

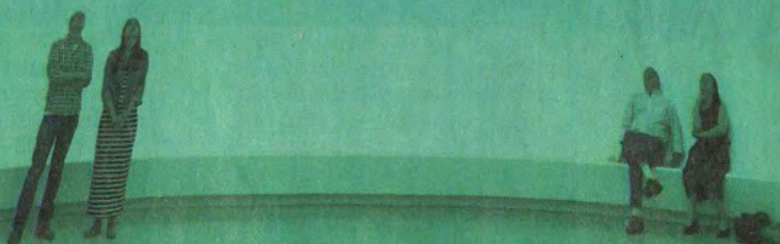
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Turrell's *Aten Reign*
at the Solomon
R. Guggenheim
Museum in
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Prince of Light

How artist James Turrell conquered the heavens

By Richard Lacayo

FOR ALMOST FIVE DECADES JAMES TURRELL has been making art that's literally impossible to grasp. He works with "materials"—light, sky, perception itself—that are weightless and boundless, the stuff of the sublime and the infinite. His most famous work, the immensity-in-progress that is *Roden Crater*, is nothing less than an extinct volcanic cone in northern Arizona that Turrell, 70, has spent decades transforming into a multichambered, naked-eye celestial observatory, an enterprise so hilariously vast, it's like a natural phenomenon itself. As he once described it, "I wanted to really work with large amounts of sky." What other artist could even say a thing like that?

So it feels right that Turrell's first major retrospective in almost 30 years is a trans-continental event, taking place in three cities simultaneously: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, where Turrell has filled the entire massive rotunda with a single glowing work called *Aten Reign*, after the Egyptian sun-disk deity. Not since God said "Let there be light" has anyone set loose so much of it.

But it may be that not since God has anyone given so much thought to what light is and what can be done with it. Though Turrell's art doesn't insist on, or even encourage, spiritual interpretation, some of his earliest encounters with the idea of illumination came by way of his Quaker upbringing in Pasadena, Calif. The Quaker way of characterizing meditation as "going inside to greet the light" intrigued him. And as a native of sunny Southern Cali-

fornia, he knew all about the light outside. Painting had always been in large part about the representation of light. Turrell wanted to drink from the tap. At art-history slide lectures at Pomona College in the early 1960s, he was as fascinated by the beam from the projector as he was by the slides. Maybe more.

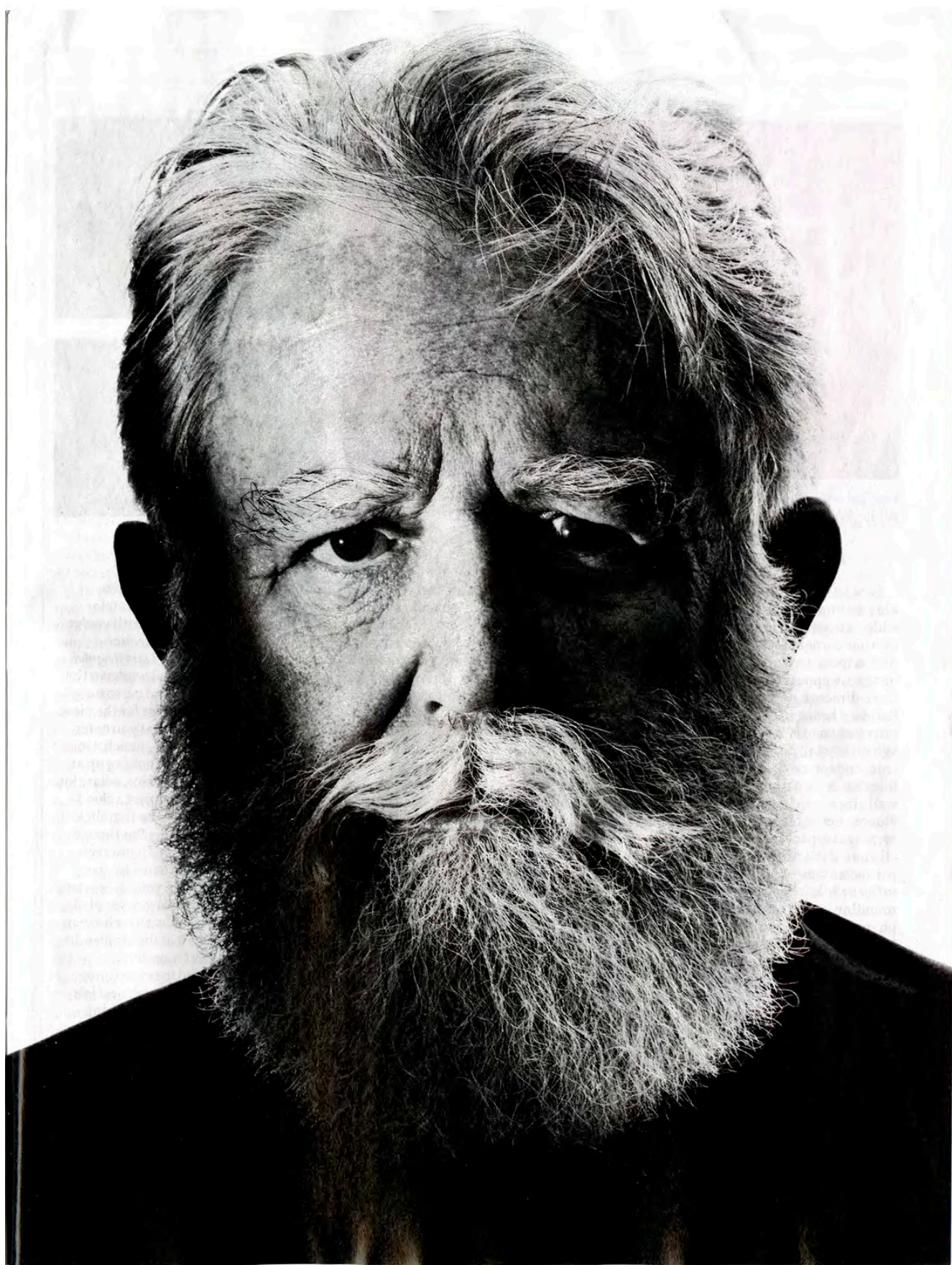
He wasn't alone. By the time he graduated in 1965 with a degree in perceptual psychology, the SoCal art scene was giving birth to the Light and Space movement. Artists like Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman and Douglas Wheeler were using light itself as their medium. In the process they were writing a new chapter in the long tradition of the American Sublime, the sense of awe before the bright dynamos of nature, conveyed largely through the sheer radiance that courses through American painting from 19th-century landscape artists like Albert Bierstadt and Martin Johnson Heade to wide-screen abstractionists of the 20th century like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman.

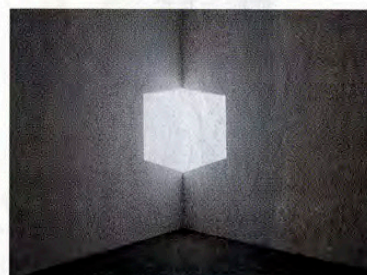
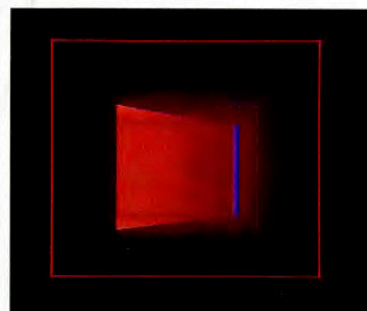
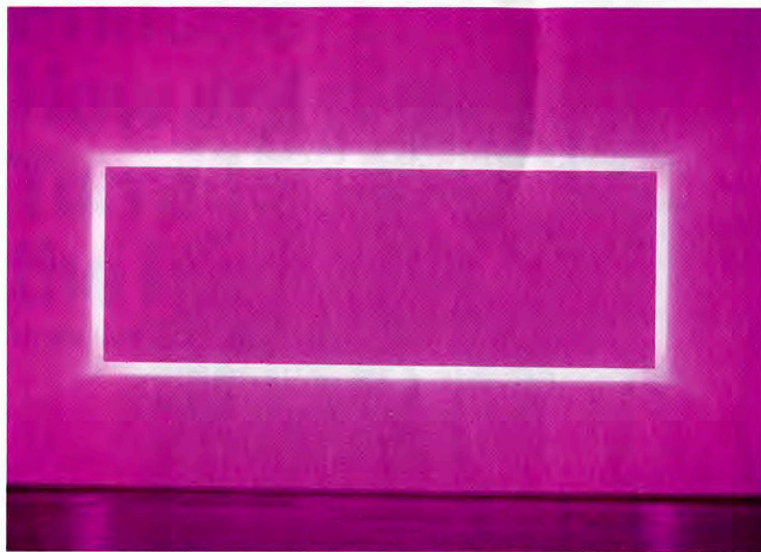
For Turrell the first issue was how to shape light into volume, to make palpable what he likes to call its "thingness." In 1966 he rented a two-story building in the Ocean Park section of Los Angeles, the former Mendota Hotel, where he painted over the windows so he could project pure light into darkness. He wanted to experiment with ways to offer an aesthetic experience that might also be a philosophical proposition about the nature of reality, illusion and perception: To what extent is the visual world simply a thing fashioned by consciousness? As Turrell once put it, "The world is not one we receive but one we create."

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
MUSEUM OF ART
through April 6, 2014

MUSEUM OF FINE
ARTS, HOUSTON
through Sept. 22

SOLOMON R.
GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM,
NEW YORK CITY
through Sept. 25





The light fantastic Clockwise from above, Raemar Pink White, 1969; Caper, Salmon to White: Wedgework, 2000; Afrum (White), 1966

In his first year at Mendota he made a breakthrough with *Afrum (White)*, in which a beam of white light is projected into one corner of a darkened room. As you move around it, the projected image can appear to be a hovering, three-dimensional cube of pure light, a flattened hexagon or just the brightly lit intersection of two very ordinary walls. Which is "real"? All of them and none. It depends on how you look at it. Work like that eventually led to panoramic wall-size pieces like *Raemar Pink White*. Fluorescent lights mounted behind a rectangular panel send a pinkish light all around the panel's edges. The bright perimeter causes the panel to appear to float while it floods the walls surrounding it with a mesmerizing phosphorescence. Later Turrell moved on to beckoning three-dimensional spaces, "wedgeworks," like *Caper, Salmon to White* in the Houston show and *Key Lime* in Los Angeles, in which LED, fluorescent and fiber-optic light create receding corridors and ghostly thresholds. With all this, Turrell aimed to make art in which not just light but perception itself was his medium—the viewer's perception—works that prompt you to examine the very act of seeing as you do it.

Turrell eventually realized that he could bring the sky down to earth for his purposes. In 1974 he designed the first of more than 75 Skyspaces in homes, parks and museums around the world. Though

each is different, most are variations on the idea of a windowless pavilion with a square or circular opening in the roof to reveal a stretch of sky. Viewers sit on benches inside, discovering the nuanced atmospherics in the atmosphere. Lights embedded in the walls inflect the sky's palette with shades it wouldn't show to viewers outside, an effect of color contrast. What it all tells you is that even the heavens are what we make of them. Maybe especially the heavens.

Turrell desired still more sky, and to get it he went mountain hunting, also in '74. By that year a handful of artists were pioneering the idea of earthworks, art made with shovels and bulldozers across large landscapes, like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake. Turrell wanted to turn a mountain into the ultimate Skyspace, a celestial viewing platform that would hark back to the great ancient megasites like Machu Picchu and the pyramids. An experienced pilot, he spent some 700 hours in the air over seven months, searching for the perfect truncated cone, before he found Roden Crater at the edge of the Painted Desert. By now Turrell has carved three viewing chambers into the mountain, plus associated tunnels, with plans for as many as 20. Within a few years he expects it to be open to the public for visits by dauntless art pilgrims, preferably overnight.

All this talk about pure light may make it seem as though Turrell's out-

put is the last word in Apollonian art—serene and quietly contemplative. You might think that until you've been transported into the technohallucination created by *Light Reignfall* from 2011, one of the final works in the Los Angeles show. The one-person-at-a-time viewing environment for the piece is a hollow steel sphere that you enter on your back via a moving bench. Once inside, you find yourself looking up at the smooth spherical interior, where for 10 minutes LED lights project a slowly changing field of solid color that flickering strobe lights agitate. But though nothing more appears on that screen than solid colors punctuated by the stuttering flash, within your eyes—and only there—complex patterns explode, fractals, bars and bubbles that churn in all directions, a result of the strobes disrupting your optical receptors.

As art—as opposed to science project and cognitive roller coaster—*Light Reignfall* doesn't have the beckoning power of Turrell's other work. Maybe silence imprints more deeply than noise. But like an LSD trip, without the wear and tear on precious brain cells, it's a vision that exists exclusively inside your head, a goal Turrell has been aiming at for decades in his work. His fundamental insight, the one that makes him an artist who will last, is that the greatest immensity of all is housed in the modest pavilion that is your brain. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: FLORIAN HOLZNER; THOMAS DUBROCK; DAVID HEALD; SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION; © JAMES TURRELL (3)