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Seeing the Light

By EDWARD HELMORE | MAY 9, 2013, 2:00 PM



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For his fervent private collectors, James Turrell's celestial skyspaces are an exercise in blind faith. The temperamental artist regards them as test runs for his life's work in the Arizona desert. Somehow, everyone's happy.

With his long white beard and measured manner of speech, the acclaimed light artist James Turrell cultivates the image of a cosmic cowboy. It's a compelling presentation, and an effective tool in his long-running campaign to seduce patrons and collectors into what he describes as "another kind of seeing." The "skyspaces" and "dark adaptations" Turrell creates for the homes, gardens, swimming pools, screening rooms, pagodas and pyramids of private collectors — almost anywhere the artist determines that the arrival of light at dawn and its departure at dusk can be captured to its full, revelatory effect — may differ in attribute and design, but they all pay tribute to and serve Turrell's higher calling: the Roden Crater Project, northeast of Flagstaff, Ariz., that is his inspiration and his burden and will one day be the centerpiece of his substantial legacy.

In the late 1970s, he optimistically informed the Dia Arts founder and collector Philippa de Menil that the giant sky observatory he was planning to sculpture into the extinct volcano would be complete by 2000. "We're closing in on that date now!" he says, impishly.

After all, when your work is concerned with the movements of the cosmos, what are a few years here and there? Since Turrell is constantly refining his ideas about light and space, there's no real expectation he will ever declare it done. Then again, he insists, "I didn't expect it to be my life's work. It's just this strange furrow I've chosen to dig."

For now, Turrell's Roden Crater is closed to visitors. But this summer the art world heavens will align for fans of the artist, with concurrent shows at the Guggenheim in New York, LACMA in Los Angeles and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. In addition, Turrell has scheduled a series of tours of the Crater (patrons only) — all serving to affirm him as a visionary artist whose medium is light itself. "I want these spaces to engage you, your perception, and for you to be conscious of how you are engaging your senses," he explains.

The initiation of a collector into Turrell's realm can be protracted, often taking years between a buyer's receipt of the artist's plans and a work's completion. (A private Turrell commission typically costs up to \$2 million). Thereafter, Turrell's collectors, "some very idiosyncratic if not totally eccentric people," as he puts it, are required to maintain the work to exacting specifications. In return, collectors gain something more. In addition to those hotly sought invites to the Crater, they become adjunct participants in his celestial field studies, entries in a geographical sketchbook in which he explores his evolving notions about light and space. To date, he's installed 82 private and institutional skyspaces, each carefully tuned to its environment and light characteristics. "I've been practicing the repertoire I'm assembling at the Crater on all these collectors," the artist, 70, says, pausing to stroke his beard. "I don't think they feel used, but there is a direct relation."

In describing the importance of journey in his pieces, Turrell mentions a night-blooming cereus known as the Queen of the Night. One could see the flower cactuses bloom in the desert, he suggests, or in a greenhouse in Gramercy Park, where he keeps an apartment. "It's the same object of perception but a completely different experience," he explains. Likewise, it's entirely different working with the soft, moisture-laden light of Scotland or Ireland (where he once lived on an island) as compared with the hard, high-altitude desert light of Arizona. On a recent trip to Beijing, Turrell found the light caused by the smog so severe that the foreground light bore almost no relation to the background — similar to the effect J. M. W. Turner (like Mark Rothko, a hero) must have seen in 19th-century London. "I can't believe how prescient he was," Turrell says. "He was painting what he saw, and that was before Impressionism."

Turrell's obsession with light, which may have originated with his stint as a high-altitude reconnaissance pilot, turns on the cusp of its coming and going. His goal, as he says, is to capture light as if in a dream: "We come into sunrise with dark-adapted eyes, so we're more sensitive to light in the morning." But even a guru knows that there are limits to what his followers will do in their quest for illumination. Art collectors aren't known for rising early, he points out, "so I'd be a fool if I just dealt with sunrise."

TURRELL: BODY OF WORK

To view James Turrell's celestial skyspaces, see the interactive slide show >>

“Picture Plane,” Los Angeles

The idea to commission Turrell to design a screening room was straightforward for the prominent art collectors Jarl Mohn (the founding C.E.O. of E! Entertainment Television) and his wife, Pamela. Turrell proposed that once you strip narrative away from film it's nothing more than projected light. So by cutting the aperture of the skyspace to the same dimensions as the screen, you achieve a kind of symmetry. “The idea was so powerful it was as close to an impulse buy as you can get,” Mohn says. Turrell didn't stop there. He proposed designing the entire room: the chairs, the end tables, the fabric on the walls and the carpeting in colors that would serve to heighten the experience. Instead of Turrell's typically spartan skyspace bench seating, he designed seats modeled after those in an old DC-3 airplane that were then fabricated in Germany. The project took two years to complete, a comparatively rapid build. (“Agua de Luz,” a pyramid skyspace in the Yucatán, took seven.) “I've told him many times the room is the centerpiece of our social life,” Mohn says. “He's created an amazing, magical experience.”

“Craiganour,” Perthshire

From the dry high Arizona desert to the damp Scottish moors, Turrell and the music producer Ivor Guest, Lord Wimborne, found that they shared a bond over big landscapes and a sense of scale and time that the wilderness sometimes invokes. “Craiganour,” the earth-and-slate skyspace at Guest's Scottish lodge, is one of Turrell's most harmonious installations. For the collector, the piece has come to symbolize the regeneration and conservation work on the estate: “I was up in a ruined bothy looking through a windowless window frame. I just thought, This is already like a Turrell the way it frames the landscape. Wouldn't it be fantastic to build one? A place you could inhabit and think about things.” Guest took a trip out to Flagstaff and flew around the Painted Desert in the artist's plane. “He said, ‘Let's fly underground,’ and dropped down into the canyon. Then he did a touch-and-go on the side of the crater. It was pretty wild.” With Scotland's low skies and the slate interior of the container, the piece intensifies the ultraviolet blues in the light. “I don't think James is just about art, at least not when he's working to the full extent of his vision,” Guest says. “It's about a lot of things. He's a traditional guy but the outcome is very futuristic.”

“Arrowhead,” Las Vegas

Twenty minutes from the Strip — to quote Milton, “Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail Infernal world . . .” — Jim Murren, the chairman and C.E.O. of MGM Resorts International, commissioned Turrell to build a skyspace set into the red rocks adjacent to his Modernist home. The artist proposed to build a small pyramid connecting an Oculus room and a Horizon room. One sees mixed light from the Strip, the other darker light from the sky above. He placed a bench between the two rooms: “The money shot,” Murren says, where the viewer can observe both apertures. “The color palettes are dramatically different. I tend to look up, not across, because my life is about the Strip.”

Murren, who studied art history in college and also commissioned Turrell to install a light work at the CityCenter Las Vegas, asked the artist for a piece that connected him to the land and the sky. “It’s a gateway to the celestial world,” Murren says. “It captures me in multiple ways, more than a traditional work on paper or work on canvas — the kind of work I was trained to appreciate.”

“Seldom Seen” and “St. Elmo’s Breath,” Norfolk

Houghton Hall, considered one of the finest Palladian houses in Britain, is home to two Turrells: “Seldom Seen,” a skyspace set within the formal garden of avenues and beech hedges, and “St. Elmo’s Breath,” a dark installation of milky pinks and purples in a water tower. “In the 18th century there was a tradition of follies and gazebos in parkland — things to be discovered — so we were creating a folly in the modern tradition,” explains David Rocksvage, Marquess of Cholmondeley. The collector believes “St. Elmo’s Breath” was inspired by high-altitude reconnaissance missions that Turrell flew over Russia and China, but Turrell says the piece was inspired by the discharge of lightning. Either way, the artist’s references date back further. “In Aleppo, Syria, there’s a 14th-century mental asylum. The patients were in enclosed spaces with different size circular apertures open to the sky. Every artist works within a frame, but James goes further back to earlier civilizations.”

“Raising Kayne,” Santa Monica

Part of Turrell’s skill is to incorporate the lifestyle requirements of his collectors. The Kayne Anderson Capital Advisors chairman and founder Ric Kayne, whose daughter Maggie introduced Turrell to the family, found that he and his wife, Suzanne, could use a skyspace over their outdoor dining area. Turrell came over one evening and sat in their Santa Monica yard. “I told him I wanted the space to be both social and yet could be meditative and experienced by one,” Kayne says. “He proposed three concepts, and I loved them all.” The winning piece can be raised and lowered hydraulically to function as a skyspace as well as a dining area that seats 12. Turrell ended up also designing the new Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery in Los Angeles. “His vision is epic beyond most contemporary artists and thinkers,” Kayne says.

“Revised Outlook,” Santa Monica

Dallas Price-Van Breda knew she wanted an oval-shaped skyspace for her home. “I think he was hoping we’d order a piece for the swimming pool,” she says. Her friends, the avid collectors Norman Stone and Norah Sharpe Stone, have a Turrell pool piece in their Napa Valley farmhouse. “You have to dive down underneath it and come up in the middle to be able to see the skyspace, and that’s not something I wanted to do.” Her initiation began, as it does for many collectors, with a trip to the Roden Crater to gain an understanding of what the artist is trying to accomplish. “He’s the best one to explain to a potential buyer what it is,” says Price-Van Breda, who tends to use the skyspace, which is nestled in the hillside garden, for contemplation.

She invites friends to tour her collection and frequently ends the trip at the Turrell. On one such tour, a friend was expelled by the group for talking too much. “I guess people have a different way of experiencing art,” she says. Since its completion, Turrell has upgraded the lighting of “Revised Outlook,” replacing the original tungsten yellow light with programmable color LEDs. “Now I have the be-all and end-all with the latest in lighting strategy and theory,” Price-Van Breda says. She considers the piece finished. “You have to start somewhere and end somewhere — and let the next person who comes along have something even better.”