

Painted Suns and Pencil Moons

An examination of the created skies in the works of artists J.M.W. Turner and Vija Celmins

by Andrea Brice

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created skies in the works of artists J.M.W. Turner and Vija
Celmins.**

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Abstract

This study has examined the sky through the works of the artists J.M.W. Turner and Vija Celmins. Through the two dimensional picture plane, the sky gains a tangible surface, bringing a seemingly limitless expanse within the confines of the canvas or page. The material qualities of these artists work and their use of the sky as a motif, has been considered within the context of two key sky events that occurred within their respective eras: Herschel's observations of the Sun in the late eighteenth century and the first photographs of the Moon sent back from the Russian space probe, Luna 9, in 1966. The influence of scientific discovery on ways of perceiving the sky through art has been explored as has the concept of the threshold as applied to both artists' work.

Introduction: Rationale, Scope, and Outline

Author, art critic and essayist and John Berger wrote, 'The sky has no surface and is intangible; the sky cannot be turned into a thing or given a quantity'.¹ Though the sky is visible to all it cannot be touched, it is simultaneously form and void, yet through art the sky can be recreated in tangible form. J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) was a painter who was and is known for his skies, particularly the day sky. The contemporary artist, Vija Celmins (b. 1938) is known for her skies, though by night. But for a few exceptions, Turner painted the day sky; the sun, the effects of light and the weather, the transient hours of dawn or dusk. Celmins on the other hand, for the vast majority of her work, has focused her lens on the night sky, repeatedly drawing, painting or making in print form, images from found photographs of space. Turner and Celmins both responded through their art to the scientific explorations of the sky that were occurring within their lifetimes. These explorations shifted the way in which the sky was seen, felt and understood in their respective cultural settings.

This present study aims to add to the field of cultural astronomy through an examination of the created skies in the works of these two highly different artists by exploring in what way they have related to the sky through the language of art, upon the two dimensional picture plane. This dissertation will look at two tipping points in the cultural history of the sky: William Herschel's observations of the sun, on which he lectured to the Royal Society in 1801; and the first photographs of the moon's surface, taken by the Russian space probe Luna 9 in 1966. This study considers the possible influence that these new ways of looking at the sky had upon Turner and Celmins' work.

Turner's life spanned the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, crossing the period that saw the transition from sail to steam. Born in Covent Garden, London, Turner was the son of a barber. He showed a very early talent for art and was admitted to the Royal Academy at the age of fourteen.² Turner's lower middle class upbringing is a prominent part of his life story, his thick cockney accent stayed with him

¹ Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2008, [1972]), p. 105.

² David Blaney Brown, 'J.M.W. Turner: Sketchbooks, Drawings and Watercolours', from the Tate Gallery webpage, originally posted December 2012, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-1775-1851-r1141041> [accessed 20/8/2020].

throughout his life and he had a reputation for being both uncouth and sharply intelligent.³ He was described by his contemporary, the English landscape painter John Constable (1776-1837), as having ‘a wonderful range of mind.’⁴ As it happened the Royal Academy in London at which Turner exhibited his work was situated next to the Royal Society, the oldest scientific academy in continuous existence.⁵ The literal ‘thinness of the walls’ kept Turner closely connected to the new scientific discoveries of the time.⁶ Whether these discoveries directly influenced Turner’s paintings is not conclusive, though he is known to be an artist highly involved with the culture of his time.⁷ What is evident is that Turner’s painted skies changed dramatically throughout his life, often in tandem with the scientific discoveries of his time.

As the sky can be experienced by anyone who looks up, it can also be viewed as a common and uniting space. Therefore, the painted sky possesses a universality that other landscape paintings, more specific to geographical place, cannot. Turner advocated throughout his lifetime for an elevated status for Landscape painting as a genre.⁸ The prevalent view of the period was that Landscape painting was a mere depiction of place and could not offer the same emotive scale for the viewer as History painting.⁹ History painting, which depicted either subjects from mythology or epic scenes taken from history, was the most highly regarded painting genre of the time. In the early nineteenth century, Landscape painting remained named for its earthbound features, regardless of whether the majority of the composition was given to what lay above the horizon line. Thus it was through his Landscapes and Seascapes that Turner explored and painted his skies. Turner’s influence upon the Impressionist movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth century is evidence that, his lifelong experiments with painting light forever changed the way both the sky and light were artistically portrayed through paint.¹⁰

³ David Blaney Brown, ‘J.M.W. Turner: Sketchbooks, Drawings and Watercolours’, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-1775-1851-r1141041> [accessed 20/8/2020].

⁴ John Constable, to Maria Bicknell, 30 June 1813, in, *John Constable’s Correspondence*, vol.2. ed. by R.B. Beckett, (Ipswich, Suffolk Records Office, 1964), p. 110.

⁵ James Hamilton, ‘Earth’s Humid Bubbles’, in *Turner and the Elements*, ed. by Ortud Westheider and Michael Phillip, (Italy: Hirmer Verlag, 2011), pp. 52-53.

⁶ James Hamilton, ‘Earth’s Humid Bubbles’, p. 53.

⁷ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, (China: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 9.

⁸ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 33.

⁹ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Jeremy Lewison, *Turner, Monet, Twombly – later paintings*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), p. 15.

Vija Celmins was born in Latvia in 1938, her early childhood marked by the chaos of WWII.¹¹ The Soviet Army invaded Latvia in 1940, for the next four years Latvia was a battle ground for the German and Soviet forces, until the end of the war in 1944.¹² In 1948, Celmins emigrated to the United States, settling with her family in Indiana.¹³ Upon arriving in America, as Celmins was initially unable to speak English, drawing and the world of books would become her refuge during the period of transition.¹⁴ Celmins began her art education at the John Herron Institute of Art at Indiana University, a well-respected institution that gave Celmins a solid grounding in the traditional use and application of materials.¹⁵ In 1963, Celmins commenced a Masters of Fine Arts at U.C.L.A., and moved into an old shop front on Venice beach, that was to be her studio and residence for the next thirteen years.¹⁶ Celmins's experiences as a child during the war, her emigration to America, the traditional art education she received, her move to the Los Angeles and the landscapes of the West coast of America were all to be formative experiences in the art that Celmins was to create.¹⁷

Celmins has said of her work, 'I've always been interested in very impossible images. Things blowing up, things disappearing in a breath. Things like the sky. It's like a totally... who knows what it is?'¹⁸ As an artist, Celmins approached the new images being produced of deep space that were proliferating in scientific magazines and the media through her intensive slow and deliberative process of drawing. Celmins began making graphite drawings of the night sky in the late 1960s, continuing the theme throughout the 1970s, culminating in the dense Starfield series of the early 1980s. After this Celmins began to explore the same motif through oil paint and printmaking, returning to drawing in the 1990s this time in the medium of charcoal. Celmins has continued to create her night sky works in print, pencil, charcoal and paint. Unlike Turner, Celmins's skies are not observed from nature, but rather from photographs of nature. Her imagery is sourced from photographs, images from books and magazines.

¹¹ Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters – the timeless work of Vija Celmins', *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2019, p. 19.

¹² Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 19.

¹³ Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 19.

¹⁴ Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 19.

¹⁵ Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 19.

¹⁶ Calvin Tomkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 19.

¹⁷ Stephanie Straine, 'Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins', in *Tate Papers*, no.14, Autumn 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/dust-and-doubt-the-deserts-and-galaxies-of-vija-celmins>, [accessed 14 September 2020].

¹⁸ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, in *PressPlay – Contemporary Artists in Conversation*, ed. by Mark C Taylor, Amanda Sharp and Matthew Higgs, (London: Phaidon, 2005), p. 101.

Celmins brings through her pictures the intangible sky into the realm of touch, transmuting the pictures she has collected into something to which she can relate, through her own material process.

Both Turner's and Celmins's works are not solely dedicated to representing the sky. However, the sky, for both artists has been a significant visual preoccupation for much of their work. This dissertation will be explored from the starting point of Turner's painted suns and Celmins's pencil moons. The concept of the threshold will also be examined in relation to the sky and to art, for Turner, through his painted depictions of the threshold times of sunrise and sunset, and for Celmins, through the threshold of the surface, of vision and of the painted night sky.

Outline

Chapter 1 will contain a review of the academic literature on the sky and art, looking at secondary source scholarship that is relevant to the primary source material of the artists work, being discussed. This will be followed by my methodology and approach.

Chapter 2 and 3 will examine the theme of Turner's painted suns and Celmins's pencil moons. Chapter 2 will consider the myriad of meanings of Turner's suns, taking into account the influence of Herschel's observations of the sun's surface and his conclusions that the sun may be a physical planet. It will also consider Turner's use of the symbolic power of the sun as a story telling device. In chapter 3, Celmins's graphite drawings of the Luna 9 photographs will be explored, considering the impact of the changing ways of seeing the sky through the technological advancements of the twentieth century. It will include references to the telescope's ability to reach through the sky, beyond what is visible to the naked eye, and photography's ability to record and hold fragments of time through imagery.

Chapter 4 and 5 will examine the concept of the threshold in relation to the sky through the works of both artists. In Chapter 4, through Turner, the theme will be approached through a consideration of his sunrise and sunset paintings. In Chapter 5, the theme will be examined through Celmins work, exploring her compositions, considerations of surface and the eye of the beholder.

A concluding section will bring together the arguments of this dissertation.

Chapter 1. Literature Review and Methodology

Introduction

This section will examine previous scholarship and literature that has discussed the art of Turner or Celmins, some directly related to the theme of the sky and others indirectly, though they significantly widen the scope through which the artists' work will be examined. This dissertation aims to explore different aspects of the sky within the two artists work, taking into consideration the vastly different cultures that have shaped their portrayals of the sky. The breadth of existent scholarship for Celmins, a contemporary practicing artist, though considerable, is not as broad as that of Turner. Therefore, this analysis will rely on both the existing criticism of Celmins's work and some key interviews with the artist. First, the two key sky events of Herschel's observations of the Sun and the photographs of the Moon sent back from Luna 9 will be considered. Next, key points in secondary scholarship related to understanding the sky in the work of both Turner and then Celmins will be explored. Lastly the concept of the threshold will be examined, through a variety of contextual applications.

Herschel's Observations of the Sun

In 1801 the astronomer William Herschel delivered his lecture, *On the nature and Construction of the Sun and fixed Stars* to the Royal Society in London.¹⁹ In his lecture, Herschel described the features of the Sun's surface beyond the visible radiant light. Herschel noted that, though much had already been discovered about the Sun, little was yet known of its 'internal construction'.²⁰ Herschel had developed a method by which he could view the sun through a telescope without blinding himself in the process. The method involved looking at the sun directly through a large telescope with a reflector, which redirected the image through a tray of inky water, allowing the image of the Sun to be observed with the naked eye.²¹ As art and science historian James Hamilton wrote, 1801 was, 'a watershed year in which a new understanding of the nature of the Sun began to be revealed.'²² These new understandings of the visible features of the sky, offered in scientific terms, a new way of comprehending the familiar Sun. They are

¹⁹ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p. 53.

²⁰ Herschel, William, '*On the Nature and Construction of the Sun and Fixed Stars*. By William Herschel, LL.D. F. R. S.', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 85 (1795), p. 47.

²¹ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p. 53.

²² James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p. 52.

also indicative of the spirit of the times within which Turner was painting. Hamilton has suggested that Herschel's observations had a major influence on the young Turner, changing the way in which he painted his skies.²³

Luna 9 and the Moon

In 1966, just over a century after Turner's death, the first images of the Moon's surface were beamed back to Earth. The photographs were taken by the Russian space probe Luna 9, the first to manage a successful 'soft' landing on the Moon.²⁴ The Russians were sending the images back to Earth via radio transmitter, encoded in an early version of fax technology.²⁵ The Jodrell Bank Telescope, which had been closely following the Russian mission, intercepted the signal. The code was recognised as fax and the various equipment required was gathered in order to print the image. As the Jodrell Bank telescope website states, 'It's hard to imagine how exciting it would have been to see the first picture sent from the surface of another celestial body appearing from the fax machine printer.'²⁶ The images were printed on the front cover of the Daily Express the next morning, with the headline *The Express Catches the Moon*, before the Russians knew what had occurred (Fig. 1).²⁷

²³ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p. 54.

²⁴ Image of photographs on the front page of the Daily Express. Online at: <https://www.jodrellbank.net/the-luna-9-space-hack-4th-feb-1966/> [accessed: 22/08/2020].

²⁵ Teresa Anderson, 'The Luna 9 "Space Hack" – 4th Feb 1966', original post 3/2/2016, <https://www.jodrellbank.net/the-luna-9-space-hack-4th-feb-1966/>, [accessed: 22/08/2020].

²⁶ <https://www.jodrellbank.net/the-luna-9-space-hack-4th-feb-1966/> [accessed: 22/08/2020].

²⁷ <https://www.jodrellbank.net/the-luna-9-space-hack-4th-feb-1966/> [accessed: 22/08/2020].



Figure 1. Front page of Manchester's Daily Express showing the first photo transmitted from Luna 9, 5th February, 1966, Image: <https://wearethemutants.com/2017/07/19/mysterious-monuments-on-the-moon-1966/we-are-the-mutants-moon-4/> [accessed 29/09/2020].

The event of the first 'space hack' as it is known, is an indication of the interest in space expressed by both the scientific community and public culture in the 1960s. Author, Dava Sobell in her book *The Planets*, tells an anecdote of her friends emotive response to the moon, (to be discussed later), and is indicative of the fervour for Space that was occurring during the late 1960s in America, when Celmins first began making her night

sky drawings.²⁸ Celmins was in her late twenties when these photographs were first taken. At this stage Celmins was establishing herself as an artist and was significantly changing her approach to her artistic practice. These photographs had a profound influence on Celmins, who began to explore through graphite drawings, images of Space and the night sky.

Turner's Skies

Turner is a painter renowned for his skies, obsessed with light, of which the sky is a natural abundant source.²⁹ Alexandra Harris in her book *Weatherland*, examined the relationship of English writers and artists to the sky. Harris noted Turner's particular devotion to the English sky, with its great variation of dramatic light effects due to its generally moody weather.³⁰ It was the particular way the elements of air and water mixed that was to be so compelling in Turner's painted skies. Art historian and Turner scholar John Gage noted that, 'it was Turner's mastery of the sky which was perhaps his greatest claim to originality as a Landscape painter.'³¹ Turner's painted skies have also been considered in terms of the significance of his painted suns. Gage specifically explored the meaning of the sun that features so significantly in nearly all of Turner's painted skies.³² Art critic and essayist Jonathan Crary, examined compositional elements of Turner's suns, in terms of their 'direct gaze' with the viewer, considering the potential relation between Turner's compositional shift and changing paradigms regarding perception and vision in the nineteenth century.³³

In addition, according to art historian Sam Smiles, Turner's art challenged the general assumptions of the day regarding Landscape Painting. Smiles wrote that the common consensus of the era was that, History Painting, as compared to Landscape 'offered little potential for the creative imagination in its execution' and could not invoke great emotion for viewer.³⁴ Yet Turner painted Landscapes with immense emotional power, expressing through the light of the sun, the atmosphere and the threshold between sky

²⁸ Dava Sobel, *The Planets*, (Great Britain, Fourth Estate, 2005,) p. 103.

²⁹ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, (India: Thames and Hudson, 2016, p. 270.

³⁰ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 271.

³¹ John Gage, 'Questions of Tone: Turner's Theme and Ruskin's Exposition.', *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1994, p. 32.

³² John Gage, 'J.M.W. Turner and Solar Myth', in *The Sun is God*, ed. by J.B. Bullen, pp. 39-48, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³³ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer – On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (U.S.A.: MIT Press, 1990).

³⁴ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 33-34.

and earth in an infinite variety of emotive language, an idea that will be explored further in Chapters 2 and 4. As he was a painter, it was through his materials that Turner spoke. Curator and artist Lawrence Gowing wrote about Turner's experiments and mastery of the watercolour medium and its influence upon the way in which he painted his larger compositions in oils. Watercolour was the medium, that allowed Turner to paint the fleetingness of the changing light and phenomena of the sky with a freshness and fluidity that would later transfer to the way in which he approached oil painting. It was his early experiments in watercolour that influenced the experimentation and development of his oil paintings.³⁵ As stated on the Royal Academy's contemporary website, 'As a portable and quick-drying medium, it proved indispensable as a means of recording scenery and fleeting effects of light and shade'.³⁶ This particular material quality that is natural to the use of watercolours changed the way in which Turner painted in oils, and most significantly for this dissertation, changed the way in which he painted his skies.

Celmins' Skies

Nevertheless, as the depths of the sky became more visible, its nocturnal surface became lost. As art historian James Elkins wrote, 'Night is when we most of us stop looking – after all, it's when there's nothing to see'. Elkins further described the orange glow that hangs over the city night all year, as, 'there is not much left of the heavens'.³⁷ Though Celmins's work is in no way directly about the disappearing visibility of the night sky, her work does span the concurrent period of the night sky's fading light. Science historian Allan Chapman, in his article regarding Thomas Harriot, the first astronomer to record his observations of the moon as seen through the lens of the telescope in 1601, prior to Galileo, has noted the significant impact telescopes had upon how the heavens were viewed and the impact this made upon how the sky was portrayed in art.³⁸ This original viewing of the Moon's surface through the lens of a telescope marked the beginning of a shift in the visual knowledge about the sky, which would continue to accompany the technological advancements in both telescopes and photographic capabilities over the following centuries. These technologies had a great

³⁵ Joyce H. Townsend, 'Starting to Paint in Oils', in *Turner from the Tate – the making of a master*, ed. by Ian Warrell, (Hong Kong: Tate publishing, 2013), p. 94.

³⁶ Royal Academy website, J.M.W. Turner page, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/j-m-w-turner-ra> [accessed 28th July 2020].

³⁷ James Elkins, *How to Use Your Eyes*, (New York, Routledge, 2009) p. 213.

³⁸ Allan Chapman, 'A new perceived reality: Thomas Harriot's Moon Maps', *Astronomy and Geophysics*, Vol. 50, Issue 1. (February 2009), pp. 1.27 – 1.33.

impact on Celmins as an artist, as all of her night sky series are based on photographs she had found in magazines or books. Considering the impact of photography as a visual medium, writer and filmmaker Susan Sontag wrote her seminal work, *On Photography*, in 1978. In it Sontag considered the ways in which the photograph has altered perceptions of vision and reality.³⁹ Art historian Roger Lipsey considered photographic scientific imagery as lacking the ability to record the felt response to the information that they represent, arguing for the equal human need of an, 'informed poetry of the cosmos.'⁴⁰ The impact of photography on Celmins's work will be explored in Chapter 3. It is between the development of the two technologies of photography and the telescopes ability to look beyond naked eye observation, that Celmins hand-made night skies have arisen and will be explored in Chapter 3 and 4.

Though Celmins has anchored her practice in repetition of a theme, she does not consider her imagery from a social, political or symbolic level, nor is it personal or private. It is none of these things to her, though she adds, 'I don't mind other people looking at it that way.'⁴¹ In this sense, it is difficult to add interpretation to the implicit meaning of Celmins's choice of astronomical photography as her source imagery for over five decades of her life as an artist. Celmins chose the imagery because she was attracted to it, never making it more complex than that in her own words. Furthermore, Celmins remarked, in conversation with fellow artist Robert Gober, that people often seek too much meaning in art.⁴² Her point was that people should look, rather than project meaning into the work too quickly. Celmins then went on to make the point that if she were an art dictator, she would tie people up and say, 'Here, look at this. And look at it again and look at it again,' and she has indeed, through her process of repetition and reiteration of the theme of the night sky, prodded the viewer to 'look at it again and look at it again'. Celmins's dry sense of humour is often uppermost in her interviews, but this comment revealed part of what lies at the root of her own art, that her work is made to be absorbed by the viewer, through slow and preferably repeated contemplation, much in the manner that it has been made. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1978).

⁴⁰ Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own – The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, (Boston, Shambhala Publications, 1988), p. 37.

⁴¹ Vija Celmins and Chuck Close, *Vija Celmins*, (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1992), p. 23.

⁴² Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPLAY*, p. 105.

The Threshold

The concept of the threshold has been defined by historian of religion Mircea Eliade as a space that concentrates the sense of, 'not only the boundary between outside and inside but also the possibility of passage from one zone to another.'⁴³ Eliade was analysing the meaning of 'threshold' within the symbolic realm of the religious person's daily life. Since the process of making art already crosses the liminal space of the inside world of the artist and the outside world of the observer, for the purpose of this dissertation Eliade's definition can also be readily applied to the exploration of Turner's and Celmins's works. Turner is famed for his sunsets and sunrises and the concept of the threshold can be applied to these times of day. The turn of the day as a 'boundary zone' has been explored in its relation to daydreaming and imagination by Orvar Löfgren and Billy Ehn.⁴⁴ Art historian Briony Fer also wrote of the altered states of visual and mental perception as the day fades to dusk and the visible world becomes an indeterminate space.⁴⁵ Art historian and writer Robert Rosenblum, also explored the power of indeterminate spaces in art, and considered philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) concept of the boundless sublime within the context of Turner's later works and the abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko.⁴⁶ The idea of the threshold will be discussed in Chapter 4.

When Celmins first began her night sky drawings in the late 1960s, she wanted an image which simply 'described a surface', her aim being to, 'place it out there, without any feeling.'⁴⁷ The concept of the threshold can be applied in a myriad of contexts to Celmins's work: as the space beyond the visible threshold of the sky that is her chosen imagery, the threshold of the surface of the work itself, and the threshold space between the work, the viewer and their own perception. Curator and writer, Stephanie Straine examined Celmins's 1974 drawing *Untitled (desert-galaxy)* (Fig.12) and the relationship between two images, one of the night sky and one of the desert floor, side

⁴³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (U.S.A., Harcourt Inc., 1987 [1957]), p. 181.

⁴⁴ Löfgren, Orvar, and Billy Ehn, 'Daydreaming Between Dusk and Dawn', *Etnofoor*, vol. 20, no. 2, (2007), pp. 9-21

⁴⁵ Briony Fer 'Night', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 71-80.

⁴⁶ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The abstract sublime', *Artnews*, Vol. 59, no. 10, February 1961, pp. 38-41, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/beyond-the-infinite-robert-roosenblum-on-sublime-contemporary-art-in-1961-3811/> [accessed 14/09/2020].

⁴⁷ Calvin Tompkins, 'Surface Matters', p. 20.

by side on the same page.⁴⁸ Curator Julia Friedrich, also examined this work, coming to her own interpretations of what the juxtaposition of these images convey.⁴⁹ Art historian James Romaine in a review of Celmins's work, parallels her material processes with the nature of her subject matter, giving valuable insight into the viewers experience.⁵⁰ Celmins herself comments on the nature of duality and of her relationship to the surface of her works, and the importance of the viewer through her various interviews. These concepts will be examined in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

The intention of this literature review was to investigate how other scholars have examined the created skies in the works of J.M.W. Turner and Vija Celmins, specifically via the ideas of the influence of scientific discovery on ways of perceiving the sky through art and through the concept of the threshold as applied to both artists work. The discussion of Herschel's observations of the Sun and the first photograph of the Moon sent back from the Luna 9 space probe, illustrate two major cultural turning points in ways of perceiving the sky. According to Harris, England's moody skies were particularly inspiring for Turner. Smiles, Gage and Crary all highlighted the role of the sun in Turner's work, for its storytelling, symbolic and compositional effects. Gowing credits Turner's prodigious watercolour experiments as influencing the way in which he was to paint in oils, changing dramatically the scope of his painted skies. For Celmins, the Luna 9 photographs marked a new way of seeing the familiar Moon, and a whole new era of space exploration and knowledge of the sky. In her work, the influence of the new photographic images from Space that were proliferating scientific magazines and books were to be the food for over forty years-worth of image-making. Sontag's theories of photography's altered realities, help to situate Celmins responses to her chosen source material. Though technology's capabilities for seeing into and recording the sky have exponentially increased, as Elkins noted much of the brilliance of the night sky is fading from view for the world's populace. Although Celmins herself makes clear that to her the materials have more meaning than the imagery, Straine, Friedrich and Romaine all found her created skies to be rich with interpretive meaning. The next

⁴⁸ Stephanie Straine, 'Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins', in *Tate Papers*, no.14, Autumn, 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/dust-and-doubt-the-deserts-and-galaxies-of-vija-celmins>, [accessed 14 September 2020].

⁴⁹ Julia Friedrich and Hubertis Butin (eds), *Vija Celmins: Wüste, Meer & Sterne = Desert, Sea and Stars*, (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König; New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2011), p. 22.

⁵⁰ James Romaine, 'Active Sight: Vija Celmins and Jackson Pollock from Pictorialism to Perception', *Image*, Issue 59, Fall, 2008, <https://imagejournal.org/article/active-sight/> [accessed 15/09/2020].

section will look in detail at Turner's painted suns and Celmins's pencil moons as a way of discussing their created skies across the two vastly different cultural periods.

Methodology

I was keen to explore through the academic context, the artistic material translation of the indeterminate sky through the works of Turner and Celmins. My background is in Fine Arts and I have previously encountered the works of both Celmins and Turner in art galleries. Both have left indelible impressions upon me. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, my ability to visit galleries and examine these specific works directly was prohibited. Therefore this dissertation has been library based and I have examined the primary sources of each artists' work through reproduction, both in books and online, selecting pieces from their oeuvres that related most specifically to the sky. My approach is first to describe what I observe in the works, particularly in relation to the sky and then to contextualise these observations within the secondary source material. I have also used secondary scholarship to place their works within each artist's cultural contexts, specifically the two significant sky discoveries that occurred in both artists' respective eras: Herschel's observations of the Sun in the late 1800s; and the first photographs of the Moon sent back from the Luna 9 space probe in 1969.

Chapter 2. Painted Suns

This section will explore the role of the sun through three of Turner's paintings, *The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage, Macon* (Fig. 2), *Snow Storm, Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (Fig. 3) and *Regulus* (Fig. 4). The sun is present in almost all of Turner's works, whether through reflected light or aimed directly at the viewer's gaze. The sun as a motif developed potency throughout Turner's life and great attention was paid to the way in it was painted. First *The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage* will be considered, taking into account the composition and the textured surface of the sun to which Hamilton saw links to Hershel's observations of the sun. Next, the significance of the sun in *Snow Storm Hannibal Crossing the Alps* will be investigated, considering both the way in which it is painted and its role as a story telling aid in Turner's portrayal of the historical epic of Hannibal. Lastly the radiating sun in *Regulus* will be examined, considering the significance of both its visual brilliance and symbolic intent. As Jonathon Crary noted of Turner's sun, 'In Turner all the meditations that previously had distanced and protected an observer from the brilliance of the sun are cast off.'⁵¹ Turner's painted suns have an impact and directly confront the viewer's eye in a way that was, in his time, unique to him. Through the examination of these three paintings, a small portion of the significance and meaning of the sun in Turner's paintings will be explored, as a way of understanding Turner's cultural response and the therefore a general response to the changing nature of the sun.

⁵¹ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 139.



Figure 2. J.M.W. Turner, *The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage, Macon*, c. 1803, oil on canvas, 237 cm x 146 cm, Image: Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust, UK.

The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage, Macon (Fig. 2) was painted by Turner in 1803. The canvas is divided roughly in half horizontally along the horizon. Trees frame the scene on both the far left and the far right of the composition, acting as a visual bridge connecting land and sky. A river curves through the middle left of the landscape, capturing the reflected light of the sky. All the compositional elements of this painting combine to draw the viewer's eye into the painting and towards the sun. Turner modelled the composition closely on those of the seventeenth-century French landscape painter, Claude Lorraine, known as Claude, (1600-1682), by whom he was immensely influenced.⁵² In this painting Turner has painted the sun, not as a yellow disk that hangs in the backdrop of the painted sky, but as a source of radiating white light that appears to emanate out of the canvas. Considered from a spatial perspective, the width of the sun's glow is equal to the width that of the whole company of merrymakers in the foreground. Given the name of the piece, Turner appears to be equating the joy of the crowd with the light and warmth of the Sun.

⁵² Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 270.

Turner's reasons for pointing the viewer's eye so directly to the sun remain unknown. Hamilton theorised, that when painting the sun in this work, Turner was demonstrating the influence of Herschel's description of the sun, on which he had lectured at the Royal Society two years earlier in 1801. Herschel interpreted his observations to indicate that the sun was planet, not a star, 'The sun, viewed in this light, appears to be nothing else than a very eminent, large and lucid planet the only primary one of our system.'⁵³ In this painting the sun had been painted so thickly it was raised from the flat plane of the canvas, like a concave disc.⁵⁴ Though it is difficult to see in reproduction, Hamilton observed that the sun's disc is 'intentionally painted in three different textures', which creates the effect of a sun that has a 'physical reality within the painting.'⁵⁵ The textured marks that Turner created in paint, the 'ridges, nodules and corrugations' also visually represent the, 'ridges, nodules and corrugations' that Hershel had described observing on the sun's surface.⁵⁶ Turner was also, according to Hamilton, for the first time, exhibiting a work in which the viewer's gaze was being taken to the sun's surface. Hamilton wrote, 'the sun in the painting goes beyond art and hovers on the threshold of experimental science.'⁵⁷ Such an event is, of course, impossible to do in reality, as to look straight at the sun like this in nature would be blinding in its brightness. Though Hamilton convincingly draws the link between Turner and Herschel, there exists no conclusive evidence beyond what can be observed in the painting itself. In this work, the sun is a physical presence in paint, raised from the surface of the canvas, inviting a tactile response from the eye, a sense that one could physically touch the sun as the sun touches us through its heat and blinding presence.

⁵³ Herschel, William, 'On the Nature and Construction of the Sun and Fixed Stars', p. 65.

⁵⁴ *The Genius of Turner: Painting the Industrial Revolution*, dir. by Clare Beavan (Fresh One Productions, 2013).

⁵⁵ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p. 54.

⁵⁶ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p.54.

⁵⁷ James Hamilton, 'Earth's Humid Bubbles', p.54.



Figure 3. J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, c. 1812, oil on canvas, 146 cm x 237.5 cm, Image: the Tate Gallery London.

The sun, in *Snow Storm: Hannibal crossing the Alps* (Fig. 5), plays a dramatically different role to the sun in the previously considered work though no less significant. Turner was in his late thirties when he painted *Snow Storm: Hannibal crossing the Alps* to be exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1812. He was, at this time a respected painter at the height of his career. The painting depicts an epic from the second Punic War, in which Hannibal, commander of the Carthaginian army, crossed the Italian Alps, heading to war with the Roman Republic.⁵⁸ The painting is roughly divided visually into thirds horizontally, the top two thirds depicting hints of the alps and the clouds of a great storm. The majority of the composition is given over to the events of the sky, as the title of the painting suggests, and visually, the subject of the painting is as much the storm as it is Hannibal's journey. According to Harris, the storm it depicts is said to have originated from one Turner witnessed on the Yorkshire moors, which he also sketched.⁵⁹ The engulfing darkness of the storm looms over the company below, the sun is obscured by the darkness of the sky, veiling its light to an eerie muted orange. The sun has no brilliance in this painting, yet its presence is still visible. Even though safe passage through the Alps is told by the glowing passage of light beyond the storm,

⁵⁸ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 271.

the muted sun encapsulates the looming threat, the dimming strength that potentially faces the Carthaginians.

Accompanying the exhibition of the painting were some lines of verse penned by Turner himself, taken from his longer work *The Fallacies of Hope*. He described the advancing chief as, 'Look'd on the sun with hope; - low, broad, and wan'.⁶⁰ In this painting, Turner has used the symbolism of the sun and the storm to deepen the complexity of his portrayal of the story of Hannibal. Turner has captured through the sky the perilous nature of the crossing, while simultaneously telling the story of the greater cycle of doom to come, of the rise and fall of empires, through the wan and warning sun. Smiles wrote, 'For Turner, one of the greatest military feats of all time is seen not as a triumph, but as the first act of a tragedy, begotten in storm and blood, whose issue will be defeat and destruction.'⁶¹ According to Smiles, the storm's wrath is not balanced with a hopeful sun, it is not a sun, 'symbolic of hope,' but rather casts, 'the false light of delusion.'⁶² The foreground of the picture depicts the attacks from the Swiss tribesmen on the rear-guard of Hannibal's army. The dark arch of cloud curving up and over the alps combined with the alternating passages of dark and light in the sky, creates a spiralling effect within the composition. The spiral draws the viewer's eye in and towards the sun, then beyond to the golden light past the storm. What is visually apparent is that Turner was painting the story of Hannibal through the epic scale of nature. The immensity and force of nature dwarfs the human scene below, thus the story becomes narrated through the visual language of the sky, including the storm, the wan sun and the golden passage of light beyond.

⁶⁰ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 37.

⁶¹ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 37.

⁶² Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 37.



Figure 4. J.M.W. Turner, *Regulus*, c. 1828, reworked 1837, oil on canvas, 89.5 cm × 123.8 cm, Image: the Tate Gallery, London.

Regulus (Fig.4) is an example of Turner using the sun to intense visual and symbolic effect. In this painting, the light of the sun radiates out from the horizon, suffusing the sky and the water of the harbour, engulfing the composition with its radiance. Turner's sun passes through the edge of the picture plane, and out across the water of the harbour, reaching beyond both the top and the bottom edges of the canvas. Furthermore, it has been painted as if the viewer were looking directly into it. Turner painted *Regulus* while on his second visit to Rome, in 1828.⁶³ The painting was exhibited twice, first in 1828 in Italy then in 1837 at the Royal Academy in London. For the 1837 exhibition, it was famously reworked on 'varnishing day', a day permitted by the Royal Academy for artists to put finishing touches to their works after they had been hung on the walls but prior to public exhibition. According to Harris, on this varnishing day, Turner was 'staging in public an extraordinary competition between sunlight and paint.'⁶⁴ As Harris noted, the question was whether Turner could replicate the brilliance

⁶³ The Tate Gallery webpage for *Regulus*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-regulus-n00519> [accessed 14/09/2020].

⁶⁴ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 269.

and radiance of the sun through paint.⁶⁵ The quest drew a crowd and the moment was captured by Norwegian artist Thomas Fearnley in an oil sketch (Fig. 5). In Fearnley's sketch the canvas of *Regulus* becomes a source of light itself, throwing long shadows behind the men who stand around lit up by the sun of Turner's paint.⁶⁶



Figure 5. Thomas Fearnley, *Turner Varnishing*, 1837, oil on canvas, 23 x 23.5 cm, Image: Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

In order to understand the implications Turner's desire to paint a blinding sun the story of Regulus is required. Regulus was a captured Roman general and the painting depicted the moment when Regulus was awaiting his departure from Rome to Carthage where a horrific fate awaited him. Regulus was to be punished by having his eyelids cut off, then forced to look into the sun until he was blind. In the painting, the viewer is Regulus. Turner has compositionally directed the viewer's eyes towards the blinding light of the sun.⁶⁷ The painting therefore tells a twofold story: Turner, the painter obsessed with light, attempting to paint the true brilliance of the sun, to 'blind' his viewer with his painting's inner light; and the story of Regulus's fated blindness,

⁶⁵ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 270.

⁶⁶ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, pp. 269 – 270.

⁶⁷ The Tate Gallery webpage for Regulus, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-regulus-n00519> [accessed 26/8/2020].

through the symbolic sun. According to Gage, in his later life Turner became more obsessed with the 'the destructive power of the light'.⁶⁸ Regulus was one way Turner could explore the more destructive capacities of the Sun's power, to blind and destroy. The overwhelming light portrayed in *Regulus* was also interpreted as a violent light by Harris, who wrote, 'Turner's sunlight, like an acid dissolves any solid matter in its path.'⁶⁹ Nevertheless, if the viewer is unaware of the story of Regulus, the form in which it is painted does not lend itself to violence. Instead it appears to be a study of an ancient port engulfed in the light of the radiant sun. The architecture to the right-hand side of the composition and the masts of the boats in the harbour to the left of the composition give solid vertical forms which frame the diffuse yellow light of the sun. Though the forms are recognisable, nothing appears distinct, the edges have been blurred and softened by the blaze of the sun. In *Regulus*, Turner demonstrated the effect a gaze directed straight towards the sun, the light dissolving the appearance of all that surrounds it. *Regulus* is a powerful attempt by Turner to portray the intensity of the sun through paint, representing a multitude of potential symbols, including the rise and fall of empires and the blindness of all men, within its radiant ability to also destroy.

As can be seen through the examination of these three paintings, Turner's suns, though ever present were used to express a myriad of symbolic possibilities. In Figure 1, it is clear that through compositional device, Turner is directing the focus of the viewer towards the sun. The sun has taken a central place of importance within the landscape, drawing the viewer's eye skyward, for further scrutiny. Turner, through paint depicted a vision of a physical sun, such as which can never occur with the naked eye in nature. Though Turner may, as Hamilton suggested, have been influenced by Hershel's discoveries regarding the sun, he does not confine his depictions to investigations of the sun's visual properties in a scientific sense. The sun's capacity to embody deeper meaning as a sky symbol, shifts according to the needs of the story being told. In Figure 2, the sun is again a central motif, it is where the viewer's eye is taken through the spiral of the storm. However, this sun does not shine with the gentle warmth of the previous painting. Instead its light is eerie, veiled to the viewer through the dark of the storm while still being the source of the illumination for the golden passage beyond. In Figure 2, Turner overtly appears to be telling a story of peril and bloodshed through the atmosphere of a talking sky, the sun like an eye far above, observing the tiny human

⁶⁸ John Gage, 'J.M.W. Turner and Solar Myth', p. 47.

⁶⁹ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland*, p. 270.

scale drama below. Figure 3 however, shows a sun which has engulfed nearly the entire composition, its light dissolving people, architecture, the horizon, and symbolically, eventually Regulus's sight. In it, Turner has suggested both the extreme radiance of the sun and the end of light, through blindness. There is no singular summary for the meaning of Turner's sun, yet he repeatedly through his compositions points the viewer's gaze directly towards it. The message of Turner's suns are coded in paint and speak across his different canvases in many voices. He was and still is able to evoke in the viewer the many guises that the sun holds; nourishment, joy, wrath, radiance, darkness, a source of both life and death.

Chapter 3. Pencil Moons

This section will examine two drawings made by artist Vija Celmins in response to the first photograph of the moon, sent back from the Russian space probe Luna 9. The two drawings are entitled *Moon Surface (Luna 9) # 1* (Fig. 6) and *Moon Surface (Luna 9) # 2* (Fig. 7). First the drawings will be introduced and visually analysed, in relation to comments made by Celmins when discussing the two works in interview. Next, the drawings will be examined in relation to the source imagery of the photograph. Lastly, the context in which Celmins has drawn the moon, including the intention of her process, will be contrasted to the first drawings made of the moon through a telescope, by Thomas Hariot in 1609. Both of these moments, the Luna 9 photograph and Hariot's telescope, marked new ways of seeing the familiar moon.

Celmins's two works, were both created in 1969. The drawings were based upon the first photograph of moon's surface sent back from the Russian space probe Luna 9 in 1966.⁷⁰ Celmins expressed her response to seeing the photograph as, 'this was the first image from another world... Moon to Earth, my imagination was so aroused. I was excited to realise what this obscure photo represented.'⁷¹ For Celmins, the 'obscure' photograph represented an image in black and white, of the surface of the moon, not as a distant object or a bright ball of light in the sky, but as a close up, grainy terrain, not entirely dissimilar to certain places on earth. The camera was placed at close range and though it looked familiar in form, the photograph was actually taken 384,400 km's from Earth. For Celmins, the photograph offered a whole new way of seeing and therefore knowing, the familiar sight of the moon. Celmins's response to this new world of visual information was to methodically and meticulously recreate the image through drawing, bringing the moon metaphorically to her fingertips.

⁷⁰ Artist Vija Celmins discusses 'Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2' from OCMA's collection, Orange County Museum of Art, originally posted 15 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7qsKGIAcVU> [accessed 28/08/2020]

⁷¹ Artist Vija Celmins discusses 'Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7qsKGIAcVU> [accessed 28/08/2020]

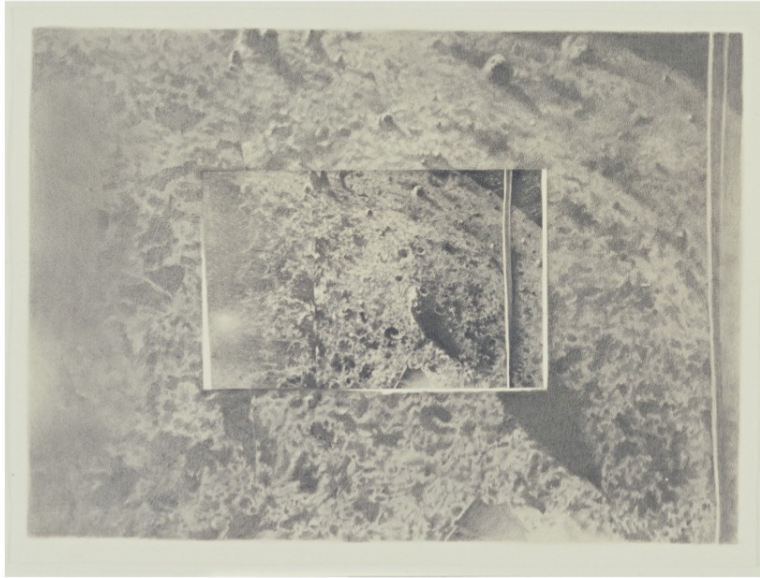


Figure 6. Vija Celmins, *Moon Surface (Luna 9) #1*, c. 1969, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 35 cm x 47.2 cm, Image: MoMA, New York.

Celmins created *Moon Surface #1* (Fig.6) in 1969 three years after the photograph was first published on the front page of the Daily Express newspaper. She found the photograph inside Bernard Lovell's 1968 book, *Our Present Knowledge of the Universe*, and tearing the image from the book, she worked directly from the torn page.⁷² The drawing, replicating the image of the moon's surface, was reproduced in delicate and accurate detail. A smaller version of the image was repeated inside the larger one, creating an image within an image. The background image is more blurred, as if it has lost some detail through being enlarged; the smaller image in the centre is rendered in sharper detail and nestled inside the larger one. To the left of the page the image appears out of focus, replicating the effects of the camera lens. The right hand side of the picture has two vertical lines running down the side that could be the fold of the page from which Celmins tore the original image and though they interrupt the image of the moon, they are clearly intentional. They are a clue to the viewer that this

⁷² Artist Vija Celmins discusses 'Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7qsKGLACVU> [accessed 28/08/2020].

is an image of a reproduction, Celmins has been true to her source. Each of these tiny details - the blurring contrasted with sharpness, the placing of an image inside the larger image, the meticulously rendered edge of the original page - all add layers of subtlety to the drawing. The details combine in effect to bring the image of a distant world into the present.



Figure 7. Vija Celmins, *Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2*, c. 1969, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 35.5 cm x 46.3 cm, Image: Orange County Museum of Art, California.

After finishing *Moon Surface (Luna 9) #1*, Celmins drew the torn page again, *Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2* (Fig.7). In this drawing the original image was created whole, without the smaller image inside. Celmins described the drive behind the process of the drawing,

I did it again, letting the whole space, of my little rectangle work fill with this abstract image. My desire was to relive this bit of the moon myself, to thoroughly describe it and place it in a more real physical form you see before you.⁷³

⁷³ Artist Vija Celmins discusses 'Moon Surface (Luna 9) #2', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7qsKGIACVU> [accessed 28/08/2020].

The process of recreating the image of the moon's surface, accrued through the slow building up of tiny marks to form the image, allowed Celmins to 'relive' this portion the moon that had been captured by the lens of a camera. The medium of graphite in which Celmins created the drawings is capable of a great tonal variation, from darks to almost imperceptible feather-like light. Celmins has utilised the sensitivity to touch that the medium can yield when in deft hands. Working in monochrome enhances the abstract quality of the image, allowing the viewer to focus upon the pattern of dark and light contrasts. Through the drawing process, Celmins has brought what she described as an image from another world into a 'real physical form', becoming something tangible and present. In these works, Celmins can be seen to be grappling with a whole new visual form for the familiar moon, enabled through the technology of photography and Space exploration.

Celmins desire to 'relive' a part of the moon for herself through drawing can be paralleled to an anecdote author Dava Sobel in her book *The Planets*, retells of her friend Carolyn. It originates in the same era that Celmins was drawing the moon for herself, during the late 1960s of the American Apollo missions. Sobel recounts the story of her friend who had been given a quantum of moon dust as a love token by an ardent admirer.⁷⁴ When Sobel asked her friend if she could see these particles of the moon, her friend replied that she could not, for she had eaten them.⁷⁵ Sobel wrote, 'By its sacred presence it had changed her very nature.... She had mated herself to the Moon somehow via this act of incorporation,' an act which Sobel confessed made her jealous.⁷⁶ The photograph and the moon dust are two examples of a slice of time in which fragments of the moon were brought back to the earth for the first time. Though they are entirely different acts, Carolyn's imbibement and Celmins's intensive pictorial renderings share something of the power that the moon can invoke, and of the desire to partake of the moon bodily. Carolyn, very literally into her body, and Celmins through the hand, eye and page.

The camera, a machine that combined the two sciences of optics and chemistry, could by the twentieth century reproduce what had previously only been attainable through

⁷⁴ Dava Sobel, *The Planets*, p. 103.

⁷⁵ Dava Sobel, *The Planets*, p. 103.

⁷⁶ Dava Sobel, *The Planets*, p. 104.

the skill of the artisans hand. Susan Sontag in her seminal book *On Photography* wrote, 'Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.'⁷⁷ According to Sontag, the photograph can have the sensation of being 'experience captured.'⁷⁸ Photographic images can, as Sontag suggested, appear to be real pieces of the world, more faithful to an objective way of seeing than an artist's rendition might be. Celmins's work, however, challenges the displacement of the artist in their role of mimesis, the representation of nature, and instead questions the 'realness' of the photograph. Celmins has described the photograph as an 'alternative subject', which for her creates the effect of distance, 'and distance creates the opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship to it.'⁷⁹ Celmins utilises the photograph then for enhanced vision, as she said, 'I treat the photograph as an object, an object to scan.'⁸⁰ In the case of the moon photograph from Luna 9, it is the only way in which she, as an individual could have had access to this particular view of the moon. Through her drawing, Celmins has brought the photograph of 'another world' into the present, of her own world.

Well before photography and space probes, there was the telescope. Thomas Hariot was the first person to make a drawing of the moon as observed through the lens of a telescope, on the 26th of July 1609, months before Galileo would execute his first sketches, (Fig. 8)

⁷⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Vija Celmins, and Chuck Close, *Vija Celmins*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Vija Celmins, and Chuck Close, *Vija Celmins*, p. 25.

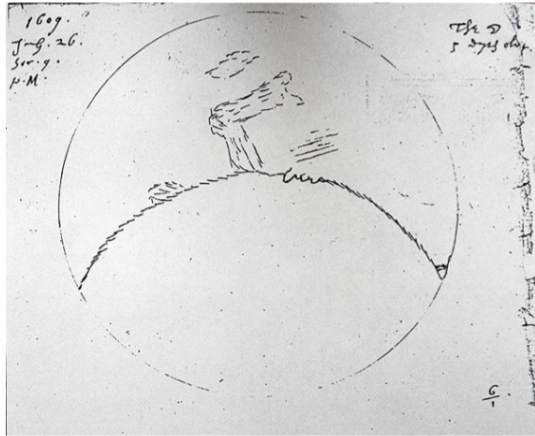


Figure 8. Thomas Harriot, first drawing of the Moon, 26th July, 1609. Image: http://galileo.rice.edu/sci/harriot_moon1609_726.gif [accessed 29/09/2020].

Harriot used a telescope, or a 'Dutch truncke' (as they were called at the time) that magnified visibility 6x, Galileo by contrast used the one he built himself, which could magnify at 2x.⁸¹ These early telescopes had a very narrow field of vision, permitting only a small portion the Moon's surface to be observed at a time. This narrow portal meant the lines of the mapping process had to be pieced together as the lens moved across the surface of the moon's terrain, making these early maps all the more remarkable. For the first time, the boundary of naked eye observation had been broken. Harriot's drawings are particularly simple, yet they mark the beginning of a whole new way of seeing the world, both celestial and terrestrial. These astronomical discoveries were to have profound effects on artistic representations of the celestial phenomena. According to Chapman, 'In the latter part of the 16th and early 17th centuries, numerous artists painted pictures of astronomical subjects in which the heavenly bodies were depicted the way Galileo and his successors had seen them through the telescope.'⁸² The Luna 9 photograph of the surface of the moon mark a similar turning point in humanity's visual relationship to the sky. Harriot's sketches record a need to observe for scientific purpose, by the time that Celmins was making her drawings of the

⁸¹ Allan Chapman, 'A new perceived reality: Thomas Harriot's Moon Maps', p. 1.27.

⁸² website for, Museo Galileo, exhibition conceived and curated by Paolo Galluzzi, Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 13 March - 30 August 2009, 'Images of the universe from antiquity to the telescope', <https://brunelleschi.imss.fi.it/galileopalazzostrozzi/section/PaintingGalileosSkies.html> [accessed 11/05/2020].

moon's surface, photography had replaced the artists hand for the purpose of scientific observation. Lipsey observed that scientific imagery, whether on the grand scale of space or the microscopic realm of the subatomic particle, cannot, 'record how we feel about these things nor what they prompt us to think. An informed poetry of the cosmos is needed no less than an informed science.'⁸³ Though Lipsey was writing about artists at the turn of the twentieth century and how theosophical influence offered the possibilities of expressing the interior realm in material form, his sentiment is applicable to Celmins. Figures 6 and 7 contain in their surfaces Celmins's felt response to the very new images that looked beyond the limit of the visible, observable world.

Celmins created something unique in her drawings of the photographs of the moon, telling of a personal relationship with the image 'of another world' from the sky. Through her meticulous rendering in the delicate medium of graphite, Celmins was able to 'relive' for herself that piece of the moon. Celmins, together with Sobel's friend Carolyn, are two examples of bodily impulse connected with the power of the moon. Celmins uses the photograph as a way to slow down her looking, and for their distancing ability. Harriot and his telescope in 1609 and Luna 9 in 1969, mark two moments in time when significant changes were perceived in the way the moon was envisaged. Harriot drew the dividing line between light and shadow across the moon's surface as observed through the telescope. Celmins did not directly observe the moon, but rather through a fragment found in a book of an image from another world, she maintained that artistic expression was just as valid and necessary in comprehending the new way of seeing as scientific observation.

⁸³ Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, p. 37.

Chapter 4. Thresholds: Dawn and Dusk

This section will explore two of Turner's paintings that portray the threshold times of dawn and dusk. Turner is famous for his skies, but even more so for his intense depictions of sunrise and sunset.⁸⁴ According to Berger, those who innovated within the landscape genre, 'led away from the substantial and tangible and towards the indeterminate and intangible.'⁸⁵ This applies to Turner's work which, over his lifetime shifted from a more representational depiction of the landscape and sky, to more fluid and ambiguous painted forms. This can be clearly seen when contrasting the more naturalistic depiction of the sky in *The Sun Rising through Vapour* (Fig. 9) compared to the dissolving horizon of *The Evening star* (Fig. 10). Through these two paintings, different aspects of the concept of threshold that the turn of day evokes will be examined, first visually analysing the painting, and then considering the work in terms of secondary scholarship. The transient colours and effects of sunrise and sunset offered Turner, as a painter, an atmosphere through which he could explore the capacities of paint to portray light, colour, and the indeterminate space of the sky.



Figure 9. J.M.W. Turner, *Sun Rising through Vapour, Fishermen Cleaning and Selling Fish*, c. 1807, oil on canvas, a34 cm x 179.5 cm, Image: National Gallery, London.

⁸⁴ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 9.

⁸⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 105.

The Sun Rising through Vapour (Fig.9) was first exhibited in 1807. According to Smiles, it was one of the two paintings that Turner had requested in his will to be hung in perpetuity next to two paintings by Claude at the National Gallery, London, the other being *Dido Building Carthage* (1815).⁸⁶ This request established *The Sun Rising through Vapour* as a significant painting amongst Turner's life's work. The painting depicts a seascape at dawn, the sun has just risen, however the full light of its rays are still obscured by the bank of clouds along the horizon. The sun illuminates the clouds with a soft orange through yellow glow, creating contrast with the purple hues. While the tall ships on the distant horizon look to be fading away into the morning mist, the foreground depicts the scattered debris of the fishermen and women, cleaning their catch and getting about the business of a new day. The sky in this painting shows a keen observation of the effects of light and colour in nature at the threshold time of dawn, just before the rays of the sun break through the day. The transitional time is also a liminal space and, according to Lofgren and Ehn, 'the ways in which light changes from dusk to dawn become a rich source for daydreaming and imagination.'⁸⁷ It is a time when the opposites of night and day cross over and join, a rich source of both colour and form for a painter to explore.

In this painting, Turner has also captured the sea's capacity to reflect the light of the sky. The surface of the sea is dead calm, mirror-like, painted in the pearlescent hues of dawn. Thus there appears to be two suns, one rising through the clouds, and one reflected in the sea. This creates a sense of two worlds meeting by reflecting each other in light. The bright warm light of the uppermost clouds are also reflected in the warm orange hues of the shore line in the lower left hand third of the canvas, giving a harmonious effect through colour between the edge of the shore and the clouds in the sky. In the top third of the canvas, the higher clouds are illuminated by brilliant rays catching the light of the sun that is about to break through the vapours. The mirroring of the sky in the sea conjures the notion of a threshold between the elements of the earth's surface and the aerial elements of the sky. In this painting Turner has created a sky in harmony with the calm sea, the colours meld together and create a sense of reciprocal light. The sense that the sky and sea are mirrored together emphasises the

⁸⁶ Sam Smiles, *J.M.W. Turner*, p. 7.

⁸⁷ Lofgren, Orvar, and Billy Ehn, 'Daydreaming Between Dusk and Dawn', p. 9.

joining of the sky above and the sea below, a harmonious phenomenon of light and reflected light that can be seen between ocean and sky at the threshold of the day.

Though Turner was a keen observer of the sky and sketched prodigiously in water colours in the open air, his larger oil compositions including his sunsets and sunrises, were painted in the studio.⁸⁸ This meant that Turner's skies were a combination of an intensive study of light and the sky from nature and the created skies of his imagination. Turner's combination of observation and imagination allowed his painted skies to cross the boundary between a highly observed naturalism and an ability to convey his inner world and the emotional key of the painting through the sky. Many of Turner's innovations in oil paint originated from his experiments in watercolour. The fluidity of the medium allowed for a completely different type of paint handling than had previously been applied to oils. Watercolour was also the perfect medium for studying and sketching the transient and luminous effects of the sky. Gowing noted that watercolour is a medium whose effects, 'come half by chance,' chance being defined by Gowing as 'confidence in the element of painting that is involuntary and unrehearsed.'⁸⁹ In Gowing's estimation, watercolour also offered a new tonal range both cooler and lighter, that when applied to oil painting, broke with previous classical conventions of colour.⁹⁰ The effects of chance and the luminous palette can be seen throughout Turner's work, significantly in his approach to painting the sky. As a matter of technique, watercolour utilises the white of the paper in order to create the sense of luminosity that glows through the coloured washes, applied in thin layers over the top. Turner applied this technique to oils, using a white ground to prepare his canvases rather than the traditional mid-brown or grey.⁹¹ Though most of Turner's techniques were a mystery to his contemporaries, it was observed on varnishing days that he used transparent mediums to which small amounts of colour were added.⁹² This technique of glazing much resembles the water colour wash and would have significantly changed the way in which he was able to convey the light and space of the sky in paint, naturalistically.⁹³ The influence that watercolour had upon the fluidity of Turner's oil painting can be seen clearly in *The Evening Star* (Fig.10) which will be examined next.

⁸⁸ Jeremy Lewison, *Turner, Monet, Twombly – later paintings*, p. 166.

⁸⁹ Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, (New York: Museum Of Modern Art, 1966), p. 16.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, p. 16.

⁹¹ Joyce H. Townsend, 'Turner's materials and Processes' in *Turner from the Tate – the making of a master*, ed. by Ian Warrell, (Hong Kong: Tate publishing, 2013), p. 45.

⁹² Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, p. 43.

⁹³ Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, p. 43.



Figure 10. J.M.W. Turner, *The Evening Star*, c.1830, oil on canvas, 91.1 cm x 122.6 cm, Image: The National Gallery, London.

The Evening Star was created by Turner around 1830. Painted to reflect the moment when day becomes night, the painting is a study of the colours of twilight. The canvas is visually divided roughly into thirds, the upper two thirds being of sky and the lower third of the beach and the sea. To the lower left, three upright posts appear to emerge from the sea. To the right, a young boy stands on the beach carrying a basket, a small white dog standing on his hind legs at the boy's feet. The darker line of the sea meets the soft grey blues of the clouds of the horizon. The light of the setting sun, still radiant in the atmosphere in the upper right hand side, creates a counterpoint in tone to the dark blue of the sea. Some areas of the painting have more highly rendered and clearly distinguishable details, such as the bank of clouds in the middle third of the horizon, that draw the viewer's eyes to the distance. Other areas of the painting are indistinct in form, indeed the beach is barely distinguishable from the horizon line where it meets the sea. The ruddy reddish ochre scumbling just to the left of the boy, according to the National Gallery website, was originally a boat that Turner painted over, returning the subject to a space empty of human elements, apart from the boy.⁹⁴ In this painting

⁹⁴ The History of the National Gallery in Six Paintings, Turner's *The Evening Star*, presented by Matthew Morgan, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-evening-star#VideoPlayer93205> [accessed 13/09/2020].

Turner has captured the sense of transience in light that colours the world of dusk. The scene of the painting is set somewhere between a sight recognisable in nature and a dream like state.

The pictorial ambiguity of *The Evening Star* can be considered by Rosenblum to embody Kant's conception of the boundless sublime.⁹⁵ Kant defined 'Sublime' as, 'found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.'⁹⁶ Rosenblum wrote that the painting placed the viewer on, 'the threshold of those shapeless infinities' and brought a sense of the immeasurable into encounterable form.⁹⁷ The small figure of the fisher boy contrasts with the formless space of the sea and sky, which meld together around him. According to Rosenblum, the figure of the boy creates a comparison for the viewer between, 'the infinite vastness of a pantheistic God and the infinite smallness of His creatures.'⁹⁸ Rosenblum also perceived a link between Turner's twilight, and the paintings of Mark Rothko. Rothko was an American abstract expressionist painter, known for his large colour fields. However, Rosenblum points out that, in Rothko's painting (Fig. 11), the fisher boy has been removed, and the viewer now stands in his place, 'standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures as if we were looking at a sunset or a moonlit night.'⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The abstract sublime'.

⁹⁶ Kant, Immanuel, *Kant's Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J.H. Bernard, (London: Macmillan and Co. 1914, c. 1892), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/48433/48433-h/48433-h.htm#book_2 [accessed 14/09/2020].

⁹⁷ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The abstract sublime'.

⁹⁸ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The abstract sublime'.

⁹⁹ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The abstract sublime'.



Figure 11. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1950-1952, oil on canvas, 190 cm x 101.1 cm, Image: the Tate Gallery, London.

According to Fer, there is a paradox that occurs, in the hours of twilight and the dimness of night that follows, when the clarity of what is seen as object dissolves, provoking a state of heightened awareness towards the perceptual capacities of vision. Fer wrote, 'As a consequence, we are prompted to ask not only what kind of structure there is to see, but what kind of structure, or structuring framework, do we have to see with?'¹⁰⁰ In *The Evening Star* (Fig.10) it could be argued that Turner, through paint, was exploring a similar phenomenon of visual perception through the changing light of day, where the traditional structures of composition are dissolving and the colours of the changing sky reflected in the sea, become the subject of the painting.

The painting was named *The Evening Star* in 1906, long after Turner's death, during the making of an inventory of the paintings Turner had donated to the National Gallery in his will.¹⁰¹ The name was chosen due to the light of the Evening star that is visible only very faintly in the sky though it can be seen more clearly as a reflection in the sea, painted in thick white paint just below the centre of the horizon. The name *The Evening Star* also relates to a piece of verse found in Turner's sketchbook from a similar period in which the painting was made. He wrote, 'Where is the star which shone at ... Eve / The gleaming star of Ever ... [or Eve] / The first pale Star of Eve ere Twilight comes ...'.¹⁰² The poem gives shape in words both to Turner's observation of the sky and to his poetic sensibilities to the sky and its changing light. The evening star is the first star visible on the horizon at night, but it also disappears as it is overpowered by the light of the moon. Turner's words and painting are both explorations of the phenomena and emotive sensation of the transience of the sky's light.

Through the examination of these two paintings, it can be observed that there was a vast difference in the way that Turner explored the sky in paint, throughout his life. In *Sun Rising through Vapour*, Turner has emulated a classical composition, creating a painting that is softly suffused with the light of the rising sun. In *The Evening Star*, the scene has become close to stripped of its human elements, and Turner is no longer emulating a classical form of painting. He has instead, explored the capacities of paint to express

¹⁰⁰ Briony Fer 'Night', p. 3.

¹⁰¹ The National Gallery webpage for J.M.W Turner's *The Evening Star*, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-evening-star#VideoPlayer93205> [accessed 13/9/2020].

¹⁰² The National Gallery website, information page, J.M.W Turner's *The Evening Star*, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-evening-star#VideoPlayer93205> [accessed 13/9/2020].

the threshold state of vision that occurs when day turns to night. For Rosenblum, it is an image of the Sublime, contrasting the small human scale to the infinite vastness of sea and sky. Building on Fer's observations, it could be argued that in paintings such as *The Evening Star*, Turner is questioning the frameworks through which he sees, including the sky, and is articulating this question in paint. When comparing *Sun Rising through Vapour*, to *The Evening Star*, Turner's changing approach to painting can be observed including the influence of the fluidity and glazing techniques of watercolour, translated into oils. Between the two painting, specifically through their skies, Turner can clearly be seen to be exploring through paint the shift that Berger referred to as the substantial to the intangible.

Chapter 5. Thresholds: The sky, the eye, paint and page

This section will examine the theme of the threshold in relation to Celmins's night sky series, considering the threshold between earth and sky, the threshold of vision and the threshold of the surface through the painted night sky. As Celmins use of the night sky as a motif extends over four decades of her artistic practice, three pieces will be examined in an attempt to examine different aspects of her exploration of night sky images. The works will be considered chronologically, the first being *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)*, (Fig. 12), the second *Starfield I* (Fig. 13), and the third *Night Sky #26* (Fig. 14). The works will be visually analysed and considered in the context of secondary scholarship. These three work span from the 1970s through to the present, illustrating both Celmins's fidelity to the subject and her subtle changes in her choice of materials, when depicting the night sky.

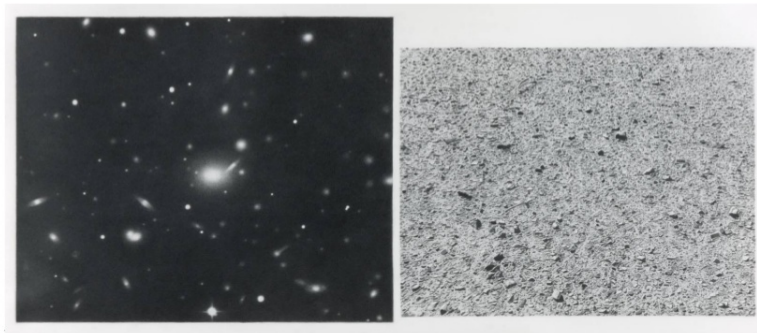


Figure 12. Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)*, c. 1974, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 44.2 cm x 95.6 cm, Image: the Tate Gallery, London.

In Figure 12 Celmins has created for the viewer a space in which they can compare the night sky to the close earth, simply as images, in black and white, with no other frame of reference or spatial context. The work is one in a series of seven, all untitled, that were exhibited at the Felicity Samuel Gallery in London in 1975.¹⁰³ Made in 1974, it is a graphite drawing on paper. The surface of the paper support was sprayed with a layer of acrylic gesso, which Celmins described as being, 'like a veil', making the surface

¹⁰³ Stephanie Straine, 'Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins'.

egg-shell smooth.¹⁰⁴ Straine noted the 'reflective' quality of the graphite that would allow the viewer in from certain angles and reflect them out from others. The two images both depict threshold spaces, suggesting the edge of something vast beyond the picture plane. The galaxy picture is black and dense with points of high contrast that depict the light of stars and galaxies; on the other hand the desert image is bright, depicting a surface of tiny particles of dirt, dust and rock. Friedrich noted how the contrasting imagery of *Untitled (Desert- Galaxy)*, connected two entirely different time frames, the sense of a present, immediate desert light, and the distant light of the night sky, 'from galaxies that died millions of years ago.'¹⁰⁵ The comparison of time is Friedrich's interpretation of the images, and is another potential layer to the interpretation of the light that the images side by side depict.

Much of Celmins's work focuses on singular imagery, however, *Untitled (Desert- Galaxy)* juxtaposes two entirely different images on the same page, side by side in a long, almost cinematically wide screen rectangular format. Celmins described how, after five years of creating single images, she reached her limit, so she began, 'sort of just shoving them together... like a galaxy that invites you in , next to a desert surface that projects out at you.'¹⁰⁶ Celmins is intensely aware of what she calls the 'retinal activity' of her work, a combination of the threshold space of the surface, the eye of the beholder, and the brain.¹⁰⁷ Straine described the dual images as 'setting up a double vision effect where the viewer is unable to take in both images at once, but rather must move between them in a rhythmic back and forth.'¹⁰⁸ The visual experience that Straine described would further emphasise the sense of contrast and unity between the two images of deep space and desert sand. Celmins intended the 'complex spatial experience' of *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)* that Straine described.¹⁰⁹ Celmins was aware that the images could not be comprehended as a visual whole when at close range, though she also noted that they would harmonise into a whole if the viewer stepped

¹⁰⁴ Stephanie Straine, 'Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins'.

¹⁰⁵ Julia Friedrich and Hubertus Butin (eds), *Vija Celmins: Wüste, Meer & Sterne = Desert, Sea and Stars*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Anthony d'Offay and others, 'Me, You, Us: Anthony d'Offay and others on ARTIST ROOMS', *TATE ETC.*, no.16, Summer 2009, p.79.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/celmins-untitled-desert-galaxy-ar00162> [accessed 15/09/2020]

¹⁰⁸ *Vija Celmins: Saying the Unsayable*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, online video recording, YouTube, 15 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVbiY1DDfvo> [accessed 15/09/2020].

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Straine, 'Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins'.

¹⁰⁹ Anthony d'Offay and others, 'Me, You, Us:', p.79.

back.¹¹⁰ And so, as the viewer approaches the work, their experience of the image as a whole would change, splitting into two, and when stepping back, the divided would once again become whole. Though it is not in Celmins's expressed intentions, a parallel could be drawn between her chosen imagery and the sense that sky and earth can be perceived as both joined and separate spaces. In *Untitled (Desert- Galaxy)*, there is a balanced the tension between the scenes of night sky and day earth, creating a taut visual message of poignant simplicity and depth, that considers in visual language the threshold between sky and earth.



Figure 13. Vija Celmins, *Starfield I*, c. 1981 - 1982, graphite on paper, 48.2 x 68.5 cm, Image: Provenance, David McKee Gallery, New York, Acquired from the above by the present owner, 1983.

Starfield I (Fig.13) made in 1982, is a dense and intricately rendered drawing of the night sky. There are painstakingly slow processes behind Celmins's work. Her *Starfield* works, a small series created in the early 1980s, sometimes took over a year to complete.¹¹¹ During this period of her drawing practice Celmins did not use an eraser, which means what appear as distant starlight and galaxies is actually the white of the

¹¹⁰ Anthony d'Offay and others, 'Me, You, Us:', p.79.

¹¹¹ Vija Celmins and Chuck Close, *Vija Celmins*, p. 32.

page, left blank between the graphite marks that have been built up, to create the blackness of space.¹¹² Celmins has expressed that she likes to relive the image, 'put it in, kind of, a human context. And, I like you to be able to scrutinise it. Sort of relive the making of it, the way that I have been doing for a long time.' The tiny marks with which the surface of the drawing have been built, contrast to the vastness of the visual space which it depicts, creating a sense of scale between the human action of drawing and the night sky it depicts. The element of touch, connects the human proportion to the infinite space of the night sky. Through touch Celmins bridges the threshold between the self and space, creating a human and poetic connection with the night sky, that as Elkins ventured, may have been lost with the ever developing technologies of the telescope.¹¹³

Celmins is highly conscious of the interplay between viewer and artwork. For Celmins, the work comes alive through the spectator, 'you find your relationship to it physically, not just mentally or by imagination. It asks participation to come alive....The body, the eyes complete the work.'¹¹⁴ This is a repeated theme for Celmins, who does not laden her work with dense conceptual meaning. Rather, she leaves it to the viewer to participate with the surfaces she has created, allowing them to experience and interpret the image and the material processes through which they were made, with their own eyes. Romaine wrote of his experience of a Celmins night sky work, 'Like the cosmos itself, the drawing is a blurring of matter and light.'¹¹⁵ Romaine's description of Celmins drawing is rich with interpretive meaning and is but one example of what the viewers experience can draw from Celmins work. Through looking, Romaine perceived a subtle link between the subject of the work, 'the cosmos', and the illusion of space created by the slow manual process, by which the work was made. The threshold between her created skies and the viewer is a highly considered space for Celmins in which the potential for true participation can occur.

¹¹² Vija Celmins and Chuck Close, *Vija Celmins*, p. 32.

¹¹³ James Elkins, *How to Use Your Eyes*, p.214.

¹¹⁴ Chuck Close quoting from Celmins' notebook in, *Vija Celmins*, p. 46.

¹¹⁵ James Romaine, 'Active Sight: Vija Celmins and Jackson Pollock from Pictorialism to Perception'.



Figure 14. Vija Celmins, *Night Sky #26*, 2016 - 2017, oil on canvas, 150 x 137 cm, Image: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Rather than projecting out in to space, the depth and detail in Celmins's night skies invite the viewer in to them. *Night Sky #26* (Fig.14) is a large black oil painting, with points of light for the stars and is one of a series of black paintings Celmins made of the night sky. These paintings are created through a technique that involves layering and repetition, a labour intensive process by which the image almost grows upon the surface of the canvas. The process involves placing a tiny dot of a cement mixture which hardens, for the points of light that are the stars, over which the dark tones of space are painted in oils. Each layer is sanded back in between, slowly building the surface into

something that Celmins, at a certain point decides is enough. The cement dots are then scraped away to reveal the white of the canvas beneath. The Night Sky paintings end up with what appears, to quote Celmins, to be 'a simple looking single image' that through her process of building layers can sometimes have up to six months of work underneath the surface.¹¹⁶ According to Celmins, this way of painting through repetitive layering, brings what she calls a, 'strange quality' to her work.¹¹⁷ Celmins describes this quality as something palpable in the object of the painting itself. Rather than perceiving the surface as a solid plane, Celmins instead describes something more permeable, 'when you get to a certain point, you can actually... it lets you in for a little bit and you think you may be seeing something that isn't there. The black night sky paintings are especially hard to penetrate ... yet I think you get a fuller space and some solid structure underneath.'¹¹⁸ What Celmins describes in regard to the process of material creation involved in her night sky paintings is a labour of intense duration and close to ritualistic repetition, imbuing her work with what she describes as a quality beyond the material elements of their construction, a relationship to the surface that is beyond what it depicts. Though Celmins relates more to her materials and created surface, her highly attentive renderings allow the viewer to draw the meaning of the image for themselves, much as they would be under the night sky.

In essence, Celmins has explored the threshold of the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, and the threshold of her material qualities, in her repeated depictions of night sky. In *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)*, Celmins experimented with duality, juxtaposing images of a galaxy and the desert floor, two vast spaces composed of tiny particles of dust. The way in which the images have been drawn also considered the visual field of the viewer, playing further on the sense of wholeness and duality that exists between the sky and the earth. In *Starfield I*, Celmins explored the limits of her materials through the blackness of graphite, stretching the threshold of the surface to create an image of immense visual depth upon the two dimensional plane of the page, placing the night sky in the realm of human touch. In *Night Sky #26* Celmins approaches the sky, through the medium of oil paint. She developed a technique by which through layering and duration, another quality occurred, allowing her to see something beyond the threshold of the surface, a quality that invites the viewer into the painted night sky. The

¹¹⁶ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPLAY*, p. 95.

¹¹⁷ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPLAY*, p. 95.

¹¹⁸ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPLAY*, p. 95.

threshold is a concept with which to examine Celmins work, a malleable concept that can be applied to a multitude of subtle elements that exist within Celmins night sky series. However, as Celmins herself has made clear, her imagery is not laden with theory and is made to be looked at and lived through slow looking, again and again, and perhaps this space is the most important threshold to consider of them all.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine the created skies in the works of the two artists, J.M.W. Turner and Vija Celmins. Separated in birth by just over a century and a half, Celmins and Turner lived through cultural epochs, the Victorian era and the latter twentieth century, that had very different scientific understandings about the physical nature of the sky, though it was the same sky that both their eyes could see. There are many factors that have shaped the way in which these two significant artists related to the sky through their art. In Chapters 2 and 3, this was explored through the themes of Turner's painted suns and Celmins's pencil moons, as responses to two milestone sky discoveries that occurred during their formative years as artists: Herschel's observation of the surface of the Sun in 1801; and the Luna 9 images of the surface of the Moon in 1966. Chapters 4 and 5 explored the concept of the threshold, defined by Eliade as a boundary between external and internal spaces. For Turner this was explored through two paintings depicting dawn and dusk, and for Celmins, through the threshold spaces of the sky, the eye and the surface. In the work of both Turner and Celmins, the sky no longer became a backdrop to the painted scene, but the subject of the work itself and in so doing, a new way of seeing and presenting the sky to others.

Milestone Discoveries

Turner's combination of highly naturalistic and imagined skies also contained monumental emotional and story-telling capacity. This was one of the ways in which Turner challenged in paint, the restrictions regarding the low estimation of Landscape painting as a genre of his time. Most significantly, Turner imbued his suns with strong symbolic intent. As discussed in *The Festival of the Opening of the Vintage, Macon*, (Fig. 2) Turner painted a sun that is raised from the canvas in textured paint. He created visually, the physical planetary sun that Herschel had described he observed through his telescope. Herschel's descriptions of his observations were at the time groundbreaking. To say, however, that Turner was relaying through paint the scientific conceptions of his time, is but one dimension of the sun in Turner's work. His painted suns are also intensely emotive, as seen in *Snow Storm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (Fig. 3) and *Regulus* (Fig. 4). As a sky symbol, these suns tell a myriad of meanings which shift according to the tale being told, yet occupy a place of centrifugal force within his painted skies.

The first viewing of the moon's surface through the lens of a telescope in 1601 and the first photographic image sent back from the moon in 1966 marked the beginning of other shifts in visual knowledge about the sky. Harriot's drawings of the moon's surface and Celmins's drawings of the Luna 9 photographs though enacted for different purposes, share a kindred response to the moon. Both used the drawn line to trace the new vision of the sky. Though Sontag suggested that the photograph has the sensation of an 'experience captured', Celmins sought to capture that piece of the moon for herself, in effect touching the moon through the hand drawn mark upon the page. The Luna 9 image marked the beginning of the lifelong journey Celmins would take of creating images of the night sky.

Thresholds

The threshold as a concept was applied to Turner's skies through two of his paintings that depicted dawn and dusk. Between these two paintings the changing nature of Turner's technique and his approach to painting the sky could be seen to shift, as Berger said, from the 'substantial' towards the 'indeterminate'.¹¹⁹ Fer discussed the threshold of the day at sundown as being a time that enhances one's awareness of the perceptual capacities of vision, and the structures through which these occur. Turner's painting *The Evening Star* (Fig. 10), appears to examine through paint the transitional time to which Fer refers, where the world becomes visually less distinct and the horizon merges with the sky. Rosenblum discussed the same painterly quality in *The Evening Star* as being in accord with Kant's concept of the boundless sublime, an essence which he perceived in continuum from Turner's late works through to the abstract expressionist painters of the mid twentieth century, particularly Rothko. The boundless sublime contrasts the infinite vastness which, in Turner's paintings, is represented symbolically through the sky, with the infinite smallness of being human. As Gowing observed, it was Turner's experiments in watercolour that led him toward the fluidity and indeterminate nature of his later oil painting, particularly when comparing the earlier work *The Sun Rising through Vapour* (Fig. 9) with the later *The Evening Star* (Fig.10). Sunrise and sunset over the sea, allowed Turner to explore how the sky and sea mirrored each other in light, creating the threshold between the world below and the world above, yet merging through the reflected coloured light. Though his paintings

¹¹⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 9.

changed stylistically over the course of his life, Turner returned to the same subjects, visiting again and again, the world of light and reflections at the threshold times of day.

Celmins on the other hand has explored her artistic process for over fifty years through imagery of the night sky captured by satellite and astrophotography. She has used the photograph as an armature, a steady and repeatable form, from which she can encounter the limits of her materials and the capabilities of her eye and hand, a working process through which she also deeply considered the role of the viewer. Celmins never gives much weight to any additional meaning within her work in words, beyond the importance of the creative process itself. From her description, Celmins's primary relationship is to the surface of her work and the experience of vision, not to the night sky itself. This being said, the work presents to the viewer an image recognizable as the night sky, though through a human context via the hands that made it. In *Untitled- (Desert Galaxy)* (Fig. 12), Friedrich saw the connection between the intimacy of the hand and the sense of distance. In this same work, Straine noted the experience of the sense of dual vision between the two images of desert floor and deep space at close range, that seems to resolve again to a whole when viewed at a distance where the viewer is able to contemplate two entirely different topographies aligned upon the same viewing plane, contained within the borders of the same page. On the other hand *Starfield I* (Fig. 13) and *Night Sky#26* (Fig. 14) are both dense black images with tiny points of white for the stars that invite the viewer to step towards them, rather than projecting them out into space. Celmins described how the surface of her black night sky paintings at a certain point let her in, permeating the surface of her own works and seeing into something 'that isn't there.'¹²⁰ The visual detail of Celmins's work, invites the same experience for the viewer of going beyond the threshold into the skies of her works, as she herself experienced in making them.

Furthermore, Celmins's unmapped night skies have a sense of constancy, of something enduring and eternal, repeated in images with only slight subtle variance, throughout her life long artistic practice. Though Celmins in interview has said that for her, the source images are not filled with symbolic intent, perhaps the night sky as an image offers a unifying quality, and a sense of stability amongst the flux. As Celmins described, she likes to work with 'impossible images' like the sky, asking, 'who knows

¹²⁰ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPlay*, p. 95.

what it is?', a question which she repeatedly asked through her materials, turning the photographs she had found from magazines and books, back into something 'human'.¹²¹ Imbued with the qualities of time and touch, she builds through tiny marks and dense layers, a sense of the unfathomable depth of the sky. The meaning in Celmins work is not applied in theory, nor is it symbolically cloaked through her choice of imagery. Instead it is created through the process of making, which is deeply involved and committed, to the exploration of her own sense of seeing and to the materials with which she creates.

Taking all of the above into account, the sky itself can be understood as a threshold place, the Earth's atmosphere, a thin layer between the infinite expanses beyond and the contained space within, while the concept of the threshold, when applied to art can be understood in another way, as a shifting space of interchange between the artist, the created work and the engagement of the viewer. Turner was a painter who worked from his observations of nature, turning his prodigious watercolour sketches, made in the open air, into larger scale oil compositions. He applied the fluidity and luminosity of watercolour technique to his oil paintings and in the process, developing a whole new way of seeing the sky through paint. For Turner, the sky was his most enduring motif, primarily expressed through the exploration of light and colour, observed first from nature, in the medium of paint, and then utilising the genre of History paintings grand themes to express intense emotive qualities through the sky. Celmins's relationship to the sky, sustained over many decades of practice, is primarily to the surface that she creates upon the two dimensional plane, rather than the sky itself. Nevertheless, the sky, pictorially, for Celmins, is a way to look through and beyond the Earth's surface.

Celmins and Turner both travelled into the sky with their eyes and, through their materials, responded to the sky from within their own internal worlds. Though there are significant differences in their responses to the sky, there is a common thread, in that the sky as a subject of visual exploration sustained them both through lifelong artistic practice and took centre stage based on great moments of astronomical discovery: the surface of the sun and the first photographic images of surface of the moon. As their responses to these astronomical events inspired them, so looking at what they created inspires the viewer and in turn asks the viewer to look anew at the original sources, not

¹²¹ Vija Celmins in conversation with Robert Gober, *PressPlay*, p. 101

the painted sun but the Sun by day and its light, not the pencil moons but the real Moon
by night.

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