

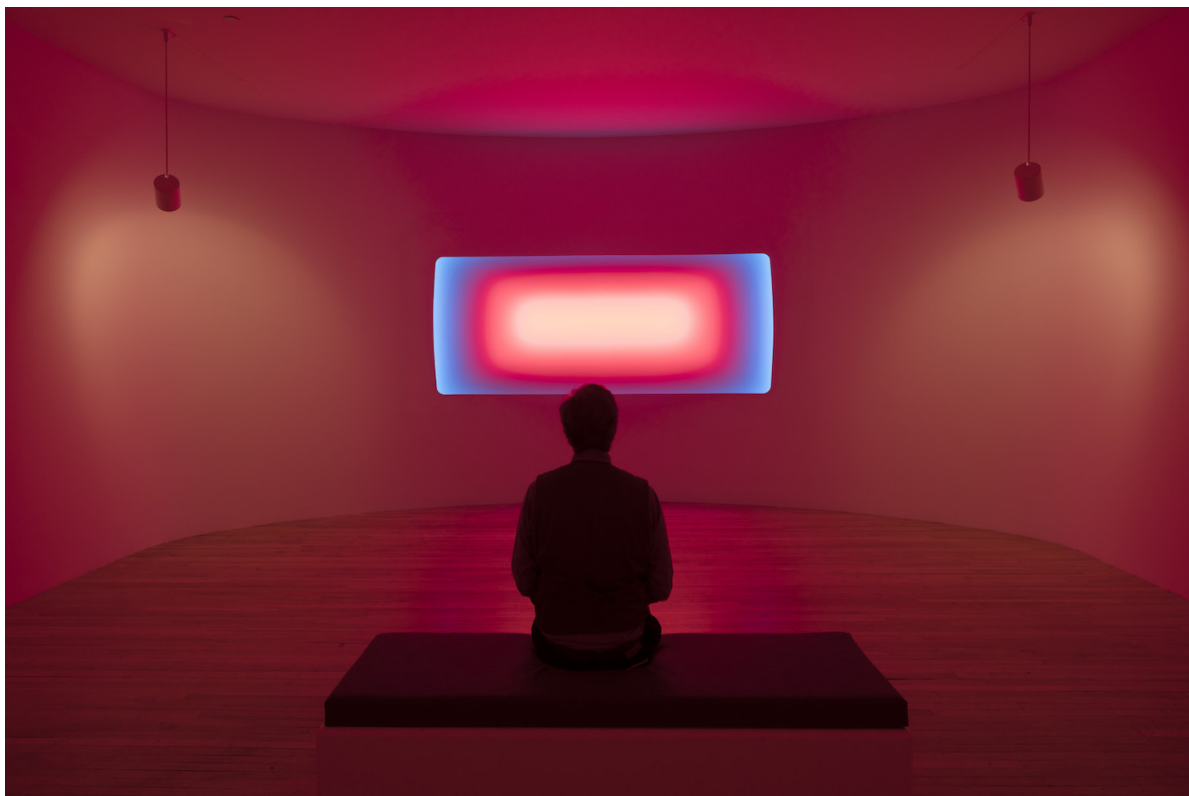
Kayne Griffin Corcoran

HYPERALLERGIC

A Journey Through James Turrell's Disorienting World at the Newly Expanded MASS MoCA

Into the Light, which will remain on long-term view at the museum, brings together installations from every stage of Turrell's five-decade career.

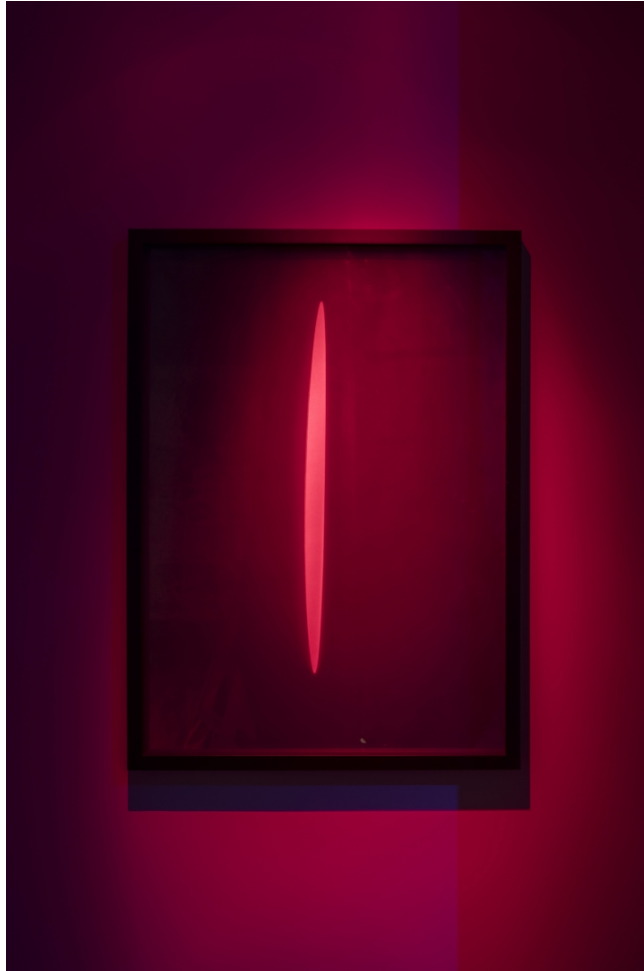
NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — Light can be bright and dull, clear and murky, or velvety and abrasive. In James Turrell's "Perfectly Clear" (1991), the viewer is subjected to an electromagnetic storm, a cascade of colors: rose, magenta, turquoise. Here, the medium is light, or, rather, the human optical-neurological apparatus that apprehends light. After putting on shoe covers, the viewer is ushered into a two-story space with curved walls and no visual markers (except for other visitors). What follows is a nine-minute-long celestial ballet, with slowly changing colors and 15-second intervals of stroboscopic effects.



Installation view of *James Turrell: Into the Light* in Building 6 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (© James Turrell, photo by Florian Holzherr)

Hopkins, Christopher Snow. "A Journey Through James Turrell's Disorienting World at the Newly Expanded MASS MoCA," Hyperallergic. 13 June 2017. Web.

"Perfectly Clear" is the centerpiece of a Turrell retrospective, *Into the Light*, at the newly expanded Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). And, as with much of his work, the piece has been designed to disrupt our sense of space and time — to call into question the authority of sight. At times, light seems to thicken, to encase the viewer in a turbid substance, and also to erase the contours of the gallery: the far wall does not appear to be a wall at all, but an undifferentiated void. But, this is, of course, is a trick of the eye, engineered by the artist to highlight the disjunction between vision and reality.



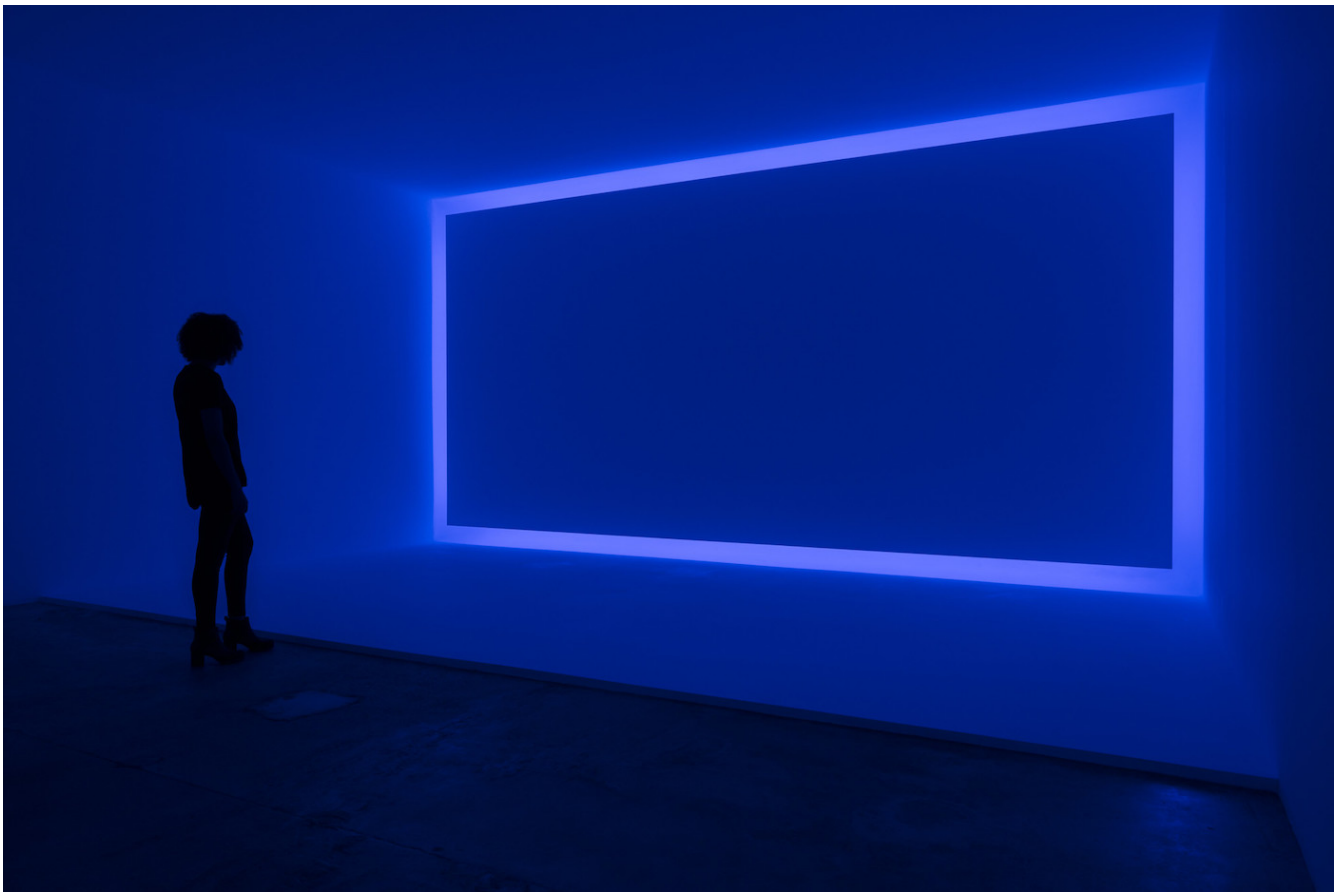
Installation view of *James Turrell: Into the Light* in Building 6 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (© James Turrell, photo by Florian Holzherr)

"This world that we inhabit has a lot to do with the reality we form through vision," he told Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in 2011. "So I am interested in how we create this world that we inhabit, and general koans nudging us into this newer landscape, the landscape without horizon, without left or right, up or down."

The exhibition brings together light installations from every stage of the career of this 74-year-old artist and elder statesman of the Southern California Light and Space movement, from what appears to be a levitating cube (a projection of buttery light in the corner of the gallery) to a series of holographic images that seem to contain three-dimensional wisps of light. To reach this light sanctuary at MASS MoCA from Boston, I drove along Route 2 across a landscape characterized by wild turkeys, purveyors of maple sweets and star-spangled bunting. The terminus of this pilgrimage was the former factory complex that has since been converted into one of the largest art museums in the world — last month, MASS MoCA doubled its exhibition space with the opening of Building 6, bringing its

gallery footprint to some 250,000 square feet. After a 130-mile journey, I entered a hushed space where other visitors were submerged in the protean matter — fuzzy, ethereal, soupy, psychedelic — emanating from Turrell's light installations. The sacral charge of the destination was amplified by the difficulty of getting there. This exhibition, more than most, is designed for direct experience, not reproduction and dissemination via Instagram. (This might be part of the reason that, as with previous Turrell exhibitions, photography is prohibited.

The exhibition encourages durational looking, with seating provided next to or inside five installations. For "Hind Sight" (1984), the viewer proceeds through a corridor into a dark chamber devoid of visual or aural stimuli (apart from the exhalations of an air duct). The experience is similar to falling asleep, as physical reality recedes from consciousness and the viewer enters a meditative state. After 10 to 15 minutes, the viewer's pupils are fully dilated, at which point the viewer is called back to the material world by the presence of a dim light on the opposite side of the chamber, so faint that it can only be perceived in the viewer's peripheral vision.



Installation view of *James Turrell: Into the Light* in Building 6 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (© James Turrell, photo by Florian Holzherr)

"When I first started out ... I reduced the light levels of many of the pieces, because when light is reduced, then your pupil opens," said Turrell last month at a gala in Boston, where he was presented with the Medal Award by the

School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts. "And, when the pupil is opened, touch comes out of the eyes, and you really can feel light ... Some people have said, 'For a person who claims to be a light artist, you use precious little of it.



Installation view of *James Turrell: Into the Light* in Building 6 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (© James Turrell, photo by Florian Holzherr)

With an antediluvian beard and folksy manner of speaking, Turrell plays the part of an artist-frontiersman, dedicating much of his time to “Roden Crater,” a dormant volcano outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, that he is converting into a naked-eye observatory. As with Michael Heizer’s “City,” a metropolis of Land Art north of Las Vegas, Turrell’s modified cinder cone is a feat of engineering tantamount to Mount Rushmore or the Hoover Dam. (To date, Turrell has excavated 1.3 million cubic yards of earth.) The magnitude of the project, coupled with the primeval landscape of the Painted Desert, has made “Roden Crater” a desirable destination for wayfaring aesthetes such as the critic Kay Larson, who wrote in 2004 for *ARTNews*, “The night I spent in Turrell’s crater changed me ... And I was altered — emptied out and shaken open. I had come out the other side, wordless.”

Indeed, many visitors to the exhibition at MASS MoCA seemed shaken open, or, at the very least, disoriented. Turrell has suggested that this disruption to the normal functioning of the human body — the experience of traveling to, entering and being immersed in his light installations — is one of the primary concerns of his work.

“I was very interested in... the walking meditation and how something develops [as] you go through it... how things then change and transmogrify,” Turrell said at the gala last month. “I like the journey of walking towards something.”

— Christopher Snow Hopkins