

Visual Arts

Katie Paterson and JMW Turner at Turner Contemporary – worlds apart

A pairing of the conceptualist's metaphysical work with Turner's visions offers majestic works but shines little light on either



'Orange Sunset', by JMW Turner (c1840) © JMW Turner/Tate Images

Simon Ings JANUARY 30 2019

Cyril Connolly, literary lion of the 1930s, reckoned that the surest way of killing off writers was to baffle on about their promise. Calling artists “visionary” might have the same effect now.

A new show at Turner Contemporary in Margate, *A place that exists only in moonlight*, juxtaposes JMW Turner watercolours with work by the Scottish-born conceptual artist Katie Paterson. The fit seems reasonable. Both artists are fascinated by light. But Turner was a visionary artist, while Paterson, born 1981, is not. Her value (and it's considerable) lies elsewhere.

Turner's deft atmospheric squiggles hang next to an airfreight parcel, a shelving unit full of lightbulbs and several thousand photographic slides depicting nothing. Paterson defends the wheeze with spirit: “I don't find my work itself scientific,” she writes in the exhibition wall text. “It deals with phenomena and matter, space-time, colour and light, the natural world as materials. Like Turner's work, it is rooted in sensory experience.”

You can find sensory experience here if you look for it. Her 2007 piece “Earth-Moon-Earth” used Morse code to bounce the score of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* off the Moon. An automated piano performs the rather gappy version that survived the round-trip. The moment you wonder where the missing notes went, you enter dreamland. Similarly, the 289 replacement lightbulbs sit ready to power “Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight” (2008) through the course of an average human lifetime. They are tuned to exactly re-create the effulgence of a full moon. I stepped into the installation expecting nothing, only to be propelled in my imagination back to the night walks of my childhood. But sensory experience doesn’t sit at the heart of every Paterson work, or even many of them.

There’s lots of precision. “It needs to be accurate to be imagined,” says the artist of a 2008 work in which people phoned up Iceland’s Vatnajökull glacier to hear it melting in real time. If all you got was the artist splashing about in her kitchen sink, what would be the point? Her literalistic approach pushes Paterson into entertaining contortions. Alongside her concern for accuracy and truth, I think we should add a love of logistics. “Second Moon” (2013-14), a fragment of the moon sent on a year-long journey counterclockwise around the earth via air freight, is a game of scale in which human and astronomical perspectives vie for contention.



Part of the installation ‘Vatnajökull the sound of’, by Katie Paterson (2007-08) © Katie Paterson

Other projects haven’t gone as smoothly. For five years Paterson sent letters of condolence to friendly astronomers, marking the deaths of stars. “Dying Star Letters” (2011-present) threatened to overwhelm her, however, as improvements in observation caused her inbox to overflow with stellar deaths.

A core of necessary failure is present in many of Paterson's pieces. Some projects are threatened by technological obsolescence. The 2,200 slides of empty space that make up "The History of Darkness" (begun in 2010) can only be added to for as long as someone makes slides (they're already difficult to get hold of). A new piece for this exhibition is a spinning wheel depicting the overall colour balance of the universe throughout its history. Its inks are pinpoint-accurate for now, but in two years' time, when they have faded ever so slightly, what will "The Cosmic Spectrum" (2019) be worth? Turner never had this problem. His criterion of truth was different. Whereas Paterson cares about measurement, he cared about witness. An honestly witnessed play of light against a cloud can be achieved through the right brushmark. An accurate measurement of the same phenomenon must be the collaborative work of meteorologists, atmospheric scientists, astronomers, colour scientists and who knows how many other specialists, with Paterson riding everyone's coat-tails as a sort of scientific tourist. Turner's quite the wrong choice to put beside Paterson. We need someone who invents the world out of words, who thinks in conceits and metaphors, and who explores them with an almost naive diligence.

We need John Donne. "*On a round ball / A workman that hath copies by, can lay / An Europe, Afric, and an Asia, / And quickly make that, which was nothing, all*". These lines from "A Valediction: of Weeping" come far closer to defining Paterson's practice than anything Turner offers.

Mounted on the wall of Turner Contemporary, Paterson's ideas include "The universe rewind and played back in real time", "A wave machine hidden inside the sea", "A foghorn set off at sea every time a star dies". Not content with setting down her ideas in words (though you can buy a book of them here, printed in ink mixed with ground-up meteorite), Paterson tries to make the more doable ones actually happen. Paterson's artworks are the koans of Zen meditative practice made real (or as real as the world allows).

Paterson is out to celebrate the hugeness of our imaginations, while recognising our physical and temporal littleness. She's not visionary; she's metaphysical. The show is terrific, but Turner is not the right foil.

To May 6, turnercontemporary.org

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