

Wagley, Catherine. "How James Turrell's Skyspaces Became a Hot Item for L.A. Art Collectors." LA Weekly. 23 May 2013. Web.

## LA WEEKLY



Just before sunset in late April, architect Duncan Nicholson brought a group of guests down the steep hill behind the brashly spectacular, John Lautner–designed Sheats-Goldstein house, now owned by Jim Goldstein. They were going to a concrete room built into the hillside, a skyspace called *Above Horizon*, by artist James Turrell. Turrell is known for spaces like this, with openings in the ceilings or walls and edges so thin it looks like there's no separation between them and the sky. Carefully calibrated light shows play while you look up or out — *Above Horizon* has openings in the ceiling and wall, both programmed to open smoothly as you watch. The sky's color and density appear to shift, sometimes quickly, sometimes so slowly you can't tell when the change occurred.

James Turrell's 2013 skyspace *Raising Kayne*, in Santa Monica

Nicholson, formerly Lautner's assistant and the architect who worked with Turrell on this space and two others in L.A., started the light show as guests found seats on the bench and off-white mattress built into the floor. But moments in he realized that he had started a show that commences slowly, not the one he had intended with changes quick enough to draw in even those with short attention spans — better to ease into the Turrell experience.

Probably because Turrell's skyspaces are immaculately crafted and have titles that could be from John Ashberry poems — *Above Horizons*, *Third Breath*, *Knight Rise* — it's easy to take him too seriously and miss the humor in what he's doing: making it gratifying to stare at the sky for drawn-out periods of time (the typical Turrell skyspace show is 45 minutes).

Right now, 70-year-old Turrell is having a moment. The artist, who studied at Pomona and began his career working with light projections in L.A., moved to Flagstaff, Ariz., in the 1970s to work on Roden Crater, the natural-light observatory he's been building for

decades out of an extinct volcano. He won a MacArthur "genius" grant in 1984, but it wasn't until the late '90s that he could support his work (the crater is expensive) without side projects — in large part due to the growing demand for skyspaces.

By June, when his retrospectives are open at LACMA, New York's Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, there will be seven privately owned skyspaces in Greater L.A. "They're popping up like mushrooms," says Nicholson, who cites L.A.'s weather and its historic openness to modern architecture as reasons.

It's also hard not to relate the popularity of Turrell's high-tech, pay-attention portals to current buzz about cultural distractedness, like the concern over swelling numbers of ADHD diagnoses and researchers' suggestion that our constant multitasking inhibits clear thinking.

At a panel at London's Frieze art fair last year, Joshua Cohen, author of the upcoming *Attention: A (Short) History*, wondered if the question "Are we more distracted now?" might be passé. Maybe the goal-oriented nature of most attention is the more pertinent issue. "How do you attend to something that has no utility?" he asked.

Seducing people into paying attention just for the sake of it has been Turrell's project for decades.

Turrell constructed his first L.A. skyspace in 1986 in the parking lot of MOCA's Geffen Temporary Contemporary. Cliff and Mandy Einstein — he an advertising creative director, she a former nationally ranked tennis player and instructor — had just begun collecting art seriously and came to see it. It was 20 feet on all sides. There were no LED or colored lights, just white tungsten lamps carefully placed behind wood benches. This meant the sky, seen through a square opening in the roof, was mostly just blue — but richly shifting blue.

Part of the effect of the white frame and lighting is that the color swallows up interrupting details like clouds, small birds or stars. "It's the densest thing you've ever seen," Cliff Einstein says of the blue sky, which feels like it's all right there, piled onto the opening. The couple commissioned Turrell to rebuild *Second Meeting* (his previous skyspace, built at PS1 on Long Island, is called *Meeting*) in their Brentwood backyard, clearing away trees and persuading the city to take down a defunct power line that would interrupt the view.

"You don't really have to know anything about it to be affected," Mandy Einstein says of the experience of *Second Meeting*, where, 27 years later, the couple still frequently spends evenings.

Goldstein visited *Second Meeting* before deciding to commission his own space, finally finished in 2004, and Nicholson brought workers on the Goldstein space to the Einsteins', too. "It's very difficult to explain," he says.

Collectors Dallas Price-Van Breda and Jarl Mohn, both of whom worked with Nicholson at Turrell's recommendation, also visited the Einsteins in the early 2000s when planning for their own skyspaces, though Turrell's designs for them are quirkier, riskier.

Price-Van Breda's space, finished in 2006, is up a stairway where a rose bed used to be. It's elliptical, with an elliptical door and an elliptical oculus that's cut into the bottom portion of the curved, sloping roof. Venetian plaster makes the walls smooth, while an irregularly curved bench made of 2,000 discrete pieces of wood curves comfortably under your neck, back and legs.

Mohn's space, finished in 2005, doubles as a screening room and has a rectangular opening and LED light programs. "It has to be watched as one would a movie or a TV show," he says of being in the space during a light show. "One can't just look at it for 10 seconds and get it at all. ... Part of the joy of sharing the work is to notice that people talk a lot for the first 10 minutes, then quiet a bit with some talking. By the last 15 minutes almost no one speaks. ... And it's done with no sound, no words, no text and no images. Just light."

Its effectiveness is impressive, but it's also intriguing that the effect of the experience was enough to motivate collectors to invest in these site-specific, hard-to-resell projects. Nicholson hypothesizes that Turrell keeps building in L.A. for the same reason Lautner stayed here. "My old boss, he didn't like Los Angeles," he says, remembering that Lautner joked about rolling a boulder down the Hollywood Hills and taking out tasteless buildings. "But he had to be here — out of several million people, there was always someone" willing to build something visionary.

"James [Turrell] said something once about taste being restriction and Los Angeles being the revenge of the tasteless," says Maggie Kayne, who co-runs Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery and represents Turrell with partners Bill Griffin and Jim Corcoran. Her parents, whom she introduced to Turrell, commissioned an open-air skyspace, similar to the public one he built in Claremont in 2007. Theirs was completed in Santa Monica in 2013 (see photo).

When Kayne Griffin Corcoran decided to move from Santa Monica to a building on 12th and La Brea, they commissioned Turrell to design the renovation. Griffin, who represented Turrell before partnering with Kayne in 2011, explains that the artist was interested because he had "yet to find perfect light in a gallery."

There's nothing epic about the look of the new space, which opens May 25 with an exhibition of drawings, plans and tools related to Roden Crater. It has glass-paned front doors and skylights in its main gallery, though at night LED lights installed in the skylights work in tandem with track lighting to make it look like it's still daylight.

Its conference room will be a skyspace with white walls and doors with minimal or no fixtures on them so that they can be closed to make a perfectly white cube. It will have a colored light program that happens, when operated, at sunset.

Berkut, the composite aircraft company that made the retractable roof for Goldstein's space, is finishing a retractable roof for the gallery's skyspace, too. Made of fiberglass, it weighs less than 500 pounds and has a curved, egglike underside. It can be operated digitally and will be synched with the security system, in case anyone gets ideas about "the big hole in the ceiling," as Bill von Helholt, Berkut's CEO, puts it.

"We look at this space as a kind of vessel for collaboration," Griffin says. The gallery's roster has an unusual array of artists, and they have invited guest curators and done shows with emerging European artists, as well as L.A. icons.

"It's a real open architecture," Kayne adds.

"Like tech and software companies," Griffin continues, explaining that he sees Turrell's work as a kind of virtual reality, one that makes people feel more present and aware. In the case of their gallery, the job of Turrell's work will be mostly to compel people to spend time with art other than his, which seems almost more earnestly ambitious than compelling people to watch the sky through a specific frame.

**JAMES TURRELL: A RETROSPECTIVE** | Los Angeles County Museum of Art | 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Miracle Mile | May 26-April 6 | [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

**SOONER THAN LATER, RODEN CRATER** | Kayne Griffin Corcoran | 1201 S. La Brea Ave., Mid-Wilshire | May 25-July 20 | [kaynegriffincorcoran.com](http://kaynegriffincorcoran.com)