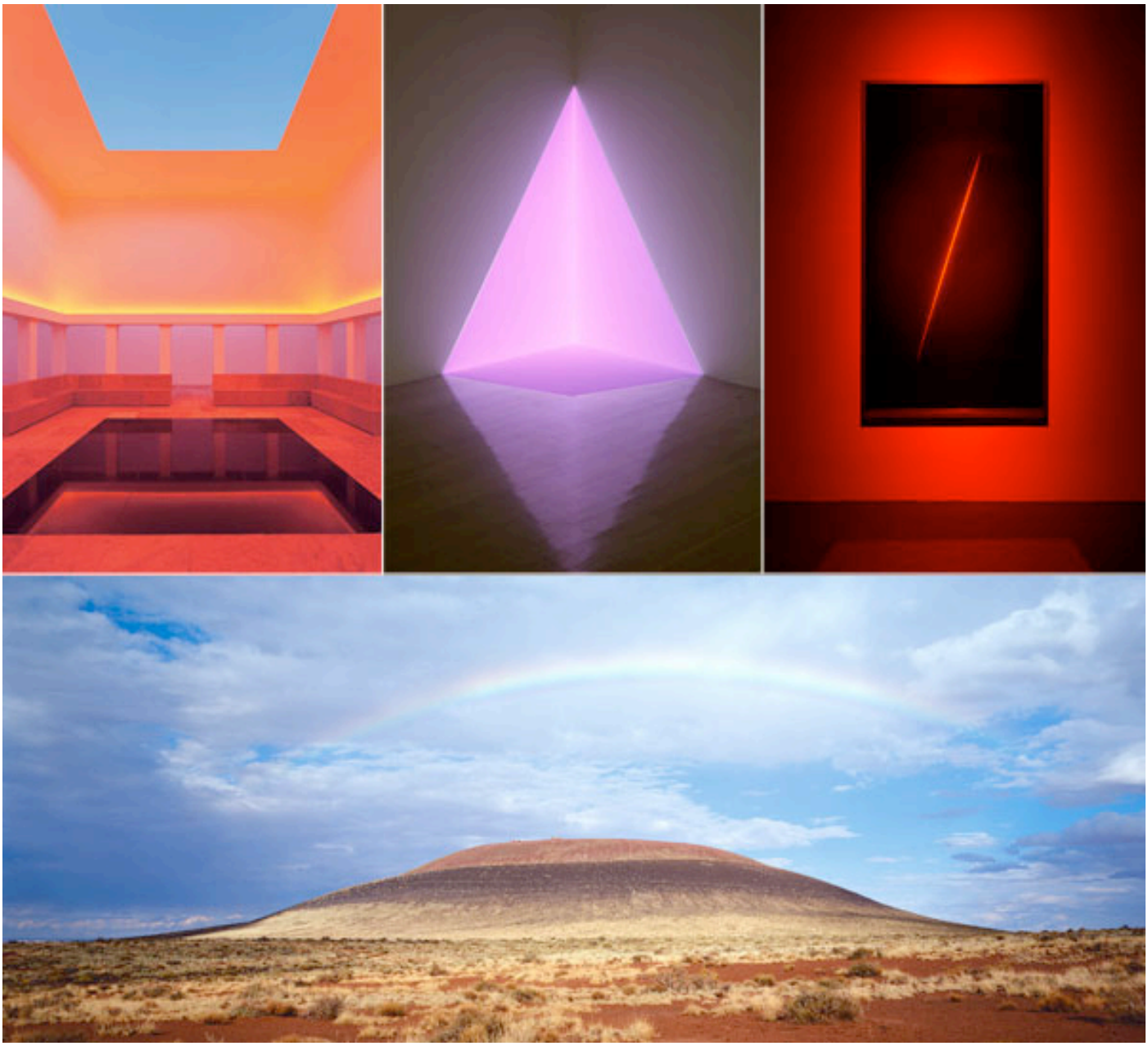
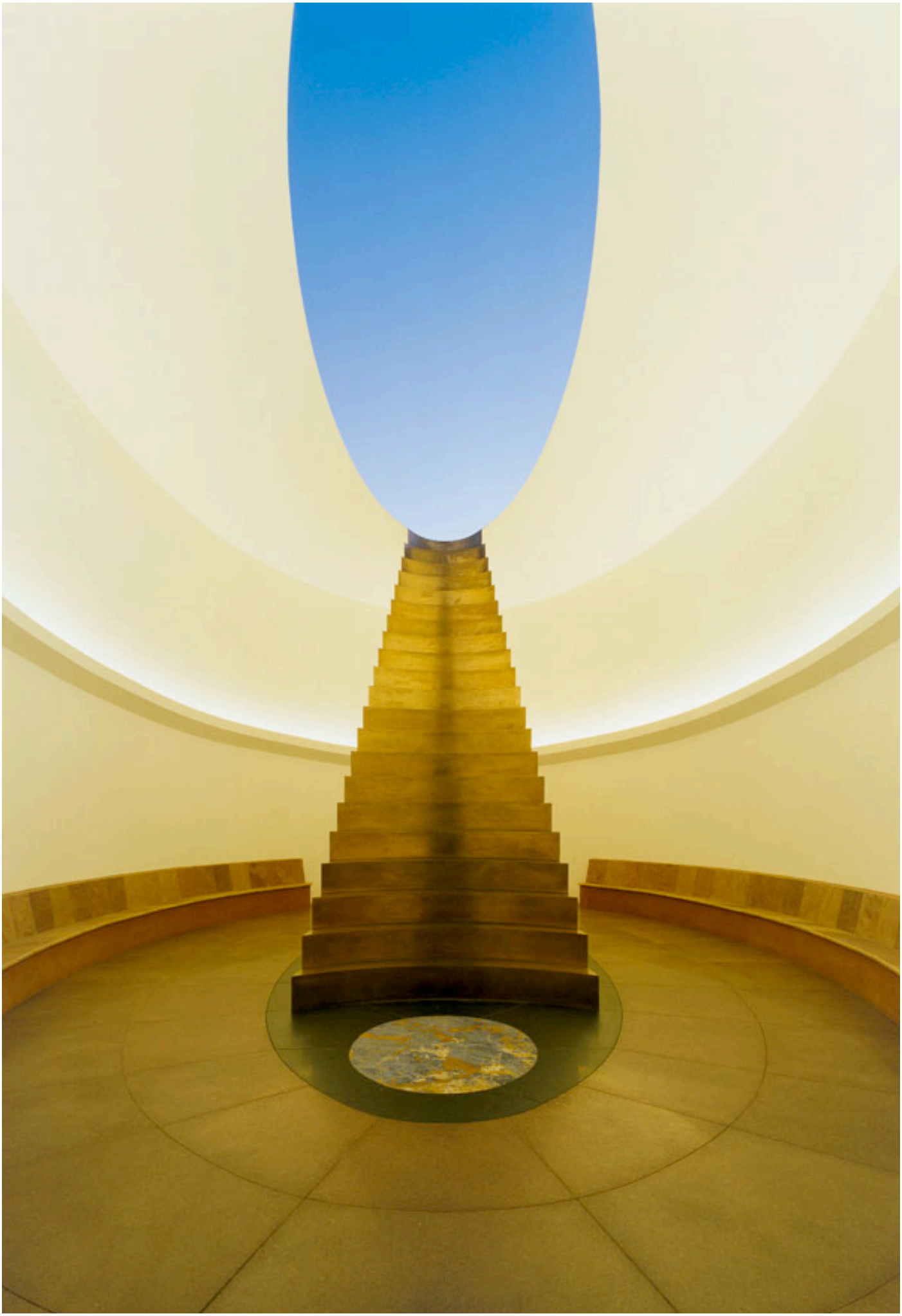
INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS

On the eve of three major museum shows, Pace artist James Turrell prepares for superstardom.
By Julie L. Belcove





Innumerable artists have live-work spaces. James Turrell's just happens to be a 155-square-mile cattle ranch near Arizona's Painted Desert, where the art project that has consumed him for nearly 40 years (and counting) is a volcanic crater three miles wide.

Roden Crater—its name even before it became an artwork—represents a singular achievement in contemporary art, not least for the sheer grit of its visionary. To help defray the cost of turning Roden Crater into a naked-eye observatory, Turrell has done everything from raising livestock to rebuilding vintage aircraft to accepting commissions for his Skyspaces, a badge among collectors. The artist, who first came to the art world's attention in the late 1960s as a leader of the West Coast's avant-garde Light and Space movement, has long been something of a folk hero, and his quest to make art experiential has had a potent impact on younger artists. Now, as he approaches his 70th birthday, three museums are recognizing his influence by mounting major exhibitions on his work: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (opening May 26); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (June 9); and the Guggenheim Museum in New York (June 21). Yet the way Michael Govan, CEO and director of LACMA, sees it, Turrell is still ahead of his time. "I think his biggest relevance is in the future," Govan says, "not even the present."

Despite having left his Maryland home at 3:30 A.M. to drive to New York to prepare for his upcoming show at Pace Gallery, Turrell is in an amiable mood. The scene across from his pied-à-terre on Manhattan's Gramercy Park looks like a Christmas card, with delicate lines of white frosting the wet black branches, which is fitting because Turrell bears a striking resemblance to Santa Claus. He is broad-shouldered, with a long, neat silvery beard and glossy hair to match. He even has a folksy voice and a jolly laugh, evident in his many quips about being a Quaker. "Art is not something Quakers do," he says, explaining his mother's skepticism about the field. "Art is a vanity. Strange thing is, the more I've been in it, the more I realize that's probably the case."

Some artists disdain critics who rely on biography to explain their art. In Turrell's case, however, his personal history is woven through his work as tightly as a tapestry. His strict Quaker upbringing, Southern California roots, captivation with flight, and study of mathematics and perceptual psychology have all fueled his meditative, magical work. In his pieces, geometric shapes appear sculpted from light; precisely cut holes in the roof reveal the sky in a whole new way; computer-programmed LED displays create visual concerts. His aim has been not to make objects—a painting, a sculpture, or a photograph—but rather to challenge viewers to consider how we see. Many of the works seem equal parts basic science and intense mysticism: Turrell wants no less than to capture the way light looks when our eyes are closed, "suffuse and lucid."

"We assume so much of what we think we receive, we receive," he says. "We're part of creating this world in which we live, but we're unaware of how we do that or even that we do that." He notes, for example, that we do not feel our pupils dilating in dimness, making our eyes more sensitive to light, "so small things can become quite important and look amazing." To that end, Turrell designs environments that can throw off viewers' equilibrium. A darkened room may suddenly disclose a ray of pink; light may appear as three-dimensional; the sky may seem to change color. The pieces provide, as he says, "no image, no object, nowhere to focus. It's like a deer looking into the headlights—and then it gets hit by a car. It's this primal quality that light has."

Turrell makes light itself the art. Even his Autonomous Structures—walk-in chambers and small buildings—are, in his view, just "containers" for light. "We usually use light to reveal an image," he says. "I wanted the light to be the revelation. It has to do with what we value. I want people to treasure light."

The way some children are obsessed with fire trucks, Turrell was always entranced by light. There was the metaphorical aspect—Quakers strive to "greet the light" when they pray—but the physical properties of light were just as compelling. His father, who died when Turrell was 10, trained as an aeronautical engineer, and Turrell was 16 when he earned his pilot's license. He is perhaps as obsessed with flying as with art, and today owns a slew of planes—so many that he shrugs off the question.

"Turrell has often said, 'My airplane is my studio,'" says Govan, who Turrell convinced to take up flying and who is now a passionate pilot himself. "The thing about flying is, you experience light purely and in a different way from being on the ground with all kinds of distractions." There's also a disorientation that can come with flying into the clouds or in the pitch dark of night, Govan adds, when there's "no left, no right, no up, no down." That can also describe the experience of viewing some of Turrell's art.

In the Quaker tradition, Turrell registered as a conscientious objector when he came of age. Though he wouldn't serve in combat, he says the U.S. government sent him on a secret mission to fly Buddhist monks out of Chinese-controlled Tibet. The planes were unlisted, he says, and the pilots did not carry passports. "America has this shadow government," he says. "It should stay in the shadows because it can't stand up in the light."

His pacifism would follow him through his university studies. At Pomona College, an interest in math and perceptual psychology quickly segued to art. His roommate was an art major, and exhibitions of Mark Rothko and Roy Lichtenstein made an impact. Turrell remembers being particularly moved by a John Cage concert he attended on campus. "I wasn't sure what it all was," he says of the radical composer. "Science strives for answers, but art is happy with a good question."

When Cooper Union rejected him for grad school, Turrell enrolled at the University of California, Irvine, where he began experimenting with light projections. His education was interrupted in 1966, however, when he was arrested in an FBI sting for advising potential draftees on how to avoid the Vietnam War. Turrell served a brief prison sentence. He doesn't miss being incarcerated—"I wasn't Gandhi"—but he's nostalgic for other aspects of the era, including the interfaith coalition of the antiwar movement: "Radical Catholics poured blood on the [draft files]. Then the Quakers said, 'We'll clog up your jails.' It was wonderful Jewish lawyers who got the Quakers out of jail."

"Everything I had been accused of, I had done—and more—but I didn't believe I should be punished," he recalls. Even 47 years later, he is wary of naming any other actions that might have aided draft evaders, though he adds with a laugh, "[President Carter] pardoned everybody we got out, but he didn't pardon the guys who [helped them]." The experience of prison and what he came to see as his own "insufferable self-righteousness" turned Turrell off for a time from practicing his religion. Still, he couldn't keep spirituality from inhabiting his art.

After Turrell got out of prison, he quickly returned to making art. He rented the run-down Mendota Hotel, in Santa Monica, for a studio. There he created a laboratory for the exploration of light, painting the interior white from top to bottom. "I liked white light on a white wall," he explains. Later he scraped away paint from the windows to allow the light from passing cars to creep through. In 1967, the Pasadena Art Museum gave him his first solo show. The following year, he made one of his first sales—to the curator David Whitney, who came by the Mendota with Jasper Johns. "That was a big affirmation," Turrell says. (Whitney's longtime partner, the architect Philip Johnson, later donated the work to the Whitney Museum of American Art.) Mostly, though, he supported himself as an auto mechanic and pilot, delivering mail to small towns and carrying out aerial burials at sea.

What he yearned for was to move his light experiments out of the studio and into nature, the way land artists like Robert Smithson were doing. After he lost his lease on the Mendota in 1974, Turrell hopped in his plane and began scouring the Western United States for the perfect hunk of rock. He knew he wanted a raised landform—a volcano or a butte—roughly 600 feet high, ideal for observing celestial phenomena. Seven months in, he flew over the Roden Crater.

It took him three years to sweet-talk the owner into selling it. Much of Turrell's purpose since has been about fulfilling his plans for the crater. He became a rancher to secure a loan for the purchase. A few thousand grass-fed Black Angus now roam the property, which is managed by one of his daughters and her husband. (Turrell, who's twice divorced and now married to artist Kyung-Lim Lee, has six children.) During this time, he has had more than 200 solo exhibitions worldwide, and in 1984 he was named a MacArthur Fellow. In the past decade particularly, since he's been represented by the blue-chip Pace Gallery, his pieces, whether with fluorescent, neon, or LED, have become highly coveted by collectors. Michael Ovitz owns two Holograms, which give the illusion of floating three-dimensional shapes. Dasha Zhukova has a Ganzfeld—a field of light that fills a room. And Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis commissioned a Skyspace, the name for Turrell's signature constructions that frame swaths of sky.

The first Skyspace was created in 1975 for the avid collector Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. Turrell sliced a hole in the roof of the count's Italian villa, allowing for quiet contemplation of the heavens. The first snowfall after the piece was finished, Panza rushed to the villa from Milan. "By the time he arrived, there was a snow pattern on the floor, which he loved and was sure was intended—I was awarded genius status," Turrell says with a hearty laugh. "I came from Southern California, not exactly a snow culture."

Turrell plans to make one Skyspace for every time zone around the world—24 in all. So far, he's made 65, from Tasmania to the Yucatán. This July will see the first convention of Skyspace owners, in Sweden. "They want to have name tags," he says wryly.

As with much of Turrell's art, the Quaker influence is strong in the Skyspaces; his Skyspace at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, New York, is even titled Meeting, in reference to a Quaker meetinghouse. Created as places to "greet the light," these works are often designed in the classic four-square style, with benches along each wall, facing the center. Turrell calls them "social works," because viewers are encouraged to sit silently together, as Quakers do in worship.

While some artists gripe about working with collectors, Turrell insists he has found his commissions fulfilling. "Art is sort of a completed pass. You don't just throw it out in the world—someone has to catch it." One of his more satisfying commissions involved the design of a Skyspace for a meetinghouse built in the late '90s in Houston. The philanthropist Dominique de Menil was a benefactor, as was the novelist James Michener, who, Turrell says, wrote his very last check to the project days before dying. But it was the many Jewish contributors who seem to have touched him the most. When he asked one patron why she gave, she responded, "I'm not a Quaker, but I want there to be Quakers." Turrell's latest meetinghouse is set to open in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, this summer.

Raising money for the Roden Crater project has proved to be more challenging, even as acclaim for Turrell's work has risen. Grants from both the Dia Art Foundation and the Lannan Foundation enabled him to finally complete Phase 1, in 2006. A series of tunnels and chambers he built now give the lucky few a new way to gaze skyward. (Admittance is still by invitation only.) The biggest expense was an 854-foot tunnel that ascends to what appears to be a perfect circle of light but reveals itself to be an elongated elliptical aperture. "I insisted on the tunnel being 12 feet in diameter so you didn't feel enclosed in it," he says.

Govan, who has been to the crater more times than he can count, is amazed at how it has become as much about sound as light, and he continually notices new things. "So often it's said of artists that their early work is the best," Govan notes. "Turrell is an artist about whom you can say categorically, his latest work is the best because of the accumulation of trial and error."

Construction on Phase 2 is set to begin in October, with Phase 3 somewhere on the horizon. "The moral of the story is, give money to artists at the beginning," says Turrell. "Otherwise, their projects just get more complex and more expensive." Asked if he had a timeline for completing Roden Crater, he shakes his head and laughs. "I'm still committed to the same deadline."