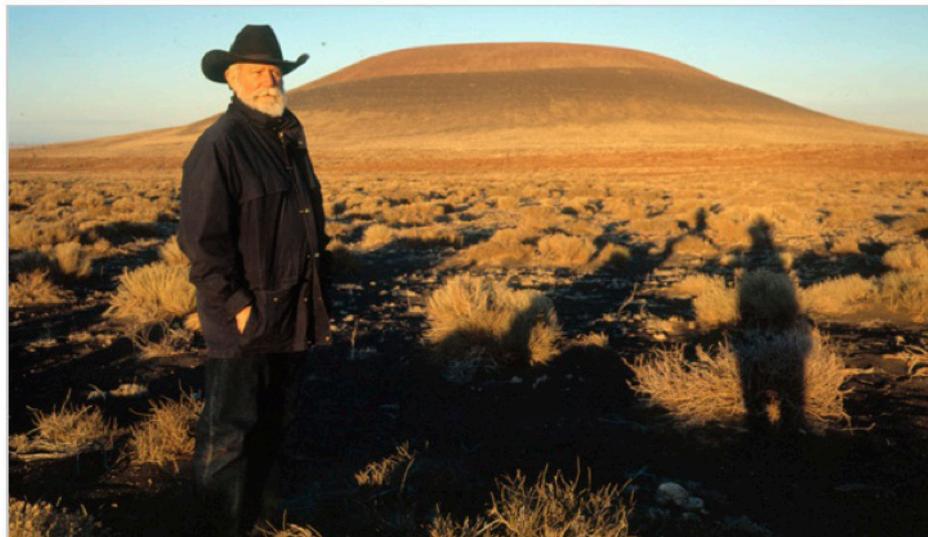


ART

Shh! It's a Secret Kind of Outside Art



Florian Holzherr

The artist James Turrell in 2001 at Rodan Crater, his artwork (or his studio, depending on how you look at it).

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TWO years ago, not long after he turned 45, Ed Sweeney made a list of things to do before he died. Take his wife to Machu Picchu. Take his young son to see the space shuttle launch. And, what is proving to be most challenging, visit the Rodan Crater, an extinct volcano northeast of Flagstaff, Ariz., that James Turrell has been transforming into a work of perceptual and celestial art since the late 1970s.



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A 2002 view of the Crater's Eye, at the center of the bowl.

A corporate pilot who lives near Los Angeles, Mr. Sweeney often flies over the volcano field near Flagstaff en route to Florida or Texas. He believes he has seen the Rodan Crater from the air. He has followed Mr. Turrell's work for several years, he said, and was moved by a recent exhibition in London. But he is having a hard time getting in the crater's front door.

In July Mr. Sweeney stopped in Flagstaff while on a road trip to Santa Fe, N.M. He placed an ad on craigslist.org that said: "Anybody know Jim Turrell or someone who can get access to his crater?? It's on my list of 20 things to do before I die."

He received a handful of responses, none particularly helpful. Someone sent back-road directions, which he didn't want to use. "I wanted some sort of approval before I stumbled onto the land," he said. Eventually he visited the Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce, which gave him the number of the Skystone Foundation, which administers Mr. Turrell's crater project.

A woman answered the phone. "Once she figured out that I didn't come bearing bags of money," Mr. Sweeney said, "she gave me the 'Due to construction and safety concerns, we can't let you see the site. Thank you for your interest.'" Mr. Sweeney also received the official line: The crater would not be open to the public until 2011.

This makes the crater, in the logic of the art world, one of the hottest tickets around. Since Mr. Turrell bought the 400,000-year-old, two-mile-wide crater in 1979 and began moving tons of earth to carve out different kinds of viewing chambers and tunnels — making his art of light, sky and astronomical events instead of, say, paint and canvas — anticipation has been building. Writers have compared it to Stonehenge and the Mexican pyramids; in Interview magazine Ingrid Sischy once predicted that someday the work “could have more fans than ‘Star Wars.’”

The question is when. After early reports that it would be completed in the late 1980s, that date has been pushed back several times for financial and artistic reasons. Some suspect that the monumental work will be “finished” only with the artist’s death.

Yet many art world V.I.P.’s have already seen the light inside the crater. Two Los Angeles museum directors, Ann Philbin of the Hammer and Michael Govan of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, flew out together this summer for a visit. Several art critics have made the trip. So have a number of collectors, because commissioning a major work by Mr. Turrell typically prompts an invitation.

It’s a matter of resources, said his Los Angeles dealer, Bill Griffin, who fields weekly requests for visits. “At this point he has to focus all of his time and energy on the completion of the project.”

Mr. Turrell confirmed as much in a statement issued by e-mail: “Visits are now restricted to those who already have supported my work or the work on the Crater. This is how it gets done. It will open to the public when finished. Your patience is no greater than mine.” He signed the message with a tag line he has used on T-shirts: “Sooner or later {hellip} Roden Crater.”

But what about people who don’t have a million dollars to donate to the project? Or the patience to wait it out? It appears that Mr. Turrell’s single-minded dedication has been inspiring something similar from his fans, who in some cases have resorted to trespassing.

In August a Bay Area photographer hiked up the crater with a small crew and posted several pictures from the trip on the image-sharing Web site Flickr.com. “We started up the volcano at dusk,” he wrote online under the screen name very1silent, “climbing in silence since we had not arranged for a tour. Part way up, in the darkness, we found a door in the cinders, but it proved locked. Scrambling over the crater lip, we saw two discs of glowing light down beneath us.”

He wound up sleeping inside the crater and waking up to dramatic views. But he ended his account by warning others not to try the same thing. “Be aware that the desert is not a forgiving place, and that the crater is remote, many miles from the nearest paved road,” he wrote. “You can die trying to get there.” He added that he restricted access to all but four photographs “for fear of inducing the unprepared to attempt a trek across the desert.”

Other Flickr photos come from people who have received official invitations. One is Chris Cogburn, a percussionist from Austin, Tex., known online as Ten Pounds to the Sound. Part of a “poetry bus” that performed across the country last year, he played a snare drum inside the Roden Crater. “It was a great acoustic experiment,” he said.

Then there’s Heidi Pollock, a mobile Web developer from San Francisco who in July posted more than two dozen photos on Flickr. Her ticket in? Her grandmother Helen McPherson had owned the crater, which Mr. Turrell spotted from the air while piloting a single-engine plane.

These visitors spoke in glowing terms about their experience inside the crater, with its assorted tunnels, viewing chambers and an otherworldly bronze staircase leading up to open sky. One visitor recalled an echo chamber that brings in noises from outside, even the softest rustling of an insect. But most were careful not to give away too many details — who wants to be a Harry Potter spoiler? — and they described their trips as a form of homage or pilgrimage.

This was the case with Eric Lindeman, an environmental designer from Los Angeles who visited the crater a few years ago when he was a student at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. He had some time between a friend's bachelor party in Las Vegas and the wedding in Phoenix, and toured the region with two friends and his sister in his Chevy Suburban. After stopping at the Grand Canyon he persuaded them to try to find the Roden Crater.

Given the lack of detailed maps it was not easy. They had to do some sleuthing, matching topographical maps in the Flagstaff library to an image once published in a magazine. They started driving in the general vicinity, until it got dark and they decided to camp out. When they woke, they realized they were closer than they thought.

“It was the most surreal, magical moment,” Mr. Lindeman said. “As the sun was coming up, we realized we were on the south side of the crater looking north at it.”

From there, he said, luck was on his side; every path led to the lip of the crater, and every gate happened to be open. What's more, when he reached a landing, a stonemason working there waved him on, apparently mistaking his vehicle for the white truck of a survey crew expected that day. It was only when they stopped the car — and “a bunch of ragtag art students piled out” — that a construction manager started grilling them. Evidently he liked their answers and enthusiasm enough to give them a tour on the spot, while waiting for the real surveyors.

Mr. Lindeman called the experience unforgettable. “To me it's a great example of art and architecture becoming one,” he said. “I would not hesitate to call it one of the natural wonders of the world.”

Sure enough, when he made it back home, he became the talk of the campus. “I told a professor about it, and she instantly made me give a slide show and invited the whole school.”

Mr. Lindeman said he would love to visit again before the crater officially opens, whenever that may be. As for Mr. Sweeney, he has not given up hope. Knowing that Mr. Turrell is an amateur pilot, he hopes to have the chance one day to talk to him about their shared passion for aviation.

Or else, he said, there's always the old dating trick. “Maybe I'll rent a little plane one day just to fly closer to it — until I run out of gas and have to land.”