JAMES TURRELL AT 70: IDEAS FOR OUR TIME

EVERYONE LOVES JAMES TURRELL, HE LOVES THEM BACK.

BY LISA SIMMY, ASLA

The artist James Turrell turned 70 on May 6, and a multyear, global celebration of his 50-year-long career is underway. Turrell’s mysterious and compelling art investigates the intersections of light, space, and human perception. His prodigious body of work includes light projections installed in galleries, museums, and private collections; site-specific works called skylights; isolation spaces known as “perceptual cells”; and his lifelong project, a naked-eye observatory in the Arizona desert called Raksawat.
Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943. He became a licensed pilot at the age of 16. His youthful inclinations were nurtured at Pomona College, where he studied art, astronomy, mathematics, and art history, and graduated with a degree in perceptual psychology. Turrell went on to obtain a master's degree in art from the Claremont Colleges. By the age of 24, he had identified his abode as both the subject and the material of his art.

Turrell is a meticulous craftsman whose work uses cutting-edge technology to connect viewers to shared experiences and ancient truths. Although he is often grouped with other "light and space" artists such as Robert Irwin, Turrell's art goes beyond the simple perception to a deep sense of time and concreteness with the earth and the sky.

Three Turrell exhibitions rolled out this spring— at the Guggenheim in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). For the Guggenheim, Turrell created a site-specific installation in Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda. At the MFA in Houston, the largest collection of Turrell's works, there are seven light installations; and viewers are encouraged to visit Twilight Epiphany at Rice University, using a pre-event registration for a special, corded tour of the Live Oak Friends Meeting House, which serves the Quaker community. The show at LACMA is the most comprehensive, occupying the second floor of the Broad Pavilion and culminating in a separate suite of galleries on the adjacent Remick Pavilion, where Turrell's most current works and the studio for Rasol Cranor are showcased.

The show at LACMA is a huge hit: Tickets sold out hard to come by; and Turrell's perceptual cell, Light Rigi, which can be experienced by only one person at a time, is sold out. The show will be open until April 2014. After that it will travel to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

I have followed Turrell's work since my first design instructor, Cherie Krasnow, introduced me to it in the mid-90s. Cherie had spent the summers driving across the Southwest and, in an effort to explain that landscape architecture could go far beyond the three B's—bollards, benches, and Bradford pears—wanted to share her experience of land art. She told us about the Sonoita Jiggy and the Lightning Field, and about James Turrell, who was building an enormous project in the desert that I then thought was called Road and Crater.

Since that time, I've seen several Turrell exhibitions and had the opportunity to visit several of his skyspaces. But the show at LACMA affords an unprecedented opportunity to study the evolution of Turrell's work over a 50-year span.

The larger part of the exhibition, inside the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, includes 10 rooms. There's a fairly conventional art experience at the beginning—a roomful of exquisite drawings and prints Turrell created to document his first explorations into using natural light. The show could be as a metaphorical visit to the West. This was the building in Santa Monica where Turrell began to experiment with light and time, blacking out windows and cutting holes in the building and then opening them for defined intervals to create specific effects.

Then the exhibition changes. Each of the next four rooms contains a work in which the experience becomes a one-on-one encounter with Turrell's mysterious objects and space. The first work is Atron (White) from 1968, a suspended and apparently three-dimensional polyhedron made of light.

Turrell's work is displayed chronologically and becomes increasingly immersive. You literally walk into Rauzer Pink White, where a warm, embracing light emanates from a floating rectangle.

In the middle of this set of encounters, there's a room devoted to the skyspaces. It is an astound- ing to discover that Turrell has created more than 70 of these across five continents. This room also contains cases filled with techni- cal drawings of the spaces and descriptions written by some of Turrell's early patrons. A particularly moving document is Count Giuseppe Panza's recollection of a visit with Turrell, eating organic food, drinking tea, and then spending the evening experiencing light and space. The count went on to commission Turrell's first skyspace at his villa in Italy.

After this room, the exhibit continues with three other installations. Yatukau is a hypnotic window-sliced-shaped piece that subtly changes colors and focus. The viewer flies with Turrell through subtly changing clouds to some unknown destination.

Experiencing this exhibition reminded me of going to a museum than of visiting a cathedra- dal or a cave. I was not so much looking at ab- stacts as being engaged in a collective, shared experience. The most pleasing aspects of the show is witnessing others' experience. Whether walking on benches in the pink light of Rauzer Pink White, puzzling over the mystery of the light-filled prisms in Anah It (Nud), or being fully immersed in Turrell's new Ganado field (visual field), Breathing Light, everyone is having a great time. Part of this is the sheer beauty of the work. It is gorgeous, it feels good, and what it's celebrating is not esoteric, but shared: the perceptual abilities we have as humans, the light, and the sky. The art puts the viewer right at the center of the experience. Turrell honors our presence by putting it at the center of his work. As he repeatedly says, because "we really want us to get it, "We create the reality in which we live." Turrell's art literally doesn't exist without us.

In 1974, Turrell flew in his single-engine plane over the Sonoran Desert, looking for a suitable site for his observatory. He found Roden Crater, a 600-foot-high, two-mile-wide extinct volcano, and purchased it with help from the Dia Art Foundation. Turrell has been working on the design and construction of a naked-eye observatory at the crater ever since.

Turrell's ongoing work at Roden Crater is highlighted in the new LACMA exhibit. In one room, a vast model of the crater is juxtaposed with photographs of the site. The room also contains some of Turrell's surveying equipment and a giant stereoscopic view of the crater. A second room features a video of Tur- rel as he describes the work, as well as models of several of the spaces. Turrell compares Roden Crater to the Buddha's stupas in Bumohodar and the ruins of Machu Picchu. As he says, without a trace of false modesty, "I like a powerful site."

Roden Crater is a work of astounding ambition. When complete, it will contain 20 chambers with sunlight entering arches and progressing rooms. Its comple- tity is a far shot with the most complicated landscape projects of any age. The working drawings, which I could study endlessly, in- dicate that Turrell has collaborated with archi- tects at Skidmore, Owings & Merill and Paula Buitantane, a civil engineer, as well as two astronomers. The first phase of construction is now in progress. The second, and most ambitious, part is for phases two and three are cut in situ. Turrell has accounted for the shifting of the planet in his calculations for the design. In 2,000 years, the project will no longer be precisely oriented to the astronomical events it seeks to capture.

What, one might ask, does this have to do with landscape architecture? Who but Turrell can arrange to purchase a volcano? Or spend 40 years perfecting a design? Isn't Turrell's work located in tightly controlled environments, and immune from the regulations that constrain our world?

I remember Laurie Olin's joking that the landscape held most like to make would be a big box that had all kinds of crazy weather inside. Landscape architects have on occasion ventured into this territory. For example, To- per Dolan created a fog room at the San Jose State Museum. I didn't get to see it, but the photos look amazing.

But beyond the gallery or museum environ- ment, the extraordinary resonance of Tur- rel's work has something to do with his con- sistent deployment of some strategies that do translate to our discipline. First, there is the framing of experience. Whether within the museum walls or within one of the sky- spaces. Turrell focuses attention. Here, I am reminded of Luis Barragán's roof terrace at the Casa Barragán in Mexico City, where the surrounding city is completely shut out by walls and the focus is on the sky, and Martha Schwartz's walled garden in El Paso, Texas. A similar experience of the environment, each with a singular focus. Then there is the stripping away of anything that is not abso- lutely essential to the experience. Again, one thinks of Barragán's work—with his chapel and the remarkable pool room at the Casa Gladiol in Mexico City, where colored planes of ma- sonry interact with the pool to form an endless and complex pattern. And of moving works by Palmera Pinzer, ASLA, and Andrea Cochran, FASLA, who have created stunning landscapes that focus one's attention on the incredible beauty of the Northern California landscape.

Finally, there is what Turrell alludes to the viewer: Take your time.

Two of these strategies, focus and duration, are deployed in one of my favorite landscapes of the past decade. The Clark Boardwalk, located about two hours east of Memphis, Tennessee, is a work of remarkable simplicity that asks us to slow down. The boardwalk leads us to walk into the forest above the ground but under the canopy of a cypress forest.

The boardwalk stretches 1,600 feet into the for- est. Along the way, there are places to sit, and at one point, a larger space lined with benches. The forest is part of a seasonally flooded plain, and so the walk is supported structurally by tradi- tional anchor systems such as turns or a metal-and-cord system—which allowed the walk to be created with minimal impact to the cypress roots.

The landscape architect of the boardwalk, Ritchie Smith Associates, keep the design so simple that it literally disappears, and your focus is on the majestic environment of the cypress forest. It reminds me of a statement Turrell made: "Remember, technology does not make good work. You can still write a poem on a brown paper bag, and haiku is just as profound as the pyramids."

Count Panza, one of Turrell's first patrons, could have been describing the Clark. Board- walk when he spoke of his garden in Italy as a "great, green space suspended between heaven and earth." It takes about 30 minutes to stroll to the end of the boardwalk. In the center, you experience the filtered light, the straight trunks of the trees, the small sounds of wind and birds. It's simple. It takes time. It's magic.  

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