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PETE TURNER

The Dr. No of Color

BY JOHN ROHRBACH

Pete Turner (b. 1934) has always lived for color. As a child he would use the change he won in gin rummy games with his father's band musicians to buy colorful postage stamps. He still remembers being attracted at an early age to the brilliant palettes of the watercolor kits that he saw at his neighborhood five-and-dime store. Gaining his first camera at age eleven cemented his love of photography, but even here he pursued his love of color. Within three years of getting that camera he had taught himself how to make his own color prints using an early chromogenic process called Printon. Although his high school grades were not quite up to par, in 1952 Turner cajoled his way into the inaugural class of Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT) new Associates Degree program in photography. There, while most of his classmates—including Jerry Uelsmann, Paul Caponigro, and Carl Chiarenza—committed themselves to black and white, he pursued his interest in color.

Color photography's technical complexity and high cost in the 1950s meant putting oneself on a commercial career track. The medium was rejected outright by most artist-photographers as too difficult and expensive, and by critics as too bound to realism—constrained by its nature to simply recording how we see. Turner's RIT training helped him recognize that color photography is more complicated than that, more challenging because of how colors project, recede, and sway emotion. He was drawn to color photography as a means of personal expression, but he needed to make a living. Luckily, magazines were beginning to add much more color to their issues, and they were looking for color photographers. Even before he graduated in 1956, Turner, with his professor Robert Bagby's help, joined the Freelance Photographers Guild (FPG) in New York City. Then after a two-year stint running an experimental Type C color print lab for the U. S. Army (a result of being drafted), he settled into Manhattan in mid-1958 to look for steady work. There, he introduced himself to magazine editors, account executives, and art directors showing his personal work, offering as proof of his skills several portfolios that he had assembled over the previous two years while visiting the city on weekend breaks from his Queens military outpost. One of these series focused on balloons. Here, in images like *Balloons in the Wind*, he combined shallow depth of field and multiple exposures to construct a tottering, compacted balance between transparency and solidity. One recognizes this scene near the Central Park Zoo, but it is an Alice-in-Wonderland world where nothing quite fits together. Balloons fill the image center, but one attends to them as bizarre humanoid forms and splashes of color and light. The other series, called "Lights of New York," included images like *Times Square*, a transformation of a snowy New York dawn street scene into a soothing cool blue vista punctuated by traffic lights that magically show all three of their signals at once.

This pictorial approach was not entirely new to the New York commercial scene. Ernst Haas had been producing photographs of poetic color and motion for almost a decade by this date, publishing them regularly in magazines like *LIFE*. Turner considered him a kindred spirit. It must have been intimidating for him to show Haas and Haas' Magnum colleagues his work that late November 1958. Cornell Capa, Magnum's founder, and Bruce Davidson, Turner's former classmate, were polite but less than enthusiastic in their response to his portfolio. For them, form always came first, and color pictures had to work just as well in black and white. Also, their goal was to create social statements through a blend of documentary and photojournalism rather than poetic interludes. Haas was more sympathetic. He agreed with Turner that form and color needed to be equal and advised the younger photographer that while he already had a good feel for color, he needed to attend more to compositional design.

BALLOONS IN THE WIND—1957

PORTRAIT BY DOUGLAS KIRKLAND

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS OF PETE TURNER'S WORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, © PETE TURNER

TIMES SQUARE—1958

ROLLING BALL—1960

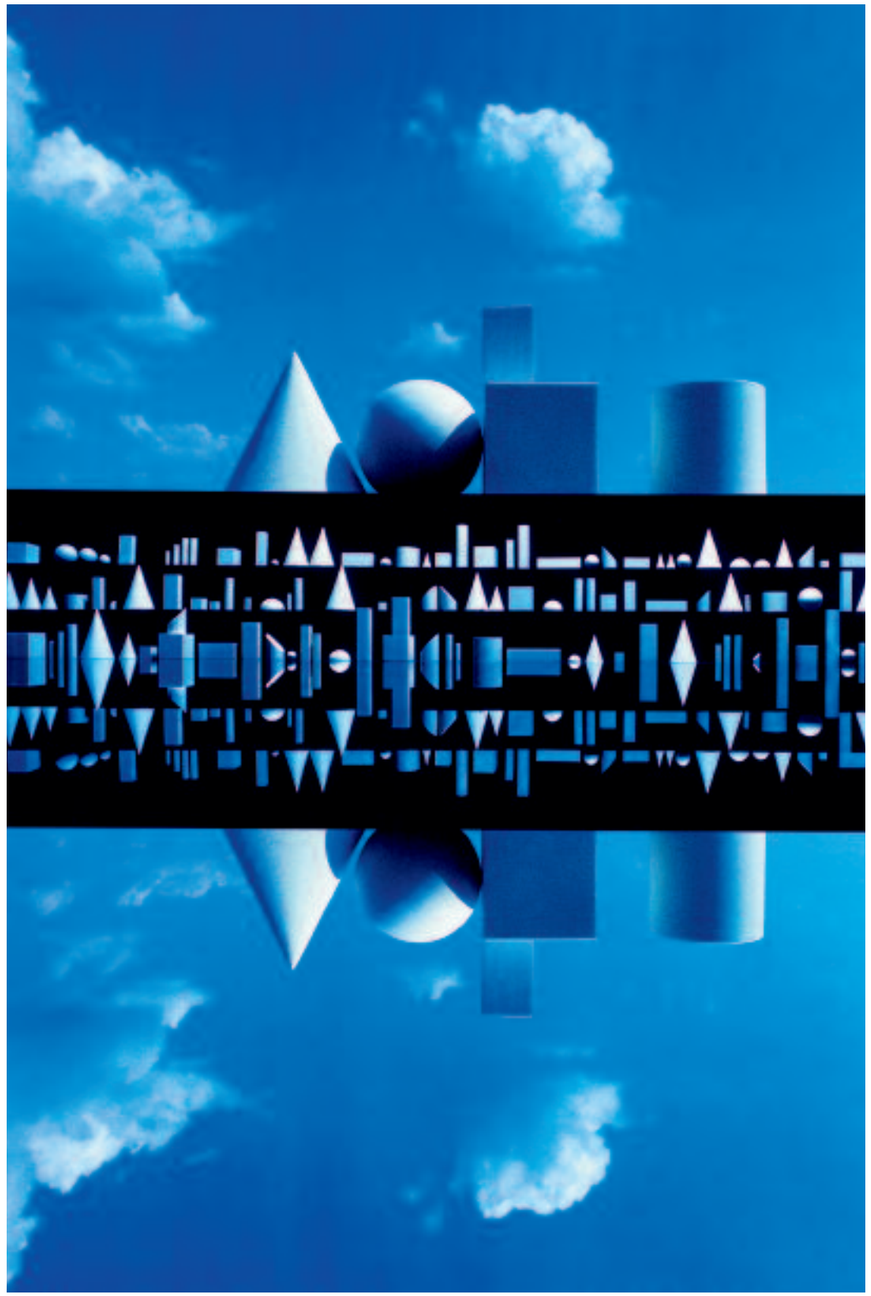
It did not take long for Turner to get his first big commercial breakthrough. Hearing through FPG that Airstream Trailer Company was seeking a photographer to document a seven-month expedition of 43 Airstream trailers across more than 11,000 miles from Cape Town to Cairo, he jumped at the opportunity. His photographer colleagues may not have wanted to leave home for so long, but it was a dream assignment for an unattached 25-year-old. The Airstream commission and its piggy-back contract to supply an article to *National Geographic* taught Turner that he loved to travel. He took full advantage of his right to periodically leave the group to explore and photograph subjects like a Ndebele Village outside of Pretoria and the Mbuti Pygmy community in the Ituri Forest in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Crossing the desert of northern Sudan, the Airstream caravan traversed a desolate stretch punctuated by a series of isolated railroad stations with conic roofs. Around sunset, the group stopped at Station #6. With time to spend and not much to look at, Turner started walking around the building and quickly realized that he could "place" the sun anywhere along the building's roofline. The result, *Rolling Ball*, was a major breakthrough for him. For the first time, he understood the distinction between finding a photograph and making one. His great preference would henceforth be for the latter. The image also delivered to him his life-long vocabulary of simplified form and clean, geometrically driven composition.

Within a short time of his return to New York from the African trip, Turner's creativity came to be widely recognized and he was in hot demand, leading to record cover assignments and steady work from magazines like *Holiday, Esquire, Look,* and *Sports Illustrated*. But he started to notice that he was losing his images. Clients worked with transparencies in those days and with no way of making top quality copies, they worked from originals. Turner found that his slides were all too regularly being returned with dents, scratches, and abrasions.

GIRAFFE—1964

Realizing that he needed to provide duplicates to clients in order to save his work from destruction, he engaged Marty Forcher at Professional Camera Repair to retrofit a Repronar stand with special lights and a means to make carefully filtered copy transparencies. He could now make exact duplicates for his client and save his originals. But he could also do something more. The set-up induced him to test every type of 35mm negative and positive color film and break every rule until he could get exactly the color, hue, and saturation he wanted. The activity delivered a second major tool to his arsenal: he was no longer forced to accept what came out of the film box.

In effect, Turner had created a manual version of Photoshop. Yet he had one more step to make to solidify his artistic voice. He took that step in 1964 when Esso (now Exxon) flew him to a salt plain in what is now Amboseli National Park in Kenya to create a photograph that celebrated the company's expanded work on the continent. After successfully photographing wild animals running alongside an Esso tanker truck, Turner coaxed those assisting the shoot to help him photograph giraffes running across the empty plain alone. Unfortunately, the transparency offering the best composition, a galloping giraffe with its legs tucked in under its body, was vastly overexposed; to save it Turner rephotographed it with the redesigned and upgraded Repronar set-up, playfully adding Wratten 32 Magenta and 21 Yellow filters to build up color and density. The result, *Giraffe,* transformed the scene into something otherworldly. Three years later, Creed Taylor would choose this challenging red and purple image to grace the cover of bossa nova star Antonio Carlos Jobim's new record album titled *Wave*. That same year a panel of judges chose it for their fifth edition of "Photography in the Fine Arts" (PFA), a program of quasi-annual exhibitions assembled by Ivan Dmitri to promote the art of photography. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was so astonished with the image that when they presented the PFA show at the museum, they



THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME—1969

ROAD SONG—1967

HEIMAEY UNDER ASHES—1973

HEIMAEY REBUILT—1996

placed an enlargement of *Giraffe* at the head of their main entry staircase. There, its overt anti-naturalism caused great consternation and even anger. How dare someone so blatantly "abuse" color? Turner had broken too many "rules." His challenge would incite Weston Naef, former curator of photographs at The Met and later at the J. Paul Getty Museum, to call him "the Dr. No of color photography." *Giraffe* presents a world that was far beyond anything that Ernst Haas would have created. What his former classmate Jerry Uelsmann was doing with black-and-white negatives, Turner was now doing in color, using transparencies as mere starting points for creating new worlds.

In 1969, the week before Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon, Turner made a photograph that took this penchant for other-worldliness to its natural conclusion. *The Shape of Things to Come* presents a refined city of cones, cubes, and spheres set against a brilliant cloud-dotted blue sky, the whole scene doubled by its reflection. The image, painstakingly assembled from multiple transparencies, is far more akin to a Surrealist painting by Yves Tanguy than to a photograph.

Turner pushed himself hard through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, juggling work for a wide range of clients. The jobs allowed him to travel extensively, to meet a variety of interesting people, and to develop new ways of seeing. One example is *Road Song*, which he shot in Kansas City after a long day photographing Chinese sculptures at a museum for a Time-Life book on Chinese art. Late in the afternoon, remembering a fence that had intrigued him, he drove out to the airport and waited until dusk. When a single car came along, he created a wide-angle symphony of cool blue evening light and repeated form. Wide-angle lenses were new at the time and he was figuring out how they might redefine vision. He was so pleased with the result that he made such lenses a staple of his photography and soon came to be recognized as a master at wide-angle. The modified Repronar set-up automatically caused the colors of his transparencies to become more saturated, and *Road Song* reflected that added saturation. Such intense hues also became a distinctive feature of his style. One sees his subjects, but one reads color first.

At their best, commercial photographs are a fine balance between clarity, surprise, and entertainment. Turner was an expert at finding this fulcrum, yet he also regularly showed his clients images that pushed well beyond their expectations. Unfortunately, rarely were his clients sympathetic to his most innovative plays with color and form. All too often they chose the more mundane images he put before them. Editor Harold Hayes at *Esquire* was an exception. Recognizing Turner's drive and extraordinary creativity, he gave the photographer close to free rein. In January 1973, when Turner read a *New York Times* report of a volcano that had just erupted in the center of the town of Heimaey, Iceland, he knew he had to go to photograph the disaster. With Hayes' support, he flew to the island that very evening. There he encountered a world as surreal as those he was creating with his modified Repronar, where the earth sprouted flames and buildings were encased in piles of blackness. "The ultimate reality trip," he called it. He went back to the island in 1996 to see how the town had rebuilt itself. Discovering that people had reconstructed their community, right down to its colors, almost exactly as it had been before the volcano erupted, he made a remarkable series of comparative images from exactly the same spots where he has made his originals.

Record producer Creed Taylor was another sympathetic client who delighted in Turner's surprises. Musicians like Quincy Jones or Milt Jackson would treat Turner as an equal muse, and generally Taylor would give him nothing more than an album title to work with. The work provided an outlet for images like

HOT LIPS—1966

EYE TO EYE—1968

Cheetah that had been rejected as too radical by other clients, and for exploring new ideas like playing against the mid-1960s high fashion for carefully contoured lips by brushing a model's lips with bright red paint, which Taylor used for Herbie Mann's 1969 album *Soul Flutes: Trust in Me*. When Taylor needed an image for Joe Farrell's 1975 fusion album *Canned Funk*, Turner pulled out a photograph he had made years earlier of a false eyeball resting in a can of peaches. Together, Taylor and Turner transformed record cover art. Their covers not only attracted critical comment, they transformed album covers into an integral part of the music selling and listening experience. Today the covers are collectors' items.

During these years as one of the most sought after commercial photographers working out of New York, Turner also gained modest acclaim for his personal photography from art and design magazines. His works were included in group shows, and in 1968 he had solo exhibitions at the major Cologne photography fair Photokina and the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The latter show subsequently traveled to 52 countries. In 1976 the Minneapolis College of Art and Design presented his one-person exhibition *Time Space in Color: A Retrospective* and travelled the show to Paris.

Yet the museum world was moving in a different direction, led by Museum of Modern Art photography curator John Szarkowki's celebration that same year of the prosaic naturalism filling William Eggleston's color photographs of Memphis and the South. Turner's work fit better into a category of Pop than the burgeoning, self-consciously ironic temper that was taking over in fine art photography circles. His photographs were not about semi-passively recording the world. They constructed clean, colorful, graphically refined simpler worlds, often ones that held a touch of humor, as in his photograph *Push* (1970). What could be more mundane after all than a photograph of a trashcan? Yet by moving and lining the receptacle up with the horizon of a sunny Florida beach, Turner induced reality to take on an amusingly surreal balance. One sees a clean new trash can, but one reads elegance. Szarkowski never quite knew how to deal with such imagery. Further complicating Turner's position was the museum world's increasing subscription to Alfred Stieglitz's early twentieth-century dictate that fine art photography had to be overtly distinct from commercial work. This line of thinking made it difficult for commercial photographers to have their work, even if created for personal reasons, accepted by museums. Finally, even in the late 1970s, most galleries and museums were still heralding black-and-white as the only true format for photographic art.

In response, Turner joined forces with Haas and his color photographer colleague Jay Maisel in 1977 to open their own gallery next door to Turner's Carnegie Hall studio. Just as Dmitri had initiated his PFA exhibition program in the late 1950s to overcome what he saw as museums' neglect of the broad vocabulary of photography, Turner and his colleagues saw this new gallery, which they called The Space for Color Photography, as a way to broaden avenues for the display of color. In a world where 20x24-inch prints were considered large, they innovatively offered Dye Transfer prints that ranged up to 40x72 inches. The Space was set up as a non-profit organization to promote color photography. It was a modest success, but not enough to keep it going longer than a few years.

By the time Turner went into transition in 1992, closing his Carnegie Hall studio in favor of a country setting at the East End of Long Island, he had won more than three hundred awards from design groups and photography associations, including the Outstanding Achievement in Photography Award from the American Society of Magazine Photographers (now the American Society of Media Photographers) and the

PUSH—1970

CLOUD WORLD—2001

Professional Photographer of the Year Award from the Photo-Imaging Manufacturers and Distributors Association. But that move did not stop him from working either in the commercial arena or on his own art. He shifted away from studio product photography and started transitioning into the electronic landscape, which enabled him to travel and print his work on site. He worked on book projects like *African Journey* and shot on location for clients like the Philip Morris Adventure Team, Saab, Adobe, and Bell Atlantic.

In 2001 Turner started visiting Mexico to photograph, purely for his own pleasure, the brightly-colored architecture produced by disciples of Luis Barragan in Baja and down the coast in the town of Careyes. In such images as *Cloud World* and *Parking Wall*, he transformed the everyday into magical worlds, where color guided by simplified form dominates, not for its own sake (He has never subscribed to abstraction or simple pattern), but to intensify appreciation for its subject.

Throughout his career, Turner has remained committed to beauty and uplift. In an artistic culture that has become increasingly preoccupied with intellect, his world of simplified form, unexpected juxtaposition, and brilliant hue weaves a vocabulary that places one clearly beyond the everyday, in a realm where Kodachrome's vocabulary of saturated color is not merely accepted, but celebrated. It is a world that Turner himself would like to inhabit. Over the last few years, as his work has been discovered by a new generation of collectors and young photographers, and emulated through sites like Flickr, Turner has turned to Epson and pigmented ink jet prints to further refine his past and new photographic delights, to fix problematic details and improve colors. Each advance in printers and inks delivers him joy and pain as he finds out how much more nuance he can get out of his now-computerized photographic files, creating ever better reflections of his original intentions—to surprise and to relish our color-filled world.

SAND DUNE AND TREE—1995

■ BOOK INFORMATION

Pete Turner: Photographs, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987.
Pete Turner: African Journey, New York: Graphis Press, 2000.
The Color of Jazz: Album Cover Photographs by Pete Turner, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2006.

■ PRINT INFORMATION

20x30-inch Archival Pigment Prints, editions of 17 and 25.
13x19.5-inch Archival Pigment Prints, editions of 13 and 25.
Prices range from $4000–$7500.
Vintage Dye Transfer Prints also available.

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PARKING WALL—2002