



LAS VEGAS

James Turrell

The Crystals // Permanent installations

LAS VEGAS IS an unexpected addition to the three recent institutional exhibitions—at the Guggenheim in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston—to focus on the white-bearded guru of immersive Light and Space installations. Sin City is host to two Turrell pieces, and as befits a metropolis built on kitsch and glitz, these works are both set at the Crystals mall (though its founders bristle at such a plebeian description).

An untitled commission from 2013 is spread across the monorail platform at the Crystals complex and includes four apertures and an element Turrell refers to as a “long glass” installed above an escalator. The interior windows are the most interesting part of the work, as they find Turrell stretching LED strips around the preexisting, uneven shapes of the building designed by Daniel Liebeskind. The best of the four offers a view of the roof’s angles and incisions; another looks out onto a Wolfgang Puck franchise. And here we get the quandary of Turrell-in-a-mall: What happens to the artist’s

generally introspective, quiet pieces when transplanted into a commercial space dedicated to pushing high-end fashion labels? What happens to a Turrell work when it is within spitting distance of a Starbucks? And for a spectator approaching this installation without any knowledge of the artist or his oeuvre, is the piece perceived any differently from a sensorial installation in a shop? Does it become more than dramatic backdrop? Context, as per usual, is king. This is not to begrudge the artist’s choosing to install in such a location; it is merely interesting to ponder how his effects are affected by such decisions.

Turrell’s second work at the Crystals, *Akhob*, 2013—translated as “pure water”—is placed far from the hustle of the main pedestrian thoroughfares. Anyone can see it by making an appointment in advance. It’s reached via an elevator in the Louis Vuitton store that deposits the viewer in a darkened foyer, where he or she is attended by young people in white suits—local art students—who take his or her shoes in exchange for protective booties that are decidedly elfin. The work itself

is one of Turrell’s “Ganzfelds,” a double-chambered structure that one walks inside, with ambient lighting running on timed cycles. What appears to be a solid white wall at the back is actually a void of undetermined depth (a laser alarm prevents anyone from accidentally tumbling off a precipice while trying to touch a surface that is not actually there). If the piece in the mall is all about how the artist’s sensory techniques interact with the existing, built environment, the one inside Louis Vuitton—despite its tangential attachment to the sponsoring luxury company—is about nothingness and solitude. Aesthetically, it’s the polar opposite of Vuitton’s own shout-it-loud self-branding.

Far more than that of any other artist working today, Turrell’s sense of siting—whether in the Guggenheim’s rotunda, a crater in Arizona, or the center of a Vegas shopping complex—has a profound and slippery effect on his own meaning. As changeable as light itself, he’s defined by where and how we see him.

—Scott Indrisek