

Turner's House

Andrew Pengilly

‘Let the room be made as dark as possible, let there be a circular opening in the window shutters about three inches in diameter, which may be closed or not at pleasure. The sun being suffered to shine through this on to a white surface, let the spectator from some little distance fix his eye on this bright circle thus admitted’.

Goethe, Theory of Colours

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Sandycombe Lodge (originally named Solus Lodge) was designed and built by JMW Turner in 1813. Situated in Twickenham in south west London, the house consists of a modest broad-eaved, central two-storey block, anchored by single-storey wings, with a basement where the central room is lit by a semi-circular window. The exterior has rounded bays with recessed panels headed by heavy triglyph bands. The entrance to the house, the only grand aspect, with its top-lit stair, has a remarkable similarity to aspects of his friend the architect John Soane's house, which was being constructed at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

In photographing the house, I wanted to explore aspects of light and dark and explore if it was possible to create a sense of Turner's work in the photographs. The strategy described by Goethe was one that I would apply.

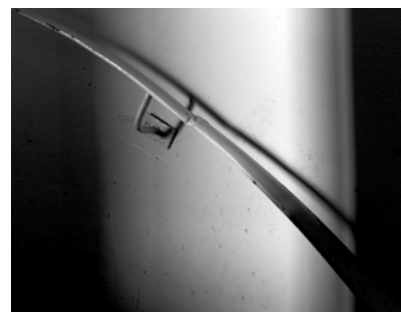
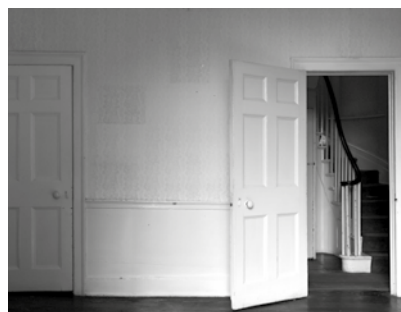
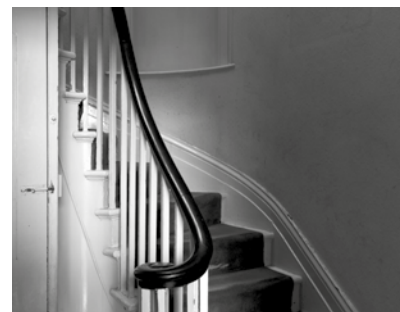
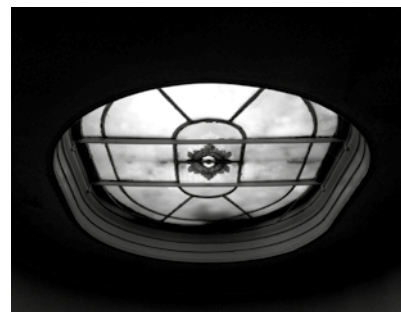
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My intention was to use the house as if it were a camera, controlling the light by the shutters. I wanted to explore both absence of light and diffused bright light, as represented in Turner's paintings. The images in darkened rooms were inspired by a Claude glass, a device that renders a scene in tones of black. Like the camera obscura, it is used to render light to show what is not directly seen, but an impression of what is there.

Turner's later works, influenced by Goethe's observations, were my inspiration, particularly *Shade and Darkness – The Evening Before the Deluge* (1843) and *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1843). My images aim to be abstract interpretations, in which the viewer senses the way the eye acclimatises to light or dark. The intention to create images that would oblige the viewer to look carefully. The images at the edge of the visible become abstractions for your interpretation. Turner's later work showed not what was there, but how he experienced a scene – so too the photographs try to create this sense of place through impression.

Turner's interest in light, which would develop throughout his career, was aided by his interest and friendship with scientists and

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photographers, including the scientist Faraday, mathematician Mary Somerville, chemist Humphrey Davy and photographer JJE Mayall. Mayall recounts that Turner is always 'with some new notion of light'.²

Fascinated by the development of photography, Turner frequently visited Mayall between 1847-49, spending time exploring and understanding this new method of capturing light. On one of these visits they discussed magnetism and the experiments carried out by Mary Somerville, which involved the magnetising power of violet light in the spectrum. The experimentation with light and its properties was also noted by Fox Talbot in *The Pencil of Nature*: '...certain invisible rays which lie beyond the violet are allowed into a darkened room and portraits are photographed with them'.³

The influence of his scientific friends is first noted in 1801 when Turner was thought to have attended a lecture by the astronomer Sir William Herschel, in which he described the physical surface of the sun. It is thought that this influenced the way Turner depicted the sun in *The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage at Macon* (1803); 'purposefully and intentionally painted in three different textures to give the sun physical reality within the painting', so no longer a flat disc but 'an object, with physical features'.⁴

Turner's fascination with the sun and his portrayal of light and dark is a central subject of many of his paintings, with his depiction of light becoming ever more abstract. In 1814 the British Institution exhibition directors offered a premium to the best landscape 'proper in Point of Subject and Manner to be a Companion' to

a work by Claude or Poussin. Turner submitted *Apullia in search of Appullus* (1814), modelled on Claude's *Landscape with Jacob and Laban and Laban's Daughters* (1654).⁵

His pastiche of Claude's painting is presented with a radical diffused light...a more illuminated sky in a higher key. Claude's pale blue sky is replaced by diffused bright light. This and the high-key light on the main subjects drew criticism from his patron Lord Egremont, who did not purchase the painting. There were limits to the acceptability of Turner's 'glare and glitter' and apparent gratuitous excess of expended light in relation to the Claudian model.⁶

By 1840 the work of Goethe, Ruskin, Turner and others indicated that the process of perception had, in various ways, become the primary objective of vision. By the late

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1830s-40s Turner's work does not use a fixed source of light, the cone of light rays previously used are gone. The distance between the light source and the viewer is foreshortened, instead of an immediate single view, Turner's paintings become abstract, an infinite series of reflections, surfaces and materials each with its own colour, interacting with each other.⁷

Turner's developing interest in the scientific study of light and perception is clearly marked by his direct reference to Goethe in the title of his painting, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1843), a direct reference to Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, which Turner owned a copy of and had annotated with his thoughts.

Studies of the after-effects of prolonged viewing of the sun caused the eye to create a sense of incandescent light demonstrated that the body was the site of chromatic events that conceived an abstract optical experience, a vision that did not refer or represent a subject of the world.⁸

Turner uses his knowledge of these after-effects to convey the sensory experience of seeing. *Light and Colour* refers to both the sun and the eye, an image of building luminescence that can never be seen and resembles the optic image left after looking at the sun. The circular shape of the painting mimics that of both the sun and the pupil of the eye on which the image is observed. The fact that the image is now created by the impression in the eye makes it part of the body, so it becomes a sort of self-portrait.

So the essential aim of the project is to reflect Turner's impressionistic approach through photographs of his house.

Bibliography

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- ² Hamilton, James. *Turner: A Life*, (Sceptre, 1997), p. 305.
- ³ Mellor, David and Fabian Miller, Garry. *Tracing Light*, (Brighton: Photoworks, 2001), p. 163.
- ⁴ Hamilton, James. *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 15 November 2011.
- ⁵ Wilton, Andrew. *Turner in his Time*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987)
- ⁶ *Ibid.* 3, p. 71.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 1, p. 138.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 1, p. 141.