

Art in America



How We See: James Turrell's Three-Museum Retrospective

by [Amy Abrams](#) 04/15/13

Three major American museums have collaborated to feature exhibitions opening this spring and devoted to Light and Space artist James Turrell. In addition to major shows at New York's Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, a mammoth retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opens May 26, showcasing six decades of Turrell's work, including his pioneering experiments in light projection, in over 33,000 square feet of gallery space.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) James Turrell: Afrum I (White), 1967, projected light, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Panza Collection, Gift 92.4175. © James Turrell. Installation view: "Singular Forms (sometimes repeated)," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, March 5-May 19, 2004. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York ; James Turrell: rendering of installation for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2012. Rendering created by Andreas Tjeldflaat. ;

"Turrell's early work was revolutionary," said LACMA director Michael Govan, in a telephone interview with *A.i.A.* "He burst onto the California scene in the early '60s with no objects, just light. His early innovation was destroying the very idea of an object—creating a very set place in art history by creating works of pure light."

Born in L.A. in 1943, Turrell obtained a masters of fine art at Claremont Graduate School, University of California, Irvine, after studying perceptual psychology and mathematics at Pomona College, Claremont, Calif. His early works with light as artistic expression were staged in rooms of a dilapidated motel. Forced to vacate due to new ownership, Turrell pursued a dream to bring his work into a natural setting, beginning the Roden Crater Project (in 1974), the transformation of an extinct Arizona volcano into a celestial observatory, an ongoing pursuit and one of the most anticipated artworks of our time. When complete, the crater is likely to be the largest artwork on earth. It features prominently in all three shows. Turrell's work also has been the subject of more than 140 solo exhibitions since 1967, and his "Skyspaces" (rooms and buildings with an aperture to the sky) are featured in 50 countries.

While art critics proclaim that Turrell uses light and space to enhance perception, the artist said in an interview with *A.i.A.*, "I like to use light as a material, but my medium is actually perception. I want you to sense yourself sensing—to see yourself seeing." When conscious of our own perceiving, we relinquish a reactive existence and witness ourselves creating our own reality. Paradoxically, when cognizant of the limits of our perception, we broaden our understanding of our place in the world.

The LACMA show—the most comprehensive—features 50 works including recent 2-D holograms; prints, drawings

and installations exploring sensory deprivation; seemingly unmodulated fields of colored light; a new, site-specific installation; early light projections; and a section devoted to Roden Crater.

The exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (June 9-Sept. 22) showcases six *Vertical Vintage* works (1967-2012), which are light-based installations that test the limits of visitors' perceptions, as well as "explore illusion and how light shapes space," explained MFAH curator Alison de Lima Greene, in a telephone interview. The highlight of the show is *The Light Inside* (1999), installed in the museum's underground Wilson Tunnel, a site that acts as both a passage between the museum's two buildings and a destination in itself. Within the tunnel, brilliant light shifts from blue to crimson to magenta.

Also featured are the artist's *Mapping Spaces* portfolio (1987) and related works, illustrating Roden Crater. A large "Glass Series" work, *Tycho* (1967), is also displayed.

The city of Houston is home to two other Turrell artworks: *Twilight Epiphany* (2012) at Rice University, Turrell's 73rd Skyspace (and one of the artist's largest), as well as a Skyspace commissioned for Live Oak Friends Meeting House, a Quaker Meeting House (1995). Turrell is of Quaker faith, and equates light with the divine. "Go inside and greet the light" were his instructions at frequent Quaker meetings during his childhood (his mother and grandmother share his faith), and spiritual associations with light continue to inform his work.

At the Guggenheim, Turrell has "re-imagined and recast the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright-designed rotunda, filling the enormous volume with shifting artificial and natural light," said associate curator Nat Trotman, in a telephone interview. The rotunda, an inverted ziggurat (a pyramidal design of Babylonian origin) echoes Turrell's interest in and exploration of pyramids in several of his Skyspaces and Roden Crater Project. The museum will also feature works by Turrell in the museum's annex level galleries. The show (June 21-Sept. 25) is the artist's first exhibition in a New York museum since 1980-although many are familiar with Turrell's art through exhibitions at New York's Pace Gallery.

Several smaller exhibitions are taking place concurrently with the museum shows.

Pace presents "James Turrell: Roden Crater and Autonomous Structure" (through Apr. 20), featuring bronze and plaster models of spaces within the crater, plus photographs of the project by Turrell, including the first-known aerial photo of Roden Crater, taken from the artist's plane.

"James Turrell Perspectives," near Turrell's summer residence on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, takes place at Academy Art Museum in Easton, Md. (Apr. 20-July 7), and features a new installation, *St. Elmo's Light*, from the artist's "Aperture" series, never-before-seen works from his "Hologram" series, and materials illustrating Roden Crater.

While installations and exhibitions of Turrell's work pepper the globe, Roden Crater Project remains the artist's primary focus. Funding for the project, an ongoing pursuit, will determine its completion date. With unrelenting requests from those eager to visit the work in progress, 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*. Currently, visits are restricted to those who support his work. Turrell said in an interview, "In age of consumerism and materialism, I traffic in blue sky and colored air."