated at length the epiphany which she experienced on the Grindelwald Glacier in a typescript she prepared and sent to Mary Charmont, of Tate Gallery London in early 1965

“the contrast of solidity and transparency, many reflected colours in strong light, the warmth of the sun melting and changing the forms, in a few days a thinness could become a hole, a hole a cut out shape losing a side, a piece could disintegrate and fall off, breaking the silence with a sharp crack and its echoes. It seemed to breathe...! This likeness to glass and transparency, combined with solid rough ridges made me wish to combine in a work all angles at once, from above through and all around, as a bird flies, a total experience.” (This passage is clearly a key, and referenced by Mark Cousins in his letter to Barns-Graham and forms the basis for the poem “In a Few Days Thinness” by Holly Corfield Carr, both included in *Glaciers, 2024 Airey, R. ed*)

A key thread of this essay is attempting to identify if Barns-Graham is on route to the contemporary sublime in her glacial landscape painting. Examining why was this theme so important in her work and how can these paintings be interpreted as fore runners to her work about light, space and capturing a sense of awe essential to artists who may be reinterpreting themes of the sublime, and environment in their work.

There are obvious visual parallels between the glacier paintings of Barns-Graham and the sky spaces of James Turrell, in the way in which they explore qualities of light, the colour blue and interact within the field of experience of the fluctuating ephemeral qualities of natural light and exterior landscape. It can be argued that in drawing attention to these qualities in natural world the artists are encouraging viewers to reflect upon the landscape within, reflecting upon changing moods and mutable desires within the human condition. Post her visit to the Grindelwald Glacier Barns-Graham spent three years making Glacier inspired works all in associated hues of blue (*Glaciers*, 2024)

Appreciation of this artwork leads to some direct personal reflection of experiences of visiting a glacier. The qualities of air, light, space and magical novelty of an environment which is harsh and encourages a spirit of adventure to visit and experience. One who has visited a glacier is drawn to hold onto the remembered qualities of light and space, a freshness, and an enlightened feeling.

On rewatching and reflecting again on the film and revisiting videos of the creation of the Edinburgh Fruitmarket Installation “Like a Huge Scotland” 2022 it is clear that Cousins may have felt some of the same. He states ‘I feel infected by the work of Willie (as she insisted on being called). When the Barns-Graham trust kindly let me see her notebooks I slightly felt as if I was looking in a mirror. She spoke what you could call a private language of form, of grid, of maths, which is my language too. She was synaesthetic, and she was drawn to the almost cubist aspect of the natural world.’

Cousins writes a letter to “Willie” included in the book *The Glaciers* (Cousins, 2024) in which he outlines the suggestion that Barns-Graham visits the glacier in a state “primed to love the glacier. Her brain ready for ignition” and proposes a number of potential triggers or areas of interest, which I mean to interrogate using their headings below, and which serve to offer a way into analysing these Barns-Graham within a critical framework. Focussing on and working towards the hypothesis that Barns-Graham did experience The Sublime in the Kantian sense and that this then continued to haunt her work over the course of the next fifty years. Barns-Graham frequently revisited the glacier and most specifically in her paintings and draughtsmanship

Experiencing the sublime

If we consider Barns-Graham glacial excursion in the context of the writings of Yi-Fu Tan (1930 – 2022) *Space and Place 1977 – The perspective of Experience*, we can liken it to the experience of topophilia or forming an affective bond with one's environment. It seems very likely that Barns-Graham encountered an emotional experience which had a lasting psychological effect upon the act of placing herself within that location and continued to revisit the Grindelwald Glacier over many years via painting to reach an associated emotional or reminiscent state. It seems likely that for Barns-Graham when creating glacial paintings she was able to reinhabit a sense of place within that work and through capturing qualities of the glacier, thus cultivating a state of environmental perception, or mode of being, which she was creatively able to revisit over the course of her life, accessible to her through creating this work. In this case as Fu Tan predicts, “experience forms reality” then we can guess that by making these works Barns-Graham is able to select or revisit a reality, possibly one where she felt awe, inspiration through interpreting light, landscape as form and a personal freedom. Her escapism manifests through landscape abstraction and is documented in *The Glacier paintings*. Over the course of her life her work is characterized by a move towards greater abstraction, focussed and distilled further to tighter views, more elemental compositions and adopting a less is more quality distinct from her earlier works. Initial Glacier drawings, and early works such as *Upper Glacier, 1950* can be almost frenetic in their energy with multiple use of layering planes and facades over each other. Later art works take only a single element and play it out to its full conclusion such as in *Glacier Field 1978*.

Use of directional light and contrast. Barns-Graham glacier paintings are immediately evocative of glacial blues and deep shadow play inherent in a glacial landscape. She found a way to push mark making skill, through drawing geometric shapes, layering planes and ice sheets. In Barns-Graham's paintings she develops a lifetime's sense of place through capturing the light in her home town of St Andrews, and later St Ives, both sea side locations known for the shifting amorphous atmosphere known to exist between the constant changes of sea air, misty fret filled air, and strong contrast of reflected light or the line of a seaward facing horizon present in seaside places. Having trained initially as a landscape painter and becoming accomplished by the time she moved to St Ives, Barns-Graham had expressed that she is looking for ways to abstract her paintings, beyond the comfortable and into modernism. This formative transition is documented in *W. Barns-Graham a studio life, Green, L*, seen by many as the definitive text on the artist's life.

Solitude. On May 29 1949 Barns-Graham reports to her Aunt in a letter that she had done two drawings having “spent one day by myself – I went up to a glacier about 11/4 hour climb and drew there taking sandwiches with me” this sounds idyllic, and seems

significant in capturing her changing mood, a shift from passive tourist to active participant, venturing off for some alone time. Sandwiches on the glacier, YES.

Sound. Imagining the cracking of the ice, the echoes. Imagining this as added a frisson of danger and genuine terror to the experience.

Gender - Photographs which show Barns-Graham on the glacier show a scene demonstrating some physical accomplishment and freedom Barns-Graham appears like depictions of mountaineers or explorers her glacial climbing gear and round snow shades giving her a contemporary cool edge. The spirit of female achievement and inhabiting the outdoors in an accomplished and joyful manner is evident in these images. Although as Cousins mentions in his "letter to Willie" she is by no means the first woman mountaineer, and indeed since there is a fine emerging set of female voices inhabiting the landscape of outdoor writing. The walking writings and detailed observations of Nan Shepherd for example go some way to highlighting how important women's narrative is in the cannon of outdoor writing. Paving the way for further contemporary artists exploring the female inhabitation of outdoor spaces and nature. This aspect itself could form an entirely separate essay.

Body. Barns-Graham experienced some ill health throughout her life, including breathing difficulties and bronchial stress. The act of walking a glacier may have induced some of the symptoms of pulmonary oedema, or at a minimum light-headedness', or even just the pure endorphin rush of exercise, that brings with it a sense of euphoria and relief. Barns-Graham may have felt joy, feelings of mental freedom, release of societal expectation and happiness associated with walking and the sheer joy of bodily accomplishment at having completed the climb.

Mathematics. In possession of a brain which sees differently Cousins points out that Barns Graham experiences the world through the lens of Synaesthesia, literally seeing in colours. Her ability to distil works using abstracted planes and lines can be linked to her mathematical analysis of planes and geometry. Her interest (as many others of the St Ives cohort) in the golden section and theories of natural geometry found in writings such as *On Growth and Form*(1917) by Scottish biologist, mathematician and classicist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (Art Weekly, Winter 2024) provided rich toolset to introduce nature based abstraction to her paintings. She was a trained landscape draftsman, married to an architect and immersed in the visual language conventions of these creative pathways. Maths and art connect and converge though technical drawing conventions, Barns-graham would have absorbed all these into her practise, and they are clearly evident to see with the drawings and paintings of the Glacier works.

Modernism – the planes and lines that Barns-Graham draws in her glacier paintings are similar in style and appearance to the modernist paintings of Ben Nicholson or the shapes and forms of the sculptures of Barbara Hepworth. All artists of the St Ives artistic community. The modernist Naum Gabo was a direct influence, with B Barns-Graham acquiring at least one of his works (see bib Barns-Graham blue book)

Pilgrimage – the act of walking in and of itself is often on the path of pilgrimage. We know that Barns-Graham is religious, Cousins refers to this in his letter (*Glaciers*, 2024) and the fact that she “went on pilgrimages”. I consider that this expedition to the glacier was later revisited many times by Barns-Graham as a kind of “pilgrimage of the mind”. Having been a longtime reader and appreciator of the Psychogeographical writings of Iain Sinclair, we are prepared to accept readily his viewpoint that “the most important walks are often the ones we revisit over and over again in our minds or dreams”. Sinclair writes in *The Black Apples of Gower* about revisiting walks back along the cliff-top paths of the Gower peninsula in South Wales where he grew up. He recognises these walks were significant waymarks in his life and experiences “sudden heart stopping rush of light and space” climbing the dunes of his remembered childhood, a physical sensation of Proustian rushing nostalgia, or a suggestion that time, memory and yearning for place live inside of us until they can be bodily reactivated either by acts of revisiting, remembrance or perhaps even loss.

In relation to this stance as a central belief in this essay it is also worth considering here the Nietzschean theory of the eternal return, that revisiting a site (a literal place) or to mentally inhabit a recurring thought or idea was for Barns-Graham a way of excising or in modern terms “working through” the emotional sense of place she was affected by her attachment to the Glacier. Using Nietzsche to frame this concept of returning repetitively to what you like, as a mode of exploring a subject matter and operating mental reiteration, repeated thoughts or revisiting the glacier as a “profound thought experiment” to extrapolate intention of thought, interrogate meaning or experience a feelings of inspiration, meaning or higher thinking, and perhaps for Barns-Graham to repeatedly access feelings of the sublime, higher power or greater meaning and to convey this in her work. This essay does not however counter consider that Barns-Graham produced works in which the Glaciers represent a spiritual dimension or imagined worlds, say in a similar vein to an artist such as Swedish painter Hilma af Klint. Although Barns-Graham is constructing her own glacial realm of experience in her paintings they are at their heart based in experiential reality and recalled from perceptive memory, based on sketches made during 1949 and the period directly after.

The sublime in art and exploring interpretations of the sublime. Kant v Burke and experiencing terror on the glacier.

There is an accepted route to travel when considering The Sublime within art and the tradition of landscape painting. Edmund Burke proposes in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) essentially frames the sublime as experiential as an external force on the body which rooted in awesome power (of nature) terror related to man’s position within the world or nature, and overwhelming power, human force against the elements.

Immanuel Kant argues in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and develops his formal philosophical argument that the sublime is not found in nature, but within the context of human mind. That the natural environment may be awesome and inspiring but without human self-awareness the sublime is impossible to achieve. That the true sublime state arises when one is confronted by something immeasurable or formless.

How do we prove that Barns-Graham Glacier work reflects a specific kind of sublime experience, or indeed that her visit to the Grindelwald Glacier was more than a tourist day trip and in fact an encounter of significance where she experienced the awe of the sublime?

Barns-Graham gives us some clue in her writings, detailed in *Glaciers 2024*, she is writing to her parents from the Oberland Hotel she states her initial impression of the picturesque scenery of Switzerland thus “I don’t alas see anything I want to draw. I know Switzerland is grand, beautiful and exciting, but as an artist, to me anyway, it has no appeal.” (detail from a handwritten letter of 23rd May 1949, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust Archive, as featured in *Glaciers*, Airey et al 2024)

This essay draws the conclusion that Barns-Graham experiences the sublime in a state of rising above her physical state and attains an awareness or out of body experience / state of bliss. Perhaps the glacier was able to place her within an altered state, of consciousness, which when she reflected upon it latterly became the source of fascination, and the paintings became an attempt to interrogate or recapture this state.

The sublime – In the glacier paintings Barns-Graham is showing us what her visceral experiences were on the Grindelwald Glacier. She uses all the aforementioned techniques of capturing light and space and uses a range of techniques to capture the atmosphere and appearance of the glacier. Barns-Graham takes her background as a landscape painter and uses her draftsperson skills to explore the ice plane, crevasses and vast landscape. She interrogates space geometrically and light by layering blue colours and opacities in her paintings of repeated motifs of folded ice planes.

Barns-Graham honouring of the landscape in this way can be seen as in a similar vein as Ansel Adams landscape of America, capturing the vastness and embodying a kind of awe in the landscape As cousins points out in his unsent letter to Barns-Graham she is not creating a picturesque or romantic version of this landscape. She is using light and form to interpret a sense of place, capturing the glaciers unique qualities, but also conveying the personal.

We know that for a landscape to be considered sublime in the sense of Kant, it must intimate not only picturesque beauty, but a sense of fear and or foreboding.

So this essay interprets the glacier paintings of Barns-Graham through the lens of a Kantian sublime. Referring to her experiences of affect on the body, mind and leaving a forever mark impressed upon her psyche.

When considering the work of Barns-Graham within the context of a contemporary sublime I found myself considering a wealth of other artists with what could be considered parallel conclusions to be drawn from their work in terms of obsession with light and form artists, creative inferences and similar suggested relationships to the sublime. I found myself wondering what Barns-Graham made of artist whose work using modern materials to interrogate light and space. The glass installation artist Helen Pashgian described in the Hayward catalogue for the exhibition *Spaceshifters* as a key figure of the light and space movement. Pashgian employs industrial materials like glass to “*incandescent effect*”. Her work featuring columns or ethereal towers, colours are blues and ultramarines, opacity and the transparent qualities of surfaces to “observe change, receding visible and invisible” (see bib) form and light qualities.

One would also include within this comparable investigation into light, space and ethereal form the works of the Californian light and space artists, the colourful planes of Robert Irwin, the relief sculptures of Larry Bell, or the encapsulation oil field room to immerse the viewer in a space and place of Richard Wilson. All seem to go some way to world making, and space creating, which in some sense the glacier paintings of Wilhelmina Barns Graham attempt to do through the medium of abstract painting and repeat drafting of form.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can now state with some certainty that the painter Wilhelmina Barns-Graham had a bodily experience of the Kantian Sublime whilst visiting the Grindelwald glacier on her 1949 expedition, and that the affect on her was such as to influence her work for the next fifty years. That the evolution of the body of work Glacier paintings by Wilhemina Barns-graham shows consistent exploration and development of this happenstance to the artist. I now firmly believe that through reiteration and repetitious exploration and abstraction of this subject matter we can clearly demonstrate the glacier as a spiritual, or totemic site for Barns-Graham as detailed by Airey et al in Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, *The Glaciers*. That through this repetition she has created a topophilic space to which she mentally returns.

This essay is confirmative that the artist Mark Cousins has successfully achieved what he intended to convey a sense of the sublime using cinematic storytelling. Cousins has succeeded in bringing the work of Barns-Graham to life and showcasing her paintings and lifework to a wider audience. Succeeded in conveying a sense of spirit of place and experience of the glacier as a topophilic space using the cinematic devices of storytelling, colour, reproducing at scale the artworks and an unusual narrative style.

Writing this essay has had the consolidating effect of reflecting on what might be the current relevance of the works of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, almost 20 years after her death. The forthcoming retrospective of her work at Tate St Ives hopes to give status, acknowledgement and new appreciative audience to an artist's whose resilient strength of character and position as a lifelong committed female artist.

It is hoped that Willie continues to be an inspiration for aspiring female artists. That her spirit of conviction and lifelong commitment to making art her own way continues to inspire. The work of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham matters now, as an example of the slow burn. How an experiential moment can have lasting psychological effect on an artist's character. Her work acts as a reminder to continue to develop trust in a human condition that has the strength to be drawn into a lifetime of making art based on a moment of affect when experiencing the awe of the natural sublime. A reminder to perhaps slow down, observe the world and to look for sublime moments when we least expect them.

In an ever increasingly digital age, where experience is distilled as mere seconds of engagement, through a screen, the idea that actual immersion in a landscape, physical living and remembered is an important and appealing one. That despite the fact that Cousins draws conclusions about Barns-Graham's work throughout the use of projection and cinema, these screens themselves still have an atmosphere of a bygone age, a window through which to experience at scale one artists vision and to inhabit the sublime as experienced by Wilhelmina Barnes-Graham. As such this essay concludes that through this cinematic re-representation and reframing Cousins has indeed entered into a symbiotic relationship with Barnes Graham and is effective entirely in his mission to sensitively introduce her work to new audiences, by showcasing an insight into her unique perspective of the world.

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