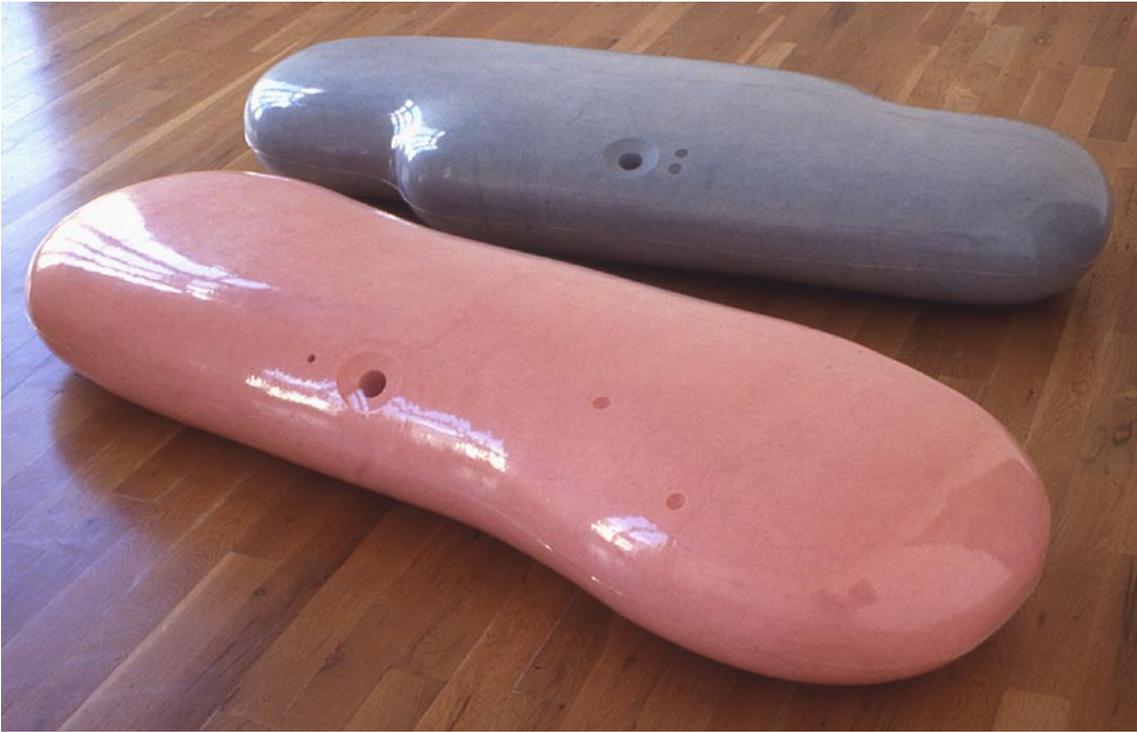


Deadening Folds - Dazzling Strangeness
Hadrian Pigott



Ruskin. I've spent most of my creative life shutting down whenever I came across him. He seemed pedantic, pious, laborious, ridiculous, too Victorian and really not what I wanted. It's easy to find Ruskin's output overwhelming, and in the past I have not particularly considered him of any relevance, mainly because my earlier work, mostly sculpture and film, was so locked in the 20th century.

The photographic series I have worked with on and off for the last few years has shifted things - the painterly appearance of these photographs, and their subject matter has opened up an interest in historical landscape painting, and suddenly it is impossible to avoid the man, his writings and his art. Read about Turner - there's Ruskin. Pre-Raphaelite landscape - there's Ruskin. Early landscape photography, rocks and mountains, the value of Nature - Ruskin, Ruskin, Ruskin.

So this opportunity to engage with the teaching collection has come at a good time. And it is an amazing collection. My involvement started with a visit to the Ashmolean Museum, and a gloves-on tour of some of the works themselves, conducted by Dr Rupert Shepherd. The possibility of public access to the collection has always been there (by appointment), but I wasn't even aware that it existed. The Elements of Drawing website eases discovering what is in this eclectic mix, and at the same time adds layers of complexity if one wishes to follow threads and links.

There is such diversity in the teaching collection, and browsing through it one comes across gems and jewels that leap out from amongst other matter that does not touch the eye or mind. But then, later, looking for something else, another nugget appears to justify continual sifting. Ruskin's careful drawings of snail shells ([WA.RS.ED.193 / 194](#)) are perfect examples of his analytical direct observation of nature, and this is continued in the series of studies of pieces of rock, where he captures on paper the whole world locked in by metamorphism ([WA.RS.ED.276 / 277](#)) and then switches his attention without comment to the manmade version of it - a piece of brick ([WA.RS.ED.281](#)). Study of a

Piece of Rolled Gneiss ([WA.RS.ED.276](#)) appears as a turbulent seascape as dramatic as Turner's Coast of Yorkshire, near Whitby (from the Liber Studiorum) ([WA.RS.ED.142](#)). Ruskin emphasises this by interspersing engravings of Turner's Cascade at Terni ([WA.RS.ED.278](#)) and Chain Bridge over the River Tees ([WA.RS.ED.283](#)). I like all this - Ruskin's determination to view the micro and the macro with the same intensity. The simplicity of Study of a few blades of grass as they grew ([WA.RS.ED.006](#)) and the drawing by Arthur Burgess of the Curve of the capitals of the Parthenon, full size ([WA.RS.ED.028](#)) demonstrate his interest in the essence of things.

Architecture looms large, and his own drawings of Gothic architecture are beautiful, the Exterior of the Ducal Palace Venice ([WA.RS.REF.067](#)), for example. Alongside many Turner architectural drawings - like the magnificent Arcades of St. Peters. Rome ([WA.RS.SUP.179](#)) - are those by Samuel Prout, and Ruskin makes an interesting juxtaposition between Prout's The Rue Mercière and West Front of Strasbourg Cathedral ([WA.RS.ED.059](#)) and a 19th-century engraving of the same view ([WA.RS.ED.060](#)), the latter being included not 'as admirable or exemplary, but as an exponent of opposite qualities'. But he adds the cautionary note in his 1870 Catalogue of Examples text, 'Yet, remember, Prout's delight in the signs of age in building, and our own reverence for it, when our minds are healthy, are partly in mere revulsion from the baseness of our own epoch; and we must try to build, some day what shall be venerable, even when it is new.'

I like the series of Ruskin's Studies of Dawn ([WA.RS.ED.003](#) / [004](#) / [005](#)) for their ease, and for the repetition and discipline of doing them. There is a lot of landscape in the collection of course, and it is this that I was particularly interested in. His preparatory sketches and exercises are fascinating, and

the series of studies of foliage, branches, trees and finally wooded landscape is a joy ([WA.RS.RUD.290](#) / [300](#)). I particularly like Ruskin's reworking of Turner as in Study of Part of the Trees in Turner's "Crossing the Brook" ([WA.RS.RUD.294](#)), Drawing of Turner's "Goldau" ([WA.RS.SUP.171](#)) and Study in Neutral Tint of Turner's "The Pass of Faido" ([WA.RS.ED.287](#)). There are some excellent original Turners too, like The Junction of the Greta and Tees at Rokeby ([WA.RS.STD.002](#)) and Evening; Cloud on Mount Righi, seen from Zug. Sketch, by Turner ... ([WA.RS.ED.300](#)), and the most beautiful Scene on the Loire ([WA.RS.STD.003](#)).

sidekick 1999



wetout 1999



In 1999 I began to work on what I called roadscape photographs. I had made a number of artworks about real or imaginary means of escape, and was curious about the value of nature for urban dwellers. It was a rather cynical or knowing project - taking photographs of moments when one woke from what might be called a driver's reverie, to see the fleeting landscape from a viewpoint predefined by the road and the car windscreen. Most of these early photographs looked like advertising images, selling the dream experience of a new car, the unlimited freedom of the road. It sort of worked - there were no products to buy and the landscape became the thing to be consumed.

However, there were a number of these early photographs that were not so easy to explain or interpret. They did not have the obvious jink and swerve of speed, but instead had stillness, a dreamy approximation of place, an imprecise memory with distortions of scale and colour.

It is these images I have pursued, eventually getting off the motorcycle I used for the roadscares, and walking into the surrounding landscape, attempting to take photographs that recorded the experience of being in a place rather than of specific details.

I spent five weeks in Cumbria, looking for something of Ruskin. The landscape he loved from childhood, the house he grew old in, a garden, a gravestone; this was his Landscape of Escape. I walked most days, cold January and February days with mist and rain and snow, bitter winds and freezing fog coating anything inanimate with a smooth layer of clear ice.

I began to understand the patience and determination of artists who work with Nature, and I discovered that Landscape is not always there, although you might be.



Ivy Cragg's 15 seconds 2005

But I struggled with the Lake District in many ways. So much of it is too pretty and composed, manicured and controlled, so walked on, looked at, photographed and painted. It makes the beautiful ordinary, almost meaningless by duplication. In a way, one has to look at the Lakes and Fells now as an artificial construct, a collective vision of a near-perfect landscape. It stopped being a natural place in the early 18th century as tourism took hold. Of course, it was firmly under the hand of man before then, but in an organic way if one accepts that man has a natural place in the world and that the shift from nomadic to agrarian existence was an evolutionary process.



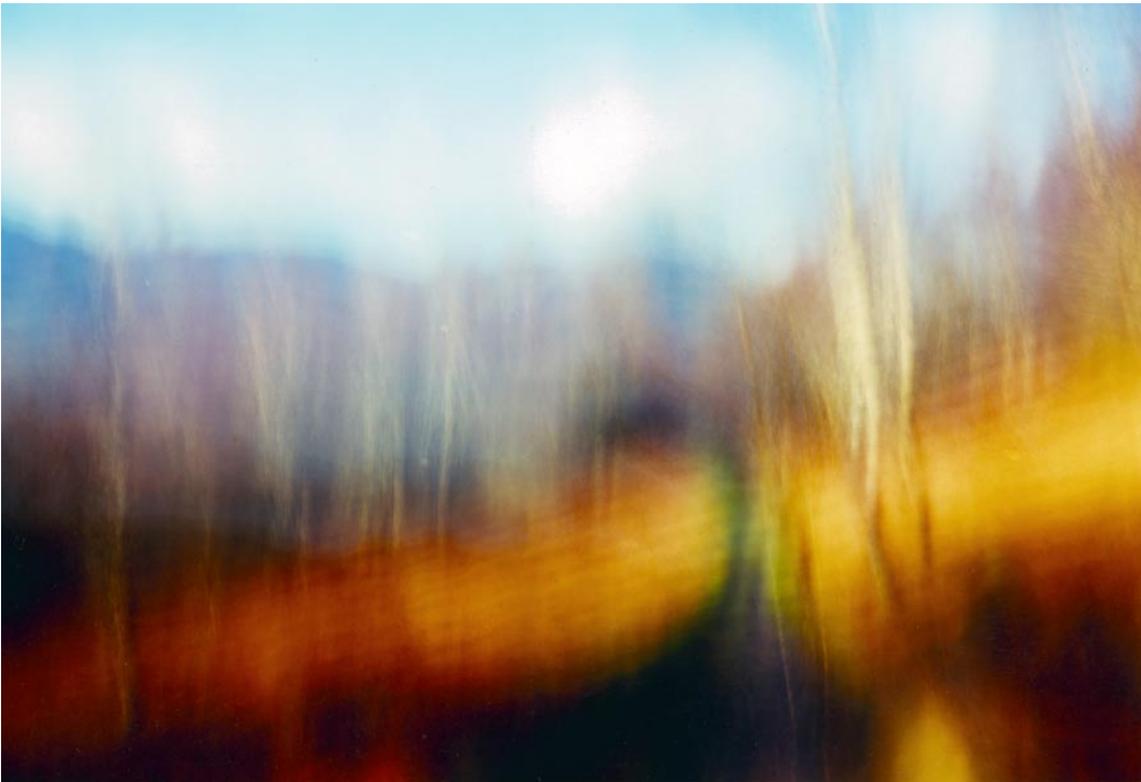
Yee How's 15 seconds 2005

Adam Sutherland, director of Grizedale Arts, explained that the Japanese are mad for the Lakes, and that they have a much more developed appreciation of the artificial in nature than we do in the West. This makes sense - the mountains are bonsai mountains, the waterfalls bonsai waterfalls.

This isn't to say that there aren't moments of wildness and genuine thrill. The top 500ft of some of the mountains can be a real challenge - you can still kill yourself up there if you are unlucky. But the main confrontation is with the elements, the fast moving coastal and mountain weather systems. I arrived in the Lakes days after the fierce storms of January this year, with very strong winds and widespread flooding. A large number of trees had fallen; ancient oaks with their roots skywards like the shields of fallen warriors, and whole hillsides of fallen pine downed with one blow. Dave Almond, the National Trust forester that I was staying with, was elated. 'Real change!' he said.



Tarn Foot's 15 seconds 2005



Pain Intake's 15 seconds 2005

I visited Brantwood on numerous occasions, and spent several days photographing in the grounds, where Ruskin created gardens, woodland trails, clearings and water features. The gardens and estate are by definition artificial - created to offer moods and vistas to the viewer.



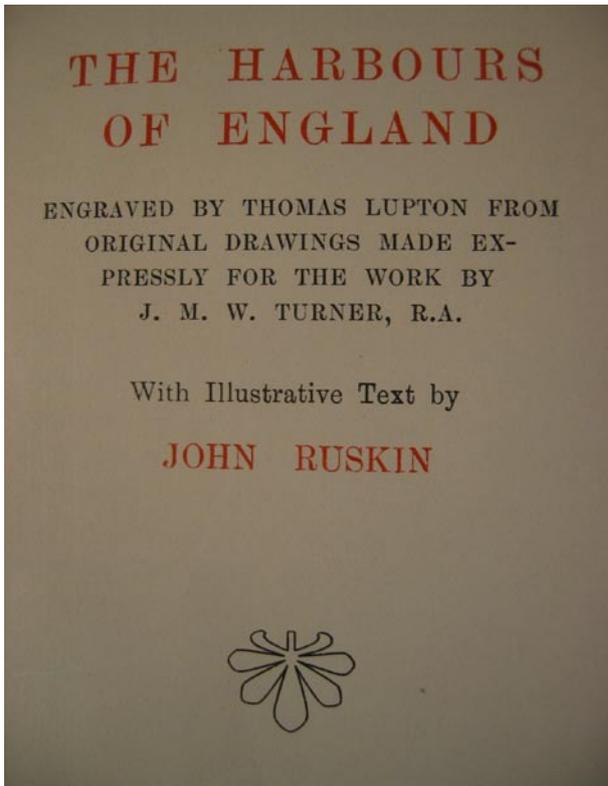
Kye Wood's 15 seconds 2005

There is no Nature in the Lakes anymore. The raw ingredients are there - water, rock, soil, vegetation - but their distribution is increasingly controlled by man. The exceptions are the vertical faces and scree slopes of the hilltops. Beyond that, by necessity, everything is controlled by agricultural subsidy, and The National Trust and National Parks conservation policy. Ruskin's loss of faith in Nature comes to mind, and mountains can become 'melancholy and dull'. And yet, if one accepts the artificiality, there is still uplift and elation at times. It is small scale and personal, no great philosophy, no guiding lights or principles. Be there, absorb it, move around in it, and be alive. That's it.



The Old Man's 15 seconds 2005

This last photograph is taken from within the grounds of Brantwood, facing west across Coniston Water which glimmers through the trees. Beyond the lake, green farmland rises to a bank of mist that obscures the quarried and scarred lower slopes of the distant mountain. Above the low cloud the characteristic peak of The Old Man of Coniston endures our feeble onslaughts past and present, and waits for nothing under a weak winter sun. This is Ruskin's view. The slate quarries would have been working when he was alive, and the sunsets enlivened by drifting clouds of pollution from the coal-fired steel industries of Barrow-in-Furness away to the southwest. The photograph has the feel of a Turner sketch or a Ruskin copy, perhaps even a Ruskin original! It works for me, the strongest reminder of the place and the day and the man.



In the bookshop at Brantwood I found a small and inconsequential book misleadingly called 'Ruskin's Harbours of England' on the spine. The inner title page makes things a little clearer:

It's Turner's 'The Harbours of England', with a text by Ruskin to bind the collection of etchings together after Turner's death.

Whilst not valuable, it is an original 19th - century edition in hardback with golden edges to the pages. The outer front and back covers are light blue and finely textured. On closer inspection this patterning is like a tossing Turner sea, and it moves in the light like a bankcard hologram. The dark blue spine of the book wraps round onto the pale covers and ends with a thin gold band like the waterline on the hull of a ship. It's an excellent piece of book design, and I wonder if Ruskin had a hand in it.



The book is written in a terse and impatient manner - it is perhaps something he took on then wished he had not. Ruskin didn't have a passion for the sea - it didn't thrill or touch him like mountains or skies. Maybe it was written during one of his bouts of depression. There is no date in my copy, but I would guess it was written in 1856 or 57. He is concerned about ageing and, more than that, about his loss of faith in Nature.

In the opening chapter he states, 'I know, indeed, that all around me is wonderful - but I cannot answer it with wonder: a dark veil, with the foolish words, NATURE OF THINGS, upon it, casts its deadening folds between me and their dazzling strangeness. [...] But one object there is still, which I never pass without the renewed wonder of childhood, and that is the bow of a Boat'. It is the 'blunt head of the common, bluff, undecked sea-boat' that he most admires: 'That rude simplicity of bent plank, that can breast its way through the death that is in the deep sea, has in it the soul of shipping. Beyond this, we may have more work, more men, more money; we cannot have more miracle'. (See Ruskin's sketch Drawing of the English Packet in Turner's "Calais Pier" [WA.RS.SUP.177](#)).

He goes on to celebrate the honest simplicity of the workman who made it, who would not see it as a thing of beauty, but as simple work to keep out water and do a job. And then what a job it does! 'No other work of human hands ever gained so much. [...] But in that bow of the boat is the gift of another world.' The iron of the nails used 'does more than draw lightning out of heaven, it leads love around the world'.

It goes on - more than fifty pages of it. But it's fast and flowing, and very Ruskin. He rants away, jabbing at commerce by deriding the refinements for speed as being precipitated by trade or luxury leisure. He dismisses all types of merchant or passenger carrying ships: 'I have nothing to say, feeling in general little sympathy with people who want to go anywhere' - a strange comment from one so well travelled in that age.

It's the simple fishing boats, local trading sloops and finally, with great awe, the Ships of the Line, that he celebrates. These of course are the boats that Turner paints, and it is Turner's subject matter that Ruskin identifies with and the plates of the book depict. He champions Turner's genius in detail. The Pre-Raphaelites get a passing positive mention. He demonstrates how poorly almost all earlier painters had represented both the sea and the ships on it, how little eye for detail they had and how unconvincing an impression their canvasses made.

The treatment of boats by the poets is also analysed: 'it is very notable how commonly the poets, creating for themselves an ideal of motion, fasten upon the charm of a boat. [...] it is a triumph to find the pastorally-minded Wordsworth imagine no other way of visiting the stars than in a boat "no bigger than the crescent moon" '(Wordsworth from the prologue to Peter Bell).

Whilst in the Lakes, I was generously invited to become an associate artist at the Wordsworth Trust by the director, Dr Robert Woof. The Trust has in its library several early editions of Coleridge's Tale of the Ancient Mariner, illustrated by Gustav Doré. I felt some tidal pull that still has me in its grip, and may lead to something else. In the meantime, here is a wondrous extract from the 1805 version of Wordsworth's Prelude where the boat is pivotal and Nature overwhelming:

*One evening (surely I was lead by her)
I went alone into a shepherd's boat,
A skiff that to a willow-tree was tied
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
'Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a vale
Wherein I was a stranger, thither come
A schoolboy-traveller at the holidays.
Forth rambled from the village inn alone
No sooner had I sight of this small skiff,
Discovered thus by unexpected chance,
Than I unloosed her tether and embarked.
The moon was up, the lake was shining clear
Among the hoary mountains; from the shore
I pushed, and struck the oars, and struck again
In cadence, and my little boat moved on
Even like a man who walks with stately step
Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on,
Leaving behind her still on either side
Small circles glittering idly in the moon
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light.*

*A rocky steep uprose
Above the cavern of the willow-tree,
And now, as suited one who proudly rowed
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,
The bound of the horizon - for behind
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And as I rose upon the stroke my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan -
When, from behind that craggy steep (till then
The bound of the horizon) a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.
There in her mooring place I left my bark,
And through the meadows homewards went with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness - call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.*

Extract from The Prelude - Book I Childhood and School-time by William Wordsworth.

Penzance, August 2005