

Conversations with Turner

The Watercolors



SKIRA

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Turnerworld: Perspectives from the Contemporary

John Akomfrah's deep well of consideration is only one of many lively and nuanced affinities for Turner's art among artists and curators working today, each confronting Turner and his impact in a radically different global context than during his life. At the time of this conversation, Mariana Marchesi was overseeing this exhibition's debut in Buenos Aires, notable as the first monographic Turner exhibition to reach Latin America. She grapples with the question of how to engage a broad audience coming to Turner for the first time.

MARIANA: One of the ways we wanted to appeal to our audience was for people to see the modern aspects of Turner.

One of the first things people understand about Turner here is they see him as a great Impressionist. So, we try to draw the audience from that side, but afterwards, explain in the gallery why Turner is not an Impressionist. And of course, you have a group of magnificent watercolors. Not many words are needed to explain their importance because the visual aspects of the works are always the ones that work best. That was the first way we tried to catch the audience.

NICHOLAS: So can we respond to something almost universal in these watercolors? Is there something we can all relate to here?

MARIANA: Yes, and you will see when you have the exhibition on display in Mystic that there is something really special about the image. There's something that art historians—I was an art historian before I was a curator—there is always this power in the image that works best for the audience. Afterward, you have all this other information you can supply, but in the end, I think for artists also, the image comes first.

Amy Concannon has risen within a generation of younger British art historians, and works directly with the Turner Bequest at Tate Britain, the beating heart of Turner's legacy.

AMY: I would agree with Mariana. He was an artist very much working in response to his time. In terms of his technical innovations, he was completely ahead of his time. It's the colors, it's the techniques, it's, as you say, the power of the image that is really quite timeless in a way. We've now come to be used to the unfinished works—they would have been quite shocking to his contemporaries. They wouldn't

*Reichenau and the Upper Rhine, c. 1842–43
(detail)*

have seen unfinished works until years after his death. Whereas, since the days of Impressionism, Abstraction, and so on, his works have a renewed visual appeal because we're now more accustomed to see things that don't have a resolution, where your imagination does the work for you. I think that has a great appeal.

*Victoria Pomery is founding director of Turner Contemporary in Margate; a new gallery that sits quite literally atop the site of Sophia Booth's former rooming house, where Turner spent some of his later days observing the play of light across the Channel. He called the skies here "the loveliest in all Europe."*¹

VICTORIA: We opened Turner Contemporary in 2011; we don't have a collection, and we don't have any Turner works so we borrow from other collections. The gallery was a culturally led regeneration project. One of the aims was to celebrate Turner's links with Margate, a small seaside town in Kent. Margate was incredibly important to Turner, and the quality of the light and his time here was, I think, very inspirational. A lot of the visitors we have aren't familiar with Turner's work or anyone else's work, for that matter. But there is a timelessness about the works. Quite often people will visit who have never been to a museum or gallery in their lives; they turn up and see a Turner work or a work by a contemporary artist, like Katie or Ellen, and they are able to get something from that work. It might be visual, or it might be about history. There are a whole range of factors that can lead to an engagement with audiences. We've found with people coming new to art that they can really get an essence of what Turner is, because Turner's work is very much about place—his sense of place is really important. And here, we have the advantage of looking out on the very views that Turner painted. Light was important for Turner

and he captured much about the light on this north Kent coast. So, we're in a fortuitous position in some ways, introducing people to Turner's work. There are still people who look at some of the watercolors, who can't believe that they were made in the 1820s and 1830s, I think because they look so fresh and so vital. We've had exhibitions here where the works look like they were just made yesterday. They're so fresh. I think there's something about Turner's work that is very special, and particularly some of the watercolors, in which viewers can really immerse themselves.

Scottish artist Katie Paterson (b. 1981) takes a break from hanging her first retrospective in the Turner Contemporary galleries to join our conversation.² Highly conceptual works, such as The Cosmic Spectrum (2019), a giant color wheel charting the "average" color of the universe, from the Big Bang to our ultimate demise, and Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon) (2007), in which Katie translated Beethoven's best known sonata into Morse code and broadcast it to the moon, playing the notes that bounced back, are accompanied by a selection of Turners showing his interest in cosmic subjects and natural forces. Among the watercolors Katie selects is Sea and Sky (c. 1835, p. 164), also in the exhibition at Mystic.

KATIE: I've just come out of nearly finishing hanging the exhibition with twenty-five Turners.

NICHOLAS: How does it feel to be a young artist working in this century in a two-artist exhibition with Turner?

KATIE: It's surreal. It feels very privileged. But at the same time, I've tried to remove myself a bit from that feeling whilst we've been working on the show. I'm not a historian; I don't have any kind of art history background. So, I was coming to Turner

from as fresh a perspective as anyone else. A starting point for me was to try to find the relationships that might have been there. For example, Turner's relationships working with scientists of his day. We've borrowed works by Mary Somerville and Caroline Herschel, female scientists that he would have known and been inspired by in his time. I was looking through lots of archives—like the strata that he was interested in, the rocks and the mountains and glaciers. So relationships arose—not just by chance, because landscape and light and color are huge Turner subjects—but they unraveled as we developed the exhibition, and I found out so much more than I ever could have imagined might connect us through time. We might work in completely different ways, yet we share the same world: a little bit of his world then and this world now.

NICHOLAS: It sounds in the way that you described your own work as if you're updating the sublime for our century.

VICTORIA: Yes, I think in a way that's absolutely true.

NICHOLAS: It's a subject that's been out of fashion for some time, but I've always questioned why. It's critical to be able to position yourself in the universe to feel incredibly small. There's a real value to being able to experience our infinitesimal-ness, if that's a word.

AMY: The ecological sublime is a hugely relevant topic, and a lot of what's just been described reveals a nice parallel between Turner's time and our time. Things were changing in society and on the earth in the landscape around Turner at a pace that was frightening to many people. Many of the issues Turner is grappling with are those we are struggling with now: how to make sense of social, ecological,

environmental change. You see those in Turner's work but also all of the things that Katie was just describing in terms of the cosmos—deep time, history, how that's registered in the earth and the landscape. You could draw a line between Turner's images of the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the shocking contemporary photographs of polar bears struggling in the Arctic—the connection for us being their reflection on how humans have, over time, impacted the planet in horrifying ways.

British-born artist Ellen Harvey (b. 1967) lives in New York City, where she previously delved into the traditions of her home island with her New York Beautification Project (1999-2001), a series of forty small oval oil paintings of traditional English landscapes painted illegally over graffiti sites around Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn.³ Her interest in Turner has only grown since.

ELLEN: I am really interested by what everyone is saying about Turner and the sublime, in part because my feelings about Turner have changed so much over the years. Growing up in the UK it felt as if Turner was constantly being crammed down my throat and I have to admit I loathed him. I liked paintings with lots of naked people and details; I disliked landscapes in general and Turner in particular. I was convinced that his inclusion in the canon was almost entirely due to the British desire to have invented Impressionism before the French. I only began to reconsider him when I was working on the *New York Beautification Project*, illegally painting landscapes over graffiti sites in New York City, and started to reconsider the picturesque landscape tradition. When you look at a lot of landscapes, it's impossible not to be struck by their formulaic quality. It made me realize just how unusual Turner was. He just wasn't interested in the carefully staged foreground with the fluffy

sheep and shepherdesses and receding planes ended with a charming ruin silhouetted against a nicely beclouded sky. He punches right out of the frame of the picturesque convention.

When Victoria asked me to make a new work related to Turner for the opening of Turner Contemporary, I had just started to overcome my rather infantile aversion and was excited to rethink his work. I also became fascinated with him as a social creature. He was so competitive and anxious to secure his place in history but he also had boundless enthusiasm and love for the world. I wanted to make that love visible again, especially his love for Margate.

That's why I ended up creating a version of the London gallery that Turner maintained from his late twenties until his death, when it turned out that he'd left its contents to the nation—the famously overwhelming Turner Bequest. He essentially built a museum to himself—which was as unusual then as it would be now. It became rather dilapidated and full of cats in the end. There's a very touching George Jones painting of Turner laid out in his coffin in his gallery surrounded by all his favorite paintings that I used as a template, replacing all the paintings with rear-illuminated mirrors that I hand-engraved in the style of Turner's engravings with a 360-degree panorama of contemporary Margate.⁴ The outside was labelled "ARCADIA" in big fairground letters so that the piece ended up looking like the unholy lovechild of Turner's gallery and an amusement park funhouse mirror attraction. In some ways, it ended up being a rather dark commentary, both on the screen-mediated fragmentation of our experience and on the way in which human enthusiasm for a particular landscape often leads to its destruction and degradation; we literally turn an Arcadia into an amusement arcade. I also loved the idea of taking this thing that Turner had built to glorify himself and transforming it so that it celebrated a place that he

treasured, reinserting the town into his aesthetic and celebrating the light that he loved by directly drawing in light. I wanted people going to Margate to see the new Turner Contemporary gallery, to go inside and see the old Turner gallery, and then to go inside that and be inside the Margate of today inserted into the aesthetics of Turner's time. (Fig. 1)

Given that Turner was the inspiration, it shouldn't have been a surprise that the piece ended up being almost mortifyingly sublime. For me, Turner really exemplifies the difference between the picturesque and the sublime. His paintings are messy and imperfect. There's a strange sense to them that the frame is almost arbitrary—as though the painting could just continue on indefinitely. They often seem like fragments of an almost endless world. Unlike most landscape paintings which prioritize the human perspective, they seem to be grasping for a larger point of view. There are generally people somewhere, but you can tell he's not really interested in them. They often look like they might be made out of mushrooms or some other strange substance—they're sort of weird, squashy people. I've been making a lot of work based on satellite photographs of late and I can't help thinking that Turner would have loved the technological sublime. There's a way in which his paintings so often seem to zoom in on some detail and then retreat to show a larger context. But that detail is almost never a human being—we are not the center of Turner's world and that's what makes it so relevant today. I think that a lot of the problems we have result from a picturesque view of our planet—that it is here to entertain us, to amuse us, to serve us, that its value is dependent on our point of view. Whereas, what I feel we need is to acknowledge our smallness and our dependence on our world. We need to see our world as Turner did.

MARIANA: In a certain way, Turner really finds the idea of the sublime, no? It's not like, for example,

1. *Ellen Harvey*

Arcadia, 2011

Mixed media installation

Thirty-four hand-engraved Plexiglas mirrors over Lumisheets, aluminum letters, light bulbs,

plywood shed, wallpaper paste, paper,

and video, shed: 9 × 15 × 33'

(2.74 × 4.57 × 10.06 m);

looped high-resolution video

(color, sound, 5:14 min.);

projection: 12 × 33' (3.66 × 10.06 m)

Commissioned by Turner Contemporary,

Margate, U.K. Installation view, Revealed,

Turner Contemporary, Margate, U.K.,

April 16 – September 4, 2011

Photograph: Amit Nachumi



what we think about German Romanticism. It's really different. With all this gesture and reaction and image synthesis that he does in his last decade of works. He marks out a different position on what the relation between man and nature should be. That's where he takes a position towards the idea that links him to the past, but also throws him towards the future.

VICTORIA: I think he was fascinated by what was going to come, wasn't he? And picking up on what Amy said, there was a revolution going on at that time—the Industrial Revolution and technological change. We're also in the midst of that now. I think Turner, as Ellen said, would have been absolutely fascinated by digital, and shocked and horrified by what we've done to the planet. As Katie said, he was friends with leading scientists; he was an architect in his own right, and we know that he was fascinated by photography at its inception. So, I think he was someone who wasn't rooted in the nineteenth century; he was looking forward and was very excited about the future. We all get terrified with what's going to change, and he saw the possibilities of things that were new, but also realized quite early on some of the shocking things that might happen because of this change.

NICHOLAS: Contemporary photographer Emma Stibbon RA is looking at this right now for an exhibition at York Art Gallery opening this year, as part of the celebrations around Ruskin's 200th birthday.⁵ She's retraced Turner and Ruskin's routes through the Alps around Chamonix to compare their watercolors of the glaciers with what can be seen today. The results are sobering; there's very little ice left.

ELLEN: There are so many ways that you can pivot off Turner. In some ways, he's almost several

different artists when you look at the watercolors, the oil paintings and the engravings and they are all extraordinary. There's a reason I didn't use painting in my work for the Turner Contemporary—you'd have to be crazy to go *mano-a-mano* with Turner as a painter. You only have to read the stories of his exasperated contemporaries to know that you'll suffer by comparison. But even the engravings, which are slightly more conventional (perhaps because he's working with engravers) are still really radical. He also tries out different ways of disseminating his work, like his gallery or his book of engravings, the *Liber Studiorum*. I think his approach speaks to our own fragmented experience of being alive today. He's never just one thing. He's a protean character. He's accessible to people because he offers such a lot.

VICTORIA: You see this in him exploring so many different things, always pushing in different directions, and I think it's an ambition that comes across in his art. He is never without his materials—whether that's his pencil and his sketchbook or paints, he's always making works. That's why there are these enormous holdings of watercolor paintings and sketchbooks.

AMY: I was thinking about something Ellen said before and it relates to what Katie said about all of his art being rooted in really close observation. The discipline of sketching, of having a sketchbook, is fascinating to us. There are over three hundred sketchbooks, and he kept all of them from his earliest days as a young man, right to the very end. He organized them in a kind of library. So, every now and again, he would make paper labels for the spines that said things like "Rome" or "Paris to Venice". They were his reference library. It's easy to take for granted now. We all carry phones around with us that have cameras in them. We can

just take a quick snap of something that inspires us or that you might want to come back to as an image to remember. But for him, that discipline was rooted in standing on the spot, rain or shine, with your paper and your pencil, giving time to the act of receiving information through your eyes and translating it by your hand. I still find it really electrifying to see his sketches, even if they're just squiggles on a page. Sometimes he was sketching from carriages going along roads, so you can see it's very bumpy. There's often an immediacy to sketches and other times they show his mind puzzling over a composition or a detail. Often you can trace an idea from sketch to painting—though they might be years apart; sometimes those sketches don't go anywhere. I love the idea that they're effectively his photograph albums. He comes back to his memories and ideas, translating them in different ways. His sketchbooks record his incredible work ethic, too, the compulsion to create throughout life. He never lost that.

ELLEN: You get the sense that Turner is just walking around and his eyes are twice as big as everyone else's. He's just trying to get everything down—he doesn't want to miss anything and everything is interesting to him.

KATIE: I was just going to mention something that surprised me. At the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh they bring out the Turner watercolors from the Vaughan Bequest every January—because it's the darkest time of year. Now, with electric light that's sort of meaningless, but nevertheless they stick to it. That's such a lovely relationship with the light outside and his work, and a century later, we still have that ritual. One of the watercolors there is of the Himalayas, and you start with the kind of "Goodness! He managed to see the Himalayas. That would have been quite an extraordinary

journey." Then you read that of course he didn't go to the Himalayas. It was through other artists' works that he imagined it.⁶ But, we come to these assumptions—at least I do anyway—by looking at an image. I thought that was quite interesting. By now almost every inch of the earth has been mapped and photographed, and can be traveled. Maybe that wouldn't have let him work in the same way. Maybe there's too much access to everything now, and what was so magical then was that he was seeing things through a really new perspective.

NICHOLAS: What you have all described in a way is this insatiable need to see, to keep seeing, to record and to bear witness. The sketchbooks certainly align with that need to create a near record of your entire lived experience. As a lover rather than creator of art, what I find so appealing about the sketchbooks is how accessible they make Turner's watercolors; you see them begin. When I began looking at his watercolors, I wasn't sure exactly what I was seeing, what techniques were present, or always how the finished works were created; they were so complex, layered and almost mystical in a way, because there is a veil of extraordinary craft masking the lived experience in the final picture. But to understand, as Amy described, that he could clamber about some rocks, or in a carriage, trying to draw what is coming in through his eyes, makes you realize that we are all at the point where we could begin to try and recreate a world in that way if we were to ever locate the passion, and dedicate the time to develop the skill. It shows you, as a viewer, a way into that artwork that isn't necessarily obvious from seeing the finished pieces. Perhaps this is also the power of his late watercolor sketches, the color beginnings.

MARIANA: There is a key word used in many parts of this conversation, and that is accessibility. Different instances of his process appeal from

different spaces and from different parts, and that's what makes him special in some sense. That's why, for example in the Buenos Aires installation, we have decided not to make distinctions between highly finished watercolors, sketches, and the abstract art or watercolors that he made from the 1830s onwards. I think that's one of the approaches that works for modern audiences.

NICHOLAS: What you're describing, similar to what Ellen said, is an approach that allows us to see the artist as a whole person.

MARIANA: Yes, of course. It also relates to the way he managed himself as an artist, behaving and being artistically different than what was done in the early-nineteenth or late-eighteenth century. So, the way he was always seeking experimentation and transformation, as Ellen said, is not only in his art, but also in the way he behaves as an artist.

KATIE: I like the potential right now to view his work differently. So often we see Turners in really old-fashioned settings. The walls might be painted deep maroon or dark green, there's all the gold, and it's presented in the way it might have been presented in much earlier times. I love being able to bring his works into these big, beautiful, airy, spacious, light galleries. Then, you can experience Turner's works in a really different way. This is what we should be doing. Let's show these works in a context that we can understand and experience in this contemporary era. So yes, I'm slightly nervous about when the Turnerites come to Margate and see we have ten-thousand images of solar eclipses on a mirror ball flooding across a Turner landscape, and what's going to happen in that regard. But after thinking about how shocking he was, maybe he wouldn't mind. (Fig. 2)

2. Katie Paterson and Joseph Mallord William Turner
A Place that exists only in moonlight, 2019
 (installation view)
 A place that exists only in moonlight,
 Katie Paterson & JMW Turner,
 at Turner Contemporary
 Photography by Stephen White

¹ "He knew the colours of the clouds over the sea, from the Bay of Naples to the Hebrides; and being once asked where, in Europe, were to be seen the loveliest skies, answered instantly, 'In the Isle of Thanet.' Where, therefore, and in this very town of Margate, he lived, when he chose to be quit of London, and yet not to travel." Edward Tyas Cook, John Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin* (London, 1903–1912), vol. 27, 164: *Fors Clavigera* (vol. 1): letter 9, September 1871.

² *A Place That Exists Only in Moonlight: Katie Paterson and JMW Turner*, on view at Turner Contemporary, 26 January – 6 May 2019.

³ See <http://www.ellenharvey.info/nybp/index.html> for an interactive map of the project's sites.

⁴ George Jones (1786–1869), *Turner's Body Lying in State, December 29, 1851*, Ashmolean Collection of Art and Archaeology.

⁵ *Ruskin, Turner & The Storm Cloud: Watercolors and Drawings*, on view at the York Art Gallery, 29 March – 23 June 2019.

⁶ See *Falls Near the Source of the Jumna in the Himalayas*, in Christopher Baker, *J. M. W. Turner: The Vaughan Bequest* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2018), 64.