

## THE NEW YORKER



THE ART WORLD

## SEEING AND DISBELIEVING

*James Turrell at the Guggenheim.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Imagine this summer's show at the Guggenheim Museum as air-conditioning for the eye and, if you're gamely susceptible, the soul. The show presents a number of works by James Turrell, the veteran wizard of installations that involve illusory effects of light, both natural and artificial. For the centerpiece, Frank Lloyd Wright's great rotunda has been fitted with six evenly spaced, concentric ovoid rings, smoothly clad in white plastic. They increase in size from the top, where a translucent membrane of the plastic admits light from the skylight, to the bottom, where the last ring fills the space,

about ten feet above the floor. An orchestration of slowly shifting colored light, from unseen L.E.D. fixtures between the rings, suffuses the atmosphere with one ravishing payoff after another: breathable beauty. The range of colors, from white to charcoal and from peach to plum, feels limitless: every tone, hue, and saturation that you know and some that seem minted for the occasion. Their sequence, while silent, feels musical, in the way that it flavors time, and hallucinogenic, in the way that it plays hob with spatial perception. The overhead array appears at certain moments to soar, cathedral-like, and at others to pan-

cake into a somewhat ruffled single plane. And now and then you could swear that the order of the rings had flipped, with the lower becoming the higher and the highest thrust down to almost within arm's reach. Don't bother trying to think under the gentle but imperious optical onslaught. Only later might you wonder what the experience was about and what it constitutes as art.

The show, which was organized by the Guggenheim curators Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman, coincides with two others of Turrell's work, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The events confer a belated burst of celebrity on a man who has long figured modestly as one of the three leading artists, with Robert Irwin and Doug Wheeler, in a movement called Light and Space, which arose in Los Angeles in the mid-nineteen-sixties. This is his first major appearance in New York since a retrospective at the Whitney Museum, in 1980. The relative neglect of a stunningly original artist owes much to his temperamental reclusion from the art world. Since 1981, Turrell has maintained a cattle ranch near Flagstaff, Arizona. There he has toiled incessantly (and expensively) to turn an extinct volcano, the Roden Crater, into a sculpted, many-chambered observatory of celestial phenomena. (So far, it is accessible only by invitation.) The features include a disk of white marble positioned to receive, through a tunnel, the direct light of the moon, roughly every eighteen and a half years. A round hole cut into the cone forms the granddaddy of Turrell's "Skyspaces"—overhead, usually rectangular apertures that, as you gaze through them, make virtual pictures of the sky. On clear days, they yield flat slabs of scintillant blue. (There's a finely crafted permanent Skyspace installation at the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 affiliate, in Long Island City, where, the other day, under fleecy clouds, a little girl was heard to remark, "It's like a TV.")

At seventy, white of beard and hair, Turrell combines the mien of a courtly Western rancher with that of a loquacious youthful enthusiast. Meeting him at the Guggenheim, I found myself

*Turrell's "Aten Reign," the centerpiece of his first major New York show since 1980.*

tumbling from small talk into a detailed discussion of the Pentateuch. This took off—far off, as it proceeded—from the title of the rotunda piece, “Aten Reign.” Aten is the deified sun disk associated with the fourteenth-century-B.C. pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who, by some reckonings, invented monotheism. So does the ocular-shaped “Aten Reign” represent the eye of God? Turrell, who is as difficult to pin down intellectually as his art is perceptually, disparaged the notion, while seeming to enjoy it. In regard to religion, he said, he has never ceased to value his childhood in a family of Wilburites—schismatic, traditionalist Quakers. There is something of the silent meetinghouse, awaiting visitations of the Spirit, about all his works. Turrell is coolly pragmatic in his way of conceiving art. But, should some people chance to have theophanies this summer at the Guggenheim, I doubt that he would mind.

Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943, and grew up in Pasadena. His father was an aeronautical engineer and an educator, his mother a medically trained Peace Corps volunteer. Turrell got a pilot’s license at the age of sixteen. (He was flying a small plane over the Painted Desert, in 1974, when he spotted the Roden Crater, and promptly landed. Two years later, he began negotiations with the owner to buy it.) He took courses in mathematics, geology, and astronomy at Pomona College, graduating in 1965 with a degree in perceptual psychology. He was notably fascinated by the *ganzfeld* effect, which is incurred by looking for a long time at a field of uniform color; the brain is overloaded and understimulated, and hallucinations may ensue. He then studied art at the University of California, Irvine, and was temporarily given the run of a derelict hotel in Santa Monica, where he plunged into researching the aesthetic possibilities of his scientific knowledge.

The time was ripe. In parallel with the revolutionary development of rudimentary geometric sculpture, in industrial materials, by the minimalists Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and others, in New York, Southern California artists were creating sleek forms, in plastics or glass, which

shimmered with color and reflected or refracted light. Turrell, Irwin, and Wheeler took sensuous appearance a radical step further, eliminating objects in favor of ambiances. Compare the dreamy sorcery of Turrell’s installations with the blunt self-evidence of the fluorescent fixtures deployed in Flavin’s light pieces. At no other time have the sensibilities of America’s Atlantic and Pacific cosmopolitan antipodes stood in sharper contrast, while sharing a generational bent for rigorously reductive aesthetics.

The Guggenheim show includes such early Turrell works as “Afrum I (White)” (1967), a square of white light projected into the corner of a darkened room, where it becomes, to the viewer’s eye, a floating cube. “Prado (White)” (1967), a projected white rectangle, flush to the floor, looks like a portal to another space, while “Ronin” (1968) appears to be a projected vertical sliver of light in a corner but really is a portal, to a smooth-contoured recess that is lit from within. (Only the test of an extended hand may convince you of the fact.) “Iltar” (1976) is another deceptive hole in a wall, its interior space illuminated by lights beamed into it from outside; again, your looking engages in an intimate quarrel with knowing what you see. A bonus of the show is the enclosure of the museum’s ramp, to seal the rotunda piece against interfering light. The ramp becomes a spiral corridor, affording a novel experience of the building’s fabulous particularity.

The show’s excellence couldn’t be more timely. It satisfies two big present cravings: that of museums to attract crowds, and that of at least some in those crowds for good art. Turrell’s intuition, nearly half a century ago, of an art keyed to the physiology of eyesight made him an estimable but marginally special figure, as waves of less subtle fashion exhausted themselves. Now that mode, both seductive and serious, trumps a trend among contemporary artists, favored by art institutions, toward clamorous, hysterically clever spectacle and performance. The Guggenheim show hits an unchanging sweet spot of what we want from any museum: a place where we can go en masse and be alone. ♦