

Revealed, Turner Contemporary, Margate

All's fair in love and visitor numbers as Margate's striking new gallery takes the great artist's work and morphs it into a mind-mapping debut show

Reviewed by Charles Darwent

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Turner Contemporary: spot the deliberate mistake. Exactly. Turner died in 1851 – inconvenient, I know, but it does limit his usefulness, contemporaneity-wise.

So why has Margate's much-publicised new gallery been given this strange name? Can you imagine a Piero della Francesca Contemporary in Borgo San Sepolcro? Well, can you?

The answer, of course, is that Margate is off the cultural beaten track and times are hard for funding. All's fair in love and visitor numbers. Turner went to school in Margate from the age of 11 to 14, and the town's mother-of-pearl seascape stuck in his mind. Unlike its other famous local artist – Tracey Emin, aka Mad Tracey from Margate – Turner's staying power as a brand has been proven. Emin's may, but then again, it may not. The risks of naming the new gallery Emin Contemporary are all too obvious.

Given this, the fact that Turner Contemporary's opening show opens with a Turner may fill you with apprehension. Happily, it needn't. Revealed turns out to be as pared down as David Chipperfield's Renault 4 of a building.

As you walk towards this, you pass what was once Margate's pride: an amusement park called Dreamland, now shut. Amusement parks and contemporary art have things in common, much of the latter looking as though it should be in the former. I refer you to the go-go dancers of Félix González-Torres, Yayoi Kusama's inflatables, Roger Hiorn's crystal cave, D Hirst's cows, etc. It would have been easy to play on that connection in Revealed – to open Turner Contemporary with the bearded ladies and hooplas of Britart, to patronise those who come to Margate by saying, "Look!

Here's a contemporary art even you can understand!"

Instead, the gallery has gone for cleverer fireworks. The Turner that opens this show is precisely what you would not expect – not a Margate seascape, but *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains, in the Island of St Vincent, at Midnight, on the 30th of April, 1812*. Although the geeky specificity of Turner's title implies he was there, he wasn't. *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains* is a work of imagination. If, like the new gallery's director, you've stuck yourself with a compulsory Turner reference, then this is as good as it gets. J M W's volcano sets the tone for a show whose topography is not the coast of Kent but the landscape of the mind.



PETER MACDIARMID / GETTY IMAGES

Worlds Apart: Russell Crotty's planets at the new Turner Contemporary, in Margate

This is most obviously so in Russell Crotty's vari-titled planets. Crotty has, in his mad, outsider-arty way, drawn landscapes on paper which he has then glued on to large fibreglass spheres and suspended from a ceiling. This and his other works – an outsize canvas star-atlas, say – chart the human need to chart. If you're going to address this, then the seaside is not a bad place to do it.

So, too, with Ellen Harvey's Arcadia. The words "arcadia" and "arcade" have no etymological connection, although amusement arcades do mean paradise for many. So did Turner's topological engravings of Britain, which showed the country as a post-romantic heaven on Earth. Harvey has pulled these strands together by erecting an end-of-the-pier peepshow, advertised by large, lightbulb-lit letters spelling ARCADIA. Inside the resinous plywood cabin are backlit etchings of Margate, all a bit knowing and tongue-in-cheek, but strangely moving. As with Crotty, Harvey's Arcadia is less to do with locality than with a human need for spectacle, the desire to represent.

Including Conrad Shawcross in this show seems unfair, because he's just so good. So good, in fact, that I'm never sure I like his work and its engineered perfections. Limit of Everything is a slowly turning oak propeller, each of its three blades having a revolving magic wand at the end, each tipped with a lightbulb. At the climax of every revolution, the lit tips touch – click! – and spin off again. Like watching the Amazing Presto, you long for the trick to fail, for the lady in the box to be sawn in half or for Shawcross to fluff his pass. He doesn't, of course, but Limit of Everything is so fine a work that you forgive him.

I wonder if Daniel Buren could be persuaded to donate Borrowing and Multiplying the Landscape to the new gallery? The window-based work might have been made for Chipperfield's building – actually, it was – with its eye-focusing circle cut from a stripey stuff that reminds you of deckchairs and sandwiches full of sand. Buren, par excellence, makes the local the abstract, which is what this show is about. Revealed is really very good. The only cloud on Margate's horizon is that it will be a hard act to follow.

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