

# SEEING THE LIGHT

THE ARTWORKS  
OF JAMES TURRELL

BY AMY ABRAMS



James Turrell in front of Roden Crater Project at sunset, October 2001  
Photo © 2013 Museum Associates / LACMA

Surprisingly, many living on Maryland's Eastern Shore haven't heard of James Turrell. The Oxford, Md. resident is—in celebrity terminology—an art star. The *London Times* has named him “the greatest artist of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Three major museums are collaborating to feature a Turrell retrospective opening this spring and his work is showcased in top galleries across the globe. Turrell's Skyspaces, rooms and buildings with an aperture open to the sky, are featured in 50 countries. Last, but absolutely not least, his renowned Roden Crater Project, the transformation of a vast extinct volcano in the Arizona desert into a celestial observatory, is one of the most anticipated works of our time. When complete, Roden Crater is likely to be the largest artwork on earth, drawing millions from all over the world with the lure of unique, beautiful and potent perceptual experiences.

Turrell uses light, the most ethereal of materials, as his medium. This is not an easy concept to grasp. First, clear your mind of the usual tools of the artist's trade—paint, canvas and clay—and replace with light. “Light is a thing,” says Turrell. “We don't think it has a ‘thingness,’ since we use it to light other things.” Throughout history, light has been a primary subject of artists including Vermeer, Rembrandt, Constable and Turner (as well as the Impressionists), linking Turrell's work to visual expression throughout art history. “While these artists made works *about* light,” explains Turrell, “my works *are* light.”

You can see an important exhibition of Turrell's artworks at Easton, Md.'s Academy Art Museum from April 20<sup>th</sup> through July 7<sup>th</sup>. Featured works include a new installation in the Lederer Gallery, an incised recess from his Aperture series, with both projecting and receding light. Never-before-seen works from his Hologram series, as well as models, prints and photographs that feature and explain the Roden Crater will also fascinate viewers.



*Afrum (White)*, 1966  
 Cross Corner Projection  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, partial gift of Marc and Andrea Glimcher  
 in honor of the appointment of Michael Govan as Chief Executive Officer and  
 Wallis Annenberg Director and purchased with funds provided by David Bohnett  
 and Tom Gregory through the 2008 Collectors Committee, M.2008.60  
 © James Turrell  
 Photo © 2013 Museum Associates / LACMA

rik Neil, the museum’s director, says, “Turrell’s works impact the viewer on varied levels. First, they are simply beautiful and captivating. Plus, they pose profound questions for the viewer. While Turrell doesn’t talk about the spiritual quality of his works, they ask us to ponder our place in the world and how we perceive the world.”

Born in Los Angeles in 1943, Turrell obtained a Master of Fine Art after studying perceptual psychology and mathematics as an undergrad. In the sixties, he established a prominent place within art history with his pioneering experiments in light projection—dispensing with objects, using pure light as works of art. He also created installations developing the relationship between light and the architectural frame.

After leasing rooms in an old Los Angeles motel to experiment with light as artistic expression early in his career, he was required to vacate, due to new ownership. A pilot since age 16, he used funds awarded from a Guggenheim grant to fuel his small airplane and realize a longstanding dream: Locate a geological formation for his vision of a celestial observatory, bringing his unprecedented work with light into nature. After a seven-month search that took him from Canada to Mexico, often spending nights in a sleeping bag under the plane’s wing, Turrell found northern Arizona’s Roden Crater. With financial support from the Dia Art Foundation, the artist began what would become a decades-long project creating chambers and tunnels for viewers to contemplate the infinite sky and cosmos. Critics have compared this masterwork—entering its final phases—to Stonehenge and the Mexican pyramids.



Rendering of installation for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2012  
 Artificial and natural light  
 © James Turrell  
 Rendering created by Andreas Tjeldflaat

During the first phase of the project, Turrell shaped the enormous Crater Bowl and the Alpha tunnel. A Sun/Moon Chamber, East Portal and the Crater's Eye are joined by the Alpha Tunnel, as well as a connecting tunnel to the Crater Bowl. A lodge on the crater's flank will offer overnight stays for visitors. A space aligned to the North Star is the next area slated for construction. When finished, the grand work will be open to the public. With unrelenting requests from those eager to visit, Turrell has responded, "Your patience is no greater than mine," and created a tongue-in-cheek t-



shirt that says, *Roden Crater: Sooner or later*. Funding for the project, an ongoing pursuit, will determine its completion date. Currently, visits are restricted to those who support his work. That's how the project will get done. Turrell says, "In age of consumerism and materialism, I traffic in blue sky and colored air." While visiting the crater is a breathtaking and life-changing experience, rightly deeming the project a monumental masterpiece and the artist's magnum opus, within the chichi art scene, inaccessibility helps enhance its status as the single hottest ticket around.



*Bridget's Bardo*, 2009  
Ganzfeld  
Installation view at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 2009  
© James Turrell  
Photo © Florian Holzherr



*The Light Inside*, 1999  
Site-specific hybrid Shallow Space  
Neon and ambient light  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Gift of Isabel B. and Wallace S. Wilson, 2000.1  
© James Turrell  
Photo © Florian Holzherr

Those desiring an overview of Turrell's works have the good fortune to attend a three-museum retrospective—a collaboration between Los Angeles County Museum of Art (staging a 30,000-square-foot comprehensive survey), Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (where visitors can experience the acclaimed light tunnel, *The Light Inside*, as well as attend the artist's Skyspaces in Live Oak Friends Meeting House and Rice University, nearby), and New York's Guggenheim Museum (where Turrell has created a site-specific work for the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed iconic rotunda).

Turrell's explorations of light and resultant artworks encourage us to see ourselves seeing. When conscious of our own perceiving—of our own thinking—we step back from a reactive existence and witness ourselves creating our own reality. Suddenly, all of life can be viewed as a shadow show of one's own making. This small act is a profound act, giving us the power to alter our reality. Paradoxically, when recognizing the limits of our perception, we broaden our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe.

#### JAMES TURRELL PERSPECTIVE

April 20 - July 7, 2013

ACADEMY ART MUSEUM  
106 South Street | Easton, MD  
410-822-2787 | [academyartmuseum.org](http://academyartmuseum.org)

Guest Speaker: Los Angeles County Museum  
Director Michael Govan talks about James  
Turrell: April 17 at 7:00pm.  
Contact the museum for tickets.