

*"First, I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object. Secondly, I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought. Thirdly, I am dealing with no focus or particular place to look. With no object, no image, and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at your looking."*

James Turrell, *Air Mass*

Confronting any of James Turrell's art works, the viewer faces the unknown world of penumbrae, a world where light appears formed by the individual's sense of emotion and perception. Turrell's work takes you to unique places suspended in time. Isolating a single light event, the artist detaches us from the present. This allows us to experience the slow flow of time and in consequence to sense light more exhaustively. Throughout history, light has been taken to convey spirituality and space. A space created by the light used to perceive it, the pure essence of architecture.

*[My work] takes things down to certain elemental places, sort of the soul of that moment and that place. One of the things that my work started to do is to make a place apart. If you are in this place, everything comes from it. On the outside, it takes certain aspects of that and heightens it. So you have this super heightened portion of it. There is another quality that is not often discussed in the work, and that is time, how time functions. It is important to slow down the time. This is a real event that is occurring, whether a sunset or a dawn. [...] So you use that time. That makes it a place apart. You feel it even more. Where you feel this change in the quality of time, which you are sensing more thoroughly.*

James Archibald Turrell, born in Los Angeles, California, in 1943, describes himself as a sculptor of light. He isolates aspects of illumination, creating objectless art that seems to be made of solid light. The results are highly subjective, depending entirely on an individual viewer's experience with the work. Seeing Turrell's work is analogous to the artist's description, in *Air Mass*, of flying: "The more you have extraordinary experience in flight, the more you recognize the difficulty in passing on the experience to others. Your experience becomes such that it is almost too difficult to talk about it. It seems useless to try to transmit the experience." Unique to Turrell's work is how completely it is left up to the viewers to decide where to locate themselves in relation to the space surrounding them. There is no image, no particular place to look.

*You have two issues with light, one is that light reveals and the other is that light obscures. The two in conjunction with one another make the architecture of space. If I stand on the stage and the footlights are on me and the floodlights from above are on me, there is so much light I cannot see the audience [...] You are in the same architectural space as the audience, but in a completely different visual space. They see you, but you cannot see them. It is very interesting how that can work. [...] [Light] is part of the building and it makes the space. We don't need to have a wall there or glass. We can put light. The Skyspaces have [...] a look of glass. There is very little material there except light. [...] I think of light as a material. I use it to work the medium of perception.*

When he was six, the artist's room had wartime blackout curtains.

*The first work I made was to take these curtains down during the day and put pinholes [in them] and make the constellations [...] and then to make different stars that were in the sky. To me that idea of being able to see the stars in the day, just by pulling the shade down, I thought this was clever and interesting. My mom thought it was not so interesting because the shades began to look like the Milky Way.*

Turrell grew up in a middle-class Quaker family in Pasadena. His father, an aeronautical engineer, was a strong influence. After his father died, Turrell became a pilot and began to fly. In 1965, he earned a B.A. in perceptual psychology from Pomona College, combining courses in physical chemistry, astronomy, and geology, all of which later became important in his exploration of light. Originally his plan was to major in mathematics. Turrell's interest in art, mainly in painting, was not so much in history or technique, but in a general attitude about what it means to be an artist. In the fall of 1965, he entered

graduate school at Irvine, University of California, where he studied art theory and art history. While in graduate school he began to work with light as a medium. He produced light sculptures using flames.

*"I remember being fascinated by light as a child. Especially with the nightlight that you leave in a child's room, providing just a small amount of light. But it was just enough light that it would make things above the bed. I remember looking above the bed and you could see everything, pictures, all that you could imagine. This is this juncture, this picture playing, between inside seeing and outside seeing. I say 'outside seeing,' how we normally see. This other seeing is the seeing behind the eyes that we generate. It is like imaginative seeing, where you imagine things and you can see them. Just as in a dream. How does the dream get there? This is a scene that is as clear and as lucid, with color as rich or richer, as when the eyes are open. So here are these two kinds of seeing that come together. They come together in the work that I would later do in the Dark Spaces".*

In 1965, Turrell altered the spaces of the Mendota Hotel, where he lived, at Main and Hill Streets in Los Angeles. He refinished the walls to be seamless, so that it would be possible to experience the light in the room without any frame of reference. This street-side room became an empty fathomless space where color prevailed: blue-green, deep red, purple, and violet. Light entered from the outside through a tiny hole, illuminating the opposite wall. Thus the tone of the indoor space changed with the light outside.

*"I had already decided to be an artist then. That was another decision, how to work [with] light. In a way, I had chosen this material, which I regarded as a thing, the thingness of light. Those were interesting decisions, because I studied psychology. I wasn't learning about light in the art classes, even though many artists have depicted light [...] [M]y interest was in one way no different than how an animal looks at light. They stare at light and then get hit by the car. That quality of light is diminished if you use the light to bear a message. For instance, the cinema. That is light, but you don't pay attention to light. You pay attention to the story in it, so you don't get to use the light's power. If you are really looking at light itself, like staring into the fire, then there is a primal relationship to light. This power is very interesting to me. There is content in light. We know a star that you cannot touch by looking at the light. We can tell the entire composition of a star by looking at its light. So there is truth in light".*

Each work is a self-contained entity and activates the space in its own particular way. Turrell's work is not static, nor repetitive, nor flat. The *Projection Series*

makes light seem solid, a free-floating three-dimensional volume with no supportive structure. The critic and artist John Coplans wrote that these pieces engender transparency without conventional employment of material.

*"[The Projection Series] is pretty much the beginning of trying to make a thingness of light. One of the things about those works, they are about what it takes to make something. The thing on the wall becomes the source, even though the source is the projector up above, but you see this as being the source. The thing on the wall, this idea of thingness, doesn't take too much before becoming form. That was very interesting to me. Also, the other thing that was interesting to me was that when you put light on the wall it is impossible to make it reside in the same plane as the wall. It is either residing through the wall, pulling it out, or it is residing slightly in front of it. You never can make it lie in the same plane. So, in closing off these walls [at Mendota Hotel] to make a studio I made Plato's cave. I made them all white, so the picture plane was really the wall. So this was a work that came out of painting in three dimensions much more than out of sculpture. I do enjoy looking at light as a material, but we don't tend to accord it the privilege of materiality.*

*But I wanted to see it as material, to feel it occupying a space. I started with the projection pieces to do that”.*

Each work offers experiences different from the last, focusing on a different aspect of light.

*“If you look at some portions of the New York sky, you can have an amazingly beautiful part of the sky. [But] you don’t notice that when you can see the rest. This is one of the things that happens in my work: I isolate something, often something that is actually occurring outside, whether a sunset or this other light event. So you feel it heightened even though [you see] less. That is one of the ways with light. [It] is very fragile, strangely fragile, because the conditions for its perception are often rather specific or particular. You often have to close something down and just take a portion of something. In a way it becomes more powerful by making it less. Also you have to take it out of its context. Usually we have light to illuminate other things. To get to a place where you are looking at light itself requires a suspension of time, a slowing down. Also a focus, so that is the only aspect you are looking at. Generally, we just use it to look at other things. It reveals something about something else, rather than being a revelation itself. So part of my work is to get the power of light back again”.*

Light is the one “material” capable of transforming all others. It adds something that leaves no trace once it is gone. At the turn of the eighteenth century, light began to be thought of in completely new terms. The implications of Newton’s experiments and theories went beyond physics.

*“I don’t know about what is light. [...] You plumb this space. You explore it as much as you can to give back to others. You send something back, which is the absolute function in art. Sometimes it is autobiographical. These are places I have gone in my thinking and so they affect what I see and what I bring back. Some things I am able to express. [...] One of the difficulties with light is that we don’t have a very good vocabulary for describing it”.*

In 1974, Turrell left his studio at Main and Hill Streets and began to look for a natural setting to incorporate the natural rhythms of light from the sun, moon and stars into his art. Over seven months, funded by a Guggenheim fellowship, he flew over the western United States, from Mexico to Canada, looking for an appropriate site. The Roden Crater, about fifty miles northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona, turned out to be the right place. In 1974 and 1975, with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and a matching grant from the

Dia Art Foundation, he began drawing up plans. Turrell has conceived an integral project: the way you arrive at the crater, the sequences of spaces within and around the crater (*Crater Bowl, Crater's Eye, East Portal, West Portal, North Moon Space, Sun and Moon Space, Fumerole Space, North Space, East Space, South Space, West Space, Amphitheater, West Saddle Connector, and West Entry Space*) and the furniture used in the lodge. Everything is carefully designed and studied. Nothing is left to improvisation. As long as there is light, the Roden Crater will be a never-ending, interactive experience with the natural rhythms of the sky.

*"Every time I saw a new space I had ideas for how to make the space. Then, when I saw Roden Crater, it had its [own] reasons for me to make what I'm making. The best way to think about all the making of this is [through] the stage*

*set of geological time, as you look across the landscape, there is the Painted Desert. There is the erosion by the Little Colorado River. There are the volcanoes. You are involved in a space of geological time, and that is the stage set on which all of this takes place. I am making spaces that play the music of the spheres in light. You feel this astronomical time, the full rhythms of what we experience on earth, and bring it closer. The sun comes down in the space you are, and here you have an eight-foot image of the sun, an eight-foot image of the moon. So this idea of playing the music of the spheres in light, I see myself as making these spaces that protect light. They shelter and apprehend light for our perception”.*

My investigation of James Turrell’s work began when Kosme de Barañano, then Director of the Institut Valencià d’Art Modern (IVAM), in Spain, invited me to curate a Turrell exhibition and produce a catalog. The work continued under the auspices of the new Director, Consuelo Císcar. After more than two years of researching, looking at, and reviewing Turrell’s work, I am still learning how to observe, how to look at light without any preconceived ideas. As the research advanced, the catalog grew. Now it surveys 600 of Turrell’s works, in 16 categories designated by the artist. The installation of four new site-specific pieces and two projection pieces at the IVAM will allow the viewer to experience various aspects of light, as each of Turrell’s works offers an experience different from the last.

Each of Turrell’s works delves deeply into how light is experienced, isolating a particular aspect and presenting it to the viewer to discover. The experience is not easily expressed in words. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote in *Obra Poética*, “the taste of the apple [...] lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself.” The observer is seduced by a solid red wall, which turns out to be light-filled space. Isolating part of the sky allows the ordinary light of the sky to be seen in electrifying blue glory, never seen before. The phantom interplay of faint lights in the dark as one’s mind and eye gradually adjust to mesopic levels of illumination is a revelation. The viewer is recruited into the personal journey that artists have been exploring for millennia. Turrell’s work captures the infinite manifestations of light, its cyclic nature, and its enigmatic silence.

(Note: All James Turrell quotes are excerpts from a series of interviews by Ana María Torres of James Turrell held between April and October of 2004)