

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

Turner : le sublime héritage, Grimaldi Forum Foundation, Monaco, 06.07– 01.09.2024



We arrived in Monaco on August 15, just so I couldn't confirm all the prejudices about this concrete labyrinth squeezed between the sea and the cliffs. As it was a holiday, all public institutions were closed so it was very hard to find a printed map anywhere near us, as we switched to old-fashioned tourism. We did try to use the internet, although we knew it wasn't a good idea, but two minutes on Google maps and 50 euros later, we were back to default settings and ready to Richy Rich's city on foot. But that's not accurate, in Monaco one doesn't walk, one drives walk, you drive maybe, unless one goes up and down stairs. Lots of them. And driving, without Google maps, in Monaco is what you would call a rollercoaster on asphalt.

We easily found the Grimaldi Foundation though, most of the tourist attractions are on the seafront, where else, so down and down stairs we went, for half an hour to get to an oasis of art! The ugly pyramid that serves as the entrance to the Grimaldi edifice gave no hint of the treasures carefully gathered up in the Turner exhibition and his sublime heritage! As a painter in my 40s I had, of course, heard about the flawless watercolors of Joseph Mallord William Turner (23.04.1775–19.12.1851) but had never seen any. And it is indeed sublime and so is his legacy extended to the works of contemporary artists exhibited alongside the master! One cannot suspect how spectacular Turner's paste is, how vigorous the structure of the landscape, how deep the perspective of his work, until one breathes next to his works. Fragile and tumultuous, evanescent



but materialistic, these openings to infinity in Turner's painting carry you to places that exist only in the painter's mind. William Turner was an Impressionist before Monet and an abstractionist before Kandinsky, Mondrian or even the newly discovered Hilma af Klint.

How did this painter manage to see beyond depth? What pushed him towards the "non-antianticization" of the image? Certainly not the idea of abstraction, which is nonetheless as modern as it is possible to be, yet he saw through painting, through its limiting matter, an unlimited space. He saw a depth, an "inside" of phenomena, of the elements, an atmospheric interior that had escaped all artistic interest until then. Turner invented the pure gesture, the graphic expression that contains the idea. The gesture that contains. It contains life, mood, and energy. To put all this on canvas and have it lived on through the ages, well, that is the desire of any artist molded by endless search and wear, to the point of sacrifice. For what else can give meaning to a gesture, to an explosive brushstroke, if not life devoted to the pursuit of that very tension that holds existence together?

This was even more evident when the curator orchestrated works by contemporary artists into the exhibition space: Kate Paterson, Richard Long, Cornelia Parker, Peter Doig, Olafur Eliasson, James Turrel, Laure Prouvost, Howard Hodgkin, Roni Horn, Lisa Milroy, Jessica Warboys, Eduard Burtynsky, John Akomfrah, and Wolfgang Tillmans, artists with works as powerful and monumental as Turner's calligraphic gestures. The presence of contemporary works wove naturally into art history's loom, the silky thread of Turner's painting meticulously sewed into contemporary art. Nothing seemed contrasting or inappropriately dwelled; it was as if Turner had always been part of the language of contemporary art. This was most visible in the cohesion between Turner's painting and the chromatic spatiality of James Turrel's installations. That staged but palpable depth, ready to engulf you in a proximate nothingness. In fact, that's what Turner does, he materializes the nothingness and makes it immediate, brings it into the proximity of the eye that otherwise doesn't know how to grasp it. Turner turns painting into a tool through which the depths of the invisible become matter. This is why the perfectly curated exhibition ended with a somewhat announced union between Turner and Rothko. Two artistic consciences so far from each other in historical time, but so close in artistic time. An unsuspected brotherhood that places Turner's painting among the great abstracts of the twentieth century. So close, in fact, that Rothko, with his waggish irony, once remarked: "This man Turner, he learned a lot from me".

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