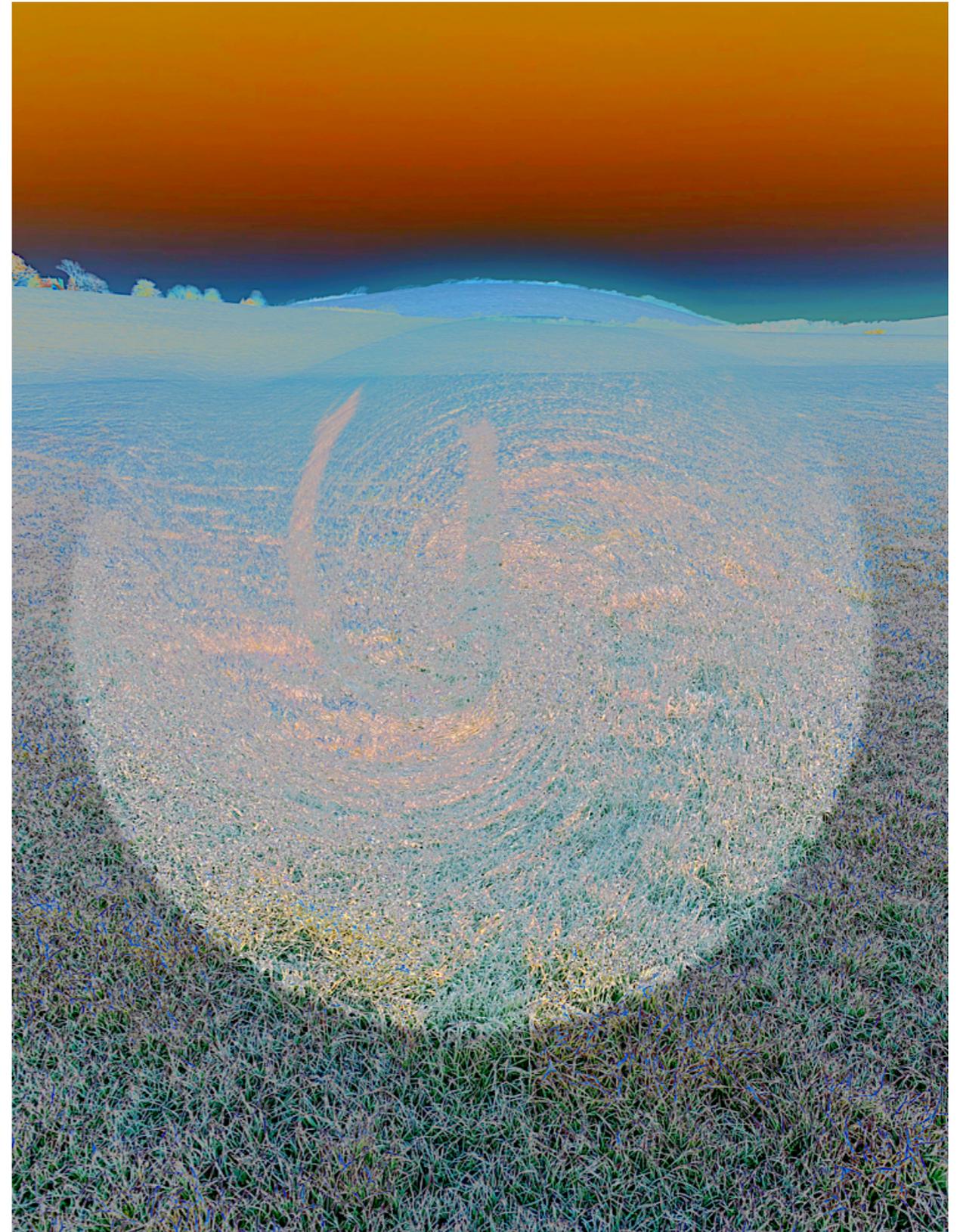




DISTORTED VISION

A JOURNEY THROUGH TWISTED PERCEPTION

You don't see much. Your rainbow is a narrow band of the light spectrum. You don't see what other people do. Your view of the world is uniquely limited. The same goes for your perception of the sight you have. You filter and process it in your own way. You see differently, you un-see differently. You inhabit your own visual world, and have to make do with conventions and presumptions when you wish to communicate your world to others. It's, perhaps, understandable when these conventions end up standing in for vision itself. The norm becomes the thing. Life is easier when you share a common language with others. Anything which deviates can then be dealt with as a clinical issue: a disorder (the word itself is telling: disorder, the normal order of things has been shattered). Those who do not fit into the ordered pattern of life, live beyond it, in a medically defined nether world of different, altered, defective people.





I'm on the outer edges of visual deviation. My sight is disordered. I sit far removed from the normal centre on that particular statistical bell curve. In a world where everyone is different, I find myself considered more different. If it weren't for the degenerative nature and the physical pain which accompanies my condition (keratoconus, with a failing corneal transplant) I would appreciate my outsider status. The things I have seen you wouldn't believe. The way the world merges, swirls and glows, and how, on a night, the lights bloom and twist around each other in a dance of neon and sodium: quite extraordinary.

I wouldn't be alone out there, however. Other deviants have travelled here before me. The routes they took varied, of course, but they left trails out into these rarely visited landscapes, trails I could follow. One such traveller was Joseph W. M. Turner. When my eyesight began to change (in my teenage years) I immediately recognised Turner's "issue": he saw the world as I, increasingly, did. I figured he too had a cornea twisted out of shape. He viewed the world through a pointed, mis-shaped eye. It couldn't be clearer – so to speak.

Well, my presumption proved part right. Distorted vision did play a role in Turner's paintings – but it had nothing to do with his eyes. Turner often looked through glass objects when viewing the subject of his paintings. It started as an experiment, but became a common practice in his art. He went out of his way to see the world in the way my eyes had taken to doing naturally. All those landscapes, dissolving into the light – the gold, vermilion and ultramarine hazes – they were my sunsets. Turner gave my vision a physical representation. Now anyone could see the world through keratoconal eyes.

The more you look, the more you see outsider painters. Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Rembrandt van Rijn, Mary Cassat, Georgia O'Keefe, Henri Matisse, Victor Brauner all produced work from the other side. From macular degeneration to cataracts, from detached retinas to losing an eye, ocular disruptions have had as great an impact on visual arts as any art school or movement. Indeed, why wouldn't this be the case? Art – and painting in particular – is a test tube for applied vision. Out here, beyond your – normal - ken, the world has an exotic appeal. We can bring back strange tales of different lands for your entertainment. People – some people - naturally gravitate towards the different. It's a good angle, a unique selling point.

Which is one way of looking at it. But then, we all have limitations. We all see the world differently, even to ourselves. Sight is not a static phenomenon. Mood can change how we see, and even more so, how we perceive. Our eyes change constantly, depending on hydration, weather conditions, general health and so on and so forth. Visual acuity shifts and changes throughout the day, throughout the year, throughout a lifetime. Both of your eyes provides you with a different view of the world. Obviously: they are different from each other. Not only does binocular vision depend on this difference, but your perception of colour, line and form are a merging of two separate views. If eyesight is not a coherent and reliable phenomenon even to ourselves, then the work of these artists serves as a reminder of our fragility in a shifting world. Their difference is universal. Fundamentally, their work is as it is, as they are they and no-one else. In that given moment, that person saw things as only they could. They showed the world how it appeared, and in doing so a new rainbow shone.

