

The Rapture of Light

A reflection on beauty, the existence of angels, the light of creation, the divine madness of love, and passionate devotion to flawless form.

By Jonathan Thomson

The Rapture of Light is a group of artworks that may be seen to form a part of the long history of Western art in which artists made representations of angels. Angels are taken to be manifestations of perfect beauty as they are made by God and like God they are made of light.

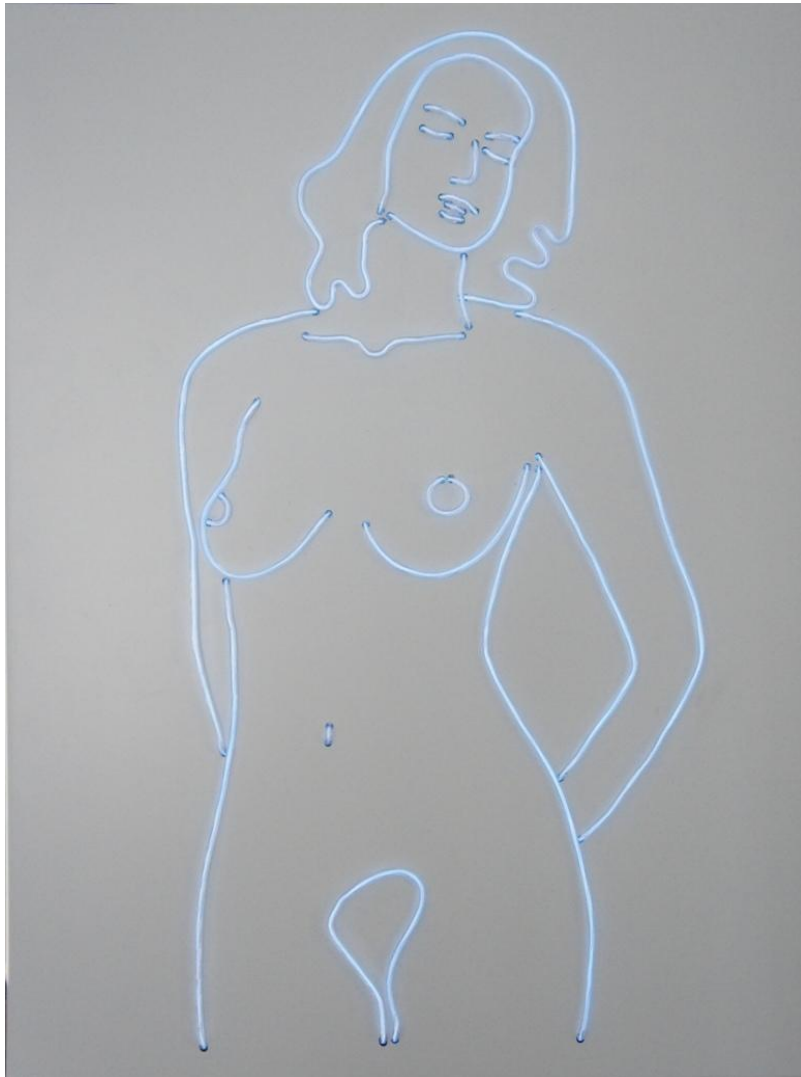
All stories of creation and all of the wisdom traditions that seek to provide answers to life's ultimate questions and help us to see ourselves in life's great design, have their beginnings in light. Light is the perfection of God, Allah, Yahweh, T'ien, Tao, Brahman and Nirvana. Both the *Bible* and the *Koran* say that God is light. Light is an evocative symbol of life, salvation, knowledge, clarity, perfection and enlightenment. "Light Upon Light" is a famous line from the 24th sura of the *Koran* that describes how God's light diffuses beauty and purity to the lowest and the highest faculties of the human soul.

Both the *Bible* and the *Koran* also say that angels are the messengers of God but neither ever explicitly describes their form. The *Koran* says that they may take any form they want and both texts say that sometimes they may have wings, but both are certain that angels are made of light. In the *Bible* Saint Stephen is described

as having the "face of an angel" which is equated with light, and whenever angels appear as angels and not in the guise of men their faces are said to be like lightning.

When not going about God's business, angels reside in heaven. In *Phaedrus* Plato recounts a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus on the divine madness of love. In his Second Speech, Socrates describes how whenever someone sees beauty in this world he is reminded of the true beauty his soul has glimpsed in heaven. True beauty was experienced when we ourselves were also pure and unmarred by that we call the body, and was perceived as visions in pure brilliant light. Worldly beauty is love that we grasp as shining most distinctly through sight as the keenest of all the sensations coming to us through the body.⁽¹⁾

Beauty cannot be reduced to any single necessary and sufficient condition. There is no solitary "essence" of beauty. The hit television show *The X Factor*, describes star quality as an undefinable "something" that is not any one single thing, but an entirely subjective collection of many different things. So it is with beauty. Ideas about what constitutes beauty are relative to different cultures and different periods of history.



Jonathan Thomson
EL008, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium Panel
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm

Art makes the invisible visible. The existence of beauty is not contingent on it ever being seen, but in order to be able to perceive visible beauty we must have light because without light there is no sight. Light is clearly not exclusive to beauty, but it is an essential factor without which all others are meaningless. Light is an essential component of the aesthetic of beauty.

This point was addressed by James Joyce in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus reflects on the qualities of universal beauty. He cites Thomas Aquinas who says: “ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur, integritas, consonantia, claritas” and translates it as “three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony and radiance”. The quality of radiance or claritas gives him pause. For him it is something more than the luminous brightness and clarity of light.

He notes that Aquinas may have meant “symbolism or idealism, the supreme quality of beauty being a light from some other world, the idea of which the matter is but the shadow, the reality of which it is but the symbol”. He also thinks he may have meant claritas as “the artistic discovery and representation of the divine purpose in anything or a force of generalisation which would make the esthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions”. But He eventually settles on “scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing. This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart.”⁽²⁾

In fact, when applied to art all three meanings are probably correct. The depiction of beauty in art is both idealised and symbolic; it is the result of conscious decisions by the artist to make something that does not just have personal meaning but one or many which can be apprehended and appreciated by diverse audiences; and its creation and appreciation provide a flash of pleasure and enchant both the mind and the heart.

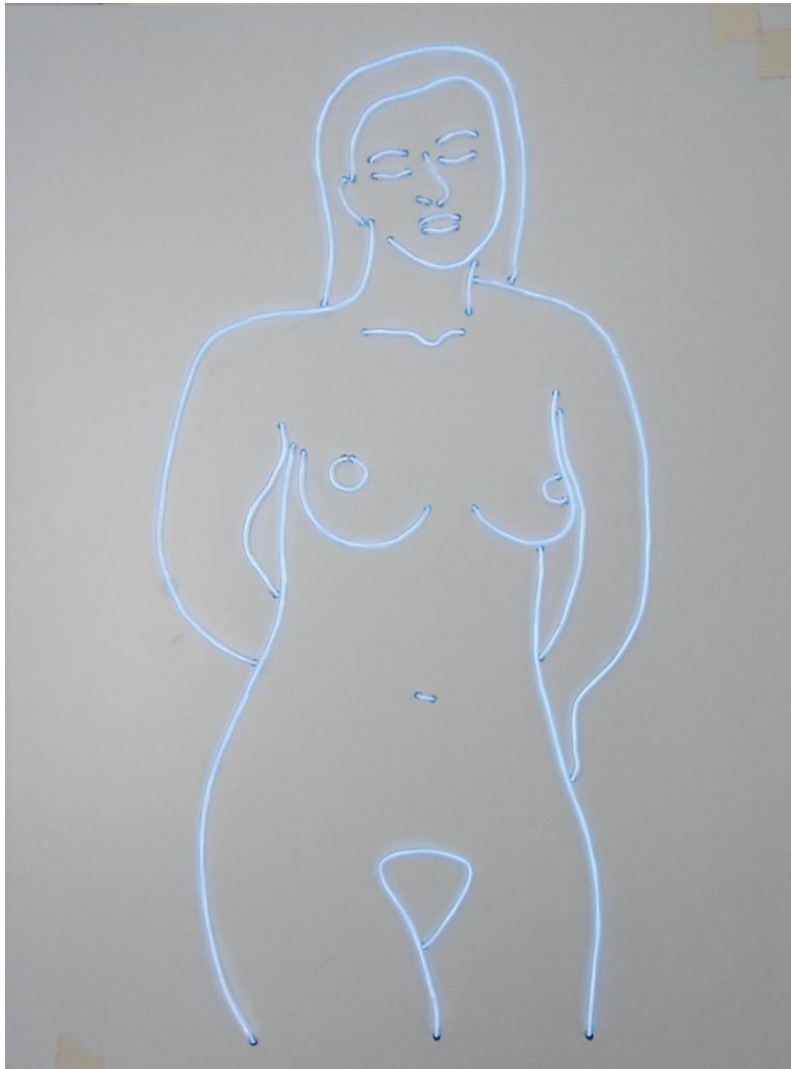
There seems to be a connection between Joyce and Nietzsche in the latter's well known comparison between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art. For the Greeks Apollo was the sun and god of light. Apollo was also god of order and harmony and visible beauty. In counterpoint, Dionysus was god of wine and riotous chaos, excess and ecstasy. For Nietzsche Dionysian beauty was that which was felt rather than seen. It aims to "convince us of the eternal delight in existence and feel its unbridled lust for and joy in existence when we become, as it were, one with the immeasurable primordial delight in existence and when, in Dionysian rapture, we sense the indestructible and eternal nature of this joy."⁽³⁾

This point was also well taken by artists of the aesthetic movement whose creed was the passionate pursuit of pure beauty. The goal for them was transformation of life into art. In his lecture "The English Renaissance of Art" delivered in New York in 1892, Oscar Wilde describes the philosophy of the aesthetic movement as a "passionate cult of pure beauty", a "flawless devotion to form" and possessing an "exclusive and sensitive nature".⁽⁴⁾

James McNeill Whistler was then and is now seen as the visual artist whose work best embodies the principles of the aesthetic movement. The catchphrase of the movement was "Art for Arts sake". Whistler asserted the purity of purpose of art and in his *10 O'Clock Lecture* presented and published in 1885 proposed that art is "selfishly occupied with her own perfection only, having no



Jonathan Thomson
EL005, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
 EL006, 2011
 Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
 Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
 40 x 30 x 5 cm

desire to teach, seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and in all times.”⁽⁵⁾

The aesthetic artists’ concern with the expressive power of art is described by Walter Pater in his essay "The School of Giorgione" in *The Renaissance*. He says art should strive “to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material [so that] the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason’, that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol”. ⁽⁶⁾

All of these things come together in the series of illuminated figures that comprise *The Rapture of Light*. Art consists in making the invisible visible and gives the fleeting intangibility of time solid form. It serves as a spur to the imagination, so that the everyday reality of the object is overlooked in favour of its impact on our senses.

Wings on human forms are conventions that transform images into symbols. Winged figures are known from antiquity in Egypt and the near East but are found in much greater numbers in the art of Greece where they represent Harpies and Sirens and a variety of other deities including the four winged attendants of Zeus – the siblings Nike (Victory), Kratos (Power), Bia (Violence) and Zelos (Zeal).

Angels were rarely represented in early Christian art and when they were shown it was in human form. Later, from the Byzantine era onwards, they were depicted with wings not just when the narrative demanded it, as in scenes of the annunciation and other specific angelic visits, but as part of the entourage of the key figures in the work. An examination of images of angels in art suggests that for some artists including Leonardo, Botticelli and Bronzino, perfect

beauty is androgynous – figures that can be construed as having reconciled the sexes and attained a form of perfection that goes beyond gender. *The Rapture of Light* are contemporary representations that seek to manifest or express the divine not through the use of wings but through expressions of male and female beauty.

The works in *The Rapture of Light* present the beauty of the human form as a source of light. The light emitted by the works themselves helps ascribe them with meaning. Light itself is a revelation.

For most of the history of art, artists have focused on making representation of things made visible through light. In the nineteenth century, the representation of light itself became the central concern of painting. JMW Turner is known as the painter of light because of his interest in the use of brilliant colours dissolving into one another in both his landscapes and seascapes. The Impressionists wanted to depict the colour of light and their use of broken brushstrokes, a high tonal key, pure colour, and a direct manner of painting were all directed to the study of momentary effects. The motif in their paintings may have been a landscape or a figure or an object, but their objective was to render the play of light in the air around the surface of the things that they saw.

In the twentieth century there was a paradigm shift away from the representation of light to the reality of light itself. This was a part of the shift in Art - which used to be recognisable through its use of paint and canvas, or carved wood or stone, cast metal or embroidered fabrics - to the use of other materials including felt, junk, found objects or anything else. Artists realized that art itself could be immaterial and artists began experimenting with physical light as art.



Jonathan Thomson
EL010, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
Angel 001, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment (Detail)
40 x 30 x 5 cm

The twenty-first century offers artists even more opportunities to merge art and science as science delivers new technologies and artists invent new ways to use them. The use of Electroluminescent (EL) wire in the series *The Rapture of Light* is a case in point. EL wire is a wire that has been coated in a phosphor that glows continually 360° along its length when a current is applied to it. It can be bent to almost any shape and command attention in a similar way to neon, but at low voltages and without the fragility or toxicity of glass neon. It offers a degree of detail and delicacy of scale that can never be matched by either conventional glass or LED neon. In the artworks that comprise the series *The Rapture of Light*, the wire has been hand embroidered onto powder coated aluminium panels.

The idea of beauty has been a constant part of life throughout the entire course of human civilization. It is an idea which is inextricably tied to sensuous and emotional engagement. John Ruskin made this connection to art when he wrote “fine art is that in which the hand, the head and the heart of man go together”. By this he meant that a successful work of art is one that combines technical ability in the physical making of the work, the original expression of an idea about the world and our experience of it, and the ability to convey those ideas clearly to other people in ways that resonate with them. (7)

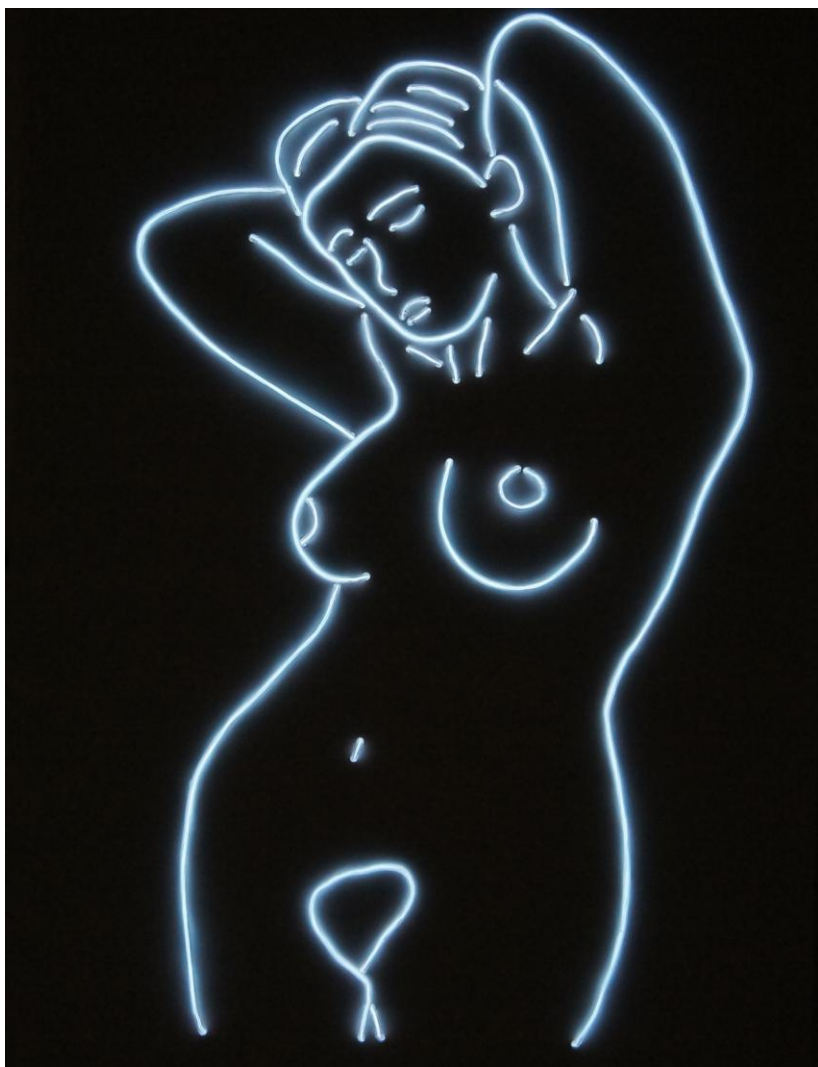
These works explore fundamental ideas about beauty. They highlight the joys and sorrows of life and love. Beauty is relative to different times and different cultures and all too often the delight it gives us is tempered by the fact that it too, like laughter and music, the perfume of flowers and the bloom of youth, will fade. All things must pass, but in our hearts and minds, that which we find beautiful is a possession for all eternity.

A clean, pure, unsullied line can accomplish lyrical, romantic, poetic inscriptions of enduring power and extraordinary beauty. When that line is formed by embroidering it in wire it takes the form of a sculpture in low relief. If that line can then itself be illuminated the artwork is no longer passively waiting to be observed, but may impel itself into your experience. Perhaps with these artworks we see what is what is meant by the term “visitation”.

Bangkok
December 2011



Jonathan Thomson
EL013, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
 EL005, 2011
 Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium Panel
 Illuminated night time view with no other lighting
 40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
 EL005, 2011
 Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
 Unilluminated day time view in bright light environment
 40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
EL013, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium Panel
Illuminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm



Jonathan Thomson
EL013, 2011
Electroluminescent Wire on Aluminium
Unilluminated daytime view in bright light environment
40 x 30 x 5 cm

Notes

1. William S Cobb, *The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato's erotic dialogues*, 250b – 250d, (State University of New York, Albany, 1993), pg. 107.
2. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1916), pg. 216 – 217.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, online at http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm#t10, Ch17.
4. Oscar Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art" *Essays and Lectures*, (Methuen, London, 1909), p. 114.
5. James McNeill Whistler, "Mr Whistler's "Ten O'Clock", 1885, reprinted in James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, (G.P. Putnam, New York, 1927)
6. Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in art and poetry* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1873), p. 135.
7. John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Vol. 16, (George Allen, London, 1905), pg 294.



For further information including availability of additional works in this series and prices please contact Jonathan Thomson at Thomson Fine Art.

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