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JAMES TURRELL MAKES LIGHT PHYSICAL

The artist visits MASS MOCA to install pieces in a new wing—and recalls mishaps people have had with his work.

The artist James Turrell has never been in a hurry. Now seventy-four, with white hair, a white mustache, and a white Mosaic beard, he has spent the past forty years rearranging a defunct volcano in the Arizona desert. Called Roden Crater, the project is still at least five years from completion. Construction, so far, has involved moving more than a million cubic yards of earth. "I'm much more the tortoise than the hare," Turrell said the other day.

Turrell was visiting the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in North Adams, which was about to open a new wing featuring nine of his works. These were nothing on the scale of Roden Crater, but still, as art works go they were large and unusually complicated. Turrell was fine-tuning one, an apartment-size piece titled "Perfectly Clear." In front of him, a set of stairs led up to a rectangular opening cut into a wall. Beyond the opening was an empty chamber. Lights installed in the walls of the chamber were making it glow different shades—first fuschia, then baby blue, then electric yellow. Everything outside the chamber also kept changing color, including Turrell.

One of Turrell's associates, Ryan Pike, was tapping on a laptop that controlled the lights. At times, the chamber seemed to vanish, and it looked as if the opening had become a wall of radiant color. At other points, the chamber reappeared, and its back wall became visible. At still other points, the lights strobed and a sort of psychedelic plaid pattern appeared across the opening.

"We're not getting much printout with this one," Turrell told Pike, who tapped away more vigorously.

"Generally, we don't see light this way, because we see light illuminating things," Turrell said. "But my interest is in the thingness, the physicality, of light itself." Other works of his on display include an illuminated diamond that, depending on one's perspective, looks like a cutout or a pyramid, and a ten-and-a-half-foot-wide lozenge of light that seems to pulsate as its colors shift.

Late in the afternoon, Mass MoCA's director, Joe Thompson, wandered by. Thompson, who is fifty-eight, is almost as much of a tortoise as Turrell. He'd first started talking to the artist about exhibiting his works back in 1987, at which point the museum wasn't yet a museum. (Mass MoCA occupies a sprawling brick complex that was used first to print textiles and then, later, to make electronics.)

"He was describing how this was going to be," Turrell said. "And I thought, You know, that would be terrific, but it's going to be an unbelievable amount of work." Thompson laughed ruefully.

The conversation turned to artistic mishaps. In 1980, a woman mistook a wall of light in a Turrell work that was on display at the Whitney Museum for an actual, physical wall. Trying to lean against it, she fell and sprained her wrist. She sued for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. During the trial, Turrell related, he'd said that he considered himself the aggrieved party, as obviously the woman had been "facing the art ass first," (The case was eventually settled out of court.)

Thompson countered with a story about a Mass MoCA visitor who sat down on a Robert Rauschenberg work that looked solid but was in fact a trough of water. The trough was surrounded by neon lights, which shattered as the visitor tumbled in. "She's lucky she didn't get electrocuted," he said.

Turrell came back with a tale about a woman who plunged into one of his works at a Venice Biennale. "I have had some incidents," he observed.

"Perfectly Clear" presents its own hazards, and so Thompson had had a pair of railings installed on the stairs leading up to the white chamber. Turrell hated them. When, on an earlier site visit, the artist saw the arrangement for the first time, Thompson recalled, "I could feel him trying to come to grips with these damn handrails. It was not going well. He looked at me and said, 'If this were thirty years ago, this would be a battle to the end.'"

Turrell said that still thought the railings were awful but he was no longer interested in fighting. "Oh, I'm just a marshmallow," he said.

— Elizabeth Kolbert