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A Tribute for Turning Light Into Art



Andreas Tjeldflaat
A rendering of a new work by James
Turrell for the Guggenheim Museum.

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“LIGHT is this thing we usually use to illuminate other things,” said the artist James Turrell, who first considered the presence of a beam of light cast from a slide projector during art history class at Pomona College in the early 1960s. “I’m interested that light has thingness itself, so it’s not something that reveals something about other things you’re looking at, but it becomes a revelation in itself.”

After graduating in 1965 with a degree in perceptual psychology and concentrated studies in art, math and astronomy, Mr. Turrell created his first light projection — what appears to be a solid cube of light floating in the corner of a darkened room that then dissolves into immateriality as you approach it. The work was included in Mr. Turrell’s solo museum exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in California in 1967, which later that year also showed experimental light works by Robert Irwin and Doug Wheeler, beginning what came to be called the Light and Space Movement in Los Angeles.

“Turrell was the first artist who really stated unequivocally that you can liberate light from its source and make it the artwork,” said Alison de Lima Greene, curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Her museum is joining with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York in coordinated, successive Turrell exhibitions beginning in May, offering an unusual opportunity to experience his immersive light environments that allow viewers to “see ourselves see,” as he puts it.

The artist, who turns 70 in May and has site-specific installations in 25 countries, has more typically worked outside major cities. His most ambitious and continuing project is at Roden Crater in the Arizona desert, which he found in 1974 after seven months of canvassing western America in his miniplane in search of an extinct volcanic crater. There, over the last four decades, he has designed and excavated a multichambered, naked-eye observatory where visitors can perceive astronomical phenomena from the vantage points he has created.

Recognizing the challenge of accommodating his expansive vision within the confines of a single museum, the organizers passed over the standard model of a single traveling retrospective in favor of this collaboration of complementary exhibitions.

The Los Angeles County Museum’s exhibition opens first on May 26 and runs through April 6, 2014; it is the largest of the three, with 40 works spanning the artist’s career.

There he is completing his newest “Ganzfeld” installation (meaning “entire field” in German). Visitors will enter a room and see a large rectangle of color that appears flat like a painting with a stair leading to it. At the top they will realize they can walk through the plane of light into a volume of indeterminate dimensions bathing them in colored light that slowly shifts in hue and intensity.

“I liken it to walking through the looking glass,” said Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles museum, who organized the show with Christine Kim. Simulating the “ganzfeld effect” — a perceptual condition like that experienced by pilots flying through fog or clouds with no spatial orientation — Mr. Turrell’s “Ganzfeld” series of recent years grew out of sensory deprivation chambers he created with Robert Irwin and the NASA scientist Ed Wortz as part of the Los Angeles museum’s 1969 Art and Technology project.

“Turrell is only now realizing some of the experiments of the Art and Technology project because new computer-driven, seven-color LED light systems allow for things they could just speculate doing in the ’60s and ’70s,” said Mr. Govan. “You never see the light bulbs, you never see the computers. They just allow the ability to manipulate the field of light.”

In Houston, the Museum of Fine Arts already has its site-specific piece by Mr. Turrell — the underground tunnel connecting the museum’s original building with its later addition that opened in 2000. “It is in essence a passage and a destination,” said Ms. Greene of the pathway, where the boundaries above and on either side seem to melt into infinite space and color cycling between blue, red and violet. “We achieved something very magical without it being difficult to walk through.” The exhibition there, which opens June 9 and runs through Sept. 22, reflects the museum’s deepening commitment to the artist by showcasing half of the 12 light installations it acquired for the collection in 2010 — a cross-section of works chosen by Mr. Turrell, which he called his “Vertical Vintage.”

Opening June 21 and running through Sept. 25, the Guggenheim exhibition will show four early works from its own collection to supplement a new Turrell commission filling the entire open space of the famous rotunda of the museum, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. In this well, Mr. Turrell will install a huge structure — essentially five nesting lampshades that mimic the rings of the museum’s ramps, each embedded with hundreds of hidden light-emitting diodes beaming full-spectrum light that will mix with the natural illumination from the building’s skylight. Inside the structure at ground level, visitors are meant to experience the sensation of light pouring down and enveloping them in a communal and contemplative atmosphere.

The trick of the piece is to set up a kind of anti-architecture that allows you to feel the light and space. “You normally look across the ramps and don’t think about this volume that is the center of the museum,” said Nat Trotman, who organized the Guggenheim show with Carmen Gimenez. “That is crystallized and solidified. It’s really about a dialogue between Wright and Turrell.”