

A place that exists only in moonlight: Katie Paterson and J.M.W. Turner, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 26 January to 6 May 2019

The idea of the Romantic Sublime exerts a continuing fascination for some contemporary artists. Katie Paterson has emerged as a key figure: her work deals with the moon and stars, glaciers and deserts, darkness and luminosity, and investigates the grand themes of our relationship to space, time and the material world. ‘A place that exists only in moonlight’, held earlier this year at Turner Contemporary in Margate, was the most comprehensive survey of her work in Britain to date, but, as indicated in its subheading, ‘Katie Paterson and J.M.W. Turner’, it was also an exploration of affinities between the great historical exponent of the landscape sublime and an artist of the twenty-first century.¹

Paterson and Turner might both be regarded as prodigies, making an impact in their respective art worlds at an early age. But this parallel was not the starting-point here. The earliest of Turner’s works to be included, *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains* (B & J 132; University of Liverpool), was first exhibited in 1815, when he was already at an age that Paterson has not yet reached (she was born in 1981). The other nineteen Turners selected were all works on paper from the Turner Bequest, dating from the early 1820s to the mid-1840s, the majority colour beginnings in watercolour and gouache. While these choices might seem broadly in line with the preference for unfinished later works almost invariably shown by contemporary artists, the logic of the selection had nothing to do, for once, with Turner’s alleged progress towards abstraction. With one significant exception, they were displayed in two clusters, interspersed with Paterson’s *Ideas*, short haiku-like sentences, as the artist herself describes them, presented as waterjet-cut sterling silver texts mounted directly on the gallery wall. The exhibition took its title from one of her sentences, and the interplay between her *Ideas* and Turner’s ‘beginnings’ could be seen as the crux of the whole project.

Paterson was assisted in the selection of Turner’s work by Ian Warrell, to whom she had sent a pre-publication copy of her *Book of Ideas*.² He created an initial list from which she made her final choice, following her own research and first-hand study of the works at Tate Britain.

Paterson began to formulate her *Ideas* in 2015: it will be a lifelong project. At one level, it points up the significance of conceptual art as one of her formative influences and, certainly, her own distinctive practice could be associated with the tendency of ‘Romantic

conceptualism' first noted by Jorge Heiser in 2007.³ Her sentences outline unheard of phenomena and plans for works 'which may or may not get made', many of which indeed seem hardly possible, such as 'a drawing made from the ashes of stars' or 'a beach made with sand from hourglasses'. Turner's beginnings, on the other hand, have been understood as attempts to set down on paper the kind of evanescent natural effects that had never been captured before, and which almost defy representation; these, too, might be taken as ideas for future works of art. But whereas Paterson's *Ideas* are disseminated through exhibition and publication, and are intended to take shape in the imagination of whoever reads them, the ultimate purpose of Turner's beginnings has long been a matter of speculation, since they were not intended for a contemporary audience.

Paterson's *Ideas* take the form of poetic fragments, pitched at the very edge of the fantastical. For all their improbabilities, though, it would be a mistake to suppose them merely whimsical exercises, for they are not so far removed from the series of conceptually daring but fully-realised works on which her reputation has been built, many of which were included in the exhibition. Here, for example, was her *Fossil Necklace* (2013), an astonishing geological rosary, 170 fossil-beads to stand for the whole span of life on earth – 'a necklace of carved fossils threaded era by era'. 'A clock that tells the time on all known planets' takes on actual form in *Timepieces (Solar System)* (2014): nine clocks to be precise, one for every planet and Earth's moon, displayed in a line opposite a group of Turner watercolours, so that in the glass protecting his beaches, sunsets and storms we could glimpse the reflection of instruments marking out our time on remoter worlds.

Paterson has worked closely with experts across a range of fields in order to resolve the formidable technical challenges that the realisation of her ideas invariably imposes. Her collaborators and advisers have included astronomers and astrophysicists, lighting engineers and nanotechnologists, geologists and botanists. She operates in a culture which promotes interdisciplinary activity, and in which an outward-looking artist can benefit from residencies and collaborative opportunities of every kind. Turner's work, of course, could never have been produced in this collaborative way, though he was open to the scientific culture of his day, and we know something of his association with Mary Somerville, Humphry Davy, John MacCulloch and other prominent figures. His scientific interests were acknowledged in the exhibition by the inclusion of engravings after *Fingal's Cave* and *Loch Coruisk*, while a display case included his progressive studies of the setting sun from the *Life Class (1)*

sketchbook (TB CCLXXIXa).⁴ But Paterson was careful to emphasise the essentially artistic nature of her practice, and its relation to that of Turner. A wall text near the beginning of the exhibition made her position clear: ‘I don’t find my work itself scientific: it deals with phenomena and matter, space-time, colour and light, the natural world in materials. Like Turner’s work, it is rooted in sensory experience.’

For both artists, the sense of the sublime is intensified rather than diminished by the advance of science, but there are significant differences in their outlook. Several of the pieces by Turner selected here strike a note of dread or anxiety. *A Storm: Shipwreck* is the first idea for what would become a terrifying account of a vessel coming to grief on a rocky coast, in a finished watercolour now in the British Museum, while in other works a lighthouse warns against hazard, or looming supernatural apparitions indicate ‘elemental wars’ to come.⁵ Paterson, for her part, does not dwell on danger or reflect on human vulnerability in the face of implacable elements. For her, sublimity is to be found in the unimaginable extent of space and time revealed by new research in astrophysics and astronomy. Her *History of Darkness* (2010-), for example, is a slide archive of images from different times and places in the universe, spanning billions of years. And whereas Turner pondered on the fate of mariners, she is concerned with dying stars: her *Dying Star Letters* (2011-) announce the death of stars, sometimes more than a hundred in a single week.

There is a further distinction to be made in their response to the sublime. There was no real precedent for the representation of light effects and natural phenomena such as Turner was attempting: this was a new subject matter, addressed with untried means. But from Paterson’s perspective, the Romantic Sublime has had a long afterlife in the arts, to the point where the imagery of vastness, distance, luminosity, darkness and elemental forces has itself become something of a debased currency. How is an artist to represent moonlight now, without falling into cliché? Her response to this dilemma has been to search for ways to convey the most astonishing subject matter through the most mundane means, and by the cultivation of understatement, irony and deadpan effect.

Paterson’s silver wall-mounted *Ideas*, for all their immense resonance, are among her most discreet works, and their intersection with Turner’s ‘beginnings’ was both suggestive and low-key. But Turner’s work was inevitably also brought into relation with some of her large-scale, more emphatic installations. The first gallery was dominated by one of her most recent pieces, *The Cosmic Spectrum* (2019), a large rapidly spinning disc printed with a

sequence of colours charting ‘the colour of the universe throughout its existence’. It sent a pulse of coloured light throughout the space, immersing the first group of Turner watercolours in an environment of continuous flux. Meanwhile visitors, stepping back to admire his dramatic depiction of the eruption of Mount Souffrier, would find themselves treading on tiny pieces of coloured paper, the residue of Paterson’s *100 Billion Suns* (2011), a work in which the colours of the confetti have been matched to gamma-ray bursts, the brightest explosions in the universe. Fired from confetti canons at intervals throughout the duration of the exhibition, it was as if debris from Turner’s volcano had somehow materialised on the gallery floor.

As befitted the exhibition’s title, the moon and moonlight was a recurring theme. Turner’s *Moonlight on River* and Paterson’s *Lightbulb to Simulate Moonlight* (2008) were both in the first gallery, but the self-contained chamber in which the latter needs to be shown meant that it was not possible, alas, to view his evocation of moonlight by her uncanny recreation of the light of a full moon. After this, however, the exhibition built steadily towards a lunar climax. In the second gallery, Turner’s *Mont Blanc and the Glacier des Bossons from above Chamonix* was overlaid by a sonic dimension with the sound of a melting glacier; *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007-8) is an archive recording of one of Paterson’s early pieces, in which a live phone line was connected to a microphone in an Icelandic glacier. Meanwhile, floating through from the next room, came the music of the first movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata from another of her earliest set-pieces, *Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)* (2007). For this work, Paterson translated the score into Morse code, and bounced the signal, sent by radio transmission, off the moon’s surface. Once received back on earth, the signal was re-translated into musical notes and played on an automated grand piano; the music had been subtly altered on its strange journey, with some of the original notes lost among the lunar craters, or deflected into space.

Earth-Moon-Earth itself was installed in the final space, along with *Totality* (2016), perhaps Paterson’s most ambitious work to date on the subject of the Moon, and undoubtedly the most spectacular (and this from an artist who has more usually been wary of spectacle). It consists of a large mirror ball, the surface of which is covered by over 10,000 images of almost every solar eclipse documented in human history. Lit by two spotlights, the revolving mirror ball sent its myriad projected images veering in multiple and bewildering trajectories

across the walls, ceiling and floor of the gallery. Turner was represented by a single work in this last space: *The Full Moon over a Sailing Boat at Sea*. Calm and serene in contrast to the whirling flux of *Totality*, every so often one of Paterson's tiny images of solar eclipse would pass right across the surface of Turner's pale gouache disc, the vision of the two artists overlaid for a fleeting moment, connected in their sense of wonder.

Afterword: Paterson's silver-lettered *A place that exists only in moonlight* is currently on display at 'The Moon' exhibition at the National Maritime Museum (until 5 January 2020), where, in a reprise of a passage from the exhibition at Turner Contemporary, it is shown adjacent to Turner's *Moonlight on River*. Paterson's *Lightbulb to Simulate Moonlight* and *Totality* are on display at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern One) from 26 October 2019 to 31 May 2020.

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Notes

¹ The most comprehensive publication on her work is *Katie Paterson*, with texts by Nicolas Bourriaud, Mary Jane Jacob, Lisa le Feuve and Lars Bang Larsen, Bielefeld/Berlin and Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016.

² Katie Paterson, *Book of Ideas. A place that exists only in moonlight*, Bielefeld, Germany, 2019, published on the occasion of the exhibition at Turner Contemporary. The cover is printed in cosmic dust.

³ *Romantic Conceptualism*, BAWAG Foundation, Vienna, Austria and Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Germany, 2007.

⁴ See James Hamilton, *Turner and the Scientists*, London, 1998, pp. 58–9.

⁵ Jan Piggott, *Turner's Vignettes*, London, 1993, pp. 43–4.