

Vogue: 'Light Year: Three Retrospectives Celebrate Artist James Turrell', by Ted Loos, May 16th, 2013

ART

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by Ted Loos



James Turrell, *Bridget's Bardo*, 2009

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To say that **James Turrell** is having a big retrospective is an understatement. This summer, three of the nation's top museums are collaborating to give the revered, 70-year-old master of monumental installation art, a cross-country, career-capping moment. The three separate shows kick off May 26 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and continue at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (June 9) and the Guggenheim Museum in New York (June 21).

But as far as Turrell is concerned, the tribute is barely vast enough, given the size of each individual work—huge gallery spaces that he suffuses with light and color. “They hog a lot of space, and I’ve been doing this for 40 years,” says the good-natured artist, who could have easily filled a few more museums without breaking a sweat.

Indeed, his mastery of scale is so assured that he’s using a whole extinct volcano as a canvas of sorts: His most famous work is *Roden Crater Project*, a still-in-progress transformation of a two-mile-wide Arizona volcanic cone into a series of observatories, intended to portray the power and beauty of the sky in different ways.

Turrell’s signature pieces are called “Skyspaces”—think of them as skylights with a transcendent dimension—and the museum shows will be filled with them. At the Guggenheim, he’s creating a work called *Aten Reign* (2013) for the Frank Lloyd Wright rotunda. “My interest has always been in light,” says Turrell. “That’s been the subject of art for millennia. But I wasn’t interested in *depicting* light. I was interested in light itself.”

In some ways, Turrell is a kind of architect, creating spaces to apprehend light in a very specific way—he builds the frame, and the light is the picture. “The work is quite simple in its final results, but you can tease so much out of it,” says **Michael Govan**, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a longtime collaborator of Turrell’s. “He takes what seems like nothing and makes it physical and material.”

It’s telling that Turrell wasn’t an art major. He studied perceptual psychology. “Color comes from context of our vision, rather than something we’re just receiving,” he says. “It’s not that the world in front of you is totally created by you—but it largely is.”

The three exhibitions come at a moment when the art world is emerging from an era during which making smaller objects seemed to suffice for many creators. Turrell has grander plans. “There was a while there when art lost its ambition,” he says, at once keenly hungry to alter our vision of world, and humble at the same time. “Part of what I do is just call attention to things—framing them, isolating them, and making them stronger for it.”

“James Turrell: A Retrospective” is on view May 26–April 6, 2014 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, lacma.org; “James Turrell: The Light Inside” from June 9–Sep 22, 2013 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, mfah.org; and “James Turrell” from June 21–September 25, 2013 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, guggenheim.org.