

Revealed:

Turner Contemporary  
Opens

Daniel Buren

Russell Crotty

Teresita Fernández

Douglas Gordon

Ellen Harvey

Conrad Shawcross

JMW Turner

## Ellen Harvey in conversation with Sarah Martin

SM We were just looking at a wonderful photograph of your grandparents in Margate, taken in the 1930s. You were born in Kent, although you didn't grow up there. Can you say more about your connection to the county?

EH I lived in Kent until I was about two. Then we moved to Switzerland and to Germany, then back to Kent for about a year. When I was six we moved to Dorset and when I was fourteen we moved to the U.S.

SM But your father has memories of visiting Margate?

EH Yes, it was his family's summer holiday destination. He learnt to roller skate there. Before I started working on this show, Margate was a slightly mythical destination for me but it wasn't a place that I had any real memory or experience of.

SM The new work that you're making for Turner Contemporary's first exhibition responds very directly to Margate as a place, both now and in the past, as well as to JMW Turner's relationship to the town. You seemed to have a very strong reaction to it on your first visit in summer 2010. Can you say something about your experience of the place and what led you to the idea for the piece *Arcadia*?

EH I was very struck when I arrived in Margate by the beauty of the situation; the combination of the light and the wide open sky and the sea. I could see why Turner had been attracted to this site. I was also impressed by people's passion for the town and by the fact that so much of that passion was directed towards the town's past.

*Arcadia* came out of my obsession with the idea that Margate's past glories as a holiday destination resulted in a consensus that the location was beautiful; once people started coming, a whole leisure industry sprang up to greet them. Now, when Margate's status as an amusement destination has become more problematic, I thought it would be interesting to try to reinsert Margate into the original picturesque aesthetic of Turner's time, to reclaim Margate as a beautiful seaside site; even an Arcadian site, in a way. There's something pleasingly perverse in naming Margate an *Arcadia* – a site of simple, natural beauties when so much of its more recent reputation has been for more artificial pleasures. The typeface of the lit sign on the outside of the piece references

the local Dreamland amusement arcade – so the sign reads 'ARCADIA' but looks like an arcade. When viewers enter the gallery, they see a projection of the ocean with a fairground sign in front of a plywood shack. It's only when they enter the shack that they find themselves confronted with the Margate of today.

SM What about people who live or work in Margate but perhaps take its beauty for granted, as we tend to do when we spend a lot of time in a place: do you hope they might see it in a new light?

EH I wanted to try to make a work that would resonate with people who lived in Margate as well as those visiting and that would address the unique site of the new gallery which is built directly on the site of the lodging house in which Turner lived with his landlady/mistress.

I also wanted to show Margate in a different way, to make it strange. So when visitors enter the shack, they find themselves inside a space that references both a fun-house mirror situation and Turner's gallery. The dimensions of the space and the thirty four mirrors replicate Turner's gallery<sup>1</sup> and the arrangement of paintings in it to three-quarters scale. The plexiglas mirrors are all hand-engraved with a 360 degree view of Margate today seen from a vantage point in the harbour. Lightboxes behind the mirrors allow visitors to see themselves endlessly reflected inside a ghostly drawing of Margate.

SM Unlike Turner, you have only visited Margate once so far. Would you say that the work is more about a romanticised or an imagined Margate, a fantasy of Margate, rather than an experienced reality?



George Jones. *Turner's Body Lying in State, 29 December 1851*, oil on millboard, 14 x 23 cm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

EH How can you separate the two? I think it's almost impossible to make a piece about Margate that doesn't deal with fantasy. It's not a place that's famous for shipbuilding, coalmining or farming. It's famous, first of all, for being a site for mass fantasy. It's a place where people went to escape from their everyday lives.

SM For Turner it was also a place of escape; he used to go by the pseudonym of 'Admiral Booth' when he was in Margate.

EH And I've sadistically brought his London gallery to Margate – probably the very thing he was trying to escape!

What I find fascinating about Turner's gallery was that it was his bid for immortality. He was obsessed with cementing his status as the greatest British painter of his time. It wasn't a common thing then (or now) for an artist to have his own gallery or to keep so much of his work. By the time he died, the gallery was apparently in terrible disrepair but his plan worked spectacularly well – the contents of the gallery form the basis for the Turner Bequest in the Tate today. You can argue that if it hadn't been for his gallery, you wouldn't have Turner Contemporary here today – Turner just wouldn't be the star that he is. Interestingly, the only visual record that we have of the gallery are two paintings by George Jones in the Ashmolean Museum Collection, one of which shows Turner laid out in it after his death. He never let anyone document it during his lifetime.

The idea of *Arcadia* is that, instead of being a monument to one man, the gallery is rededicated to Margate itself. Turner's gallery was a fascinating transitional space between his decline and death and his increasing posthumous fame. I liked the idea of trying to create a liminal space between the Margate of today and a different Margate, a Margate of the imagination, where each viewer can insert his or her own fantasies.

SM Elements of the view that you're depicting in the engravings haven't really changed very much since Turner's lifetime.

EH I'm sure Turner would recognise a lot of the buildings. I'm not sure what he would make of the materials of the piece. I think he would have liked the idea of drawing in light since it was such an obsession of his. He probably wouldn't have thought much of my engraving skills. He was famously tough to work for. I tried to reference the actual engravings Turner had made because they were the medium through which most people would have known about Turner.

The engravings were much more widely available and helped to create Turner's fame during his lifetime, whereas the gallery, one could argue, contributed to his fame after his death. Of course, Turner's engravers were incredible craftsmen and they were working in mezzotint and engraving so they had both line and shade at their disposal – there was no way I could compete with that with just a diamond point on plexi!

SM You have talked about the labour of love involved with making these engravings by hand. Similarly in your recent work for the Bass Museum in Miami, you copied every nude in the Museum's collection. Why do you often choose to employ such a laborious, handmade approach in your work?

EH I don't always work this way but it's true – there's definitely a masochistic element to some of my work. We live in a world where handmade things are increasingly rare so making something by hand can be a good way of making your obsession visible. In this case the engraving had to be handmade to refer to the original engravings, also because Turner's gallery was so much about one man, I felt it had to be a one-woman piece, it had to be in one hand. To have had the plexiglas mirrors laser-engraved for example, or to have them engraved by many different people, would have resulted in something that felt completely different.

SM I'm interested in the materials you are using for this piece, in particular the contrast you are setting up between the highly detailed, polished elements of the work such as the intricately engraved mirrors, and on the other hand, the slightly ramshackle construction of the room itself. I wondered what the significance for you is of these two approaches to materials in the work.

EH None of the materials are particularly fancy – with the exception of the ultra-thin light boxes hidden behind the mirrors. I wanted the piece to feel a bit abject but to have aspirations of grandeur: the *Arcadia* sign, for example, aspires to amusement park glamour but the shack immediately behind it is pretty pathetic. Plexiglas mirrors are just a cheaper version of glass mirrors. It's all about the desire for something extraordinary, romantic and outside of the everyday, and also the fact that your resources are so often limited.



Ellen Harvey. *Arcadia*, 2011, detail. Photo: Jan Baracz

SM I wanted to ask you about the way that the relationship between past, present and future seems very much to the fore in the work, the way that you are positioning Margate as a place somehow poised between the past and the future.

EH I very much want to have the piece talk to Margate at this particular moment, the instant of the opening of the gallery and to insert the visitors to the new gallery into Margate in a very literal sense.

SM We talked earlier about Dreamland, which is going to re-open in the future as a heritage amusement park and is obviously another important reference point for the new work.

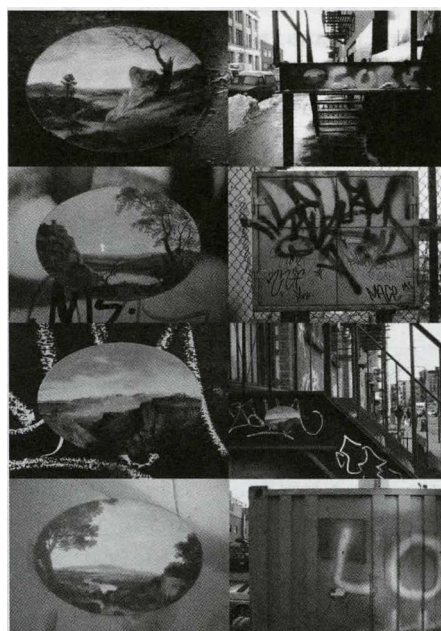
EH I was surprised to find Dreamland in Margate because the only Dreamland amusement park I knew of was the one that burned down in New York's Coney Island in 1911 – which turns out to have been what inspired John Henry Iles to build Dreamland in Margate. I've made work in Coney Island and I was struck by the fact that the two places have experienced quite similar trajectories. It was an obvious call to steal the Dreamland typeface for the ARCADIA sign. I particularly like the fact that it was such an American Wild West kind of typeface, given that I'm located here in New York. The video projection of the ocean for the installation was filmed in Coney Island. That's not necessarily an important piece of information – it could be anywhere – but I thought it was nice to reconnect the two places again.

SM The idea of failure or the impossibility of representing something is often to the fore in your work. Why the fascination with failure?

EH I like the idea of failure, of things that don't quite work. I think that's one way in which people connect to artwork. It's the human condition to try to do extraordinary things which never quite work out. As an artist you're always haunted by the ghosts of artworks that could have been better if you'd had more time or resources or just been a better artist. You're never satisfied. In this case, my engravings are never going to be as good as those that Turner had made. The picturesque aesthetic of Turner's engravings also comes perilously close to kitsch when used today. But I like my work to be a bit embarrassing – it's the fact of my caring enough to try even though I'll inevitably fail that lends the piece emotional meaning.

Similarly, I'm not interested in creating a perfectly intelligible experience for the viewer, even if I thought such a thing were possible. For me, a successful artwork is one that embodies many points of view simultaneously, that resists a unitary interpretation. An artwork should leave you with more questions than answers; in some ways it should fail. It should seduce you into thinking but what you think should be up to you.

SM Are you interested in landscape as a genre? I'm thinking in particular of the *New York Beautification Project*, 1999–2001, where you inserted small-scale versions of traditional landscape paintings into the urban cityscape, merging them with existing graffiti, to provoke questions about what is acceptable as art.



Ellen Harvey. *The New York Beautification Project*, details, 1999–2001, 40 paintings, oil on New York City, 12.7 x 17.8 cm each. Photos: Jan Baracz



Dreamland, Margate, 1920. Image © Thanet District Council

EH I've always been interested in the clichés of art production that the different genres of painting represent because I think they're a fascinating place to explore what our society wants and expects from art, but until fairly recently landscape was my least favourite genre. I always thought landscapes were a bit boring. I didn't much like Turner either. As a child I liked paintings where there was something going on, naked people, monsters, stuff like that and it took me a while to get over that.

I became interested in landscape as a result of the *New York Beautification Project* which was really a piece about graffiti as a kind of urban painting. I wanted to tag graffiti with something that would create a dialogue about public consensus about what is and isn't art. I ended up choosing to paint little oval landscapes in oils because I wanted something shamelessly pretty and non-controversial – essentially the least macho tag imaginable. So I was using the landscape as a very inoffensive 'art' signifier. It was much more about the fact that if you use a very conventional aesthetic and you belong to the right demographic, you can get away with murder than about the landscape per se. Also beautification is always about inserting nature into an urban situation, so I thought landscapes would fit very well. Using the nude would have had a very different effect, for example.

SM You were using actual paintings as the basis for the landscapes weren't you?

EH I ran out of my own landscape ideas pretty quickly so I started copying, which turned out to be a great education in the genre. I ended up thinking a lot about the idea of an aesthetic as opposed to a functional relationship to the landscape. If you look at nature in terms of aesthetics, rather than seeing yourself as connected to it, it can have some pretty grim consequences; the picturesque is not as innocuous as it seems.

SM A number of your previous works have examined the way that art is presented and framed and how this alters our understanding and experience of what we are seeing. What do you imagine the viewer's experience of *Arcadia* will be?

EH I'm hoping it will be a strange and seductive experience but obviously each person will have a different experience. I imagine that the piece will mean something very different to residents of Margate as opposed to those who've primarily come to see the new building.

I like the idea that visitors will go into Turner Contemporary to visit a fake seaside attraction that turns out to be Turner's gallery which they then enter in order to see themselves inside Margate. I like the idea of going inside in order to see outside.

SM I wonder what Turner would have made of it?

EH Turner was famously hard to please but I think the physical ambition of the piece might have resonated with him. It's also all about him and a place he loved so I think he would have enjoyed that.

1 Turner first opened a gallery at his house in Harley Street in 1804, at the age of 29. He mounted a number of exhibitions of his paintings, watercolours and drawings there between 1804 and 1811, when the gallery closed for refurbishment. It re-opened in 1812 with annual exhibitions taking place until 1816 before closing again for further alterations between 1818 and 1822.

Interview conducted in the artist's studio,  
New York, November 2010





