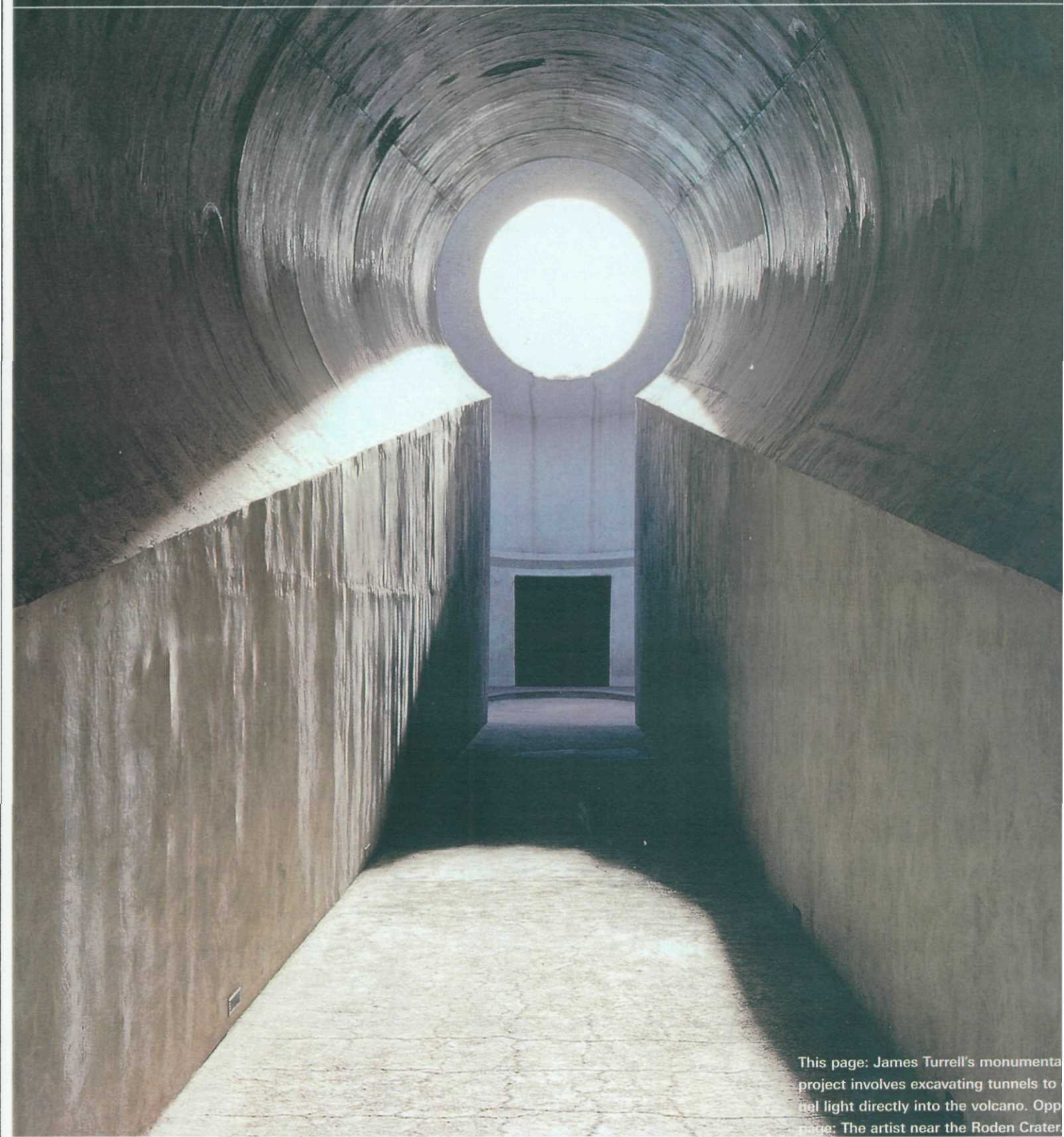


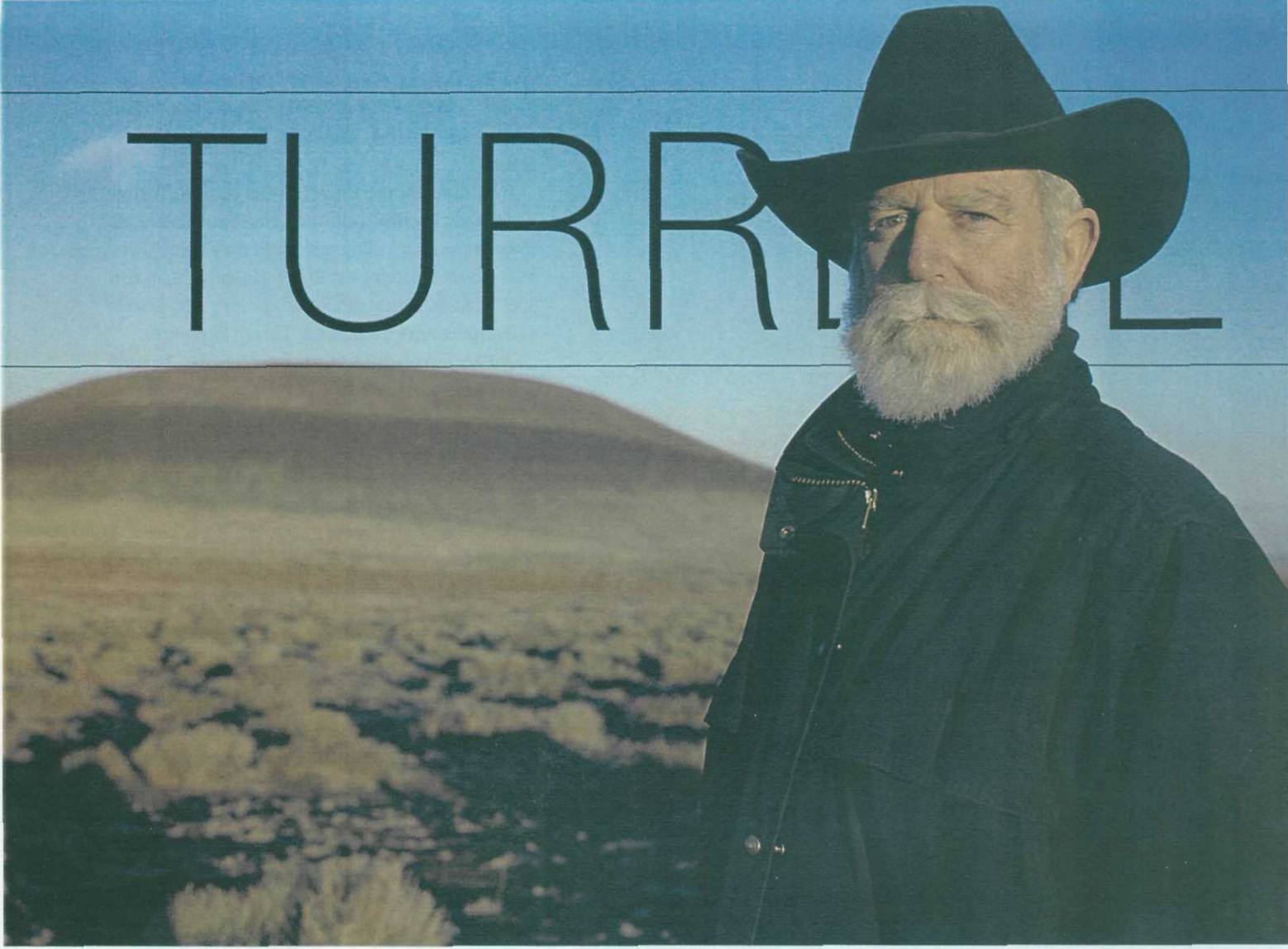
# JAMES



This page: James Turrell's monumental project involves excavating tunnels to channel light directly into the volcano. Opposite page: The artist near the Roden Crater.



# TURRELL



## CRATER COWBOY

International art superstar James Turrell has spent the last three decades transforming a crater in northern Arizona into the world's largest work of art. By Amy Abrams. Photography by Florian Holzherr

THE "BIG-NAME" ARTISTS YOU LEARNED ABOUT IN school made it into the textbook because they rocked their world, shattering political, social or artistic paradigms, often creating their own "isms." Think Impressionism, Expressionism or Dadaism.

Not yet an "ism" dedicated to him, but named "the greatest artist of the 21st Century" by the *London Times*, artist James Turrell has chosen Arizona's high desert as the home for his extraordinary artistic vision.

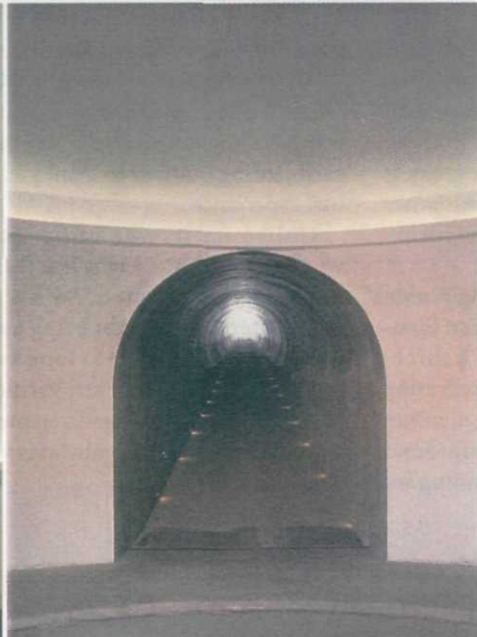
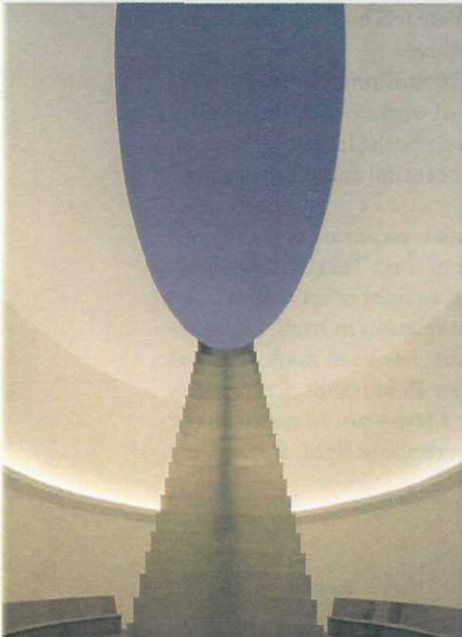
For the last 30 years Turrell has been transforming Roden Crater, a long-extinct volcano east of Flagstaff on the San Francisco volcanic plateau, into a celestial observatory. A three-phase project, Turrell has completed phase one by excavating tunnels and spaces that channel light from the sky, sun, moon and stars directly into the volcano. To date, nine underground chambers and the crater's bowl are in place. With funding se-

cured for phase two, a completion date will be set depending on when funding is secured for phase three.

At an estimated total cost of \$20 million dollars, Turrell's crater is one of the most anticipated works of our time. When complete, the Roden Crater will likely be the largest artwork on earth, luring millions to a unique, beautiful and potent perceptual experience.

Unlike artists who utilize paint, paper or clay, Turrell works with light. "Light is a thing," says Turrell. "We don't think it has a 'thingness.' We use it to light other things. I am really interested in light being a revelation in itself. Light has been the subject of art as long as art has been made. Look at the history of Western art: Vermeer, Rembrandt, Carravagio, Constable and Turner—to name a few—not to mention the Impressionists. Their paintings were about light. Instead, my medium is light."





Using light as a tool, Turrell explores the nature of individual perception. “My art is about your seeing,” he explains. “It’s about forming your own reality.”

In addition to the Roden Crater project, Turrell has staged highly acclaimed museum shows all over the world. Valley residents may recall Turrell’s 2001 visionary exhibit, *Infinite Light*, at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as the museum’s permanent Turrell Skyspace.

An accomplished pilot since age 16, Turrell used money awarded from a 1974 Guggenheim Fellowship grant (other prestigious awards include two National Endowment for the Arts grants and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship) to fuel his small airplane. His goal: locate an isolated geological formation to realize his grand vision of a celestial observatory to bring his work with light into nature.

After a seven-month search of the Rockies from Canada to Mexico, often spending nights in his sleeping bag under the plane’s wing, Turrell found his canvas in northern Arizona’s Roden Crater. With financial support from the Dia Art Foundation for the Arts, he began what would become a decades-long project. “That it’s taken me 30 years is almost embarrassing, like someone who never finishes their thesis,” says Turrell laughing. “I have a daughter who was born when I started this; now she’s a doctor in Flagstaff.”

Besides his “whatever it takes” mentality, Turrell has a unique combination of traits and experiences that paved his path to Roden Crater. Combining college studies in perceptual psychology and mathematics with graduate studies in the arts, Turrell built a base of knowledge to support his artistic vision. Following his studies, Turrell moved to Los Angeles where he leased rooms in an old hotel to experiment with light as artistic expression. After new ownership forced the closure of his studios, Turrell climbed into his airplane to find a natural setting for his work.

Turrell’s mother and grandmother were both Quakers who equated light with the divine, so it was inevitable for him to follow their teachings. “Go inside and greet the light,” were his instructions at frequent Quaker meetings. Turrell’s father, an aeronautical engineer, nurtured his early passion for aviation as frequent flights revealed the sky’s mystery and spirituality. Soaring so close to the heavens sparked questions in the young pilot. Through his work, Turrell encourages us to ponder our place and purpose and turn inward for answers.