

Revealed – review

Turner Contemporary, Margate



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Turner Contemporary in Margate: 'It has the quality of a beacon, pulling you towards it.' Photograph: Richard Bryant/arcaidimages.com

In the summer of 2009, I went to Margate to report on the seaside town's plans for regeneration: grandiose plans that involved the building of an art gallery, Turner Contemporary, named for JMW Turner, who considered the skies over Thanet "the loveliest in Europe". During this assignment, something rather peculiar happened: I fell stupidly in love with Margate, as if with an unsuitable man (the town, one of our most deprived, has many virtues, but it is also full of boarded-up shops and seedy pubs), and ever since I've been a crazed evangelist for it.

About the gallery, however, I was less convinced. Designed by acclaimed and admirably sensible architect David Chipperfield, it would have no permanent collection. Its success would depend on temporary exhibitions. Would these, I wondered, be good enough to pull in visitors? And what of its relationship with the town? Would the sight of it standing invincibly on the seafront fill locals with fierce Margate pride or would they regard it warily, a spaceship landed from another planet?

Two years on, and just a few days before the gallery opens its doors to the public, it is still too soon to answer these questions. But one can speculate. The building itself, visible the moment you leave Margate's (Grade II-listed) station is, I think, too plain-speaking to provoke carbuncle fury: constructed with opaque, off-white glass, it pulls off that strange trick of being ethereal at a distance and functional close up. Walk along the seafront and it has the quality of a beacon, pulling you towards it.

Once inside, it seems more akin to a shed: a very elegant and light-filled shed, but a shed all the same. This is deliberate, of course – Chipperfield has built an art space, not some bullying icon – but it also doubles the burden of expectation on the gallery's programme. You would not travel to Margate for this building alone, though on a sunny day, I think its cafe, with its views of the sands, will be a fine place to sit and eat a crab sandwich.

The gallery is on two levels: pale walls, natural light, poured concrete floors. On the ground floor, beside the shop, visitors are greeted by a white neon opening book by Michael Craig-Martin; the gallery's only permanent artwork, it is a reproduction of the artist's first public commission, which once hung in Margate's library. This is what passes for a connection to the past here in Margate – this and the gallery's borrowing of paintings by Turner.

For its first show, entitled Revealed, the Turner in question is *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains, in the Island of St Vincent, at Midnight, on the 30th of April, 1812, from a Sketch Taken at the Time by Hugh P Keane, Esqre*, on loan from the University of Liverpool. Why? I've no idea. My instinct would have been to choose a Turner inspired by his trips to the Kent coast. A member of staff told me that the connection was "eruption" – the new gallery exploding on to the scene in volcanic style! – but to me, its inclusion is indicative of the random nature of the exhibition generally. The show has no unifying vision; its impulses are magpie, as if its curators were grateful for what they could get.

On the ground floor is a new installation, *Borrowing and Multiplying the Landscape*, by Daniel Buren: yellow stripes stuck on a sea-facing picture window to form a vast port-hole. It's pretty enough, but I think the view has its own drama. On the stairs is the painfully banal *Afterturner* (2000), by Douglas Gordon, which plays on JMW Turner's words: "The sun is God" (the gallery has installed one phrase – "God is the sun", "The sun is good" and so on – per step).

On the landing above, you will find Teresita Fernández's *Sfumato (September 18)* and *Eruption (Small)*. These pieces, from 2009 and 2005 respectively, are inspired by volcanic eruptions – the former speaks of dust clouds, the latter of molten lava – but they suffer terribly through their proximity to Turner's painting around the corner. His work, all shadow and light, is so exquisitely rendered it seems almost to be alive. Beside it, Fernández's work looks improvised and static, a mortifying own goal for a space that boasts the word "contemporary" in its title.

Upstairs, the gallery is divided broadly in three. In one room is Conrad Shawcross's new installation, *Projections of a Perfect Third*, which seeks to represent a chord in drawings, sculpture and one of the outsize mechanical systems that are his trademark. Ordinarily, I enjoy Shawcross's eccentric, exacting work. But I could not understand this series, even after reading the notes I was given (they spoke confusingly of computer models and drawing machines). And what connection does it have to Margate, Turner or the rest of the show? None, so far as I can tell.

After this, though, things pick up. Russell Crotty's room, a collection of charts and delicate globes, is adorable and the American artist has at least fashioned one fibreglass sphere especially for the show. *Walking Towards Dreamland* – suspended almost invisibly so that it seems to float in the air, light as a dandelion clock – is decorated with white cliffs over which, on close inspection, is etched a strange graffiti of Margate words and experiences. It's delightful, capturing the coast's beauty and its fugitive underbelly in a scant series of lines.

The show's highlight is Ellen Harvey's commission, *Arcadia*: a wooden hut, inside which are large rectangles of etched glass with light behind them, each one showing a Margate harbour scene (including Primark and Arlington House, an infamous 1960s tower block). Outside is a sign saying "Arcadia", made of light bulbs and written in the same typeface as the one for Margate's Dreamland amusement park (now closed but soon, it's hoped, to reopen as the world's first museum of historic rides).

Dreamland, which opened in 1920, was a British version of Coney Island's Dreamland, which burnt down in 1911, and for this reason, along one wall is a projection of the Atlantic; you can hear the waves roll inside the hut. *Arcadia* is brilliant: beautiful, witty, poignant, site-specific, exactly the kind of thing I was hoping to find. The gallery should – must! – get a purchase fund going: this piece belongs here.

Meanwhile, though I accept it's an amazing achievement to have got this far, and wish them all the luck in the world, I think the people at Turner Contemporary have a little work to do. It took me 90 minutes to get to Margate by train, but less than half that time to walk the gallery.