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EAVESDROPPING ON THE TIMES MAGAZINE
The New York Times

June 17, 2013, 6:36 am 3 Comments

Behind the Cover Story: Wil Hylton on James Turrell's Magic

By RACHEL NOLAN


Wil Hylton

Wil S. Hylton, a contributing writer for the magazine, wrote this week's cover story about the artist James Turrell. His last article for the magazine was about Belgian tobacco.

When did you first hear about James Turrell?

It was about 20 years ago at a museum in Pittsburgh called the Mattress Factory. They have one of his "Dark Space" pieces, called "Pleiades." You walk into a room that's pitch black and you climb up a little ramp, and then you wait about 15 minutes for your eyes to adjust. Eventually you begin to see a faint swirl of color on the horizon, but you can never quite pinpoint where it is, or if it's really there. I realize how banal that sounds, but the sensation is breathtaking. You start from such a visual void that when the light appears, it feels incredibly delicate and precious. I was just swept away. After that, I was always looking for another fix of Turrell.

You spent more than 100 hours with Turrell, chasing him to different cities. Were these normal interviews?

I think every story wants to be reported its own way. Sometimes you need to be the hard-nosed reporter pushing for access, because that's what the story requires. But this was the other end of the spectrum. James made his time enormously available. He would call me out of the blue and we'd talk for a couple hours about sailboats or astronomy or cattle ranching, and then a few days later I'd try his cellphone and we'd talk for another two hours about airplanes and gravity and the alkalinity of cement. I mean, these weren't always the most revealing conversations. James is not great at introspection. If you're hoping to understand his evolution as an artist, or his thoughts on aging, or his relationship to faith and family, you're going to have to work for it. But the challenge wasn't access.

Does his work seem like one thing — perhaps a machine — during installation, and another thing during exhibition?

I'm amazed by the gap between his materials and his effect. When a piece is going up, all you see is crude construction — a bunch of guys framing walls, hanging drywall, mudding and sanding, that kind of thing. At the end, it's just a big, white, empty room. Nothing very special. But then the lights come on, and the most accurate word is probably "magic." That's what it feels like. The walls instantly vanish and you're standing there in the gloaming light, completely alone, with triangles and cubes floating around you, and the darkness just washing through you, and the empty room is gone. You've passed through the looking glass.

His "perceptual cells," in which the viewer is blasted with blinding light, sound like an absolute nightmare. Do you have any sense of what moves Turrell to make this kind of art?

He talks a lot about the principles behind his work, and how he wants to make light feel tangible, and to call attention to light rather than using it to illuminate something else, and he's interested in the power of light to define architectural space, and the way we drink sunlight to get vitamin D, all these interesting ideas. But you know, what really interests me is the psychological experience of all that. His work makes you acutely aware of your own perception. It takes away some of your power, because you can no longer be sure what is real, but it replaces that power with a profound sense of wonder. You almost can't believe what you're seeing. You're just basking in this crazy light.

The names of his series sound as if they come straight from a Silicon Valley pitch meeting: "Skyspace," "Ganzfeld," "Wedgeworks."

The names can be silly. They're fairly literal, since the "Wedgeworks" look like wedges of light and the "Skyspaces" look at the sky. The problem is, when you hear those terms over and over, they begin to sound like jargon. And that's unfortunate, because what's great about this work is that it feels like the opposite of jargon. It's direct and visceral and doesn't require any of the usual art-history baggage masquerading as "context." You just view it and experience it, and it is what it is. It would be nice if the language were equally simple, and not gunked up with invented terms. On the other hand, you can understand the challenge. When you're building something that looks like an alternate universe, it's probably useful to develop some naming conventions.

Turrell will exhibit his work in Los Angeles, Houston and New York this summer, but he has kept access to the Roden Crater, which he considers his masterwork, restricted. Does he plan to make it a museum — completely open to the public — when he finishes?

He definitely plans to open the crater. It's just a question of getting to the right point. There are three phases to the work. The first is already done. The third can be completed after the crater is open. So the second phase is the critical step. He's ready to work on it, but he still needs to raise the money. It's a small matter of about $20 million. Maybe somebody will get a Kickstarter going.

Turrell is 70. He began the crater in 1974. What would happen to the crater if, God forbid, Turrell did not live to finish it?

It's a good question, and until recently, there wasn't a good answer. But James has spent the past few years drawing up a complete set of architectural blueprints. The detail is outlandish. So even if something terrible happened, I think the crater could be finished at a level very close to his vision.

What does it feel like to experience the crater?

The comparison I would make is to an observatory. Even in the deepest chamber of the volcano, the walls are illuminated by starlight. In some ways, you feel more connected to the heavens than to the earth. You know this light is millions of years old and has crossed the galaxy to reach you. It's an intimate feeling to have with a star.