



PETE TURNER
EMPOWERED BY **COLOR**

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Cover: Pete Turner (American, b. 1934). **LIFESAVER, USA, 1967**. Digital ink-jet (Epson) print.
George Eastman House collection © 1967 Pete Turner.

PETE TURNER

EMPOWERED BY **COLOR**

ON DISPLAY AUGUST 12, 2006–FEBRUARY 4, 2007

Exhibition curated by Sean Corcoran

Introduction

EMPOWERED BY **COLOR**: An Interview with Pete Turner

All photographs: *Pete Turner (American, b. 1934).*
Digital ink-jet (Epson) print. George Eastman House collection.



ROLLING BALL, 1960. © 1960 Pete Turner.

Introduction

For the last half-century, Pete Turner has used his mastery of the photographic medium to create images with a unique personal vision. Noted for his dramatic use of color and graphic composition, he has produced a diverse *oeuvre* that transcends traditional classification. **PETE TURNER: EMPOWERED BY COLOR** is a retrospective exhibition exploring the breadth of his career.

Turner's career began during the infancy of color photography, at a time when color was used almost exclusively for commercial purposes. Unlike many contemporaries, Turner embraced color, seizing opportunities that allowed him to master the process and to create the imagery he felt compelled to make. Unconcerned with the labels of "art" or "commercial," he has deftly created a life's work that blurs these boundaries.

Turner achieves his vision by combining the technical tools of photography with a perceptive eye for compositional color. Learning to manipulate hue and saturation early in his career, Turner created photographs that looked unlike anything previously seen, such as *Giraffe*, 1964 (page 8). Over the years, he has continued to push the medium of photography by employing an impeccable sense of timing and a long-running fascination with geometry and surrealism. The results are photographs such as *Shapes of Things to Come*, 1969 (page 14), and *Cloud World*, 2001 (page 21), images that transport viewers to other worlds.

Color photography is Pete Turner's passion. His love of image making has resulted in a personal visual language. Take the time to examine Turner's photographs. While at first many may seem simple, a closer inspection reveals a rare level of complexity and precision. It is the truly talented photographer who makes the difficult seem facile.

—**Sean Corcoran**, *Assistant Curator of Photographs*
George Eastman House



TIMES SQUARE, 1957. © 1957 Pete Turner.

EMPOWERED BY **COLOR**: An Interview with Pete Turner

This interview took place by phone between Pete Turner and Sean Corcoran, assistant curator of photographs at George Eastman House and curator of PETE TURNER: EMPOWERED BY COLOR.

Sean Corcoran: After you graduated from RIT, as part of the first class to receive a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography in 1956, you were drafted into the military. In many cases this might have sidetracked a career, but in your case it became a rare opportunity. How did this happen?

Pete Turner: I got lucky and was stationed at the Army Pictorial Center in Long Island City. I reported in and began working with the brand new type-c color process. As part of the job, the army required that I continue training by constantly making pictures and prints. I was encouraged to make personal work, which eventually became a portfolio that proved invaluable. During this time I was working on the series *Lights of New York*.

SC: Was your photograph *Times Square, 1957* (page 4) from the series *Lights of New York*?

PT: Yes. I often stayed with my aunt, who had an apartment on Madison Avenue. I can remember getting up at dawn and photographing a huge snowstorm. Everything was quiet. It's especially visual if you are there just after the storm and there are no footsteps in the snow. Another picture from that series was used for *The Sound of New York* album cover and is in my new book, *The Color of Jazz*.

SC: How did you begin making pictures for album covers?

PT: I came across the name Creed Taylor [a producer for ABC-Paramount Records] on the back of several album covers. I made an appointment and brought in my portfolio of color prints. Creed said he was working on an album called *The Sound of New York* that

had all the musical energy of the city. Being a man of contrasts, Taylor liked the quiet feeling of the photographs from *Lights of New York*. His decision to use my photograph was the beginning of a long photographic relationship. Some of the album covers were assignments, but most of the time he would give me a title and I would select something for it. The beauty of album covers is their longevity; they become collectors' items.

SC: Not long after your military discharge, you received an assignment to photograph in Africa. You came away with some wonderful images from the trip. How did you get the assignment?

PT: I was working with the Freelance Photographers Guild (FPG). They introduced me to Pat Terry from the Airstream Company. He was looking for a photographer who could spend half a year photographing a caravan of trailers driving from Cape Town to Cairo. I was twenty-four years old and it was a dream assignment.

SC: *Rolling Ball*, 1960 (page 2) was made on this trip. Could you tell us a little about this photograph?

PT: I was traveling across the Nubian Desert. It was a pretty barren place, with railroad tracks and a few huts. One of the huts had a cone-shaped roof and was the only thing I could see in the entire area that could make an interesting photograph. I watched it for a couple of hours. Finally, the sun began to set, and as I started walking around the hut with a medium telephoto lens, I noticed that I could line up the sun anywhere along the side of the roof, bottom, middle, or top. It was a breakthrough for me, really a seminal image. I realized I didn't need to use only what I found. I could make pictures instead of just taking them.

The foreword I wrote for my book *African Journey* is a diary of my experiences on that trip. When I came back I had a strong portfolio of color work from Africa, plus all the photographs from my time in the military. In those days color work was rare to see. I met Harold Hayes [*Esquire* editor from 1961–1973], who asked, "Who is this kid that

has all this color work and has traveled to all these exotic places?” The meeting sparked a long creative relationship between editor and photographer and made many photographs possible.

SC: Not long after, you went back to Africa and made your famous picture *Giraffe*, 1964 (page 8). This photograph received a lot of attention at the time. Could you explain why?

PT: You have to realize that if someone added a skylight filter—which hardly added any color but would protect the lens—that was a big deal. If you used a polarizing filter, that was an even bigger deal. People didn’t really put color filters in front of their lenses. Using color like this was really unprecedented.

SC: You were drastically changing the look of an image from what was found in the real world. People weren’t used to that.

PT: The *Giraffe* picture is important because it broke a ton of rules, and it also said something to me. It said you don’t need to be afraid to experiment. Playing things safe is often a mistake. Later on, Weston Naef [former curator of photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and current curator of photographs at the Getty Museum] asked me if I would put some prints in the collection of the Metropolitan. Looking at the work in my apartment, he said, “Pete, you are the Dr. No of color photography!”

SC: Now you use digital photography. How has digital imaging changed the way you work?

PT: Well, the process is completely different. Prior to the digital age, you sent your film out to the lab for processing and that was it. Now, you use your media card. There is an electronic look to it. But it does give you the option to make your own film. This is the luxury of digital color. With technology like Epson, printing is just unbelievable. It puts you back in the lab, without a darkroom, and your standards sure get higher!



GIRAFFE, 1964. © 1964 Pete Turner.

SC: Your latest series of photographs, *Walls of Light* (pages 21-24), has the compositional punch of much of your previous work, while using a much wider palette. Does this series continue to push the possibilities of color photography?

PT: I constantly feel challenged to try new things. I learned to control the use of hue and saturation about fifty years ago. Constant handling was destroying my master chromes, so I wanted to make high quality duplicates. I used a duplicating machine and Kodachrome film to make copies. I got increased saturation with the duplicates; the color was just so much more vibrant. I started using filters to change the hue. I discovered that I could control both saturation and hue.

I made my own optical printer that allowed an unbelievable amount of control. I took a Repronar [slide duplicator] and put a Nikon camera on it and a real strobe light underneath it. Nobody else was doing this in the early 1960s. And I made this discovery just because I didn't want to send my masters out! In trying that little experiment, I developed a whole new way of changing the look of color photographs. This became part of my trademark style.

Now, with the right software, these controls are all built in. Today, what I am really after is simplicity. Simplicity, such as images like *Funicular*, 2006 (page 24), or *Cloud World*, 2002 (page 21), or *Blues Walls and Light*, 2002 (page 23). I like broad canvases, and these photographs combine the essential elements I look for: light, color, and space. I've been working on this series for a few years now and am still fascinated when it all comes together. It's an endless work in progress...and I love it!



DOORWAY TO NOWHERE, 1963. © 1963 Pete Turner.



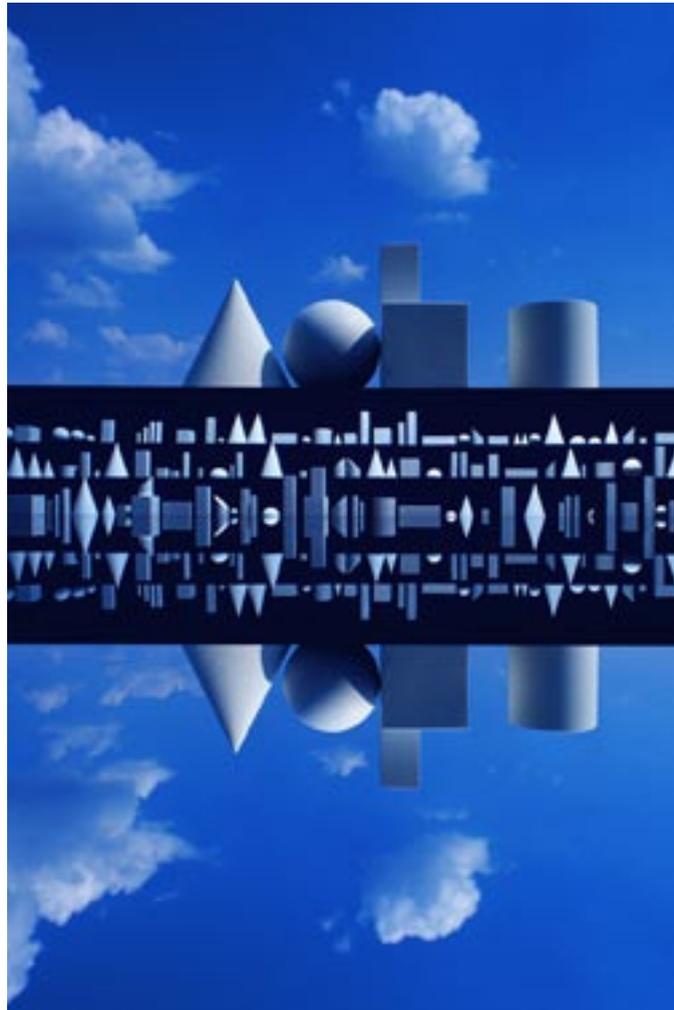
ROAD SONG, 1967. © 1967 Pete Turner.



IBIZA WOMAN, 1961. © 1961 Pete Turner.



OLD AGE, 1968. © 1968 Pete Turner.



SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME, 1969. © 1969 Pete Turner.



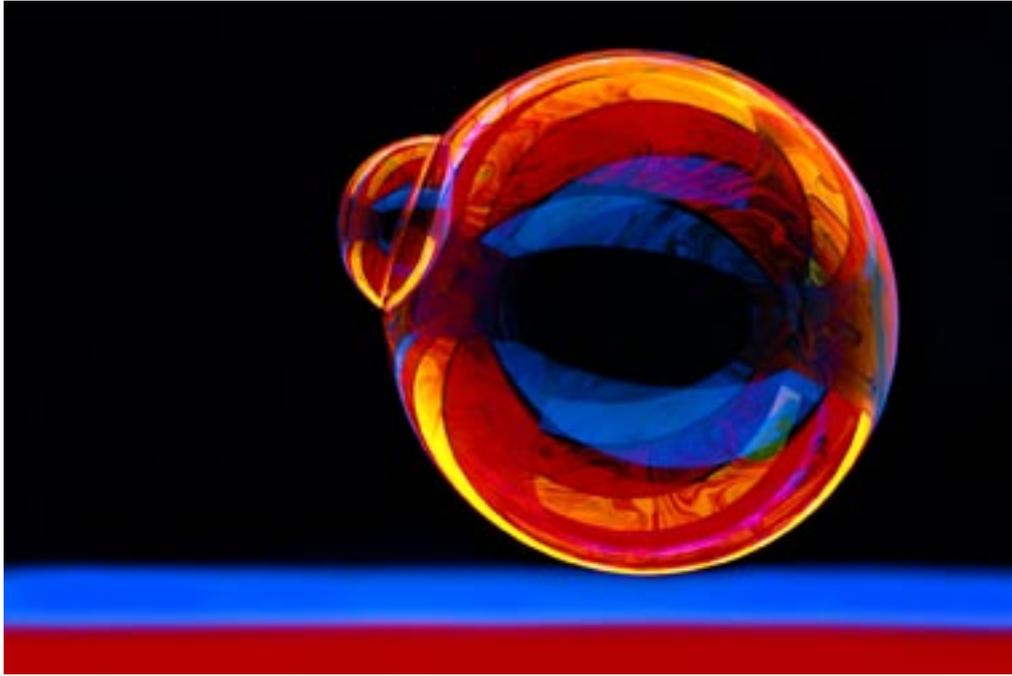
PUSH, 1970. © 1970 Pete Turner.



HOT LIPS, 1966. © 1966 Pete Turner.



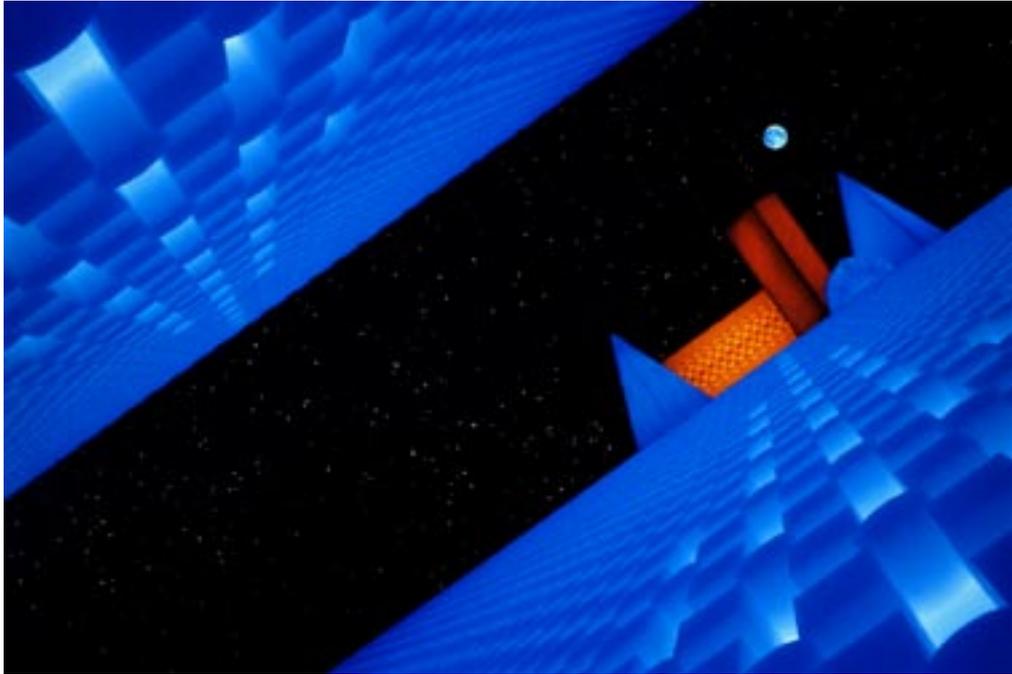
CHEETAH, 1970. © 1970 Pete Turner.



BUBBLE AND STRIPE, 1980. © 1980 Pete Turner.



LAS VEGAS SHOE, 1995. © 1995 Pete Turner.



FUTURE CITY, 1986. © 1986 Pete Turner.



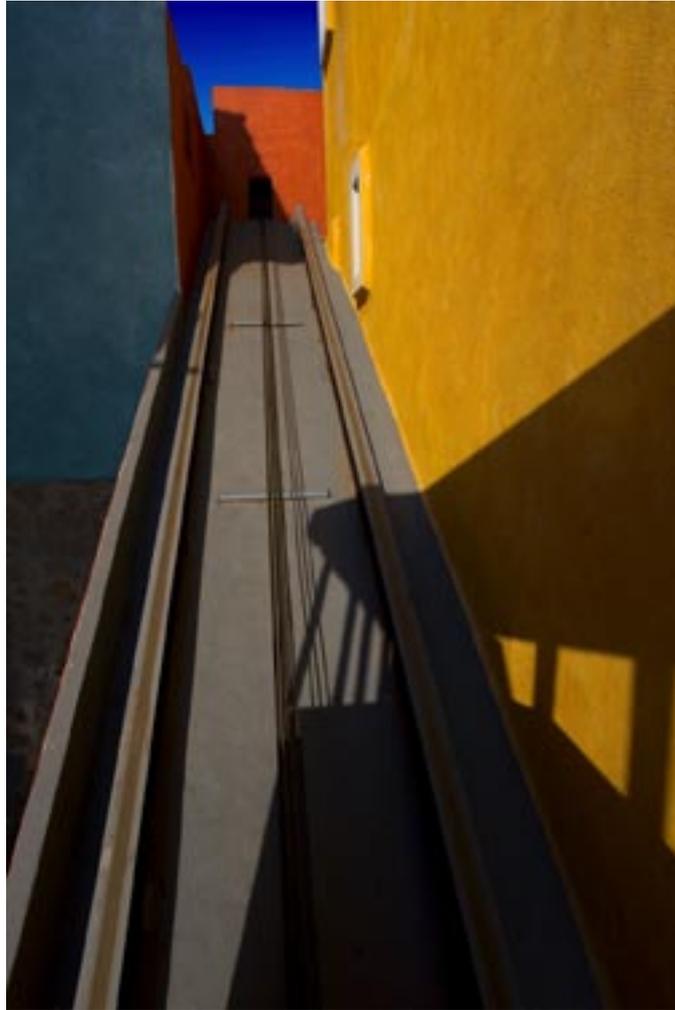
CLOUD WORLD, 2001. © 2001 Pete Turner.



PALM FROND AND WINDOWS, 2004. © 2004 Pete Turner.



BLUE WALLS AND LIGHT, 2002. © 2002 Pete Turner.



FUNICULAR, 2006. © 2006 Pete Turner.



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Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm; Thursday, until 8 pm; Sunday, 1 to 5 pm. Closed on Monday.

For more information about Pete Turner, please visit www.peteturner.com.

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Thank you to my wife, Holly, for her constant support.

Back Cover: **ETHIOPIAN BAR, 1959.** *Digital ink-jet (Epson) print.*
George Eastman House collection © 1959 Pete Turner.

