

VISIÓN | doble

REVISTA DE CRÍTICA E HISTORIA DEL ARTE

Título: Carta a Mr. Turner desde el Ártico
Title: A Letter to Mr. Turner from the Arctic

Autor / Author: Mercedes Trelles
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras

Resumen: El paisaje del Ártico es el protagonista de la exhibición Drawn Into the Light / Atraídos por la luz, creada por los artistas Osvaldo Budet y Shonah Trescott. El contacto de estos creadores con la vida natural del Círculo Ártico se presenta como una invitación a reflexionar sobre el cambio climático y sobre la relación entre el ser humano y la naturaleza.

Abstract: The Arctic landscape is the protagonist of the exhibition Drawn Into the Light, created by artists Osvaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott. The contact of these creators with the natural life of the Arctic Circle is presented as an invitation to reflect on climate change and on the relationship between human beings and nature.

Palabras clave: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, Naturaleza, Osvaldo Budet, Pintura, Fotografía, Shonah Trescott, Mercedes Trelles

Keywords: Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico, Nature, Osvaldo Budet, Painting, Photography, Shonah Trescott, Mercedes Trelles

Sección: English / **Section:** English

Publicación: 15 de febrero de 2015

Cita recomendada:

Trelles, Mercedes. "A Letter to Mr. Turner from the Arctic", *Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte*, 15 de febrero de 2015, humanidades.uprrp.edu/visiondoble

Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte
Programa de Historia del Arte, Facultad de Humanidades
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras
13 Ave. Universidad Ste. 1301
San Juan, Puerto Rico 00925-2533

+1 (787) 764-0000, extensión 89596
vision.doble@upr.edu
<http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/visiondoble>
<https://revistas.upr.edu>



A Letter to Mr. Turner from the Arctic

Mercedes Trelles

Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras



Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn into the light*, 2015.

On January 21, 2015, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art) inaugurated the exhibition *Drawn into the light/Atraídos hacia la luz*. The exhibition focuses on landscape evocations of Ny Ålesund—a research center in Svalbard, Norway, located within the Arctic Circle—and it is the product of a collaboration between the Australian artist Shonah Trescott and Osvaldo Budet, from Puerto Rico. During the time they spent there as artists in residence, they created a series of digital photographs, drawings, silkscreen prints, paintings, and small wooden constructions based on their experience, which they exhibited for the first time in Germany in 2012.

For the Puerto Rican public, no place may be more remote and otherworldly than the Arctic. When I learned about the theme of the exhibition, which was advertised as one that sought

to raise awareness about climate change, I expected a sort of wintry exoticism. However, the show has less to do with the snow fetish that plagues Puerto Ricans than with a concern for environmental changes. Nevertheless, the exhibition also discloses a fascinating meditation of the landscape genre and how it has affected our attitude towards nature.



Oswaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn Into the Light*, 2015.

Photo: Antonio Ramírez Aponte

Upon entering the room, it is apparent that the artists' primary strategy is to create a sense of disjunction. Throughout the show we constantly encounter paired images, where a digital color photograph printed by means of a gelatin silver process portrays a pristine, saturated, and hyperreal image that is contrasted with a different method of representation, such as black and white photographs that are blurred and out of focus or India ink drawings on photographic paper. When the images are not portrayed in pairs, other strategies are used to spark a sense of dislocation, such as Trescott's silkscreen prints in which she uses printed text (from the Kyoto Protocol) that contrast with great splotches of ink, evoking the hazy, dramatic effects of a Turner landscape.



Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn Into the Light*, 2015.

The contrast between the images serves to indicate and at the same time erase human presence in these arctic spaces. In the series of photographs paired with drawings, the photograph portrays a pure, unadulterated, empty landscape. The drawing, similar to the illustrations we would find in old books, represents everything that the artist removed to create the photo—towns, chimneys, machines, and railroads—in short, the detritus of human presence. The series that pairs color and black-and-white images plays with an implicit feeling of temporality, in which the world of the past is presented in a blurred monochrome of trains and railroad tracks as signs of conquest and progress, which clashes hauntingly with another world, our own, where the ruins of modernity are scattered across the bleak countryside. According to Osvaldo Budet, his digital manipulation of the images is intended as a sort of “healing” of the landscape—a symbolic restoration of nature to its original state.

Landscape is undoubtedly the central theme of this exhibition. Throughout the show there is a continual emphasis on our experience of mediation with nature, whether through simplified drawings similar to those used to illustrate books, or through laser prints, silkscreens, and oil pieces on stainless steel, reminiscent of reproductive engravings and photogravure. Even in

the photographs that seem to show less intervention and seek to recreate the experience of a spectator before the arctic landscape by using a panoramic format, as with *Monument I* and *Monument II*, we find that the landscape before us is in fact an amalgamation of hundreds of photographs.



Osvaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn Into the Light*, 2015.

The most eloquent works on the human mediation of nature are those created by Trescott. These landscapes speak more directly about the pictorial role in the creation of this artistic genre, thereby implying a sense of purity, individuality, and heroism (the unadulterated landscapes suggest the coming of future explorers, and some of the drawings documenting the removal of our intervention reveal specters of heroism). In the silkscreen series *Protocolo de Kyoto* (*Kyoto Protocol*), the irony of superimposing heroically Romantic Turner-esque landscapes on an environmental conservation document is overwhelming. In other works, such as *La hora 1, 4 y 5* (*The First, Fourth, and Fifth Hour*)—small paintings on glass illuminated by LED lights—the nineteenth-century references contrasting with modern technology are clearly legible both through the formal language of brushstrokes and expressiveness and through the decorated frames. Toward the end of the exhibition, a series of paintings on mylar mirrors reinforce an

understanding of the landscape as a reflection, not of nature itself, but of what we wish to perceive. As viewers are confronted by this display, they must choose to avoid their own reflection in the mylar in order to see the concise, nearly abstract landscapes.



Oswaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn Into the Light*, 2015.

Photo: Antonio Ramírez Aponte

This collection of works, inspired by an interest in environmental conservation, goes a step further by conceiving a meditation on the landscape genre as an accomplice to the environmental problems we experience today. In that sense, the four-minute video at the end of the exhibition is indeed eye-opening. Titled *Precipicio de los pájaros (The Birds' Precipice)*, it depicts an arctic landscape that initially is marked solely by the sound of shrill bird-calls. Gradually, the camera begins to focus on the birds, and the landscape that looked motionless and empty is not only sonorous, but full of life and movement. A female figure with a shotgun on her shoulder briefly appears kneeling, unmoving, and looking upward. The disjunction between artist and landscape is evident—instead of still or empty, it is changeable and full of life; instead of silent, it is sonorous. We are the ones who are left mute and motionless before it in a state of contemplation that we have developed from past works of art. As the video comes to an end, words in yellow letters, which had been vaguely interfering with the image throughout, become clearly visible: “Global Warming is Happening Now.”



Oswaldo Budet and Shonah Trescott, Exhibition: *Drawn Into the Light*, 2015.

The exhibition *Drawn Into the Light / Atraídos por la luz* will be displayed until May 17, 2015, at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico. Additional information about the museum and its educational program may be obtained by visiting its Facebook [page](#).

Translated by Ben Cochran
Edited by David Auerbach