

Light-years ahead

By BARRY DAVIS 06/28/2014

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Photo: Courtesy

If you're feeling stressed out, down or that the pressures of life are getting to you, the perfect antidote may not be too far away. You don't have to take yourself off to some far flung meditation center or fly to India to live in an ashram for a while, all you need to do is toddle off the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, to James Turrell's "Light Spaces" exhibition.

The show is an experience-and-a half.

The members of the public who visited the exhibition, while I did the rounds with German-born co-curator Rita Kersting, generally exuded a sense of hushed reverence as they meandered between tastefully positioned Turrell creations. But there was also a feeling of wonderment and fun.

One of the chief chill-out spots in the show is the American artist's 1992 work *St. Elmo's Breath*. You have to, literally, feels your way into location.

The entry walls are painted black and I obediently, and gratefully, followed Kersting's instruction to place my hand on the wall to the right as she vanished from view only inches in front of me. A black curtain was successfully navigated only to be followed by more dark walls and a second black curtain. And then you enter what feels like something of a New Age sanctum.

St. Elmo's Breath is one of Turrell's Space Division Constructions that he began to create in 1976. The

works in the series allude to the flatness of a screen or a canvas, and the purplish image immediately entices you as a sense of calm and tranquility begins to wash over you. The artist wants us to experience the whole work without homing in on one part or another. He achieves that by presenting us with a plane of color that defies focusing and induces to us to go with the flow.

This is a visually undefined work.

“I am dealing with no object,” explains Turrell. “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, no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at looking.”

It is a novel and altruistic concept in an image-suffused world.

Clearly, you have to have your technical and technological wits about you to produce something so ingenious and compelling. Turrell, 71-years-old and hailing from Pasadena, California, is the definitive polymath. He has a degree in perceptual psychology, and studied mathematics, geology and astronomy before attending a studio art program at the University of California. It was here that he began experimenting with light projections and eventually completed a master’s degree in art at Claremont Graduate University. And, before all that, he obtained a pilot’s license at the tender age of 16.

Turrell was around to help organize the exhibition and, in fact, has a long relationship with the Israel Museum.

“He had his first exhibition here in 1982,” observes Kersting. “That was one of his first shows outside the US and now, 30 years later, he has come back with Light Spaces, which I think is the most beautiful exhibition in the museum.”

It is, indeed, fascinating to see what can be created using something as ephemeral and incorporeal as light. There are works in the exhibition that seem so simplistic, yet are powerfully captivating. Afrum (White), for example, appears to be nothing more than a rectangle of bright yet soft white light projected onto a corner of a white walled room.

But it is strangely enticing, as are all the other works in the show.

“This is the first light work Turrell ever did,” explains Kersting. “He was influenced by the paintings of the time [Afrum dates from 1969] – New York school abstract expressionism. He also studied art history and he saw depictions of light in art history, in the works of the great old masters like Rembrandt, the impressionists and Turner.”

Turrell eventually went for the source.

“He looked back at the projector that was projecting the slides of the paintings and he saw the real light,” Kersting continues. “He said ‘this is much more interesting than the depiction of light,’ and then he decided to only use light in his work.”

Turrell’s understanding of the technical ins and outs enabled him to create items based on primal shapes that imperceptibly draw you in. His graphic work, *First Light*, from 1989-90, and *Still Light* (1991), feature classic forms such as a cube or a pyramid. The images are two dimensional and are presented in a portrait format but give the senses of three-dimensional objects. Again, it is Turrell’s deep understanding of the principles of light and of the machinations of visual perception, that enable him to offer the viewer such a seemingly simple item in such an alluring manner.

TV addicts may dig Bullwinkle that is located in a niche and comprises an opening in the end wall, shaped like an old-fashioned television screen, which emits soft yet dense light that alternates between shades and degrees of intensity. The source of the light comes from a concealed magnetron screen and the end result is an almost palpable sheen of color. The work is viewed from two chairs placed at a TV-viewing distance from the aperture.

The "Light Spaces" experience is completed by the Space That Sees structure in the museum gardens, which comes from Turrell's Skyspaces series. The category incorporates works located around the world that comprise specifically proportioned chambers with a ceiling aperture through which the sky can be observed. The way the light enters the rectangular white walled chamber, naturally, changes through the course of the day and with the seasons. Like the other works in the exhibition Space That Sees should leave you breathing deeply and easily.

For more information: (02) 670-8811 and <http://www.english.imjnet.org.il/>