



## James Turrell's mission to capture the heavens

By **Laura Allsop** for CNN  
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PIRE GALLERY/FLORIAN HOLZHERR

James Turrell, pictured at the Roden Crater.  
Photo by Florian Holzherr

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

James Turrell exhibition opens in Moscow

Artist uses light as sculptural material; results confusing yet beguiling

Labor of love is Roden Crater, a naked-eye observatory in Arizona desert

Funds need to be raised to complete work on crater

**(CNN)** -- In a remote spot in the Arizona badlands, a man with a light aircraft, a Stetson and a dream continues work on his long-time labor of love.

The Roden Crater is conceptual artist James Turrell's magnum opus, an extinct volcano crater near the Painted Desert that houses a naked-eye observatory and light and space installations.

Turrell famously pioneered using light as a sculptural material in the 1960s and his works -- which can be seen in museums around the world -- are notorious for their ability to upend visitors' spatial awareness.

A one-time student of perceptual psychology, Turrell's installations take in holograms projected against walls that fox viewers into thinking they are real; and whole rooms filled with seemingly opaque, colored light that produces a disorientating haze.

"These are zones without horizons," Turrell told CNN of the latter. "It's like entering the world underwater, without gravity -- sometimes you have this problem when you fall in of not even knowing which way is up. The physical sensations are very misleading but also exhilarating."

### I'm interested in the 'thing-ness' of

At the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow, visitors to a newly opened [James Turrell exhibition](#) can experience this sort of disorientation first

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--James Turrell, artist

hand, by entering "Ganzfeld" chambers or submitting to a succession of mind-altering strobe-lights while enclosed in a pod that, Turrell explains, allows them to see "behind their own eyes."

The Ganzfeld effect is a phenomena of visual perception caused by looking at a uniform field of colour. Some say that it can cause hallucinations.

"Light speaks to all of us," said Turrell. "We take light through the skin and turn it into Vitamin D, making us heliotropic. So we have this physical relationship to light, but we also have an emotional and spiritual relationship to it."

He cites passages from the Bible and Buddhist ideas about enlightenment as examples of the strong relationship between light and the spirit. But, he said, "We generally use light to illuminate things and I'm interested in the 'thing-ness' of light, so rather than light being the bearer of revelation, the light itself is that revelation."

Many of Turrell's installations reference ancient places of worship. The [Roden Crater](#) -- which he located while flying a light aircraft over the Painted Desert in the 1970s -- takes its cue architecturally from Mayan temples, with its conical shape and warren of tunnels and chambers beneath.

"It has this strange power," said Turrell about the desert. "I used to think that only people who were crazy were attracted to the desert but once you've lived there you become that way anyway."

The desert is a landscape for prophets but also, he said, "the flotsam and jetsam of life" -- it is the go-to place for epiphanies and spiritual redemption. It is also, he said, the best vantage into the heavens and the crater features "skyspace" installations that collect natural light from the sun, planets and stars through openings in its structure.

Plans are afoot to build a new skyspace that follows the North Star, according to Richard Andrews. He is the curator of the exhibition in Moscow, which is organized in association with the [Pace Gallery](#) in New York, as well as the President of the Skystone Foundation, which looks after Roden Crater.

## The subject of his work is so universal

--Richard Andrews, Curator

"You'll be in the space, looking up through a viewer and you'll see the Little Dipper, which contains the North Star, rotate, and it will give you a powerful sense of the Earth's rotation," he explained.

If funds are forthcoming, this new skyspace could be built in three years, and plans have already been drawn up by the artist, alongside astronomers, engineers and an architect.

Turrell is open about the fact that he makes new work for exhibitions around the world to finance the crater. "But they also warm me up for the pieces at the crater. I'm trying them out before I set them in stone," he said.

Though he was once sued by a woman so disorientated in one of his installations that she fell and broke her wrist, the majority of people that visit Turrell's exhibitions are enthralled by his hypnotic, transcendent works.

"The subject of his work is so universal, it's not dependent on language or cultural background. The kinds of experience that people have in the Ganzfeld spaces are strangely familiar and yet also unfamiliar, which is very beguiling," said Andrews.

Despite much anticipation from fans of Turrell's work, it may a few more years until the Roden Crater is finally completed and open to

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the public.

"I promised I would open it in the year 2000, and I'm sticking with that," Turrell said, with a chuckle.